

Bible Work in Eastern Europe since 1945 (Part 2)

WALTER SAWATSKY

The first part of this article was published in RCL Vol. 3, Nos. 4-5, pp. 4-10. The first sentence should read "At best only about 5 per cent of the people . . ." and not "At best only about 25 per cent of the people". Ed.

Yugoslavia

This is the fourth country which can be included in the "normalized" category. Scripture importation has been continuous since 1951 although at first the customs fee was very high, being reduced to 50% in 1954. Now, apart from some work by missions, scriptures are produced locally. The UBS turned over all production in 1969 to the Yugoslav Bible Society while some private publishing houses in Yugoslavia had been printing scriptures earlier. The secretary of the Yugoslav Bible Society is Orthodox. A total distribution figure of 1,232,395 - 273,400 of which represents unofficial distribution - still only means that 6.25% of Yugoslavia's 20 million had access to scripture. But it should be remembered that in contrast to the GDR or Hungary, Yugoslavia has a much shorter Christian tradition.¹

The smaller evangelical groups are well supplied. As it is comparatively easy to import Bibles into Yugoslavia unofficially, many Bibles are sent by the missions in the hope that they will be transferred to some other East European country such as the USSR. Yugoslavs have sometimes complained that they have been oversupplied. Moreover, the relatively easy conditions have led to other over-zealous behaviour. In the summer of 1974 a Yugoslav pastor working among the Albanian population in the south was questioned at great length and threatened with prison because some mission group had gone from door to door handing out brochures including scripture portions, which gave almost no indication of the sender's identity. The authorities held him responsible because the packet included one of his writings, albeit published abroad without his consent.

Czechoslovakia

After a period when Bibles were increasingly scarce the situation here has begun to change, enabling the UBS to talk about a breakthrough. For the Protestants the reestablishment of a Bible Society after its closure in 1953 was the major breakthrough. Established in March 1969 and called Czechoslovak Bible Work, it is an independent committee within the Czech Council of Churches. Soon after its creation its work was limited to the Czech half of the population when the government organized the country into Czech and Slovak provinces. Recently there have been breakthroughs for the Slovaks too. But in the Slovak area distribution and importation must be handled by Church bodies whereas in the Czech area this is done by the new agency through a general secretary. In the Czech areas Bibles can be bought through the Prague Bible Bookshop and denominational headquarters in Prague.

Initial imports increased and there was some production such as 30,000 Slovak New Testaments and 20,000 Czech Bibles in 1970. In 1972 and early 1973 the work appeared to be getting more difficult. For example the new translation of the Gospels was ready for the press and was prematurely reported in print by the UBS in early 1972. Permission came through later in the year but in fact the translation did not appear till 1973 when 28,300 instead of 30,000 were produced. However, the work increased later in 1973 and it was expected that production and import for 1974 through March 1975 would total 140,000, including 46,000 for Slovakia.

Total distribution since the war has amounted to about 1,402,950, of which 307,950 came unofficially. This means a distribution for 9% of the 14.5 million Czechoslovak people of whom 55% are Roman Catholic and 12% members of a variety of Protestant Churches. After 1968 particularly the Czechs' customs control became more rigid. In 1972 a British Pentecostal minister working for Underground Evangelism was arrested for smuggling a cache of Bibles and religious literature. He was sentenced to two years but released after ten months thanks to the intervention of various people including politicians. The negative publicity for Czechoslovakia which resulted continues and also worries the local Christians.²

Romania

Perhaps the breakthrough most publicized and discussed came in Romania in 1968. Politically this country of 20 million remained in line behind the USSR on policy until the mid-60s. The Orthodox Church now

represents about 85% of the population and the 1.5 million Roman Catholics account for another 7½%. There are other Protestant groups, some primarily of Hungarian and German ethnic origin, but among the Romanians the fastest growing denomination seems to be the Baptist Church, now third largest among Baptists in Europe. Since the war Romanians have received approximately 1,321,320 pieces of scripture of which 970,200 came by unofficial means. The bulk of this number has been brought in since 1967. The fact that this means one piece of scripture for only 6% of the population is verified by the fact that Western travellers in Romania are still asked by most believers they meet: "Did you bring Bibles?" In general the unofficial Bibles have gone to the Evangelical or Neo-Protestant groups so they are *relatively* well supplied.

In the grounds of the Patriarchate in Bucharest stands the second oldest Christian printing press in Europe. It had produced 70,000 pieces of scripture on its 300-year-old press from 1945-68 (10,000 Bibles, 20,000 New Testaments and Psalms, 10,000 Gospels, 10,000 Epistles and Acts, 20,000 Psalms). Then in 1968 the UBS announced that the Romanian Orthodox Church was producing 100,000 Bibles. By 1972 an additional 150,000 pieces of scripture had been produced (the largest being 60,000 New Testaments) and during 1974 the press printed another 100,000 Bibles for distribution in 1975. In addition the press has asked the UBS to supply paper for a further 300,000 scriptures. The UBS has provided the paper throughout as well as a number of modern machines so that it is now a highly efficient printing plant.

The 1968 announcement of 100,000 Bibles has been repeatedly attacked by people who claimed that the Bibles were not printed, or that if they were, they had been sold to Romanians in the West. Officials of the UBS visited Romania several times and were able to verify the printing of the said 100,000: they saw copies in homes, churches and monasteries but did not of course see each copy in the hands of a local believer. The Norwegian Mission bak Jernteppe announced in 1970 that they had doubted the claims, sent someone to investigate and then declared them to be true in their opinion. Part of the confusion arose because the first 100,000 were not printed as one total order. About 30,000 were printed in 1968 with the remaining 70,000 ready by 1970. These were not all distributed, presumably so as to maintain a supply until permission was given for further printing.

What has impressed many observers most about the Romanian Bible story is the systematic means of distribution employed. Since 1969 each Orthodox congregation has received an average of 21 scriptures, some of them Bibles. When the 60,000 New Testaments were published in 1972,

the Administrator of the Orthodox Press sent a circular to each deanery announcing the manner of distribution. A parish with one priest could receive six copies, one with two priests 11 copies, with three priests 16 copies and with four priests 21 copies. The priests then had to find persons wishing to buy but who had not bought the 1968 edition of the Bible. The name of the purchaser had to be filled out on a form in quadruplicate and was checked against a list so as to prevent anyone receiving more than one. The purchaser paid the cost of the New Testament (30 lei) and upon receipt of the New Testaments, which were delivered to the deaneries by special truck, paid an additional 30 lei for subsidizing the Special Seminary at Curtea de Arges. In this circular of 1972 the Orthodox Press also offered to supply one copy per parish of the 1968 Bible, available at a cost of 32 lei and a contribution of 68 lei. All in all, a very systematic distribution, although some might wonder what additional reasons there could be for registering the buyers. The translation left much to be desired as well. Only superficial revisions were made in 1967 to a text said to be archaic.

This publication programme was of little benefit to the other denominations although some copies were distributed by the Lutheran Church. There are no reports about Bibles going to the one million member Catholic Church. During 1974, however, four denominations received permission to import 2,500 Bibles each with the Hungarian speaking Lutherans importing 1,500. Though the numbers are embarrassingly small, it represents a breakthrough for the Protestant groups. Some are already receiving a second import licence. At the same time, a new press law makes the unofficial activity more dangerous: one Romanian Pentecostal was imprisoned for two years in July 1974 for distributing Bibles brought in from abroad.⁸

Bulgaria and Albania

Here the Bible achievements are extremely limited. For the future there is some ground for optimism in Bulgaria, but none for Albania thus far. Some authorities estimate that 85% of the Bulgarian populace is Orthodox with an additional 7.5% Catholic and .5% Protestant. At the last census listing religion in 1962 only 27% were Orthodox compared with 85% in 1946. There is no report of local production or of an import licence granted, and the 11,968 official scriptures imported were imported in 1949, 10,000 of which were portions. Approximately 221,250 scriptures were imported unofficially after 1967, that is for 0.36% of the eight million people. In 1972 after 11 years of work, the Holy Synod of the

Orthodox Church finally completed a new translation of the New Testament, revising the 1925 translation. In 1973 Protestant and Catholic representatives were invited to review the translation and offer constructive suggestions. Since 1970 the UBS has offered to supply paper for production of 50,000 and the Bulgarian Orthodox were hoping to print in 1974 but permission has not yet been granted. For Albania the story is most tragic since the constitution does not permit any religious activity. Even the unofficial work seems impossible.

USSR

In the degressing order used in this paper the USSR should have preceded Bulgaria but is treated last due to its complexity. It is by far the largest East European country with a population of 250 million according to figures for 9 August, 1973. Based on the 1970 census, we find that the great majority are Slavic people : 129,015,000 Great Russians, 40,753,000 Ukrainians, 9,052,000 White Russians. There are, however, a great number who represent various non-Slavic peoples, many of whom do not speak Russian. According to the 1970 census there are 58 million people in the Soviet Union who cannot speak Russian at all. What is said below about the Russian Bible will not apply to them.⁴

Strangely enough, although the BFBS was very influential in Russia at one time (the first sister society was the Russian Bible Society 1813-26), there is now no programme for Bible distribution in the USSR. An official of the UBS in April, 1972 made the following categorical statements :

1. We have not distributed any Bibles in the USSR.
2. We have not produced any scriptures in the USSR.
3. On infrequent occasions the UBS has sent scripture parcels (primarily ancient Armenian editions to aid that translation project).
4. The UBS has produced a "great deal of Russian Bibles" in the last five-ten years but UBS does not claim "Distribution" for this.⁵

This does not mean that the UBS has not tried, but success has been limited to some preliminary agreements on cooperation in translation work.⁶

The first Russian Bible Society was closed in 1826 after having completed the New Testament in modern Russian. A complete version of the Bible in modern Russian did not appear till 1875 and the Russian Bible was first published in 1882 (20,000 copies). The first Synodal Bible only appeared in 1889. One further publication of the Bible in the Synodal edition took place in Russia in 1908. In general, we must conclude that

throughout the tsarist period, Russian Bibles were scarce. There was certainly no supply left to fall back on during the Soviet Bible famine.

In analysing Bible publication achievements during the Soviet period it might be well to remember that the Baptist Church considered the Bible much more central than did the Orthodox and hence its insistence on getting it. The Evangelical Churches that later made up the officially approved Russian Baptist Union experienced their greatest freedom and growth following the Revolution. During the 1920s as conditions became more difficult there were scattered reports of Bibles sent in freely by post. Prokhanov, an extremely energetic leader in St. Petersburg, secured funds in America in 1926 with which he published 60,000 Bibles, 60,000 hymnals and 15,000 concordances.⁷ How many pieces of scripture were brought in by other means is not known. It could not, however, have been more than a few hundred thousand considering the number of Bibles in Russian published anywhere.

Following the "Thaw" came a few more publications in the Soviet Union. In 1956 the Orthodox printed 50,000 Bibles and 25,000 New Testaments. The next year the Baptists were able to print 10,000 Bibles. More than a decade later came the next breakthrough when the Orthodox between 1968 and 1970 produced 30,000 Bibles and the Baptists 20,000.⁸ In 1962 the Latvian Lutheran Church was able to print 10,000 New Testaments. The Armenian Orthodox Church produced 10,000 copies of the Gospels and Acts in 1970, followed by 10,000 New Testaments in 1974-75. Also in 1973 the Lithuanian Catholics were able to produce 10,000 copies of the new translation of the New Testament and Psalms. In December 1974 the Baptists were able to produce 20,000 New Testaments with Psalms. An edition of 35,000 New Testaments for the Orthodox is expected in 1975, making a new grand total since the war, of 220,000 copies of which 110,000 were only New Testaments.

Getting these Bibles published was no easy matter. Novosti Press Agency used the occasion to make propaganda about religious liberty in the USSR :

The Constitution of the USSR guarantees every citizen of the Soviet Union, both religious and non-religious, the freedom of the press. The Fundamental Law ensures the freedom of the press by granting to religious citizens out of state stocks paper, printing shops and other necessary equipment and materials for putting out printing matter. Like all other Soviet citizens, the followers of various religions use their right and publish the religious literature they need.⁹

Since this official news agency was not hereby referring to the rigid printing controls most Soviet citizens experience, the intended meaning

of this last sentence is manifestly untrue. 190,000 copies of scripture to satisfy the current generation of an estimated 33 million Orthodox and Baptists alone is preposterous. As recently as February 1969 a British newspaper reported the story of a Leningrad theology student who had no New Testament.¹⁰ Much more to the point is a statement by Karev, late General Secretary of the AUCECB in December 1967. Reporting to the Plenum on the situation with regard to the printing of Bibles he took note of the many letters asking when it would be ready. Then he pointed out that :

First of all, our brotherhood must know that to print such a solid book as the Bible is not an entirely easy matter but is beset with various difficulties, and to overcome these takes time, time, and more time. But this does not mean that the printing of the Bible will drag on indefinitely. The Bible will be printed and will see the light of day during 1968. The day will come when the joyful news will fly about our brotherhood "The Bible has left the printers!"¹¹

When this event occurred, the copies were sent out to the churches in a proportional manner so the Baptists claimed. They were distributed to the Orthodox via the priest, who passed on congregational requests. Of these few thousand, it should be remembered, at least several hundred turned up in the West as complimentary copies.¹²

Since 1955 it has again been possible to visit the Soviet Union as a tourist. Those who went were struck by the numerous requests for Bibles and noted the existence of hand copied Bibles and hymnbooks. Tourism has vastly increased since then and many tourists have taken Bibles. But still today tourists are asked whether they have Bibles. The Soviet authorities recognized very well that these people were bringing Bibles and that the missions were using them as a channel. Recently, increasingly watchful Russian customs guards have been able to reduce this flow of unofficial material. When asked, they claim that this material is forbidden. Yet they are unable to cite any law making the Bible illegal in the USSR for it continues to be published in the USSR itself. Presumably administrative instructions to this effect exist which they are unwilling to publish.

In the post war period (mainly after about 1967) possibly up to 1,812,421 pieces of scripture were brought into the USSR. Most of these apparently reached the major tourist cities in European Russia whilst the Western border areas got a disproportionate share. More than the exploits of these "Bible smugglers" Western observers have been amazed by the existence of a Christian printing press in the USSR. Early in 1971 some of the Reform Baptists obtained a printing press that could be quickly dismantled and put into several suitcases for transport. Sympathetic workers sold them paper, ink, and other necessary materials and they

❖

began to produce a variety of printed material including Holy Scripture. Statistical information is hard to obtain. But the Reform Baptist organization claimed to be able to produce 500 pieces of literature including Bibles, New Testaments and religious literature per day. Informed sources state that this figure should not be used to estimate how many Bibles were printed in a week, month, etc. One source suggests that their printing achievements included as much as 40,000 Bibles. In any case, on 28 October, 1974 this press called "The Christian" was discovered near Riga (Latvia). Seven workers were arrested and 15,000 New Testaments plus 16 tons of paper were seized. So another source of scripture has been removed.¹³

Restrictions may not be as significant or damaging as the counter offensive unleashed by the Soviet atheists. The current Orthodox journal has a circulation of 20,000 and the Baptist one only 6,000, whereas the leading atheist monthly journal, *Nauka i Religia* ("Science and Religion"), has a circulation of 360,000. A reason for the restrictions on Bible publishing has been that due to the scarcity, paper in the USSR needs to be restricted to that which has high priority. Since religion would be expected to have such low priority, it is surprising to see how much paper is expended to combat it. In the 12 year period from 1928-40 a total of 140 million copies of anti-religious literature (1,832 titles) were printed. 44 million pieces were issued by the State publishing house in 1930 alone. After a lull this heavy output of atheist literature was renewed, becoming an all-out campaign from 1959-64. This continues today.¹⁴ The paper avalanche is even greater in the political realm. The Soviet Union in spite of its continuing scarcity of paper, engages in extensive printing. The 220,000 copies of scripture since 1956 must be seen in this context.

Conclusions

The above information can lead to various conclusions. From a Christian point of view, the continuing shortages are perhaps most striking. What has been achieved at official and unofficial levels is nevertheless gratifying, and resulted mainly from financial donations made by Christians in the West. None of it could have been done without considerable cooperation between believers in both East and West. A study of overall totals, reveals that official work compared with unofficial, accounts for twice the amount of scripture. A study of totals according to country, reveals that official work was more successful in the GDR, Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia whereas the unofficial was more successful in the USSR, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. These are deceptive conclusions.

As the preceding analysis indicates, the relative success of either official or unofficial work did not always simply depend on government policy. Since official work in the GDR and Poland was relatively easy, many of the missions emphasized countries which were in greater need. Furthermore, in some countries where, statistically, unofficial work has been more successful, a recent shift in policy has made such work more difficult whereas, at the official level, long term negotiations are now beginning to pay off. The chart on p. 14 includes annual distribution for the past six years and may help identify such developments. Conversely, could such a chart for unofficial work be composed, other possible short term trends might become evident.

Several factors not so evident from a listing of statistics are involved. Both UBS work and unofficial work clearly have been hampered by financial restrictions. The increasing success in the past seven years was facilitated by a larger number of financial donations. Yet both the UBS and the missions claim they could have done more had there been more money.¹⁵ Furthermore, the survey illustrates some of the many inequities which exist between recipient groups. In many of the countries small groups of Protestants received the bulk of the literature because they had the contacts with the primarily Protestant missions and the heavily Protestant UBS. Then there are the minority nationality groups which have been slighted due to lack of translations. Finally when it comes to making a witness to the atheist part of the population, there appears to be a shortage in all countries. That new converts obtain Bibles is due to the generosity of the witnessing Church in Eastern Europe.

Although the writer has attempted an honest scholarly analysis and sober presentation, the reader will have observed certain biases, particularly the pro-Christian one. Perhaps he should indicate as well his views on the highly loaded question of Bible smuggling.¹⁶ In addition to what has already been said in passing, the writer would refer the reader to the succinctly stated editorial of *Christianity Today*, 26 April, 1974, and would commend that hearty endorsement of "the importation of Bibles into communist countries by any means that do not oblige us to disobey God's commandments". The latter phrase involves affirming the scriptural text, "we ought to obey God rather than men" and this includes obedience to Him in using moral means as well as goals. Certain strictures are thus imposed on a Christian's actions at both the official and unofficial level, but then God's criterion is not success but faithfulness.

2 January, 1975.

¹ A circular letter from La Verita Mission (Italy) in August 1972 asked Westerners to stop reprinting Yugoslav literature in the West and distributing it freely in Yugoslavia because this undercut the growing self-sufficiency of local Christian publishers.

² David Hathaway, *Czechmate*, London (Lakeland Publishers) 1974. The local secretary's annual report for 1972 (*UBS Bulletin* 2/73 p. 115) stated: "The Bible cause has been and still is gravely affected by the activities of Christians abroad who are trying to intervene in the internal domestic situation of the Churches, especially by smuggling into the country evangelistic literature together with Bibles. This activity is not welcome as there are scriptures here and the Churches are active."

³ *Keston News Service*, No. 4, 23 Aug. 1974.

⁴ I am indebted to Boris Arapovic of East Bible Institute, Stockholm for the analysis of the 1970 census.

⁵ UBS inter-office memo (copy on file at CSRC). Some of the Bibles referred to in point 4 were bought by missions for distribution in the USSR.

⁶ See articles on the Leningrad Bible Group by K. Logachev in *The Bible Translator*, July 1974 and Jan. 1975.

⁷ Steve Durasoff, *The Russian Protestants*, 1969, p.44 and 57. The *Historical Catalogue of British Bibles* at the London Bible House mentions only 50,000 of the Zhidkov-Prokhanov Bible.

⁸ I am using the highest figures given based on information provided by Archbishop Pitirim and AUCECB leaders in 1970 for the UBS. The figure of 30,000 Bibles produced by the Orthodox between 1968 and 1970 is not a strong one. *Irenikon*, Spring 1971 p.395, reported that the Russian Orthodox Church published 20,000 copies with "help from the Baptist Church". Starting with Smaadahl's memo dated 17 March, 1972, UBS has used the figure of 120,000 Bibles and New Testaments for Orthodox and Baptists, whereas the 1970 figures suggest 135,000. Thus it is possible that the Orthodox and Baptist shared copies and that the permission for 30,000 and 20,000 was not fully realized. Since June 1973 the UBS has been using the incorrect figure of 140,000.

⁹ Cited by *RCDA* XI, 1972, p. 72, quoting Fyodor Savin of Novosti Press Agency, Moscow, in 1970.

¹⁰ *Mirror*, 2/69 p. 4.

¹¹ *Bratsky Vestnik* 1/68 p. 64.

¹² How many were sent abroad is a matter of dispute, but a statement such as Daniel Poysti's at a Methodist church in Lancashire that "Not on any bookstall throughout the whole of Russia could you buy one Bible" and the assertion that they were all exported to America, is unnecessary hyperbole (*CWN Series*, 17 April, 1972, p. 16). The Novosti Press writer explained that because of separation of Church and State religious books cannot be sold in State bookstores.

¹³ Although the news reached the West quickly through several sources, the most astounding came from the Reform Baptists themselves. It was a brief factual statement with pictures of the seven young people arrested. The printing was done by yet another secret press.

¹⁴ Pierre J. Beemans, "Scientific Atheism in the Soviet Union 1917-1954". *Studies in Soviet Thought* VII, 3, 1967 pp. 234-242.

¹⁵ When the UBS Continental European Production Fund was set up in 1967, European societies were asked to contribute an extra \$1 million (DM 3.7 million) over a five year period. By early 1973 only DM 1,371,300 plus a loan from German churches of DM 975,000 had been received, that is, just over two-thirds of the goal.

¹⁶ For recent publications which take a different view see Brother Andrew, *The Ethics of Smuggling*, Wheaton (Tyndale House), 1974; a small pamphlet on the same subject by Richard Wurmbbrand (1974); and Joe Bass in *Underground Evangelism* May 1974.

Official and Unofficial Scripture Distribution

		GDR	POLAND	HUNGARY	YUGO- SLAVIA	CZECHO- SLO- VAKIA	ROMANIA	USSR	BULGARIA	ALBANIA
<i>Recent</i>	1974	—	—	40,000?	—	140,000?	15,500	55,000?	—	—
<i>Annual</i>	1973	159,246	148,990	35,000	42,064	3,117	4,000	20,000	—	—
<i>Official</i>	1972	145,929	128,410	30,000	68,016	3,036	60,000	—	—	—
<i>Distribution</i>	1971	102,209	143,694	22,000	30,458	84,500	90,000	—	—	—
<i>Rate</i>	1970	84,879	174,199	—	19,478	31,596	10,620	40,000	—	—
	1969	70,000	204,476	25,000	25,766	20,000	—	20,000	—	—
	1968	—	—	—	—	—	100,000	—	—	—
<i>Total</i>	Official:	5,862,110	3,138,840	332,000	958,975	1,095,000	351,120	165,000	11,968	
<i>Distribution</i>	Unofficial:	100,000	125,000	660,400	273,400	307,950	970,200	1,812,421	221,250	
1945-74	TOTAL:	5,962,110	3,263,840	992,400	1,232,375	1,402,950	1,321,320	1,977,421	233,218	
9 COUNTRY TOTAL:		Official:	11,915,013							
		Unofficial:	5,568,200	(or 4,470,621)						
		TOTAL:	17,483,213							
						9 Country Population Total		375,726,000		
						Percentage rec'd Scripture		5 per cent		
Population:		17m.	33m.	10.5m.	20m.	14.5m.	20m.	250m.	8.5m.	2.2m.
Per cent Religious:		58	97	79	73	67	93	20	83	30
Per cent rec'd Scripture:		28	10	10	6.25	9	6	1.25	0.36	0.0

NOTES: (a) Total scripture figure represents approximately 33 per cent Bibles and New Testaments; the remainder are portions. This is true for both official and unofficial, with the portion per centage perhaps slightly higher for the latter.

(b) 1974 statistics indicated (?) expected, but completion not yet announced and not in overall totals.

(c) The two "Unofficial Total" figures represent two ways of arriving at the total, the higher figure due to certain statistics for which no specific recipient country was indicated. It must be emphasized that these numbers are estimates.