The Russian Baptists

A Fundamentalism File Research Report
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This report is intended to be a resource to help Fundamentalist Christians in studying and evaluating religious leaders and movements. It draws primarily upon materials housed in the Fundamentalism File in the J. S. Mack Library on the campus of Bob Jones University.

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The Russian Baptists

Among the groups worldwide bearing the name Baptist, few have a heritage as distinct as the so-called Russian Baptists. In the United States, where the largest portion of the world’s Baptists are located, most people know only those Baptist groups who trace their lineage through seventeenth-century Great Britain. By contrast, the Russian Baptists are the product of continental European influences (with some non-Baptist contribution from Britain) and native Russian forces.

As Leon McBeth notes, even the label Russian Baptists can be misleading, because many grouped under this name are not Russian—and some are not even particularly Baptist. Those who would understand and appreciate the nature of the Baptist groups in Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union need to understand their origin and history. In fact, as writers such as J. A. Hebly note, observers will fail completely to understand Russian Protestantism in general if they do not study its origins in Russian history, culture, and religion.

Background of the Russian Baptists

In getting to the roots of the Russian Baptists, one must distinguish between those people and institutions who set the stage for the growth of Russian evangelicalism and those who directly contributed to evangelicalism’s development. Among these “stage-setters” are a number of persons gathered around Czar Alexander I (1801-25), including the czar himself.

Influences from the Circle of Alexander I

The nobility of Russia tended to be much more religiously flexible than the general populace. Every shade of belief from deistic free-thinking to cloudy mysticism existed among Russia’s upper class. From this class emerged the initial influences for evangelicalism. Baroness Julie de Krüdener (1764-1824), the widow of a Russian nobleman, underwent a religious experience through contact with the Moravians. Something of a mystic, she spoke with Czar Alexander, gaining a surprisingly sympathetic hearing from the emperor. Likewise, lifelong friend and trusted counselor, Alexander Nikolayevich Golitsyn (1773-1844), influenced the czar. Alexander appointed Golitsyn, a virtual deist, as Procurator of the Holy Synod, practically the “Secretary of Religion” for the Russian state. Surprisingly, once in office, Golitsyn took seriously not only his duties but also religious faith in general. He began to study the Bible and not only supported reforms in the Russian Orthodox Church but also pursued friendlier relations with Russia’s small Protestant minorities, as well as hosting foreign Protestant visitors.

Czar Alexander himself underwent some sort of mystical experience during the Napoleonic wars. The nature of this experience still puzzles biographers, but it clearly made the czar more open to religious influence. (Interestingly, both he and Golitsyn took a special interest in the teachings and manner of life of the Quakers.) The czar also became favorable toward religious reform. The most important of these reforms was the formation of the Russian Bible Society in 1812, with Golitsyn as its head. Over protests of the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, the RBS proceeded with the translation and publication of the Scriptures in modern Russian. By 1819 the society had translated the New Testament. Unfortunately, Alexander’s successor, the reactionary Nicholas I, shut down the society in 1826. Later Czar Alexander II permitted Bible distribution, but under auspices of the British Foreign Bible Society. The BFBS distributed Bibles in Russia from 1863 until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. As was the case in the Protestant Reformation, the availability of the Scriptures through translation and publication helped fuel efforts toward religious reform and revival.

Direct Progenitors of the Russian Baptists

Nevertheless, the lasting effects of these early influences remain uncertain and difficult to quantify. Brandenburg writes that these “gospel influences … only seem to have had a temporary and individual effect in the vastness of Russia. Whether they contributed to the revival among the Russian peasants in the second half of the
nineteenth century, and if so how far, it is impossible to establish at this time. The historian is on firmer ground when he turns to people, institutions, and movements that contributed directly and visibly to the rise of the Russian Baptists.

**German Influences**—The origins of the Russian Baptists have a definite German flavor. As the Russians expanded westward, their empire took within its borders a number of German Lutherans as well as some from the German Reformed tradition. The Russian government allowed these new citizens to continue practicing their faith, and they provided a leaven for religious reform.

An even more important source of Russian Protestantism were the Mennonites. Russian expansion southwestward into the Ukraine and eastern Europe opened new territory for development. Since Russian peasants were legally bound to their land as serfs, Russia’s rulers sought settlers from abroad. The Mennonites provided one such source. A number of Mennonites, who were pacifists, had left their native Netherlands to settle in Prussia, where Frederick the Great exempted them from military service. When the Prussian rulers who followed Frederick revoked the exemption, the Mennonites welcomed the invitation of Catherine the Great (1762-96) to settle Russia’s new western territories. Catherine likewise granted a military exemption, and the Mennonites built prosperous farms and villages.

Yet it was not simply these German communities but rather these communities transformed that contributed most directly to the rise of the Baptists. First, Pietism entered Russia through German Lutheranism. Pietism was a movement emphasizing the need for genuine piety in the Christian life, as reflected in heartfelt conversion, holiness of life, and zealous evangelism. Pietism expressly rejected the cold formalism it encountered in Europe’s state Protestant churches.

**Stundism**—Even more important in Russia than Pietism was Stundism. The name of this movement comes from the German word *Stunde*, meaning “hour.” The name refers to the “Bible-study hours” (*bibelstunden*), small meetings for prayer and Bible study, similar in pattern to the small devotional circles (*collegia pietatis*) established by the Pietists in Germany. Through the *bibelstunden* many were converted and raised to new levels of Christian devotion. The Stundist movement appears to have originated with the ministry of Johann Bonekemper (1796-1854), who worked among the German Reformed in the Ukraine. A major Stundist revival began in that region around 1860. Particularly affected at this time were the Mennonite communities, many of whom had lapsed into religious formalism. A major event among the Mennonite Stundists was the formation of a new revivalist denomination, the Mennonite Brethren.

These revival movements were able to survive, in part, because they were limited to the ethnic Germans in Russia. The czar’s government allowed the Protestant communities relative religious freedom. The government forbade, however, the conversion of native Russians. When the Stundist revival began to reach beyond the Germans to Orthodox Russians, authorities were bound to notice.

**British Influences**—Another contributor to the development of the Russian Baptists were religious influences from western Europe. Reference has already been made to the work of the British Foreign Bible Society. One leading figure in this work was Scotsman John Melville (d. 1886). He spent sixty years traveling widely in Russia distributing Bibles, forty of those years under the auspices of the BFBS. Much as Johnny Appleseed spread apple trees across the American frontier in his own eccentric way, so Melville sowed the Scriptures across swaths of Russian territory.

Also from Europe were several English missionaries who had been influenced by the Plymouth Brethren. F. W. Baedeker (1823-1906) conducted a courageous ministry over the vast expanses of Russia as he worked among prisoners. Even more important in the development of the Baptists was a friend of Baedeker, English nobleman and evangelical Christian Granville A. W. Waldegrave, Lord Radstock (1833-1916). Of Plymouth Brethren background like Baedeker, Lord Radstock found that his noble title opened many doors for him among Russia’s upper class. He made his greatest mark in the conversion of Colonel Vasili Aleksandrovich Pashkov (1821-1902) a wealthy former military officer. Pashkov in turn supported a circle of Evangelical
Christians in St. Petersburg. The Pashkov circle provided an incubator for the growth of what became known as the Evangelical Christians. Unfortunately, pressure from the imperial government eventually limited their activities and forced Pashkov into exile in Paris.

German Baptists—Not all European Protestants active in Russia were British, by any means. One of the most important figures was Johann Oncken (1800-84). Oncken is likely best known for his pioneer work in establishing the Baptists in his native Germany. He also conducted mission work elsewhere in Europe, including Austria-Hungary, the Balkans, and Russia. In addition, Oncken sent German artisans into Russia who not only plied their trade but also served as missionaries. The effect of Oncken and his missionaries was to introduce ideas such as congregational polity and baptism by immersion among the revivalist groups. The Mennonite Brethren, for instance, adopted baptism by immersion at least partly through the influence of the German Baptists.

Molokans—Also contributing to the rise of the Baptists were native Russian groups, among whom were the Molokans, or “milk-drinkers,” a name derived (according to one theory) from the fact that they drank milk (moloko) during Lent. This quasi-Protestant group, who called themselves “spiritual Christians,” originated in the eighteenth century. They were a quietist group, like the Quakers. They rejected baptism, had no ordained ministry, and relied on an inward spiritual leading. Many early Russian Baptists, such as N. I. Voronin (whose baptism in 1867 traditionally marks the beginning of the Baptists in Russia), were of Molokan background.

“Evangelicals” and “Baptists”

As this sketch indicates, there was some variety of belief and practice among the early evangelical Protestants in Russia. This diversity led to the formation of two loosely defined groups: the “Evangelicals” (or “Evangelical Christians”) and the “Baptists.” (Note that in this essay the capitalized Evangelical refers to the particular Russian group whereas evangelical lowercase refers to evangelical Protestants in general.) The difference was more a matter of emphasis than real division. The Evangelicals were often baptistic in practice, notably in preferring baptism by immersion. In the early twentieth century, before the Bolshevik Revolution, they even aligned with the Baptist World Alliance.

Yet the Evangelicals were not as overtly denominational as those who embraced the label “Baptist.” The Baptists were much more insistent on distinctive such as immersion. Furthermore, the Baptists jealously guarded congregational independence, while the Evangelicals were more open to some oversight above the congregational level. These differences, though important, did not hinder fellowship between the two groups, especially when they were united by persecution. In the twentieth century, the fortunes of the two groups would be one under Communist domination, although the fault lines of their division were sometimes evident.

An indication of their general similarity in belief was relatively easy interchange among the different revival groups. An illustration is the career of Jacob Wiens. Born in 1874 and converted under the ministry of the Mennonite Brethren at the age of seventeen or eighteen, he became a minister and was forced to flee Ukraine because he preached to native Russians. He served briefly with the British and Foreign Bible Society and, through contact with European evangelicals, went to Berlin to study. Wiens returned in 1905 and became pastor of a Russian Evangelical congregation that maintained friendly relations with the growing Baptist movement. Government persecution (including a brief exile to Siberia) forced him to go to the United States in 1911, where his family joined him in 1912. In exile, Wiens served both Baptist and Mennonite Brethren congregations. Later Wiens’s son and especially his grandson became important leaders of the Russian Baptists.

Rise of the Russian Baptists

The traditional date for the origin of the Russian Baptists is 1867. In that year, a former Molokan, N. I. Vorinin, was baptized as a Baptist. Although some converts had been previously baptized by immersion as believers (the Baptist pattern), they had been ethnic Germans and Mennonites. Vorinin represented the spread of the evangelical revival to ethnic Russians. Realizing the potential legal liabilities from the czar’s
government, the Mennonites encouraged the Russians to organize their own groups. Baptist congregations began to form among “awakened” converts.

Early on, the Evangelicals and Baptists recognized their kinship, and in 1884 they held a conference at the home of Colonel Pashkov to discuss uniting the two groups. The effort failed, but the Baptists held a meeting later that year in Ukraine and formed the Union of Russian Baptists. Although it was an illegal organization until 1905, the Union provided some coherence and structure to the movement. A major leader was D. I. Mazaev, the president of the Baptist Union from 1887 to 1920, who oversaw the Union through difficult times.

A great difficulty was the opposition by the czarist government to any Protestant evangelical revivalism that touched native Russians. The 1880s saw a wave of anti-Stundist legislation. Government officials removed children from Stundist homes, imposed bans on the employment of Stundists, and threatened exile to dissenters. This crackdown was part of a general repression of religious and political dissent that followed the 1881 assassination of the relatively liberal Alexander II.

For the rest of the era of czarist Russia, the fortunes of the Baptists varied. Any time the government cracked down on nonconformist movements, the Baptists suffered. When periods of relief and relative openness occurred, such as the liberal thaw in Romanov authoritarianism following Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), the Baptists generally enjoyed greater liberty. Such relief was always brief, however, and ultimately gave way to the more ruthless repression by Communism.

**Baptists and the Soviet Union**

**Revolutionary Russia**

In 1914 Russia entered World War I against the Central Powers, led by Germany. The war proved to be a costly mistake. The Russian forces suffered catastrophic defeats, and the war brought immense suffering to the Russian people. Revolutionaries undermined the government by appealing to the starving, war-weary Russians with slogans of “Peace, Land, Bread.” In March 1917 a socialist revolution toppled Czar Nicholas II.

Then in October 1917 (O.S.) the violent socialist faction, the Bolsheviks (later to be called the Communists) overthrew the moderate government. Under Nikolai Lenin, the Bolsheviks established a thoroughly Marxist state, eventually renaming it the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or the Soviet Union for short.

Surprisingly, the years following the Bolshevik Revolution were comparatively good ones for the Baptists. The Communists did not see the Evangelicals as a political threat, as the Russian Orthodox Church was, and some even appeared to think that a group persecuted by the czar’s government might be willing to make common cause with Communists. Perhaps even more important, the Soviet government was too concerned with establishing its own authority and fighting off counterrevolutions to worry greatly about small church groups.

As a result, Russian Baptists and Evangelicals entered a period of relative openness in the 1920s, with opportunities for evangelism and expansion. In June 1918, for example, while Russia was still under its Provisional Government between the fall of the Romanovs and the Bolshevik Revolution, Moody Tabernacle in Chicago hosted a General Conference for the Evangelization of Russia, well attended by large crowds eager to reach Russia with the gospel. I. S. Prokhanov was a major leader of the Evangelicals in this period, helping guide the group during the transition from czarist autocracy to Communist totalitarianism. In 1920 the Baptists and the Evangelicals came close to effecting a union, and they did succeed in lessening tensions between the groups. The result was a time of unprecedented growth for the Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Missionaries from Europe and North America joined the efforts. Among those ministering in the Soviet Union at this time was Jacob Wiens. He returned to his native land, along with his son Peter (who came to use the more standard Russian spelling of Vins for his last name).

According to Sawatsky, one by-product of this Euro-American participation was the exposure of the Russian Baptists to Western evangelical theology. In particular, Sawatsky says, Russian Baptists imbibed the influences of Keswick holiness teaching and dispensationalism (especially premillennialism). It is worth noting...
that one can see the roots of such influence even earlier in the ministries of F. W. Baedeker and Lord Radstock, both of whom were of Plymouth Brethren background, a group that was influential in spreading dispensationalist premillennial ideas.

**Stalinist Years**

The era of openness proved to be brief. Lenin died in 1924 and was succeeded by Joseph Stalin. Probably one of the few rulers in modern history to rival Adolph Hitler in savage cruelty, Stalin furthered the harsh totalitarian regime of the Communists. Through social engineering and outright repression, Stalin inflicted enormous suffering on the Russian people. In the twenty-five years of Stalin’s rule, some forty million citizens died by execution or starvation or died in prison.

**Soviet Religious Policy**—The year 1929 marked the beginning of Stalinist repression of the church. Some of the suffering resulted from Stalin’s general policies. Farm collectivization, for example, was Stalin’s policy of eliminating privately owned farms by joining them into government-owned collectives in which all farmers would work for the state. This change struck hard at the Baptists, who were mostly farmers and relied on family farms both for their living and for their family and communal life.

More specifically anti-religious was the Religion Law (or “Law on Religious Associations”) of 1929. The Soviet constitution stated, “Citizens of the USSR are guaranteed freedom of conscience, that is, the right to profess or not to profess any religion and to conduct religious worship or atheistic propaganda” (Article 52). The Religion Law, however, spelled out more specifically how the government intended to regulate religion. According to the new law, churches could give no material help to their members, which eliminated the churches’ charitable activities and increased dependence on the state. The law forbade evangelization, especially among young people (ages eighteen and under); this provision was a blow after the relatively open evangelization of the 1920s. Also congregations could have no church societies or organizations, save what was necessary for worship. The implication was that worship was restricted only to church buildings—leaving people who were permitted no buildings quite literally out in the cold. Even when a congregation had a building, the majority of citizens in any town could seize a church building for secular purposes and oust the congregation.

**Persecution**—Added to legal restrictions was a harsh policy of arrest, torture, and execution. In the light of the millions who died under the various forms of Stalinist tyranny, it is difficult to determine precisely how many Christians actually perished at the hands of the Communists for their faith. Many Christians likely died in the famines and other suffering caused by Stalin’s brutal industrialization program. Walter Kolarz cites statistics that indicate the effects of this persecution. In 1929 in the far east of the USSR the Baptists had 193 congregations and the Evangelical Christians had 118. In 1932 the two groups combined had only 85 congregations.

Joseph Stalin once said, “A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.” Certainly, the recounting of personal tragedies brings home the callous cruelty of the Stalinist repression in ways that the citing of cold statistics (no matter how appalling) can never do. Consider the case of Peter Vins. When the crackdown came, Soviet officials gave foreign missionaries the choice of becoming Soviet citizens or leaving the country. Peter Vins’s father, Jacob Wiens, chose to return to North America, where he ministered for several more years. Peter, however, had married and now had a son. He chose to become a Soviet citizen and remain. His period of ministry was brief and interrupted by imprisonment. His son, Georgi, recalled how as a boy he had seen his parents sewing portions of Scripture into his father’s clothing so that he could have the Scriptures in prison. Communist authorities arrested him for the final time in the mid-1930s. Several years later, government officials told Vins’s family he had died in a prison camp in 1943. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union did they discover that the secret police had shot Vins in 1936.

**Formation of the Baptist Union**—Throughout the 1930s the Russian Baptists suffered persecution and deprivation. Relief came, unexpectedly, with World War II. Hard pressed by the forces of Nazi Germany, Stalin attempted to rally all Soviet citizens to the national cause by any means possible. To secure Baptist support, the government promoted the formation of a Baptist union. Although such an organization had long been a
dream of Baptists and Evangelicals, it took government intervention to bring it about. Meeting in Moscow in 1944 (at government expense), Baptists and Evangelicals voted to form the All Union Council of Evangelical Christians—Baptists (AUCECB).

As popular as the Union may have been among many of the Evangelicals and Baptists, the event was not without complications. One of the most controversial aspects was the government’s decision that Pentecostal churches be pushed into the AUCECB as well. As a condition of joining (however unwillingly) in 1945, Pentecostals had to make several compromises with their practices and beliefs, most notably agreeing “to abstain from unknown tongues in general meetings.” Some Pentecostals eventually left the Union, preferring the dangers of independence to the compromise of their convictions.

The inclusion of the Pentecostals was not the only source of growth for the Union. The AUCECB extended its reach over even more non-Russian Baptists and other Evangelical Protestants as the USSR expanded westward after World War II. Kolarz says that by 1960 the AUCECB oversaw 5,400 congregations and maintained their oversight through the help of 45 presbyters, who were responsible for as many as 200 congregations apiece.

The government’s goal in forming the AUCECB was not simply garnering good will. The Soviets also wanted centralization—and the control that accompanied it. Rather than deal with scattered independent and semi-independent congregations, the Communist authorities now had one organization with a known leadership to whom they could make their will known—and whom they could hold accountable for failures. This situation contributed to a perception that the Union’s leaders were more eager to placate authorities than to promote the wellbeing of the churches, as in 1948 when AUCECB leader Jacob Zhidkov expressed satisfaction that the number of baptisms was declining—a good sign, he said, because it showed that novices and temporary converts were not being baptized. Even more clearly, the new organization was often at odds with the traditional Baptist polity and church organization. Sawatsky charges, “In spite of its protests to the contrary, the AUCECB during its first fifteen years had clearly usurped extensive powers away from local churches. Senior presbyters, for example, were appointed by Moscow, sometimes even the local presbyter was appointed by Moscow.”

Yet one should not assume that the formation of the Union marked an absolute decline in Baptist fortunes. In 1946 Baptist leaders in the USSR wrote a rather glowing letter to America stressing the supposed liberty they were enjoying. One might dismiss such comments as propaganda to please the Soviet government. Yet there were other signs of life as well. Immediately following World War II, Sawatsky reports, the Baptists saw a revival and remarkable growth, so much so that there was a shortage of church leadership. Following this was a second revival in the mid-1950s after the death of Stalin, particularly among ethnic Germans. Whatever the motives of the Communists in initiating the formation of the AUCECB, the event did mark an improvement in the condition of the churches.

Khrushchev and the Rise of the Unregistered Churches

To the relief of just about everyone, Joseph Stalin died in 1953. His successors, led by Nikita Khrushchev, initially relaxed the tyranny of the Stalinist regime. Under the label of “de-Stalinization,” the Soviet government loosened restrictions on freedoms of speech, the press, and religion. The Soviet Union permitted, for example, the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s novel One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, an unsparing portrait of life in a Stalinist prison camp. Under de-Stalinization, the church benefited from the limited printing of Bibles and hymnbooks and from the freeing of a number of prisoners from prison camps. As mentioned above, there was also a revival among the Baptists and an increase in numbers.

This period of openness did not last, however. In 1959 Khrushchev launched a campaign against the churches that lasted until his fall from power in 1964 and was renewed periodically by his successors. In 1961 alone, Sawatsky reports, the Soviets closed some three hundred Baptist churches. The Khrushchev crusade marked a shift in strategy from earlier persecutions. Previously, the Communists had treated Baptists as criminals. Now the Communist leadership began...
to regard religious dissidents as mentally ill and therefore subject to medical "treatment" in mental hospitals.

Another distinctive of the Khrushchev persecution is that it singled out the churches among the institutions of Soviet society. Michael Bourdeaux points out that Baptists had suffered greatly in the Stalinist era, but it was a time when every portion of Soviet society suffered, even many members of the Communist Party who perished in Stalin’s purges. In the 1960s, however, the Soviet government directed its efforts against the churches directly and especially against the Baptists.

"Instructional Letter"—The event that sparked the most prolonged controversy among Russian Baptists in the 1960s was not a government action but rather an action of the AUCECB (albeit under government pressure). In 1960 the Union issued what became known as the "Instructional Letter" (or "Letter of Instructions"). The Letter dampened evangelistic efforts by condemning "unhealthy practices of a drive for numbers of members." It discouraged the baptism of converts between the ages of eighteen and thirty and forbade accepting for membership anyone who had not completed his military service. The instructions curtailed religious activities: no religious services in one’s home and no participation in services other than those of one’s own congregation. If public baptisms were necessary, believers should avoid attracting crowds and should hold baptisms with the approval of state authorities.

This apparent accommodation by the Union to their Soviet overlords stunned many of the Baptists. Such instructions were particularly significant when the Baptist movement was feeling heightened concern over what had become by the 1950s an aging church membership. The letter, undercutting both evangelism and youth work, sparked a protest movement. At the head of the insurgents were Gennadi K. Kriuchkov and Georgi Vins, the latter the son of the martyred Peter Vins and the grandson of Jacob Wiens.

The protest group was originally called the Initsiativnaya gruppa ("action group") and labeled Initsiativniki, or sometimes the "Reform Baptists." Initially, Sawatsky reports, perhaps as much as half of the membership of the AUCECB supported the reformers in protest of the position of the Union’s leadership. The controversy soon shifted from an internal conflict to an outward split. The protestors lost all faith in the leaders of the Union and "accused the ministers of the AUCECB of conscious apostasy from the evangelical truth." The result was the formation of a new group, the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians—Baptists (CCECB). Kriuchkov became president of the organization and Vins its secretary.

Registered vs. Unregistered Churches—Because the AUCECB supported registration with the government and the CCECB generally opposed such registration, the two groups came to be known as the "registered churches" and the "unregistered churches." Actually, the terms are not precisely accurate. As mentioned above, at least some of the registered churches initially supported the protest. Furthermore, the CCECB did not actually reject registration. The group allowed registered churches to join under its by-laws but opposed any government interference that accompanied registration. As "The Statutes of Union" for the group say, "Registration of the ECB churches with the organs of government should not serve as an occasion for violation of the principle of the independence of the church from the state." Nor did a lack of registration necessarily mean adherence to the CCECB. Sawatsky points out that in the 1960s and 1970s perhaps as many as two-thirds of the Baptist congregations were unregistered, but not all unregistered churches necessarily supported the Initsiativniki.

The "Instructional Letter" undeniably sparked the conflict, and its policy of political accommodation was undoubtedly the central issue. But other factors heightened the division. Leon McBeth views the split as primarily Evangelicals (registered churches) versus Baptists (unregistered churches). There is evidence to support this idea. Hebly notes that the return of released prisoners in the mid-1950s brought back many Baptists who had not been part of the 1944 union and who did not want to see Baptists joined to the Evangelical Christians and the Pentecostals. Some of these opponents of the Union went under names such as "Pure Baptists" and "Free
Baptists.” Hebly suggests the presence of this faction may have been one of the roots of the 1960s split. It is possible that ethnic conflicts played a role. An observer sympathetic to the unregistered churches notes that members of the unregistered churches tend to be of ethnic German descent whereas those in the registered churches tend to be of Russian descent.

Some ideological differences also separated the two groups. Hebly suggests that the Evangelical Christians and the Baptists had different view on culture. Using H. Richard Niebuhr’s famous categories, the Evangelical Christians affirmed cultural involvement—“Christ the transformer of culture.” The Baptists, on the other hand, practiced a cultural separation—“Christ against culture” in Niebuhr’s parlance. It is interesting to note, for example, that the “Instructional Letter” from the leaders of the registered churches firmly admonished, “Narrow views which are still encountered among believers concerning art, literature, movies, radio, television, and so on should be decisively set aside.” Instead, “Members of the congregation should be worthy citizens of the Socialist homeland.” More basically, Sawatsky points out that the AUCECB tended to stress unity over purity and the CCECB stressed purity over unity. He quotes a spokesman of the CCECB: “Our major goal is purity and unity, but above all purity.”

Although these factors likely heightened the division, one should not lose sight of the central issue dividing the two groups. Georgi Vins described what he saw as the main difference:

One of the unions, the organization to which I belong, rests entirely and completely upon the gospel teaching, fundamental teaching of the gospel ... mainly absolute freedom of conscience, full separation of church and state. The gospel is the important thing. The main task of the church is preaching the gospel in this world. We believe the Lord Jesus is the head of the church and no one else has the right to dictate or interfere with the function of the church. And this, our stand, makes the difference between us and the other group which is in some ways under the influence of the government.

Condition of the Registered Churches—After the outbreak of this conflict, the AUCECB experienced both ups and downs in its relations with the government and its fellow believers. In response to the storm of protest, the Union in 1963 withdrew the “Instructional Letter” and made other overtures to protestors. But as Hebly points out, many of the protestors were in prison by that time and were in no position to appreciate peaceful gestures. Furthermore, Bourdeaux charges, the leadership of the AUCECB did not really attempt to give any place to the reformers in their special congress of 1963, apparently attempting to reconcile with the insurgents unilaterally.

More positively for the AUCECB, in 1963 (in the midst of the controversy) the Mennonite Brethren joined the Union. Thus another strand of Russia’s Stundist revival heritage was joined with the others. On a more controversial note, in 1962 the AUCECB joined the World Council of Churches at the urging of the Soviet government. This action increased the visibility and prestige of the Union. Yet the liberal slant of the WCC and the role of the Communist government in promoting the move created unease among conservative Protestants in the West (normally, the most natural supporters of the Russian Baptists). To some, joining the WCC merely confirmed that the AUCECB was but a propaganda tool of the USSR.

Recurrent through the statements and actions of the Baptist Union is a theme of what one may call resigned accommodation. McBeth quotes a registered Baptist as defining their situation with the government: “If we have sugar, we will drink tea with sugar. If we have no sugar, we will drink tea without sugar.” McBeth neatly summarized the situation for registered Baptists under the Soviet regime. Writing in 1987, he said, “It appears that the registered churches of the major union, while they behave circumspectly and do not push their luck, have freedom to hold stated services. However, they are not allowed to have Sunday Schools or give open religious instruction to youth. They have a perpetual shortage of Bibles and other religious literature and are not allowed to conduct a theological seminary.”

One must hasten to note that the registered churches were not theologically liberal. Georgi Vins observed in 1982, “Most Baptists in the Soviet Union, regardless of whether they are
registered or unregistered, believe in the absolute authority of the Word of God and in the deity of Jesus Christ. The only question that really divides the church in the Soviet Union … is their relationship to the government.”51

**Condition of the Unregistered Churches**—If conditions could be sometimes rocky for the registered churches, their situation was nothing compared to what the unregistered churches endured. Persecution and arrest became normal. Perhaps the worst atrocity was the execution by torture of Siberian Baptist pastor Nikolai Kuzmich Khmara in 1964, where the brutality of prison authorities included cutting out his tongue.52 In the late 1960s, over two hundred of the leaders of the unregistered were jailed, a number that declined somewhat in the 1970s.53

The leader who became most widely known in the West was Georgi Vins, secretary of the CCECB.54 Born in 1928, Vins had only scattered memories of his martyred father. Graduating from Kiev Polytechnical Institute, he became an electrical engineer. When the controversy broke out over the “Instructional Letter,” Vins plunged in on the side of the *Initsiativniki* and was ordained as an evangelist in 1962. He was arrested in Kiev for preaching and jailed for fifteen days. This was but a taste of the more drastic treatment he was to receive. In 1966 he received a three-year sentence for his activities, and in 1974 was imprisoned again. The latter imprisonment ended in 1979 when the Soviet Union, through negotiations with the Carter administration, stripped Vins of his citizenship and exiled him to the United States.

The problem for the unregistered churches was how (if at all) to protest or resist. They astonished Soviet authorities on May 16, 1966, when five hundred believers held a peaceful but quite public demonstration outside the Central Committee building in Moscow. They presented a petition and stayed all through the night, even in the rain. Finally, the police assaulted the crowd, forced them into a fleet of waiting buses, and took them to jail. Although quashed, the unheard-of demonstrations worried Soviet officials and resulted in more arrests and prosecutions.55

Rejecting overt resistance, the unregistered Baptists responded by gathering and publishing information on those who were prisoners for conscience’s sake in the Soviet Union. This information helped make the situation a matter of prayer among Christians worldwide, and the publicity (international at times) created some protection for those imprisoned. One such effort was the Council for Prisoners’ Relatives, begun in 1964. Among its most important leaders was Lidia Vins, widow of Peter Vins and mother of Georgi. She suffered a three-year imprisonment for her work.56 This organization wrote letters, circulated petitions, and printed bulletins. It was a major means of getting information about the unregistered churches to the West.

In the 1970s these attempts, with the help of some Western journalists, brought publicity, if not always relief, to the situation of the unregistered Baptists. Also in these years the Soviet Union was pursuing a policy of détente (relaxation of tensions) with the West, a situation that focused attention on the USSR’s treatment of religious dissidents. This situation likely contributed to the success of American diplomatic efforts to gain the release of Georgi Vins from prison in 1979. In exile in the United States, Vins formed the International Representation for the Council of Evangelical Baptist Churches of the Soviet Union. This organization continued to publicize the plight of Baptist dissidents behind the iron curtain, especially through its publication the *Prisoner Bulletin*.

One should note and dispel two common misconceptions about the situation for the unregistered churches. First, the unregistered churches faced not so much constant persecution as much as the constant threat of persecution. Although the believers could (and did) sometimes worship without interference, they had no legal standing and could and at any time be placed under arrest. Also, despite such persecution, Russian Baptists were not overtly anti-Communist. Many took seriously the biblical admonitions (e.g., Rom. 13) to honor their government. Georgi Vins wrote,

> We don’t comment or have any type of official statement about government, whether it be communism, socialism, or capitalism: that’s our principle. We believe there should not be any attempt to tie Christianity to some type of economic theory. Christians living in a totalitarian state would never raise issues or questions such as that. We will speak out
against atheism. The government won’t even allow us to do that, but we do.\textsuperscript{57}

As J. C. Pollock observes, “The idea that Christians are a fifth column longing to overturn the Revolution is far astray.”\textsuperscript{58} Rather, the concern of the registered churches was primarily for freedom of worship.

**Baptists and the Collapse of the USSR**

The situation for all Soviet citizens, including Baptists, changed drastically in the 1980s. In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party and president of the Soviet Union in 1988. Faced with a worsening Soviet economy, he announced a policy of perestroika (“restructuring”) to try to reform the USSR’s creaky Marxist system. Even more important was his announcement of glasnost, or “openness.” Like Khruschev’s de-Stalinization of the 1950s, glasnost launched a period of greater freedom for the Soviet people—freedom of speech, of the press, of dissent, and of religion.

The Baptists greeted these changes gladly but cautiously. A stream of church leaders emerged from the prison camps so that by December of 1988 not a single prisoner remained.\textsuperscript{59} Georgi Vins changed the name of his organization to Russian Gospel Ministries, International, shifting the emphasis from information about prisoners to promoting evangelism, missions, and church planting.\textsuperscript{60} Both registered and unregistered churches enjoyed greater freedom of worship. Yet the lessons of Russian history made them wary. Previous periods of openness under both the czars and the Communist commissars had been followed by fresh repression.

One cannot tell what would have followed Gorbachev’s reforms, for events soon overtook him. In the late 1980s Soviet-bloc nations in Eastern Europe overthrew their Communist governments and broke from the Soviet sphere of influence. Gorbachev did not respond. Reform movements gained momentum within the USSR, and pressure for change reached a breaking point—which came after the collapse of coup led by hard-line Communists in August 1991. On Christmas Day of that year, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ceased to exist. In its place stood a reduced nation of Russia and fourteen other new nations formed from the former Soviet republics.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought changes in the condition of Russian evangelicals, to say the least. The new Russian constitution gave citizens probably their greatest religious liberty in the nation’s history. Many American and other Western Christians began to direct evangelistic and missionary efforts to the newly opened field. As these Western Christians came in, Baptists often provided the most natural connection for American evangelicals and Fundamentalists.

A major change was the reorganization of the Baptist Union. The Pentecostals, no longer kept in the Union by coercion, separated and formed their own organization.\textsuperscript{61} The Union also fragmented by nationality, with Baptists in the former Soviet republics—now independent states—forming their own unions (with Russia and Ukraine forming the largest) joined in a federation. In addition to these departures, the AUCECB issued a revised estimate of its numbers. Saying that previous figures had been unwittingly inflated, the Union claimed only 3,000 churches with 250,000 members.\textsuperscript{62}

The collapse of the USSR did not bring about a reconciliation between the registered and unregistered churches. Although the initial cause of the split—government interference in the affairs of the churches—was no longer a problem, the other issues were not resolved. Furthermore, thirty years of conflict and ill feeling were not to be easily overcome. The unregistered churches in particular did not trust the registered churches. Also, with the lessening of the persecution that had united them, some of the unregistered churches began to manifest new divisions, such as tension between European Baptists who wanted oversight above the level of the local church and Asian Baptists who jealously guarded congregational autonomy.\textsuperscript{63}

The opening of Russia also opened lines of fellowship between American Christians and Russian Baptists for the first time. Mixed with the delight for this opportunity was also a sort of culture shock. Some Russian Christians became deeply concerned about Western influences in theology and culture.\textsuperscript{64} Some Americans, not understanding the history of the Russian Baptists, were surprised when the Russians espoused doctrines not always consistent with what Americans
were used to. One Baptist Fundamentalist of Landmarkist leanings, for example, complained, “Baptists in Russia believe in the universal church theory and that a person may lose their [sic] salvation.”

Complicating the situation for the Russian Baptists, in 1997 the Russian president signed a new religion law. This legislation tightened restrictions on foreign religious work in Russia and privileged the position of the Russian Orthodox Church. Its most notable provision required church groups to register as “religious associations” with varying limitations on their activities according to their classification. Only churches officially recognized fifteen years before the law was enacted (i.e., recognized under the Soviet Union) could achieve the highest status. This last provision reinvigorated the old registered-unregistered dichotomy as churches from the AUCECB were better able to demonstrate a legal existence under the Communist state.

The situation for the Baptists in the other Soviet republics varied. Some, particularly those countries more European in culture and heritage, allowed a great deal of liberty, although they often required some form of government registration. A study in 2000 by Paul Marshall of the Center for Religious Freedom gave only Estonia, of all the former Soviet republics, its highest rating for religious freedom. Latvia and Ukraine were close behind. Most of the former Soviet republics, including Russia, ranked in the middle of Marshall’s findings as “partly free.” Two former Soviet republics, the predominantly Muslim nations of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, ranked at the bottom as “not free.”

Turkmenistan garnered the most publicity for its repression of Protestant minorities. In late 1999, for example, Turkmen authorities deported two CCECB pastors and raided four CCECB congregations. Drawing international attention was the case of Turkmen Baptist pastor Shageldy Atakov. Arrested in December of 1998 on a charge of swindling, Atakov endured not just imprisonment but also beatings, torture, and subjection to psychotropic drugs. His refusal to renounce his faith led Atakov to fear he would never emerge from his imprisonment alive. After international pressure, however, Turkmen authorities released him in January 2002.

The situation for Baptists in the Islamic republics was at least as bad as—if not worse than—their plight under the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

The story of the Russian Baptists is hardly ended, although it will likely be constantly changing. A group that has learned to endure czarist autocracy, Communist totalitarianism, and the uncertainties of contemporary Russia can likely continue to adapt as conditions change. There remains in the history of the Russian Baptists examples of bravery under persecution and lessons about the necessity as well as the danger of Christians trying to accommodate the demands of their government and culture. Perhaps, they ultimately hearken back to the words of Christ: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). Throughout their history the Russian Baptists have sought to render Caesar his due, but they likewise have offered a testimony of allegiance above all to those things that are God’s.

Notes


4Brandenburg, p. 46.

5See Brandenburg, pp. 48-56; Hebly, pp. 26-27.


12A letter by Ivan Kargel describing the meeting that led to the formation of this Union is found in Lawrence Klippenstein, “Russian Evangelicalism Revisited: Ivan Kargel and the Founding of the Russian Baptist Union,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 27, no. 2 (April 1992): 42-48.

13See Hebly, pp. 59-60.

14See Jesse W. Brooks, *Good News for Russia* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1918), for a description of this conference and the addresses given there.

15Sometimes spelled Prochanov. A number of incidents from the revolutionary era either involving Prokhanov or related by him are found in Brandenburg, pp. 173-85 passim. See also Durasoff, pp. 50-60.

16Durasoff, pp. 61-64.

17Sawatsky, pp. 340-41.

18See Durasoff, pp. 77-87.

19Kolarz, p. 310.


21Sawatsky gives a history of failed attempts at union between the Baptists and Evangelical Christians, pp. 78-84.

22The original name was “Evangelical Christians and Baptists,” but the and was changed to a dash to stress unity between the two groups. Sawatsky gives a full description of the circumstances of the 1944 union, pp. 84-99.


24Kolarz, p. 305.

25Sawatsky, p. 348.

26See Hebly, pp. 116-20.

27Sawatsky, pp. 56-59.

28Sawatsky, pp. 64-67.

29Sawatsky, p. 131.

30Bourdeaux, *Faith on Trial*, p. 50.

31The text of the most relevant portions of the “Instructional Letter” is found in McBeth, *Sourcebook*, pp. 618-19.

32For Kriuchkov’s account of his differences with the AUCECB, see Gennadi Kryuchkov [Kriuchkov], “The Church Soviet Authorities Designed,” *Sword and Trowel*, November 1984, pp. 2-5 (supplement).


34Sawatsky, p. 140. The text of the Initsiativnik’s charge and appeal is found in Michael Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, pp. 53-62.

35Quoted in McBeth, *Sourcebook*, p. 615.


37Sawatsky, p. 183.


39Hebly, pp. 123, 144.

40“Changing Scene in the Soviet Union,” *Sword and Trowel*, 29 December 1989, p. 3.

41Hebly, pp. 144-45.
44Sawatsky, p. 234.
46Hebly, pp. 143-44.
47Bourdeaux, p. 87.
52In 1979 Georgi Vins reported that he knew of at least ten Ukrainian Baptists who had been tortured to death in the previous twenty years. “Vins Asks Support for Soviet Dissidents,” *Christian Inquirer*, June-July 1979, p. 10.
53Sawatsky, p. 148.
55This protest described in detail in Bourdeaux, *Faith on Trial in Russia*, pp. 9-22.

64See “Russian Baptists and Western Theological Decadence,” *Sword and Trowel*, 24 May 1990, p. 10.
67Thus, for example, the favored category includes many Baptist congregations—those which were willing during the pre-glasnost years to make the compromises needed to get official registration.” Lawrence A. Uzzell, “Letter from Moscow,” *First Things*, January 1998, p. 18.