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Historiography of the Russian Baptists

ON September 8-9, 1967, the Centre de Recherches et d'Etude des Institutions Religieuses in Geneva convened a symposium entitled "Prolegomena to the Historiography of the Russian Baptists". The purpose of the symposium was to review this neglected area of historical research from a professional point of view. Particular attention was paid to (1) the need for historical research on the Russian Baptists, (2) the competence of the fund of scholarship presently existing in the Western academic community to engage in this kind of study, and (3) to identifying and locating the major scholarly resources available in the West.

A small group of highly specialized scholars attended the symposium. Among those present were:

Dr. and Mrs. Stephen Dunn, of the University of California, authors of studies of ethnographic and sociological problems of the Soviet peasantry and sectarians;

Rev. A. Klaupiks, of the Baptist World Alliance, a lifetime student of the Russian Baptist Movement;

Dr. Andrew Blane, of Hunter College, New York, author of a doctoral dissertation on the history of the Russian Baptists;

Dr. Wilhelm Kahle, Director of the Kirchlichen Erziehungskammer für Berlin, and author of numerous studies of Eastern Protestants;

Mr. John Lawrence, Editor of *Frontier* magazine and author of numerous studies of Russian history, who participated (with J. C. Pollock) in a field study of the Russian Baptists in 1963;

Rev. Michael Bourdeaux, author of *Religious ferment in Russia*;

Dr. William C. Fletcher, Directeur of the Centre de Recherches, and author of numerous studies in the modern history of religion in the USSR.

All the scholars present were unanimous in their evaluation of the great need for historical study on the Russian Baptists. What little is available in Western languages on the Russian Baptists (such as in the works of Kolarz, Kischkowsky and others) is far from complete, and the Western student is forced to return to works which contain many errors of fact and interpretation and are badly out of date (such as the works of Rushbrooke and Conybeare).

The number of Western scholars who are competent for this field of studies, although as yet quite small, is more than adequate to undertake such historical study, providing sufficient encouragement and resources were available to support this kind of study. The symposium was in agreement about the need for institutional support for historical research on the Russian Baptists and felt that if such institutional support should materialize there is every reason to believe

that significant contributions to the knowledge of the religious and academic community would result.

Most of the energy of the symposium was directed towards evaluation of the historical resources available to the Western scholar. The Academy of Sciences of the USSR within the past decade has published a small number of exceedingly important works in the history of the Russian Baptists and allied religious groups. These recent studies by the Academy of Sciences—and particularly those by the academicians L. N. Mitrokhin and A. I. Klibanov—although they are written from a particular point of view, contain a wealth of material which has yet to be analysed by Western scholarship. These materials consist both of sociological field studies of the contemporary Baptists (as contained in the series *Problems of the History of Religion and Atheism*), and also of documentary research into archival materials not available to the Western scholar. The scholarship contained in these recent works by the Academy of Sciences is profound and will provide the Western scholar with a great wealth of material for his study of each period of the history of the Russian Baptists.

With regard to specific materials, the symposium arbitrarily divided the subject into four major periods and attempted to define the most important resources for each period.

1. *Prior to 1860.* The religious milieu which formed the background from which the Russian Baptist movement emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century is one of the most obscure periods for the Western researcher. Little is known about this period at present, and it is difficult to identify even the major resources which are available to the Western scholar. It was suggested that a search should be made through the Russian Orthodox publications of the nineteenth century and earlier for materials relevant to the sectarians. Although it was generally agreed that this avenue holds minimal promise for the scholar, attempts should be made to locate any extant literature coming from the sects themselves—materials reflecting the point of view of such groups as Molokans, Doukhobors and the various religious movements known generically as Khlysty. A considerable amount of understanding is to be gained from a study of the Old Believers (a schismatic wing of Orthodoxy) during this period, particularly of the "Priestless" branch. Further understanding might be gained from studying such Western influences as the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Masonic movements and also Western settlers within Russia such as the German Mennonites.

2. *1860-1905.* A considerable fund of material is available for this early period of the history of the Russian Baptist Movement. The available resources may be divided into seven basic classifications.

- (1) Considerable research on this period has been performed by the Soviet Academy of Sciences and in particular the academician A. I. Klibanov. These works not only provide data from the archives, but also serve as an exceedingly useful guide to the vast library of Russian Orthodox publications dealing with the sectarians. Most of these materials are available in the West at

the Helsinki Library and elsewhere, and the recent work of scholars such as Klibanov will be of inestimable value to the Western scholar seeking a guide to this extensive material.

- (2) A small number of specific works by Russian and Soviet authors is available and can be used as a supplement to the work of Klibanov. Included in this category would be not only the extraordinarily useful work of V. Bonch-Bruevich, but also of such authors as Dahl, Leskov and Butkevich.
- (3) A considerable amount of material is available from the sectarians themselves. The Western scholar can seek data in the various periodicals of the sectarians during this period. These periodicals can be located both in research libraries, through such organizations as the Baptist World Alliance and the Y.M.C.A., and in particular collections of émigré Russian Protestant organizations. Also within this category should be included a search for official documents such as would result from meetings at the diplomatic level or with Western Church organizations.
- (4) The annual reports of Constantin Pobedonostsev for the latter part of this period contained significant data on the sectarians. Study of these reports would contribute greatly to an understanding of the period.
- (5) Some attention should be made to the works of propaganda which deal with this period. This would include not only anti-religious propaganda from Soviet press, but also propaganda written by hostile authors at the time. In particular, certain Russian Orthodox treatises would be included in this classification.
- (6) Specific works by Western observers, while not always reliable, will often contain information not available elsewhere. Note should be made of works by such authors as Lvoire Beaulieu, Mackensie Wallace, Kennan, Baedecker and Stepniak. Also to be consulted are the occasional articles which appeared in major Western periodicals during this period.
- (7) It is possible that some helpful material could be found in an archival collection of émigré religious groups. This would include not only the several Baptist organizations in the West but also the archives of such groups as the Molokans in California and the Mennonite libraries in Kansas and Indiana.

3. 1905-1955. The materials available for the twentieth century history of the Baptist movement are somewhat less abundant than for the earlier period, particularly with the regard to the events after about 1930. Among the materials to be consulted are the numerous sectarian periodicals which appeared for shorter or longer periods prior to 1930, including those of the Russian Mennonites. Conference materials are available both from international Baptist meetings and from Baptist conferences and plenary sessions held in Moscow and elsewhere prior to 1926. The works of Bonch-Bruevich are of especial value during this period. The rather laborious search through the masses of anti-religious propaganda produced by the Soviets promises to yield considerable data, and indeed for the decades prior to World

War II this sort of material is practically the only source of data. Analysis of the official periodical of the Russian Baptists, *Fraternal Herald*, will provide considerable information, especially for the post-war period. Finally, some few Western works produced during this period contain references to the Russian Baptists and although these secondary sources do not promise a great wealth of information, they should be consulted by the scholar.

4. *1955 to the present.* The materials available for the recent history of the movement are among the most abundant for the Western scholar. A great deal has been written by the various Academies of Sciences and Soviet scholars in general on this period. The Western scholar can locate the most important materials among this wealth of research by using as his guide a very small number of series of books and monographs (such as *Problems of the History of Religion and Atheism* mentioned above), searching under the names of a very few leading scholars (such as Klibanov and Mitrokhin) and by consulting the list of publications from a half dozen of the major research institutions which are interested in this problem (such as the Academy of Sciences of the USSR). The Baptist journal *Fraternal Herald* is a second chief resource for this period. A great deal of data is available in the anti-religious propaganda, which has been quite vigorous with regard to the Baptists and allied sectarians since 1958. Much of this material is available in translation, and the formidable task of going through this material can be reduced by utilisation of such translation services as *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas* (National Council of Churches, U.S.A.), *Research Materials* (Centre de Recherches, Geneva), *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* (New York), and *Joint Publications Research Service* (U.S. Congress). Finally, specific scholarly works should be consulted by the scholar—works by such authors as Kolarz, Sheinman and Bourdeaux.

Thus the conclusions of the symposium were, first, that there is an unquestionable need for research on the history of the Russian Baptists. Second, a wealth of material is available and has yet to be analysed by Western scholarship. Third, there is a sufficient number of qualified experts in the academic community to carry out such research. Fourth, there is a great need for institutional support of research in this field. While it is to be hoped that informal communication among such specialists as were present at the symposium will eventually result in some increased attention to this field, the need will remain critical until institutional support, whether from specific universities or research institutions, or from historical associations of Baptist or other religious groups in the West, will materialize to encourage the long overdue scholarship on the history of the Russian Baptists.

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