

# The "Initsiativniki" of the Ukraine

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The dissident wing of the Soviet Baptist community, the *Initsiativniki*, provides an interesting and indeed unusual example of cross-national, or State-wide, dissent within the USSR. As a result, the background of its supporters, their socio-economic and geographic origin, take on an added significance for an understanding of the forces which unify and enable it to transcend such a potentially divisive factor as nationality. While a common faith and acceptance of the claims of the reformers is the essential ingredient of this unity, the following questions also arise: Who are the dissidents? What other characteristics have they in common?

This preliminary study intends to examine the background of the dissidents in just one of the Soviet republics—the Ukraine. The *Initsiativniki*, or supporters of the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (CCECB), in that republic, although by no means unique, play a very important part within the overall pattern, with individuals, families, large groups and even whole congregations participating quite openly. Moreover, the extensive documentation produced by the movement itself provides us with a rare opportunity to actually quantify at least the active part of a remarkably large scale form of dissent.

Undoubtedly the most active Baptist dissidents are, by a twist of fate, precisely those who have received prison sentences. Many of these sentences are, at least in the first instance, relatively short by Soviet standards, and those so dealt with are frequently active again shortly after their release. Indeed, a number of the Ukrainian Baptists have even continued their campaigning within their places of confinement.<sup>1</sup> While it is possible that some of these Baptist prisoners may well have broken more mundane criminal laws (as the Soviet press frequently claims), the documentation tends to confirm that the lists of prisoners contain only those convicted of offences relating to their beliefs and to actions in defence of those beliefs. They can thus be taken as referring essentially to dissidents.

Analysis of 611 *Initsiativniki* imprisoned between 1961 and 1973<sup>2</sup> reveals some 139, or slightly less than 23% to be from the Ukraine, while the Ukrainian population constitutes approximately 19% of the total Soviet population. This group includes some of the principal breakaway Baptist leaders such as Presbyter Alexei F. Prokofiev (one of the two founding figures)<sup>3</sup>; Iosif D. Bondarenko (from Odessa)<sup>4</sup>; and Georgi Vins.<sup>5</sup>

Although their names indicate that by no means all of the 139 are

definitely Ukrainian by nationality, the Ukrainian element constitutes an overwhelming majority of the 139. Moreover, a number of known and probable Ukrainians living outside the Ukrainian SSR were also imprisoned (eight definite, and 43 possible)—notably from the neighbouring and formerly Ukrainian territories around Rostov and Krasnodar.

The distribution of the 139 within the Ukraine reveals one or two interesting points. Some 79, or 57%, were residents of cities with populations in excess of 100,000. A further 21, or 15%, came from towns of over 30,000 inhabitants. Of the remaining 39, or rather less than one third of the total, 14 lived in towns of 10,000 or more citizens. Thus only 25 inhabited very small towns or villages. It is clear from this that the Baptist activism is primarily an urban—indeed large urban—as opposed to a rural phenomenon.

As far as the actual scatter is concerned, the list of domiciles (printed in their Ukrainian form) provides the following distribution in cases where more than one person has been arrested from a particular locality: Odessa, 16; Kyiv (Kiev), 12; Krivyy Rih, 10; Sumy, 7; Kharkiv, 6; Kergachi, Khmelnytsky, and Kirovohrad, 4; Cherkassy, Chernivtsy, Chervonoarmeisk, Krasnodon, Lviv, Marganets, Saki, and Shevchenkovo, 3; Chernihiv, Lugansk, Protopovka, Rivne, Seredina-Buda, Shostka, Simferopol, Smela, Vovkivchiki, Zhelte Vody, and Zhytomyr, 2.

The activism appears to be fairly evenly distributed across the Ukraine, with only a few major cities such as Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk notable for their absence. It is the figures for Odessa and Krivyy Rih which really attract the attention. This relatively high level of activism may merely reflect larger Baptist communities in those cities (though, in the absence of any statistics, this is difficult to ascertain), or may indicate greater determination on the part of the police in dealing with such cases. Details of charges, other than the relevant article of the criminal code, are only available in a few instances and throw little light on the matter.<sup>6</sup> The somewhat international nature of Odessa's population coupled with the likelihood of correspondingly heightened police vigilance, is not a factor obviously involved here; for while a considerable number of the Baptist prisoners elsewhere in the Soviet Union are clearly German by nationality, all the Odessa cases involve Ukrainians or Russians. It may not be entirely coincidental however that Odessa, with approximately 110,000 Jews in a population of 667,000,<sup>7</sup> has also been faced with a large measure of Jewish activism.

Occupational background is not indicated in the lists of Baptist prisoners and only infrequent reference is made to this factor in other documents or Soviet press attacks on the dissenters. It would therefore be unwise to make any generalisations on this nonetheless important matter.

The extent of the urban basis of the support does tend to complement the manual working-class characteristic indicated in the few known cases. Certainly the intelligentsia does not appear to be widely represented in their ranks.

The low proportion of women among the prisoners (12 of the 139) runs contrary to the stereotype image of present-day Soviet believers as ageing, female war-widows, though it may indicate a more lenient official line in dealing with them, especially where families are involved.

The age distribution is similarly revealing, as well as being rather convenient for analysis in percentages. Of the 99 whose birthdates are known, only two were born before 1900 and 20 before 1920. The majority (62) were born between 1926 and 1940. This is perhaps rather younger than might be anticipated from the usual Soviet official image. Indeed, at least one Soviet publication has commented upon this situation in relation to the *Initsiativniki* as a whole, remarking that,

Among Baptists who have come under the influence of the Action Group (the CCECB) young people are represented more widely than in regular ECB congregations; sometimes supporters of the Action Group have been called Young Baptists. Some of these groups are comprised of more than 50% young people.<sup>8</sup>

And yet this group clearly represents a first post-revolutionary generation—many doubtless from the families of pre-revolutionary believers. Five of the prisoners were nonetheless born after World War II.

In addition to outright imprisonment, short-term arrests, fines and other forms of harassment have been applied to the Ukrainian Baptists in an attempt to achieve conformity with the regime's terms of acceptable religious activity. As early as 1967, it was reported that, "In Kiev alone there have been 85 cases of 10-15 day arrests" of people attending outdoor services when registered places of worship were not available.<sup>9</sup> Violence has clearly been employed on occasions, and Ukrainians have been among those who have died while under police detention.<sup>10</sup>

Below this level of indictable activism, the Ukrainian *Initsiativniki* communities have also been involved in other types of dissidence, particularly in supporting petitions and appeals to the Soviet authorities. A number of these documents have a hundred or more signatures appended to them,<sup>11</sup> and yet, coming as they do, largely from the CPR (the Council of Prisoners' Relatives—that is from the immediate families of prisoners) they reveal patterns of distribution of activity very similar to the prisoner lists. Thus one such appeal of November 1969, with 62 clearly legible signatures, contains 4 from Odessa, 4 from Kiev, 3 each from Lviv and Krasnodon, and 1 each from Sumy, Kirovohrad and Lugansk.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the *Initsiativniki* communities in these cities, whether or not met with commensurate repressions, are clearly very large indeed. One 1967 appeal to the Soviet government (concerning alleged militia brutality) was sent on behalf of the Kiev community of 400.<sup>13</sup> A service held outside Kharkiv on 2 May 1973, was attended by a congregation of as many as 1,500 according to one report.<sup>14</sup>

The Ukrainian Baptists have clearly proved themselves a most active, bold and resilient element within both the Baptist movement as a whole and also the broader Civil Rights cause. Indeed, far from being daunted by the regime's draconian reaction to it, some of the movement's Ukrainian members have attached themselves to or played a leading part in Civil Rights protests within their very places of confinement. There is equally little indication of any waning of support or enthusiasm. However, while this Ukrainian element may form a representative cross-section of the Baptist dissidents throughout the USSR, further systematic studies on other areas will have to be carried out before this can be confirmed and the nature of their overall support ascertained.

<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1967, six of them petitioned the Ministry for the Protection of Public Order for permission to carry on their religious activities in a prison camp (reported in a letter from P. S. Overchuk to the Procurator of the Ukrainian SSR, 10 May 1967); while Boris Zdorovets, among others, has participated in hunger strikes and petitions from the camps on a number of more general civil rights issues (see for example *Khronika Tekushchikh Sobytii*, No. 1, 30 April, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Listed in M. Bourdeaux: *Religious Ferment in Russia*, Macmillan, London, 1969, pp. 211-229; R. Harris and X. Howard-Johnston: *Christian Appeals from Russia*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1969, pp. 92-143; a *samizdat* document produced by the Council of Prisoners' Relatives, 1 November 1969; and in lists published in *Dein Reich Komme*, Stuttgart, No. 2, 1972 and Nos. 2, 4 and 5, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> On Prokofiev's activities, see Bourdeaux: *Religious Ferment in Russia*, particularly pp. 22-6.

<sup>4</sup> On whose second trial, see *Pravda Ukrainy*, Kiev, 4 October, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> For biographical data on Vins see M. Bourdeaux: *Faith on Trial in Russia*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1971, particularly pp. 60-100.

<sup>6</sup> One such case from Odessa in 1962 is cited in detail in a letter from two of the Baptist leaders, Kryuchkov and Shalashov, to Party First Secretary, Khrushchev, 13 August 1963 (published in Bourdeaux: *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 63). Another Odessa trial, in 1967, is the subject of M. Bourdeaux: *Russian Christians on Trial*, European Christian Mission, London, 1970.

<sup>7</sup> See J. D. Newth: Jews in the Ukraine—A Statistical Analysis, in *Bulletin on Soviet and East European Jewish Affairs*, No. 3, January 1969, p. 19; and I. I. Millman: Major Centres of Jewish Population in the USSR, in *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, No. 1, June 1970, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Article by A. I. Klibanov and L. N. Mitrokhin in *Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma*, No. 3, 1967.

<sup>9</sup> Appeal to the UN Secretary General of 15 August, 1967, cited in Harris and Howard-Johnston, *op. cit.* p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> For example K. S. Kucherenko in Nikolaev on 22 January 1962—see Bourdeaux: *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> One such document of March, 1969, had 1,453 signatures from all over the Soviet Union. From the Kiev congregation alone, an appeal dated 24 May, 1966, had 116 signatures while another from the same community on 25 February, 1968, had 176. A 1968 letter from the Odessa community had 80 signatures.

<sup>12</sup> *Samizdat* appeal to all Christian Churches and Christians of the World, 20 November 1969.

<sup>13</sup> Dated 5 April, 1967, this was appended to a more general CPR appeal to the UN General Secretary of 5 June 1967.

<sup>14</sup> *Samizdat* document, quoted in *Sunday Telegraph*, London, 2 December 1973. As with similar meetings in other parts of the country, this one was broken up by the State security forces. Similar instances have been reported for example from Kiev in May and June, 1966 (Appeal from Kiev of 24 May, 1966 cited in Bourdeaux: *Religious Ferment in Russia*, pp. 120-1; and appeal to the UN Secretary General of 15 August, 1967, in Harris and Howard-Johnston, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-3), and from Krivyy Rih in early 1970 (document cited in Bourdeaux: *Faith on Trial in Russia*, p. 163).

## CARDINAL HEENAN

All friends and supporters of Keston College will join with me in mourning the loss of our dear friend and patron, Cardinal Heenan, who died on 7 November, 1975. Few people have given us personally more encouragement, and through this Keston College has been able to increase the amount of attention given to the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in the Soviet Union. We hope that this work on which we are now engaged, supported by the Ford Foundation, will stand as a fitting memorial to the Cardinal.

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