
More Persecution of Soviet Adventists

by Oxana Antic

The campaign in the Soviet press against Reform Adventists—members of the unregistered All-Union Church of True and Free Seventh-day Adventists—which has been going on for some years, appears to be reaching its culmination. *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, one of the newspapers that regularly publishes articles fulminating against the unregistered Adventists, recently published a long two-part article by Boris Chekhonin entitled "Who Do the 'Living Christs' Serve?"¹

In the first part of the article, Chekhonin, who is a political commentator for TASS, describes a visit he made to the home of V. Vasil'chenko, an Adventist who had been arrested, in the company of a senior investigator of the Tashkent Public Prosecutor's Office. The investigator showed the journalist the basement of the house, which contained equipment used by the unregistered Adventists to print their publication, *Vernyi Svifetel'* (*The True Witness*).

The second part of the article deals mainly with Vladimir Shelkov, the chairman of the unregistered Adventists who died on January 27, 1980, at the age of 84 in a strict-regime labor camp in Yakutia. Chekhonin speaks of Shelkov as though he were still alive and at liberty today. He writes, for example: "Shelkov, his accomplices the brothers A.I. and M.I. Murkin, and other

leaders of the sect are striving to turn religion into a 'curtain of fire,' an 'instrument of psychological warfare.'" He describes in detail how Shelkov is supposed to have beaten and tortured his grown-up children. He repeats again and again that Shelkov is "a fascist toady," "a Nazi accomplice," "a traitor," and so on. Only in passing does he mention that, after allegedly staging a mock funeral, "the falsifier really does die." One charge that Chekhonin levels against the unregistered Adventists is that they have become "a real Jesuit Mafia" and, as a result, "the needy and those with many children were refused help." He conveniently ignores the fact that Soviet religious legislation categorically forbids religious organizations to engage in any charitable activities.

Adventists of the True Remnant, as adherents of the All-Union Church of True and Free Seventh-day Adventists are sometimes known, are one of the religious groups most persecuted in the Soviet Union. This group broke away from the official Adventist organization in 1924, when the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Seventh-day Adventists addressed a pledge of loyalty to the USSR Central Executive Committee. Prior to that, the Adventists had been opposed to the October Revolution, which they regarded "the banner of the Antichrist." Despite the pledge of loyalty, the officially recognized Adventists, like other churches, suffered terribly under Stalin, subsequently being deprived of their central organization.

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While the unregistered Adventists are the target of a vicious campaign of denigration in the press, it is worth noting that even the factual information about Adventists in the Soviet Union that was to be found, for example, in the 1964 edition of the *Shorter Scientific Dictionary of Atheism*,² is missing from the 1984 edition of the *Dictionary of Atheism*.³ In fact, the later work contains no separate entry at all on Adventists in the Soviet Union.

There would seem to be no term of abuse that the press has not used to describe the leading members of the All-Union Church of True and Free Seventh-day Adventists. They have been called "swindlers," "obscurantists," "traitors," "rabble," "parasites" and "criminals." *Pravda Vostoka*, for example, published a series of three articles entitled respectively, "The Maestro of the 'True Remnant,'" "The Parasite from the 'True Remnant,'" and "The Swindler Brethren from the 'True Remnant.'"⁴

The first of them, by A. Grigor'ev, deals with Sheldov's son, also named Vladimir. The younger Shelkov went on trial before the Kattakurgan People's Court in Samarkand Oblast in March or April 1984, and was sentenced to five years in strict-regime camps on a charge of speculating in spare parts for cars and motorcycles. While Grigor'ev describes the defendant as a "grabber" and "speculator," Shelkov himself stated several times during the trial that he was being persecuted for his faith: "I am a believer; that's why I'm being hounded. I'm suffering for my faith. They did the same thing to my father."

The second article described a visit the author made with an investigator to see another Adventist, Ivan Cheremisov, in the prison where he was being held. Cheremisov too said that he was being victimized by the authorities because he was a believer. Cheremisov is accused of violating the Ten Commandments in his way of life and even

Spectrum Readers Respond To Amnesty International

by Charles Teel, Jr.

Many letters of support for Soviet Adventist Arseny Stepanovich Matsyuk were secured from *Spectrum* readers in response to a letter to the editor posted by an Amnesty International Group and published in the Vol. 12, No. 4 issue of *Spectrum*.

Matsyuk was arrested by Soviet authorities July 17, 1980, in the Zhitomir region of the Ukraines, presumably for passing out literature expressing beliefs deemed inappropriate by his government. He is a member of the True and Free Seventh-day Adventists, a nonconforming branch of Russian Adventism.

"I would estimate that between three and four hundred signatures were gathered as a result of an appeal to *Spectrum*," noted Kim McKormie, a member of Amnesty's Adoption Group assigned to register support for Matsyuk. "In addition to our *Spectrum* contributors we collected hundreds of signatures ourselves and also from Amnesty groups across the country."

Independent of any government political faction, economic interest or religious creed, Amnesty International was the recipient of the 1977 Nobel Peace Prize. The organization is comprised of 250,000 volunteers in more than 130 countries whose chief activity is to write letters to government officials on behalf of "prisoners of conscience" whose cases have been researched by Amnesty's secretarial staff. (To qualify as an Amnesty prisoner of conscience it must be documented that an individual has neither employed nor advocated violence and has been imprisoned for expressing his religious or political beliefs.)

Should *Spectrum* readers wish to be alerted to the existence of an Amnesty group near them, they can write: Amnesty International, National Section Office, 304 58th Street, New York, NY 10019.

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in his conversation with the journalist, who presents the conclusion of the visit in particularly colorful terms:

“Just for a second, the mask of good nature left the thin face with its high cheekbones; the eyes flashed, and a spark of raging fury swept towards me from the corner of the cell. I am sure he wanted to violate another commandment—the sixth.”

To judge from its tone, the article is directed primarily at religious readers, particularly unregistered Adventists, and aims to discredit Cheremisov in their eyes by revealing his alleged violations of all the Ten Commandments. Cheremisov was also mentioned in an article in *Kosomol'ets Uzbekistana*, which states that, when charged with stealing a car, “he did not even confess his guilt during the trial.”⁵

Despite the laconic statement in the *Dictionary of Atheism* that “the total number of followers of Adventism in our country is now relatively small,”⁶ it would appear even from articles in the press that congregations of unregistered Adventists exist in many

parts of the USSR. Not long ago, *Sovetskaya Moldviya* complained about the situation in the village of Gura-Galbenei, where members of the local Adventist congregation “even asked for a special school to be started for the children of believers that would open on Sundays.”⁷ (The Adventists observe Saturday as a day of prayer and have frequently applied to the authorities to have their children freed from school on that day.)

There are also congregations of unregistered Adventists in Georgia. Several years ago, *Zarya Vostoka* published an article about a court case involving two women members of an unregistered Adventist group in Tbilisi.⁸ Similar groups are to be found in Chernigov Oblast, on the Don, in Leningrad, and in Vinnitsa Oblast. Everywhere they are persecuted. At the beginning of last year, a petition signed by 378 Adventists accusing the Soviet government of “genocide against believers” was received by the International Society for Human Rights.⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, October 4 and 5, 1984.
2. *Kratkii nauchno-ateistichesky slovar'*, Moscow, 1964, pp. 12-13.
3. *Ateistichesky slovar'*, Moscow, 1984, pp. 9-10.
4. *Pravda Vostoka*, April 17, April 20, and June 15, 1984.

5. *Komsomolets Uzbekistana*, August 1, 1984.
6. *Ateistichesky slovar'*, *op. cit.* p. 10.
7. *Sovetskaya Moldaviya*, July 15, 1984.
8. *Zarya Vostoka*, July 2, 1981.
9. *Ostkirchliche Infomationen*, January 1983, p. 7.