

Soviet Pentecostals: Movement for Emigration

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The largest collection of Pentecostal documents ever sent from the Soviet Union arrived in the West in December 1976. The documents provide information about over 100 families who wish to emigrate from the USSR on religious grounds.¹ Several of the documents bear witness to the virtually continuous persecution of Pentecostals since 1930.² Until recently they have borne their sufferings with patience and in silence, and apart from an attempt to appeal for help to the US Embassy in Moscow by a group of Pentecostals from Chernogorsk (Central Siberia) in 1963,³ Soviet Pentecostals did not seek to draw the attention of world opinion to their plight until the early 1970s.⁴

Since 1973 there has been a growing movement for emigration. It began with members of the congregations at Chernogorsk (including some of those involved in the 1963 incident) and Nakhodka, on the Soviet Pacific coast, where most of those trying to emigrate were originally members who had moved there from Chernogorsk. By 1975 the movement had spread from Chernogorsk to Novokuznetsk and Myski, over 200 miles away by train. Joint petitions to emigrate have been made by these three congregations.⁵ In Nakhodka, as the present documents testify, the movement has spread to other members of the congregation, some of whom have lived in Nakhodka since 1957-58, and from there to Vladivostok and other nearby towns in the Pacific Maritime Province, to Staro-Titarovskaya and Karer in the North Caucasus, where some of the Nakhodka congregation have moved since 1969, and to Batumi, on the Georgian Black Sea coast. In Nakhodka an emigration committee has been established, headed by the congregation's assistant pastor. The overall leadership has passed into the hands of Nikolai Petrovich Goretoi, pastor of the Nakhodka church from 1957 until his arrest in 1961, and now pastor of the Staro-Titarovskaya church.⁶ The number of would-be emigrants has now reached 1,000.⁷

The new dossier of documents comprises 350 pages and includes photographs of many of the families who are seeking to emigrate. Several

of the appeals are dated August and September 1976, and some were sent abroad separately at that time. The only older documents relate to the trial of Grigori Vashchenko's son Daniil in 1974, and these were received in 1975.⁸ The new material consists of six general appeals that serve as introductions to the 74 appeals from individuals or family groups, and the names and addresses of 27 additional individuals and families, all of whom wish to emigrate from the USSR. There are also two official documents: the bill of indictment against two members of the Nakhodka church, and the decision of the Kazakhstan procuracy refusing to rehabilitate posthumously the father of two brothers who are seeking to emigrate with their families. The collection is completed by letters from the Nakhodka and Vladivostok churches to Yevgeni Bresenden (who has emigrated to the USA), Nikolai Plotnikov (who has emigrated to Austria) and Vladimir Bagrin (who has emigrated to Canada) which commission them to act on behalf of the churches. The appeals are nearly all from three areas: the Far Eastern Maritime Province (Nakhodka, Vladivostok and some smaller towns), the North Caucasus (the settlements of Karer and Staro-Titarovskaya in Krasnodar province) and the Georgian Black Sea coast (Batumi and a nearby settlement). All three groups, however, are linked: most of those in the North Caucasus moved there from Nakhodka, and one of the appeals from Batumi is from the family of a man whose brother is among those writing from Nakhodka. A family from Chernogorsk is also listed, and there is an appeal from a family in Cherkassy, in Ukraine, whose eldest daughter is married to one of the sons of N. P. Goretoi, the leader of the emigration movement. A few appeals are from unidentified locations.

The collection was compiled and arranged according to the alphabetical order of names by Alexander Ginzburg (see photograph in *RCL* Vol. 5, No. 2), a leading member of the "Helsinki Monitoring Group". The group sent with the dossier a covering letter, dated 2 December 1976, which defended the right to emigrate on religious grounds.⁹ Many of the appeals refer to the Helsinki Agreements and are addressed to the heads of governments of all 35 States which participated in the Helsinki conference in 1975. Further contact between the Pentecostals and the "Helsinki Monitoring Group" has been hindered by the arrest of several of the group's members, including Ginzburg. Lidia Voronina, who travelled to Nakhodka and Staro-Titarovskaya on behalf of the group in December 1976 in order to find out more about their situation,¹⁰ was granted an exit visa shortly after she returned to Moscow. She had been applying to emigrate for three years and was now given only two weeks to leave the Soviet Union.

Most of the Pentecostal appeals¹¹ focus on the difficulty of bringing up children as Christians in Soviet society. (Of the 600 names listed, more

than half are of dependent children under 18.) Many of the documents allege that teachers have treated Christian children unfairly: for example, teachers are said to have subjected children to mockery, sending them home for not wearing a pioneer tie (when they have refused on principle to join the pioneers, which is a "voluntary" organization); they are said to have lowered the marks of Christian children as a form of punishment and to have stated in the school-leaving testimonials of these children that they are religious (such a statement will usually bar a child from further full-time education). These documents also claim that Christian schoolchildren have been maltreated and beaten up by other pupils, with the acquiescence, if not the connivance, of the teachers. Although forms of persecution against adults are also described – for example, discrimination in employment and housing and denial of social security benefits, as well as the dispersal of meetings and the fining of Pentecostal leaders – most parents feel that they can endure persecution which is directed against themselves; but they cannot bear to see their children suffer.

Apart from documents describing the persecutions of individuals and congregations at the present time, the dossier contains appeals which describe conditions in the past. There are details of arrests and trials in Alma-Ata in the 1930s, in Frunze in 1951–52 and Nakhodka in the 1960s. The underground existence of the Pentecostal churches in the late 1940s and early 1950s is described: tiny groups met infrequently and in total secrecy in private homes at night; occasionally larger meetings were held deep in the mountains. The amnesty for Christian prisoners in 1955 brought new hope and Pentecostals began meeting openly. Then renewed persecution forced them to move from town to town and to resume a semi-underground life.

Some of the documents which deal with N. P. Goretoi's congregation are particularly interesting as the activities of Goretoi (the leader of the emigration movement) and his followers in Central Asia, Siberia and Nakhodka were described in several books and articles published in the late 1950s.¹² In some cases the very same events have been described from opposing points of view. This congregation subsequently moved yet again, this time to the settlements of Karer and Staro-Titarovskaya in the North Caucasus. They have now lived in many parts of the Soviet Union and have found everywhere that the attitude of schools, employers and local authorities is equally hostile. They conclude that the persecutions they have met are not local excesses, but national policy, and therefore see no hope of improving their situation except by emigrating from the USSR.

A strong case is made by this dossier against joining the ECB (Evangelical Christian and Baptist) Union and against autonomous regis-

tration, which has been offered by the authorities for a number of years. In Karer in 1969 and in Nakhodka and Batumi in 1974-75 Pentecostal churches were allowed to meet for public worship without registration and without any conditions being imposed, except that of not preaching against the Soviet system. In all cases the right to worship was based upon verbal permission. While this situation seems to have continued in Karer and Batumi, in Nakhodka the authorities have attempted to put pressure on the congregation to register as a condition for continuing public worship. The congregation has been resisting this pressure on the grounds that the conditions of registration impose an organizational structure on Pentecostals for which no Biblical foundation can be found. These conditions also require that members of the executive committees (of each congregation) be vetted by the local authorities, and this, the Pentecostals consider, is interference in internal church affairs. Registration, in their view, would also restrict the activities of the Church and hinder the fulfilment of some of Christ's commands: the documents mention, for example, the command to perform charitable works, not to swear oaths, not to kill, to pray always in the Spirit, to teach children the Christian faith. In fact, according to state regulations, they claim, children under the age of 18 are not allowed to attend services at all. The authorities have tried to impose this restriction on the Pentecostals in Karer and Nakhodka. This is the first time that Pentecostals have specified the conditions for registration to which they object. As for the Pentecostals in the ECB leadership who encourage the acceptance of registration under such conditions, they are considered to be destroying the Church in the view of the authors of this dossier.

In general, the Pentecostals who wrote these documents see no place at all for a Christian in Soviet society. They feel that to live any longer in Soviet society will inevitably lead them into sin through compromise with the system. For presbyter N. P. Goretoi, it is not persecution, which Pentecostals have borne patiently for many years, but his interpretation of scripture that causes him to wish to emigrate. He and other Pentecostals believe that God is calling them to "come out". This is reflected in the title given to the whole dossier: "Come out of her (Babylon), my people" (Rev. 18:4).

¹ For a selection see pp. 174-179.

² For an outline of the history of the Soviet Pentecostal movement see Michael Rowe, "Pentecostal Documents from the USSR", in *RCL* Vol. 3, Nos. 1-3, pp. 16-18.

³ This incident was covered widely in the press at the time and prompted J. C. Pollock to write the book, *The Christians from Siberia* (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1964). At that time, so little was known about the Soviet Pentecostal movement that nobody realized that this group consisted of Pentecostal Christians.

⁴ Up to 1974, 13 documents were received. They are described in "Pentecostal Documents from the USSR", *loc. cit.*

⁵ Documents DS/1975/P/12-158 (listed in RCL Vol. 3, No. 6, p. 66) and DS/1975/P/170-230 (listed in RCL Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 68-9).

⁶ See photo opposite p. 176.

⁷ See UPI report on 24 March 1977.

⁸ DS/1974/P/18-21 & 24 (listed in RCL Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 65-6). Daniil was released early, at the end of 1976. The family has now emigrated.

⁹ The letter was published by the US Congress Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe: *Reports of Helsinki Accord Monitors in the Soviet Union. Documents of the Public Groups to Promote Observance of the Helsinki Agreements in the USSR. A Partial Compilation, edited and prepared by the staff of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.* 24 February 1977, ii+123 pp., pp. 65-7.

¹⁰ "Report on a Trip to the Pentecostal Congregations of Staro-Titarovskaya, Krasnodar Territory, and Nakhodka, 5-23 December 1976", AS 2872, 12 January 1977.

¹¹ Most of the issues discussed below are mentioned in the documents selected: see pp. 174-179.

¹² F. Myachin, *Ne po puti (On the Wrong Path)*, Moscow, "Gospolitizdat", 1959. *Pravda o sektantakh (The Truth about the Sectarians)*, Vladivostok, "Primorskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo", 1958.

Pentecostal Dossier: Extracts

The following documents written by a number of Pentecostal believers in the USSR, form part of the dossier, "Come out of Babylon, my people" (see preceding article). Nikolai Bobarykin is a deacon of the Pentecostal Church in Staro-Titarovskaya, Northern Caucasus, and Valentin Burlachenko a deacon of the church in Nakhodka, Far Eastern Maritime Province. The authors of the other three appeals are ordinary members: Vera Shchukina is from Staro-Titarovskaya, Andrei Kovalenko from Karer, Northern Caucasus and Stanislav Babichenko from Batumi, Soviet Georgia. Between them they illustrate all the main issues raised in the dossier: persecution of Pentecostals from the 1930s onwards; discrimination against Christians and against children from Christian families; and pressure on Pentecostal congregations to register and their reasons for objecting to registration.

NIKOLAI GRIGORIEVICH BOBARYKIN
(BORN 1932)

I, Nikolai Grigorievich Bobarykin, and my wife Ella Kirillovna, have been believers since 1949. We have ten children, also believers. We are members of the Christian denomination of Pentecostals. I

am a deacon in my local church, elected in 1954. From the day of my conversion I have been a witness of the violence employed by the Soviet authorities against believers. In 1949 we were living in Frunze in the Kirghiz Republic, where I began to confess the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Immediately I began to suffer persecution for my faith, along with my fellow-believers. We, at that time still young people, longed to meet together to study the Bible. Because of the intense persecution we were forced to hide in places a long way outside the city. One Easter we walked in twos and threes, no more, to the hills ten kilometres away so that our persecutors might not see where the believers were going to hold their service to the Lord. Old men and women followed us to the hills to hear the Word of God and to praise Him for His glorious resurrection. Around us were only bare cliffs without a single small tree. The sun was scorching hot and our supply of water grew very warm. But we, meeting in those hills, were happy to be in a gathering where we felt ourselves free. God alone saw and heard us as we sought Him in prayer with our praise and our laments at our persecutions. The silent hills witnessed our service. We returned very tired, but inwardly renewed. In the city it was impossible for us to hold meet-