

Pentecostals in Bulgaria

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The Pentecostal Church is by far the largest Protestant denomination in Bulgaria with approximately 10,000 members and 120 churches.¹ There are Pentecostal churches in all the major cities and also in many of the smaller towns and large villages. The Church is recognized by the State and there is a Pentecostal Union based in Sofia. Pastor I. Zarev is the President of the Union and Pastor D. Zhelev the Vice-President.

Pentecostalism was first introduced into Bulgaria in 1921 by Russian émigré Pentecostal missionaries from the USA such as D. Zaplishny, I. E. Voronayev and E. Kolshovsky.² The denomination grew rapidly at first: it had about 1,000 members in 1925 and 2,000 by 1928. It suffered a drop in membership during the Second World War but experienced a sudden burst of growth after the communist takeover in September 1944.³ It then continued to grow at a slower rate, until recently, when it has been experiencing a revival.

At first sight, the Pentecostal churches appear to function freely. There are congregations of between 100 and 600 in the main cities,⁴ the largest congregation being that of the church in Burgas, one of the two major cities on the Black Sea coast where Pentecostal influence is said to be strongest.⁵ Services are held twice on Sundays and twice during the week, usually on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Most believers feel free to participate actively in the services, particularly during times of open prayer and testimony. Pentecostals frequently travel to visit churches in other towns, bringing greetings from their own congregations and sharing testimonies and experiences. Special occasions such as baptisms and weddings also attract large contingents from neighbouring towns. Services of believers' baptism are held openly in the churches themselves, usually once a year on Whit Sunday, and in some churches 60 or 70 people are baptized on this occasion.

The Pentecostals seem in some ways to have more freedom than the other Protestant denominations. For example, Pentecostal leaders appear to have little difficulty in obtaining permission to travel abroad for conferences, whereas members of other Protestant groups are rarely allowed

out of the country. In September 1976 five Pentecostals attended the World Pentecostal Conference in London, and one of them, Pastor Zhelev, was allowed to remain in England for five months after the Conference to study English at the International Bible Training Institute in Burgess Hill, Sussex. Bulgarian Pentecostal leaders also attended the European Pentecostal Conference in the Hague in July 1978 (three delegates), the European Pentecostal Fellowship Seminar in Austria in March 1979 (four delegates) and the World Pentecostal Conference in Canada in October 1979 (four delegates).

Nevertheless, the Pentecostal Church is subject to the usual restrictions and limitations which operate in the Soviet Union and other communist bloc countries. For example, although children under 18 attend services openly, they are not allowed to participate actively; and believing pupils at some of the more prestigious secondary schools are reluctant to attend church frequently, if at all, for fear of possible repercussions at school. The same is true of professional people, especially teachers, who fear repercussions at work. Some Pentecostal teachers keep their faith secret and seldom or never attend church in their own towns, where they are well-known, doing so only when visiting other towns; others have been forced to choose between their jobs and their faith, and having chosen the latter are now doing entirely different jobs, such as clerical work or selling in roadside kiosks; still others manage to keep their jobs as teachers, but usually only by accepting posts in primary schools or remote villages to which teachers are not generally attracted.⁶

Pentecostal pastors preach the Christian gospel openly and without compromise but are careful to avoid political themes and anything which could be construed as criticism of the political system. They also restrain members of the congregation if, when giving testimonies or making prayer requests known, the latter appear to imply some criticism of the State or state organs. For example, if a believer speaks slightly of the health service while testifying to divine healing, the pastor makes a point of saying how beneficial and necessary the health service is. He may do so because he genuinely believes that this kind of positive attitude represents the correct Christian position; but he is often bearing in mind that there might be police informers in the congregation. The presence of informers is taken for granted and their task is to report to the police any statements which could be considered offensive to the regime. The pastor may then be called to police headquarters to explain himself. Pentecostal pastors are in any case obliged to report to the police regularly.

A split occurred in Bulgarian Pentecostalism in 1928 when the so-called Pentecostal-Tinchevists—followers of Stoyan Tinchev—broke away from the main movement. These believers differ from mainstream Pentecostals in that they reject any sort of organization or structure as liable to distract believers from faith in Christ. For the same reason they are suspicious of

special church buildings and prefer to meet in believers' homes. Whenever a Tinchevist feels divinely led to have a meeting in his home, he informs other members of the group by letter. It is alleged that this often means that Tinchevists are absent from work for several days.⁷ Tinchevist men are obliged to keep their hair very short and wear moustaches while the women have to wear long dresses.⁸ They also reject any form of medical assistance: in 1960, for example, Boyanka and Ivan Vanevski, Tinchevists from Veliko Turnovo, were tried for allegedly letting their six-year-old daughter die of diphtheria rather than summon medical help.⁹

Although in the past the Tinchevists would have nothing to do with mainstream Pentecostalism, there are recent signs that young people in the movement wish to have contacts with orthodox Pentecostals or even to join them. They are known to be having discussions about this with Pentecostal leaders.¹⁰ This is especially so in Sofia, where the Tinchevists have two meetings, one with about 100 members and the other with about 150.¹¹ Outside Sofia, Tinchevists are found mainly in the Pleven, Russe and Veliko Turnovo regions.¹²

There are other unofficial or "underground" groups within the Pentecostal Church, besides the Tinchevists, which meet in believers' homes. Many of these are interdenominational and are often started by people dissatisfied with worship in the official Pentecostal churches, either because they disagree with certain aspects of the pastors' teaching or because they feel that the pastors themselves or other members of the congregation cannot be trusted. There are said to be many such groups in the Burgas area where the official Pentecostal congregation is particularly large. Many people attend both the official church and the unofficial meetings.

Most of the time, the Pentecostals are not harassed if they keep within the limitations imposed by the State. However, they may occasionally be subject to arbitrary decisions by the police. In 1975, for example, the pastor of a large Pentecostal church in a Bulgarian city was forced to leave the city because he had no residence permit. He had lived there for several years with no objections being raised and many Pentecostals therefore concluded that this was a pretext, the real reason being that the pastor had refused to comply with the authorities in some matter. Fortunately, he was able to change places with the pastor from his home town who had a residence permit for the city in question.

Because the Pentecostal Church, like the other Protestant Churches, was started by foreign missions, it cannot claim to be a "national" Church in the sense that the Bulgarian Orthodox Church can. For this reason, and also because the Pentecostals (except the Tinchevists) still have links with foreign missions, the State sometimes finds it expedient to charge them with working for foreign governments and organizations. For example, a large group of Bulgarian pastors, many of whom were Pentecostals, were tried and convicted in 1949 on charges of espionage.¹³ The

best known of these were the brothers Haralan and Ladin Popov who came to the West after their release.¹⁴ More recently, Pastors Stoyan Bukov, Stefan Stefanov and Mladen Mladenov were banished to remote villages in 1975 on charges of foreign currency dealings. The real reasons for these sentences, however, appear to be that Bukov, pastor of the Plovdiv Pentecostal church, allowed foreigners to preach and distribute tracts in his church and that he refused to forbid children to attend church; that Stefanov, pastor of the Shumen church, was instrumental in the conversion of the daughter of a Party official; and that Mladenov preached to young people.¹⁵

Although the Pentecostals are allowed to worship freely, all organized evangelistic activity is forbidden. Until about mid-1976 this seemed to hamper the growth of the Church severely, and the majority of new converts tended to be from Pentecostal families. Few non-believers dared to attend services and person-to-person witnessing was the only channel available for the Pentecostals to share their faith. Even this was risky unless the non-believer was a close and trusted friend; non-believers in turn were reluctant to show any interest because of the relatively high cost of commitment: church membership can lead to difficulties at work or to restrictions on educational opportunities.

Another serious problem has been a severe shortage of Christian literature. The Pentecostal Church has access to printing facilities only for the production of a limited number of religious calendars every year. Although no Bibles or hymnbooks have been printed in Bulgaria since 1944, believers nevertheless appear to be relatively well-supplied with copies of these, imported by various unofficial means; but they have little or no expository literature, and no Concordance exists in Bulgarian. The lack of suitable literature is felt particularly by the pastors, who have no aids to their teaching and preaching apart from a few old books dating from before 1940. This is a severe handicap since, with very few exceptions, Pentecostal pastors are all untrained. The only way a Protestant can receive any theological training is by obtaining a place at the Sofia Theological Academy. This is an Orthodox institution. Of the four Protestants currently studying there, one is a Pentecostal. They gained entry because they were baptized Orthodox as infants.

These difficulties brought about a period of stagnation in the Pentecostal Church, and from 1944 until 1976 it saw little growth. Since about mid-1976, however, the picture has altered radically: while the problems mentioned above still exist, there have been constant reports of religious revival and increasing church attendance, particularly among young people. One such report from early 1978 stated that while the revival mainly affected young people, it was having a beneficial effect on old and young alike.

In a short period of time, over a hundred people received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and there have also been many miraculous healings which have glorified God. The result is that the churches are now full of people thirsting for God and His Word.¹⁶

Believers say that while there has been no change in the preaching, there has nevertheless been a great influx of new converts into the churches. They are convinced that this is the hand of God at work, since they themselves have not made any special evangelistic efforts. They tell of one particular Pentecostal church in southern Bulgaria which is experiencing great renewal and where a young man who was almost blind was healed. This particular church was considered by Bulgarian Christians to be the least likely place for a revival.

This religious revival has led to a corresponding increase in pressure from the State. Although there had previously been occasional clamp-downs on Pentecostals who went beyond the official restrictions (for example, the exile of the three pastors mentioned above), many Pentecostals were able to receive gifts from abroad, carry on unofficial evangelistic activity and translate Christian literature into Bulgarian; and the authorities often turned a blind eye to such activities. In the last two or three years, however, there has been increasing police harassment of Pentecostals and other believers, culminating in a wave of house searches and arrests in March 1979.¹⁷ Five Pentecostals—Pastor Georgi Todorov of Veliko Turnovo (Treasurer of the Pentecostal Union), Peter Yanev and Bancho Banchev of Burgas, Nathaniel Tsachev of Troyan and Mitko Zhekov of Akheloï—were tried in mid-September 1979 on charges of receiving goods as well as foreign and Bulgarian currency from abroad (Art. 250 (1) and (2) of the Bulgarian penal code). All five received sentences ranging from three to six years, as well as heavy fines.¹⁸

It is significant that this group of five Pentecostals includes men of considerable spiritual standing among Bulgarian believers, whose loss will be keenly felt by the churches. Pastor Georgi Todorov, for example, is a convert from communism and a notable preacher whose evangelism has led to many conversions; he has incurred the hostility of the authorities several times, and in 1978 the Veliko Turnovo local paper went so far as to print a cartoon of him. Peter Yanev is a musically gifted evangelist and youth worker who also had an effective ministry. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian press was at pains to emphasize that the trial was not an attack on the Pentecostal Church, and pointed out that the leadership of the Pentecostal Union officially disapproves of the "activities of the accused", a statement to this effect being made by Pastor I. Zarev at the trial.¹⁹

It cannot be denied that these five Pentecostals did receive monetary gifts and goods from Pentecostals abroad, but this has been happening for years, as even the secular press admits.²⁰ The authorities, however,

did little or nothing to prevent it until the Pentecostal Church started experiencing revival on a large scale. Time alone will tell whether this marks the beginning of a period of repression by the authorities or whether it was a temporary clampdown.

¹These figures were given by a Bulgarian Pentecostal leader. The figures of 6,000 members and 25 houses of worship are given in *Churches and Religions in the People's Republic of Bulgaria* (published in English), Synodal Publishing House, Sofia, 1975, p. 68. Other religious groups in Bulgaria and their membership are as follows: Bulgarian Orthodox—six million (or 75 per cent of the population); Muslims—80,000; Roman Catholics—50,000; Eastern-rite Catholics (Uniates)—10,000-15,000; Jews—6,000; Congregationalists—5,000; Adventists—3,000; Methodists—1,300; Baptists—650.

²*Protestantskite sekty v Bulgaria*, Partizdat, Sofia, 1972, p. 189.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 190-1.

⁴See *Keston News Service*, No. 44, 13 October 1977.

⁵*Protestantskite sekty v Bulgaria*, p. 190.

⁶See *Keston News Service*, No. 44.

⁷*Protestantskite sekty v Bulgaria*, p. 201.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁹Case No. 145, Turnovo People's Court, 3rd District; in *Protestantskite sekty v Bulgaria*, p. 202.

¹⁰Letter from a visitor to Bulgaria, 31 October 1979.

¹¹*Ibid.* The mention of "meetings" in this letter seems to imply that the Tinchevists in Sofia, being more numerous than in other places, have a more formalized organizational structure.

¹²*Ibid.*, and *Protestantskite sekty v Bulgaria*, p. 202.

¹³*The Trial of the Bulgarian Pastors*, Dennis Walton Dodds, unpublished.

¹⁴Haralan Popov was sentenced to 13 years while his brother Ladin was sentenced to five years. Haralan left Bulgaria legally in 1962 and Ladin defected in the early 1960s (after Haralan had left the country).

¹⁵See *Keston News Service*, No. 44.

¹⁶Letter from a Bulgarian Pentecostal, March 1978.

¹⁷See *Keston News Service*, No. 72, 10 May 1979; No. 75, 21 June 1979.

¹⁸These sentences were subsequently reduced as a result of two appeals by the accused and pressure from western countries. See *Keston News Service*, No. 86, 22 November 1979; No. 93, 6 March 1980.

¹⁹K. Panayotov, "Kogato dyasnata ruka 'ne znae' kakvo pravy lyavata", *Otechestven front*, 31 October 1979, p. 4.

²⁰*Ibid.*

Note: Since the above article was written the imprisoned Pentecostal Peter Yanev has been released. He was originally sentenced to five years' imprisonment, but after two appeals his sentence was reduced to one year; and he was finally freed on 29 July 1980. He married his Finnish fiancée on 17 August. It is generally believed that his engagement and the resulting publicity his case received in Scandinavia prompted the modification of his sentence.