
Special Section

The Oppressed Brother: The Challenge of the True and Free Adventists

by Charles Scriven

Previous issues of SPECTRUM have contained articles on the Seventh-day Adventists in the Soviet Union, many of whom suffer from oppression at the hands of a government antagonistic to their religious commitments.

In what follows, the president of Walla Walla College, Clifford Sorenson, and Roland Blaich, a professor of history at the same college, discuss the situation of the True and Free Seventh-day Adventists in the Soviet Union. These Adventists' convictions about the proper relationship of church and state and their sufferings at the hands of the Soviet government constitute a moral challenge to the Adventist community.

Scriven: Dr. Sorensen, how did you acquire a special interest in the situation of Adventists, and in particular True and Free Adventists, in the Soviet Union?

Sorensen: My interest was largely generated from the fact that my wife's family was on the scene in Russia when the Adventist Church experienced many of the

Sorenson, whose doctorate is from the University of Southern California, recently traveled to the Soviet Union and met with members of the True and Free Seventh-day Adventist Church. Blaich's doctoral dissertation at Washington State University dealt with the Christian churches under Hitler, and he continues to pursue his interest in the relation of religious groups to totalitarian governments.

The moderator of these conversations was Charles Scriven, a member of the theology faculty of Walla Walla College and the associate editor of SPECTRUM. They were recorded in two separate sessions and later edited for publication. Scriven recently traveled to the Soviet Union where he was able to meet with members of the (registered) Seventh-day Adventist Church in Moscow.

—The Editors

early events leading to today's circumstances. At least one of our relatives was a delegate to the 1924 Moscow Conference where key differences arose among those in attendance.

Scriven: Have you ever met with Adventists of the Soviet Union yourself?

Sorensen: I have never personally met with members of the registered church, but I have met my wife's cousins who work as pastors in the True and Free Adventist Church.

Charles Scriven is an associate professor of theology at Walla Walla College. He is the author of *The Demons Have Had It*.

Scriven: Dr. Blaich, your background includes doctoral studies on totalitarian governments, specifically Nazi Germany.

Blaich: Yes, my studies have centered on the Christian churches in a Nazi totalitarian setting. Naturally, I am very interested in the experience of the church under communism, specifically in East Germany, but also in the Soviet Union.

Scriven: Perhaps that's enough by way of background. The topic is the Adventist Church in the Soviet Union. I am particularly interested in the situation of the True and Free Adventists there, though I hope that this discussion will illuminate the general question of the church's existence in a totalitarian society. Now, to get started, would you say something, Dr. Blaich, about the nature of the totalitarian state. With what kind of government does the church deal in Russia?

Blaich: First, the totalitarian state, whether fascist or communist, is based on an ideology that defines truth and gives to the group in power a monopoly on truth. It demands perfect conformity in all spheres of life. Second, the totalitarian state characteristically seeks to mobilize the masses. This is where it differs from mere dictatorship. It seeks to involve the masses positively in the system. It does this, on the one hand, through indoctrination—this requires a monopoly on information—and on the other hand, through terror.

Scriven: Can you comment, in particular, on the special problems churches face under totalitarian governments?

Blaich: The ideological state is necessarily opposed to the church. The church is an alternate source of information or truth. It denies the ideology's absolute claim to truth. It rejects the totalitarian claim to dominate all spheres of life. And the Christian refuses to be mobilized into the system. The church is inevitably a rival that must be conquered or eliminated. There is no question about that. The only question is how.

Sorensen: But the Russian government

officially affirms its people's right to religious freedom and would cite the existence of Christian churches and of millions of Moslems within its borders as evidence of this.

Blaich: Yes, this is true, but it can be explained. The ideal—for any totalitarian state—is to break down traditional structures, including traditional religions, so that it can mold the masses into a new society. It is very difficult to do this when these structures have existed for a long time. The Soviets, as did the Nazis before them, have used a diversified approach. They have used atheistic indoctrination—through the media, schools, and youth movements. They have used intimidation and persecution. But at the same time, they have wanted to give the appearance of toleration—of benevolence, in some cases—toward churches and religious leaders. This is to give the impression, at home and abroad, that the persecution that is widely talked about is actually not happening, but that the country is a legal state and only deals harshly with those who are violating the law. Thus they can avoid the formation of a united, determined opposition.

Scriven: In light of this background on the relation of churches and totalitarian governments, let's turn now, in particular, to the situation of the Adventist Church in Russia. Articles in past issues of *SPECTRUM* (Vol. 11 No. 4) have acquainted our readers with the broad outline of what is now known: that in the middle 1920s a division among Soviet Adventists occurred over how the church should relate to the totalitarian Soviet government; that from then until now many Adventists have been willing to register their congregations with the government and to cooperate with the wishes of the government to a substantial degree; that others have in various degrees and ways resisted the efforts of the government to domesticate the church; that among these latter a quite radical group has existed under the name True and Free Seventh-day Adventists. Because of your

background, Dr. Sorensen, I am especially interested in what you have to say about the True and Free Adventists, who came into considerable prominence when their 87-year-old leader, Vladimir Shelkov, died in a labor camp in 1980.

Sorensen: Our limited communications with family members of the True and Free Church indicate that, in their view, the official Adventist church—the church registered with government agencies and recognized by our own central church administration—has abandoned to a large measure, or at least distorted, the Adventist “truth.” They think the official Adventist Church has, in a sense, become Babylon—has eroded certain basic tenets, by having surrendered its autonomy and become a

pawn of the state. They are not happy that the official church is willing to take the route of quiet diplomacy; they believe we must speak out, be heard, be confrontive, and challenge the authority of the government, with respect to its infringement of individual freedoms, especially as they pertain to the church.

Scriven: In what ways do the True and Free Adventists think Adventism should confront the state?

Sorensen: Embarrassment of the state is one tactic they have used. Through published statements and in other ways, they have tried to show the true character of the present regime both to the citizens of their nation and to those who reside outside the Soviet Union. They try to prove, for

Amnesty International Asks Adventists to Help

The following letters requesting assistance have been received during the last few months. Amnesty International, an organization which won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1977, has many times spoken out on behalf of Adventists imprisoned in the Soviet Union. Amnesty International has made one of its principal objectives the unconditional release of “prisoners of conscience,” persons who have not used or advocated violence and are detained for their beliefs, color, sex, ethnic origin, language, or religion.

One way Amnesty International’s 250,000 members in 134 countries work for their release is to form groups that adopt specific prisoners, whose cases the group documents and publicizes. Amnesty International currently has under adoption as prisoners of conscience, approximately 70 Seventh-day Adventists, most of whom Amnesty International says are imprisoned for producing, possessing, or distributing unofficial religious literature.

—The Editors

To the Editors: Since early this year, Amnesty International Group 250 in Chico, California, has been acting in defense of a young woman who has been unjustly imprisoned in the Soviet Union. Leta Nagreskaite, who belongs to the Church of True and Free Seventh-day Adventists, was arrested September 1981 in Leningrad while distributing illegal religious pamphlets. The two-and-one-half-year sentence she received is a clear violation of the basic right to religious expression guaranteed by international covenants, as well as by the U.S.S.R. Constitution.

Leta Nagreskaite was born January 9, 1953. She comes

from Kaunas, Lithuania. She was employed as a curator in the Republican Zoological Gardens. She has a mother and a sister, Eita, who is her identical twin. Leta and another woman came to Leningrad on September 21, 1981. They were seen placing printed leaflets in mail boxes and were reported to the police. Leta was arrested and had in her possession 13 copies of *Open Letter* Number 15 in a plastic bag. The *Open Letter* is a bulletin which reports on the violation of rights of religious believers. Issue Number 14, of which Amnesty International has a copy, reports on the suspicious death of Seymon Bakholdin, which occurred while he was serving a seven-year sentence for his religious activities.

A trial was held in Leningrad City Court from December 17 to December 21, 1981. The chairwoman of the court was V. I. Poludnyakova and the Procurator was Trubina. Leta Nagreskaite was charged under Article 190-1 of the RSFSR Criminal Code: “circulation of fabrications known to be false which defame the Soviet state and social system.” The maximum sentence under this article is three years. Because she had a good character reference from her place of work and no previous convictions, the court said it would be lenient. She was sentenced to two-and-a-half-years’ imprisonment in a corrective labor colony. Amnesty International does not yet know her exact whereabouts.

Our group has become involved in this case out of a concern for protecting human rights for all people. We particularly welcome your participation in campaigns such as this to help the victims of religious persecution.

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instance, that the authorities are not supporting, as they claim, true freedom of conscience and religion. This is the main thrust.

Scriven: Can you be more specific about the criticism the True and Free Adventists have of the officially recognized church?

Sorensen: The primary concerns are, first, the apparent willingness, as they perceive it, of the official church to cooperate with military service requirements of the government—to the point even of bearing arms; second, the willingness of the church to cooperate with the government regarding prior approval of sermons and government supervision of the transfer of ministers from one congregation to another; third, the apparent willingness of

the church members to send their children to school on the Sabbath and to cooperate in government-enforced programs in the autumn, when young people are required to harvest crops on the Sabbath. These are all ways in which they believe the church has surrendered itself to the government and hence become a modern-day Babylon.

Scriven: How did these differences develop, anyway?

Sorensen: It would seem that the roots of this issue stem from World War I and the military service issue which developed in Germany as a result. The Friedensau meeting held in July of 1920 is very important in this respect. The purpose of this gathering was to bring together the various elements within Germany and

To the Editors: The Hudson Valley Group of Amnesty International has been working to obtain the release of Rikhard Albertovitch Spalin from imprisonment in a Soviet labor camp. Mr. Spalin is a member of the Church of the True and Free Seventh-day Adventists and has been incarcerated for both his association with and evangelical work for his church.

Rikhard Spalin was born in 1937 and resided with his wife, Galina Ivanovna, and their four children in Georgievsk, which is between the Black and Caspian seas, in the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic of the U.S.S.R. Mr. Spalin was arrested with others in the Stavropol area on August 13, 1978, and on June 11, 1979, charged—under Articles 190-2, 162, and 92 of the RSFSR Criminal Code—with circulating anti-government slander, engaging in a prohibited trade and stealing state property. Mr. Spalin was found guilty and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in a labor camp in Velsk, near the White Sea. Reliable sources report that Mr. Spalin's arrest stemmed from his salvaging of a discarded printing press and its subsequent use to print *True Witness*, an underground religious publication.

Conditions in the Velsk camp are described as poor. In addition, Mr. Spalin is imprisoned 1,300 miles from his family, is allowed no visitors, and mail service is prohibited or delayed for months. He has reportedly developed a seizure disorder (very possibly caused by physical abuse), hypertension, and heart disease.

Amnesty International believes that Rikhard Spalin has been imprisoned for no other reason than the free exercise of religion and the expression of his beliefs. In theory, these rights are supposedly secured under the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 18 and 19), ratified by the USSR in 1973. In reality, these rights do not exist.

Our strategy is to mount a constant barrage of correspondence directed at Soviet officials who are responsible for Mr. Spalin's imprisonment and to pressure those officials into, at minimum, improving Mr. Spalin's living conditions, but, ultimately, into allowing his release. The success of this tactic relies on the generation of letters from a large number of people and organizations. To this end, we have approached the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists to enlist their help in mobilizing the American Adventist community to remonstrate on the behalf of Mr. Spalin. Unfortunately, we were informed that the General Conference does not recognize the True and Free Church as legitimate, and therefore will do nothing on his behalf. Consequently, your help is vital to the success of our efforts. We need to inform the Adventist community of the desperate plight of Mr. Spalin and the entire True and Free Church.

We implore our readers to write to Soviet officials. Two officials who reside in the United States are:

Ambassador Oleg A. Troyanovsky
United Nations Mission of the USSR
136 East 67th Street
New York City, N.Y. 10021

Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin
Embassy of the USSR
1125 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

It is our hope that through the cooperation of Amnesty International, SPECTRUM, and the Adventist Community, Rikhard Spalin's freedom can be secured.

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Europe which held opposing views on the issue of combatancy.

Scriven: Explain the connection between all of this and what is going on now in Russia.

[True and Free Seventh-day Adventists] think the official Adventist Church has, in a sense, become Babylon . . . by having surrendered its autonomy and become a pawn of the state.

Sorensen: Some leaders of our church in Germany in the early days of World War I had indicated that participation of our young men in the military, including the bearing of arms, was a church-approved position. A group later identified as the “opposition party” was highly displeased with this state of affairs and became openly opposed to the leadership and tried to rally the church members to their viewpoint. At the Friedensau meetings, the General Conference representatives met with the various church factions to discuss the problem and to bring about conciliation. A. G. Daniels was chairman of these meetings.

This all ties to the Russian problem because at the conclusion of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian government sought to establish a relationship with the Christian community as a whole and, subsequently, with the Adventist church in particular. The government had learned about the early German statement allowing the bearing of arms and took it to be a representative statement of the church’s posture with respect to combatancy. In other words, government officials took this policy to justify their view that every young man in Russia who was an Adventist should bear

arms and participate fully in military service. What had happened in Germany, therefore, had a significant impact with Russian authorities and on the issues considered at the 1924 Moscow Conference.

At the Friedensau meetings, the General Conference leadership had hoped to bring about sufficient understanding so as to facilitate further dialogue and study. The transcript of these meetings, however, suggests that the opposition party members present at the meeting were not persuaded, and the effort to encourage further dialogue largely failed. We must bear in mind, of course, that the opposition party felt they had been deeply hurt, even betrayed, by the action of their leaders. They felt that the church in Germany should have supported noncombatancy and regarded this as the traditional position of the church. (It is not clear, however, that the general church had had any previous occasion to establish a clear position on the issue.) As a consequence of the collaboration of church leaders with government representatives, many German Adventists who were committed to a noncombatancy position as a matter of conscience were incarcerated or lost their lives. This resulted in major abrasions between the groups, between those who felt they should support leadership and those who felt they should support what they saw to be the traditional—and biblical—posture of the church.

Scriven: What was the 1924 Moscow Conference on which, as you say, all of this had an impact?

Sorensen: The Russian authorities requested the church in 1924 to send delegates to Moscow for a meeting on church-government relations. When the delegates arrived, the Russian government presented previously prepared documents specifying church latitudes and authority limits. These “agreements” specify most of the controls which prevail today. There were subsequent conferences in 1928 and in the early 1930s, each establishing more restrictive policies for the church. Delegates to the 1924

meeting were, in many cases, intimidated by government agents while traveling to Moscow on the trains. They were instructed in no uncertain terms as to the issues and how they would vote. At that convention one group signed the documents, thinking it would be best to concede and be cooperative; another group refused and subsequently became identified as the True and Free Adventists.

Scriven: We've talked a bit about the background and outlook of the True and Free Adventists. What do you understand about the relationships that now exist between True and Free Adventists and those Adventists who register and cooperate, as far as possible, with the government?

Sorensen: Through various communications, I judge that both groups are following rather independent courses with very minimal communication and, in many cases, with substantial levels of distrust of each other. We must keep in mind, however, that the True and Free Church has been identified as a subversive and unauthorized group by government agencies. For that reason its members are not willing to participate in any type of public forum. This makes it nearly impossible to bring the two groups together in order to resolve mutual problems and establish confidence and trust.

Scriven: This difficulty of communication between the True and Free Adventists and the rest of the Adventist community complicates the whole question of how the church should understand its relationship to these people. In view of the little that we do know, how, Dr. Sorensen, do you think the SDA Church should respond to their plight?

Sorensen: Unfortunately, the church has been quite reluctant to respond in any setting. Of course the matter is extremely delicate. In a public setting, certainly, the church has to tread very carefully. Certain public statements could damage existing lines of communication and even existing freedoms.

Scriven: You mean that speaking out on behalf of the True and Free Adventists

would have the effect of making things more miserable for the registered Adventists?

Sorensen: There can be little doubt on that point. On the other hand, silence about these matters, or even an effort to negotiate in quiet, careful ways, can also yield nothing; the process can go on without any evidence of results.

Blaich: Negotiation is meaningful and can be successful only where it is done from a position of strength. That rule from diplomacy must also be applied here. There will be little incentive for the Russian government to give at all on behalf of the True and Free Adventists, unless it becomes clear that there is something for them to gain in giving. And I think that is where the importance of speaking up comes in. The potential of our speaking out would mean, for them, losing something.

Scriven: How would it mean losing something?

Blaich: The Soviet Union is sensitive to world opinion. This is demonstrated in the release of dissidents. The Soviet Union would like to appear as a legal state that guarantees all reasonable constitutional rights.

Sorensen: If it would be a mistake for the church to single out the plight of the True and Free Adventists through official church organs, surely as a church we could at least speak out on behalf of all peoples in controlled or restricted societies. In my view, our church should develop a significant profile on the general issue of the freedom of conscience. This could be achieved in world leadership settings—such as the recent Madrid Conference, for example.

Scriven: This is one way in which the church as an official organization might help assuage the pain of oppressed peoples like the True and Free Adventists. But would an effective approach include a variety of ways of dealing with totalitarian governments? How, Dr. Blaich, did the churches in Nazi Germany which were openly critical of Hitler do what they did?

Blaich: There were different types of resistance to the Nazis: from that of organized groups to that of individuals, from outspoken statements of opposition to quiet, passive resistance.

Scriven: And it did have the effect of helping, in its way, to undermine the Nazi leadership?

Blaich: Yes. Christians who resisted at all—and simply living the life of a Christian is an act of resistance to evil—presented an automatic limit to the development of totalitarianism. Some church leaders in Germany were quite outspoken especially on issues such as the atheistic indoctrination of youth, infringement on parental rights, euthanasia, and the violation of basic human rights of some minorities such as the Jews.

As a church, we have, to a degree, been trained to be passive, apolitical, and uninvolved.

Some even suggested openly that the Nazi state violated God's law and natural law and therefore was not a legitimate state. The effect was the suspension of some Nazi programs such as euthanasia, or at least the modification of Nazi tactics. This is a fact which can be clearly demonstrated. Certainly on a broad basis, the progress of the Nazi *Gleichschaltung*—the conformity of society with Nazi ideology—was greatly slowed down.

I should say, too, by the way, that there is another dimension of resistance to Nazism that we haven't mentioned yet. Christians in Germany were aided by Christian spokesmen in other places—England, America, and the Scandinavian countries, for example—spokesmen who wielded power through public opinion.

Scriven: But what about Christians who did not resist Nazism?

Blaich: Well, here we touch on a sore spot. The Christian church has been

subjected to much criticism for this. It is true that in a country where more than 90 percent of the population were members of a church, Nazi crimes would not have taken place except for the silence, toleration, and even cooperation of Christians.

It is sad to have to admit that members of the Adventist Church cooperated. To protect the institution and organizational structure of the denomination, the leaders of the Adventist Church accommodated to the Nazi state and its ideological stance. For example, the German *Morning Watch* for April 20, 1940, praised Adolf Hitler for his humility, self sacrifice, and "warm heart."^{*} Adventists even disfellowshipped members of Jewish origin.

In all fairness I should add that there *were* a few persons in our church who were subversive and risked their lives in the process of protecting the persecuted. As always, the men and women of conviction and courage were few and far between.

Scriven: All of this suggests that there is a useful distinction to be made between the witness of the church as an official organization and the witness of the individual member. Ought we as individuals to be more outspoken in voicing our support of people such as members of the True and Free Adventist Church?

Sorensen: There were individuals in Nazi Germany and other conquered and occupied countries who had a profound influence for good, beyond all proportions of their number. Standing unflinchingly on a principle, even to the point, often, of sacrificing themselves, they forced government officials either to do something drastic or to back away. As a church, we have, to a degree, been trained to be passive, apolitical, and uninvolved. There are many settings where we could, by vigilance on behalf of human rights, make a difference in the world.

^{*}See Erwin Sicher, "Seventh-day Adventist Publications and the Nazi Temptation," *SPECTRUM*, Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 11-24.