

The Persecution of Baptists in Russia.

LAST July my attention was called to the persecution of Russian Baptists, and I received a promise from Mr. Arthur Henderson, the Foreign Secretary, that when diplomatic relations with the Soviet were resumed, he would make an appeal to the Soviet Government on behalf of some hundred Russian Baptist Pastors and teachers exiled or in prison.

Since then persecution has continued in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Baptists have been subjected to a more rigorous persecution as part of a general attack on religion.

The whole of Christendom has become alarmed, and we have witnessed official protests by the Pope, the leaders of the Anglican and Free Churches in this country, and by leaders of religious life in America and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, the question has degenerated into a controversy on political and party lines. The result has been the publication of evidence of tortures and murders of Priests of the Orthodox Church in Russia, of pogroms, and of wholesale persecution of all Christians in the U.S.S.R., all alleged to be more or less officially inspired by the Soviet Government. The agitation has reached such dimensions that the immediate severance of diplomatic relations with Russia is demanded.

The reply of the Soviet authorities has taken the form of a denial of any persecution and even an assertion that complete liberty of worship exists. This contention is supported by the head of the Orthodox Church in Moscow in a recent interview with the Press.

What are we to believe? Are we the dupes of Anti-Russian propaganda initiated by White Russians and broadcast from Riga, or have these persecutions any foundation in fact?

It is the purpose of this article to examine impartially the facts so far as they are ascertainable. I will deal mainly with the Baptist aspect of the question. I have an hereditary interest in the well-being of Russian Baptists, and sources of information are available, the genuineness of which can be examined.

First an historical background is necessary. How come there to be any Baptists in Russia? Dr. Rushbrooke, the general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, in his book, *Some Chapters of Baptist European History*, has given a fascinating review of the growth of the Russian Baptists.

The Baptist Church in Russia is only two generations old. The Mennonites who emigrated from Holland to Russia at the invitation of Catherine II held beliefs extremely similar. German Baptist settlers were responsible for the establishment of Baptist communities in South Russia in the middle of the last century. Their influence spread rapidly. The first Slav to be baptised was Nikita Voronin at Tiflis in 1867, and his converts spread through the Trans-caucasus.

In Ukrainia Baptists appeared, as "Stundists," or "Bible-readers," and soon came into opposition with the Orthodox Church. Years of persecution followed, but the pioneers of the movement were men of great faith and great courage. Such a one was M. Ivanoff-Klishnikoff (father of the present secretary of the Russian Baptist Union), who preached in all parts of Russia for twelve years, until he was finally arrested and exiled. An independent and more intellectual movement, due to the influence of an Englishman, Lord Radstock, resulted in the spread of evangelical Christianity in the North. These "Pashkovites" (as they were called after Colonel Pashkoff) had much in common with the Southern Baptists, though they never actually united with the Russian Baptist Union founded in 1884.

The abolition of the Holy Synod in 1917 and the separation of Church and State led during the early days of the Revolution to greater religious freedom. The Soviet constitution allowed Freedom of Conscience and the right of propaganda for or against religion.

In the years after the War the Baptist community, freed from the old Tzarist persecution and the wrath of the Orthodox Church, continued to expand. There were set-backs, of course, and all Pastors were disfranchised and suffered from the hostility of the Communists to all forms of religion. Nevertheless, the leading Baptist Pastors were not unfriendly to the Soviet, and supported the enfranchisement of the people which the new régime procured. Their simple evangelical faith, in sharp contrast to the ritual of the old Orthodox Church, made a wide appeal. Statistics are misleading, especially in a country like Russia, but Baptist adherents probably numbered several millions.

A Pastors' college, training some eighty students for the Ministry, was established in 1927 under the direction of M. Ivanoff-Klishnikoff, the secretary of the Russian Baptist Union. A friend of mine who attended the leading Baptist place of worship in Moscow was deeply impressed with the fervour of the crowded congregation.

From time to time my father met the leading Russian Baptists who came to this country both before and after the

War. Indeed, he learnt elementary Russian so as to address simple sentences to them. As Eastern Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance he watched the growth of the Baptists in Russia with keen interest, and when occasion demanded protested to the Russian Ambassador here against Tzarist persecution, and mobilised British and American opinion on their behalf. At the successive Baptist World Alliance Conferences, the Russian Baptists sent their representatives. At the last Conference in Toronto in 1928 some twenty Pastors and teachers came from Russia.

At the end of 1928 a distinct change was noticeable. The dispatches of reliable American correspondents in Moscow emphasised the spread of anti-religious propaganda, the closing of churches, the dispersal of worshippers and the imprisonment of Baptist teachers in particular. This witness is confirmed by a study of the Soviet Press. The Baptist teaching had been making great headway among the workers in factories and the town-dwellers. The supremacy of the Communists was challenged and by the beginning of 1929 a great anti-religious drive was launched. The Soviet Government, recruited exclusively from the Communist ranks, was forced to take action. The Baptists were said to be hostile to the labour Unions and the peasants. They must be checked and thwarted.

An amusing commentary of the "Baptist Movement and its Political Significance," is given in a book published in 1929 by the Government Press in Moscow. The author is B. Tikhomirov. I am again indebted to Dr. Rushbrooke for this information. The writer objects to the demoralising methods the Baptists employ. The women's sewing circles is "an exploitation of female labour"; the "maiden circles," whose white dresses and melodious songs have extraordinary fascination, even for young communists, are also suspect; meetings are held for believers and unbelievers, and the latter "are carefully stalked, and then treated in the Baptist spirit." Baptist teaching is the religious ideology of the masses—a swindle. Moreover, they are linked with an international organisation antagonistic to Soviet Russia—an organisation for serving capital. The big four—according to the author—are John D. Rockefeller, Henry Ford, David Lloyd George, and William Green (President of the American Federation of Labour). It is an imposing Triumvirate, especially when Mr. Ford (who, I believe, is not a Baptist) is added. It is clear that the Baptist methods are threatening the spread of communism!

But to continue my review, to say that Baptists were murdered, tortured or even continuously persecuted, is an exaggeration. The method was for more subtle and effective.

Mr. Walter Duranty, the careful correspondent of the "New York Times" in Moscow, wrote in February, 1929, that the Soviet authorities had issued orders for the arrest of Baptist Pastors and Administrators wherever found. Local organs of the Government were cautioned against arresting the rank and file, but were to "strike at the heart of the Baptist organisation."

There followed the notorious Soviet decree of April 8th, 1929. The original constitution was to be amended. Freedom of Conscience was changed to Freedom of Worship subject to specific regulations. Worship could only be conducted in defined places under police registration. All economic and cultural activities were prohibited. The reading of the Scriptures was allowed. Prayer meetings or study circles, Sunday schools or needlework classes were forbidden. Sermons were not encouraged. Religious instruction of children under eighteen had long been forbidden.

The drive continued throughout the year. Worship was free, but Pastors were heavily taxed and harassed. Members of the congregation often lost their civil rights. They were not allowed to continue in labour Unions, and lost their bread rations. Baptist children were expelled from school. The official paper, *The Baptist*, was not forbidden—its circulation was restricted to 2,500 copies. It has now ceased. The printing or importation of the Bible was forbidden. Pastors were reduced to poverty owing to the heavy tax. Over a hundred of the leaders were exiled or thrown in prison. Places of worship were seized for the use of the Communists. Only one meeting place to-day is open in Moscow. The Secretary of the Baptist Union, M. Ivanoff-Klishnikoff, is in prison. The President, M. Odinzoff, is allowed his liberty. Some Pastors were sent to the White Sea Settlement. Others to Siberia. Several of the delegates to the Toronto Baptist World Alliance Conference are in prison. M. Bukreev was imprisoned and lost his reason. The severity of the persecution varies in different parts. In Odessa, there has been a clean sweep of all religious communities. Elsewhere if a place of worship is open (subject to the restrictions of the April decree) gangs of Communist youths with whistles and drums make worship impossible. Pressure is brought to bear on priests to recant. The list of those who do is given great publicity in the press. No Baptist pastor has yet recanted, as far as I have heard.

The situation changes from week to week. Imprisonment is not always for long periods. I know of only one death through exposure. One minister, known to some of us in this country, has recently been released after a few months' imprisonment. His wife died from heart failure, overjoyed at his sudden return. As I write I have the names of men in front of me—men known

to my father—men who attended our conferences, who have been subjected to intermittent persecution. I have in front of me letters from pastors who have escaped across the border, testifying to the agony and anguish of the last year of terror. These letters are not forgeries—they are in the familiar handwriting of men who are known to the officials of the Baptist Union. Yes, there is complete freedom of worship in Russia subject to the above restrictions. There are no massacres—no tortures—only restrictions. Not even continuous persecutions. It is the method of slow strangulation. The Baptists in Russia need our prayers and our aid, and that the truth shall be known in England and America.

Needless to say, at the beginning of 1929 the leaders of the Baptist community protested to the Soviet against the restrictions and persecutions to which they were subjected. It was a sad reward, they pointed out, for their loyalty to the Soviet. They had taken no part in political affairs. One cannot perhaps substantiate a general negative. But the persecutions of the Baptists are not regarded by those responsible, as a punishment for subversive propaganda, but as part of a general attack on religion. According to communist doctrine religion is an opiate—a soporific; it teaches contentment with the established order; it upholds tradition; above all, it diverts the energies of reformers into channels of passivity and stagnation.

Every allowance must be made for an inevitable revolt against the pre-war Orthodox Church—a central pillar of the Tzarist regime and the consistent enemy of reform. That Church must bear its share of responsibility for the revolution and the gigantic experiment in communist government that still prevails in Russia. The Church has too often been the enemy of Christianity in all countries.

One can understand the severe reaction in Russia against religion which takes the form of a revolt against all organised expressions of it whether Orthodox or Evangelical. But it is a strange irony of fate that those who suffered most from the Tzarist regime, should themselves suffer most from those who ended that tyranny.

It is not necessary to examine the complicity of the Soviet Government in the Anti-God campaign of leading communists. It may well be that it is powerless to stop it, even if it wished to do so. The "Isvestia" of June 8th, 1929, an official Government organ, contained an article by Lunacharsky, Soviet Minister of Education. It ran:—

"The Soviet Government's mighty hand will support the Society of the Godless," and "religion must be rooted out by the most intensive anti-religious propaganda."

Both the "Pravda" and the "Isvestia" have encouraged the war against religion and made charges against the Baptists to which they cannot reply. There is no right of reply in the Soviet Press. The Bolshevik Journal "Trud" (Jan. 7th, 1930) states that in Moscow there are now 287 churches of all denominations against 675 formerly. During 1929 579 of "God's boarding-houses" were closed in other parts of the country, over 1,000 being now shut down.

In conclusion it should be fairly stated that the persecutions of religion in Russia is no justification for persecuting Mr. Arthur Henderson here, who is as much concerned as anyone at the trend of events. Nor would I urge a break of diplomatic relations. No step can be justified at this time that would intensify the persecution of those we are anxious to help. But it is a time of anxiety not only for the Russian Baptists but for all those here who deplored the attitude of the last Conservative Government, and who have always been ready to give the Soviet Government a chance to make good. One can only hope that their more responsible leaders will realise the immense harm that is done to their own cause by a denial of liberty to those who are one with us in faith but not in nationality. British public opinion—indeed, the public opinion of Christendom—is hardening against the Soviet.

The stage may shortly be reached when public opinion may demand more drastic steps than a public protest. The Red-letter election shows how difficult public opinion is to control or keep within the confines of reason, once a wave of sentiment sweeps the country. Soviet policy is not continuous or stable; it acts and reacts according to the strength of groups within the central executive. Wiser counsels may yet prevail, and on this faint note of hope one may conclude this melancholy review of current persecution in Russia.

GEOFFREY SHAKESPEARE.

THE Annual Meeting will be held on Thursday, 8 May in Liverpool. Members and friends are invited to tea at four o'clock in the Fabius chapel. This site was given for Baptist burials in 1707, and contains many old grave-stones. After tea, reports will be given, and elections will take place. Members will note the existing officers and committee, by the back page of the cover. Additional nominations may be sent to the Secretary within April. Principal Underwood will read a paper on the early relations of the Academy at Horton with the Lancashire and Yorkshire Association.