

Soviet Religious Policy Under Brezhnev and After

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The death of Leonid Brezhnev and his replacement as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union by Yuri Andropov in November 1982¹ was the cause of little grief and even less rejoicing amongst the Soviet population. Foreign policy aside, the Brezhnev years had been characterised by the avoidance of any fundamental political change and considerable stagnation in the realm of policy-making, a tendency reflected to some extent in the religious policy of those years.

After the harsh treatment under Khrushchev² believers may have derived some hope from the period of “drift” in Soviet religious policy that followed his fall in October 1964.³ The number of anti-religious press articles began to decrease and their tone became less offensive. In practical terms this change was reflected in the release of nearly 200 Baptist prisoners and, in some cases, the quashing of their sentences.⁴ There was increased emphasis on the need for the strictest observation of “socialist legality” and the avoidance of “administrative measures”, and one leading jurist stated that “not one believer should be condemned merely for belonging to a religious sect and spreading its religious views”.⁵ Elsewhere there was criticism of the unsophisticated nature of much atheist work and the failure of many anti-religious activists to realise that “closing a parish does not turn believers into atheists”.⁶ However, all these discussions were primarily concerned with the methodology of atheist work and there was no questioning of the basic tenets of Soviet anti-religious policy. Religion was still viewed as “the major opponent of a scientific world view”, whilst the formation of a “consistent communist morality” was “impossible without a consistent struggle against religious ideology”.⁷ Administrative measures were deemed unacceptable — though the brutal attacks on the Pochayev monastery in western Ukraine in July 1965 demonstrated that not all local officials were aware of this — but the ultimate elimination of religion remained a central goal of the regime.⁸

As a comparatively stable, conservative leadership coalition emerged towards the middle of 1965 there came ominous signs of change, with a number of political arrests in Leningrad and Ukraine. September saw the arrests of the writers Sinyavsky and Daniel, followed in October by the ap-

pearance of an article in *Pravda* which described the Stalinist period as “one of the most brilliant in the history of the Party and the Soviet State”.⁹ This “creeping conservatism” was reflected in Soviet religious policy when amendments to Article 142 of the RSFSR Criminal Code (relating to contraventions of the laws on the separation of Church and State) increased the severity of penalties for second offences.¹⁰ Though in part a reflection of a general hardening of the political line, this legislative change should also be seen as an official response to the emergence of a religious dissent movement, particularly among the Baptists, whose *samizdat* appeals were beginning to appear in the West.¹¹ They produced a well-argued critique of the legislative position of believers, demonstrating how the separation of Church and State decreed in 1918 had been undermined by subsequent enactments, notably the 1929 Law on Religious Associations.¹² From the Orthodox Church came the well-known open letters of Fathers Gleb Yakunin and Nikolai Eshliman which documented state intervention in the internal life of the Church and criticised the passivity of the hierarchy in the face of this threat.¹³

As the dissent movement gathered pace in the 1970s there were three developments that must have proved of particular concern to the authorities. Firstly, there were growing links between religion and nationalism in various parts of the Soviet Union, notably in Lithuania, but also to some extent in the Central Asian Republics, Georgia, Ukraine, the Russian Republic and elsewhere. In Lithuania, as in Poland; it has traditionally been the Roman Catholic Church that has best expressed the national aspirations of the people, and since 1945 the Church has remained the only Lithuanian institution not to come completely under the control of what many view as the occupying power.¹⁴ Its strength was vividly demonstrated at the end of 1971 when over 17,000 Lithuanians signed an appeal protesting about the lack of true freedom of conscience; equally impressive has been the continued appearance of the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* which since 1972 has carefully documented the many problems facing believers in this small Baltic republic.¹⁵ Potentially more explosive is the situation in the Central Asian Republics, where a rapidly expanding population is beginning to come into contact with the Islamic revival that has swept through much of the Arab world.¹⁶ (See article on pp. 31-5 — Ed.)

A second factor which the political authorities had to come to terms with was the gradual coming together of religious and secular dissent. Various individuals had been led by their Christian convictions to speak out on human rights issues in the 1960s, and cooperation between religious and secular dissenters became a feature of the human rights movement during the 1970s, particularly in the wake of the Helsinki Agreements on détente in Europe signed in 1975. Central to this development was the creation in 1976 of the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights.¹⁷ Though their primary aim was to defend the rights of religious believers, members of

the Committee worked closely with members of other groups set up to monitor the Soviet record on human rights.

Finally, Soviet young people were exhibiting increasing interest in religion.¹⁸ Soviet anti-religious press articles were forced to admit that the Baptist *Initsiativniki* attracted many of their adherents from amongst young industrial workers, that is, the group said by Soviet sociologists of religion to be the least susceptible to religious belief.¹⁹ Equally problematic to the propagandist was the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church, allegedly the preserve of the ignorant *babushka*, was proving increasingly attractive to young intellectuals who had become disillusioned with the official ideology. From such young people came the members of the Christian Seminar, and many other study groups, which sought to explore the meaning of confessing Christ in the modern world.²⁰

In considering the official response to these developments it is important to distinguish between Soviet "religious policy" and Soviet "dissent policy". One concerns the regime's view of the future of religion in Soviet society and the practical implications of this; the other concerns official responses to a particular manifestation of religious belief. Though there is considerable overlap between the two areas they must not be confused if we are to understand Soviet religious policy in recent years. We should, therefore, be careful in talking of "a Brezhnev religious policy" or the "systematisation" of anti-religious activity, for these terms relate essentially to Soviet dissent policy, where one can detect a fairly clear pattern. Until the late 1970s political constraints prevented an all-out assault on secular and religious dissent, and it was only with the cooling of East-West relations, particularly after the invasion of Afghanistan, that the politicians felt they had nothing to lose by a more concerted attack on dissent. For religious believers this policy was reflected in the rapid rise in the number of Christian prisoners, from about 180 in spring 1979 to nearly 400 in 1982.

Looking more generally at "religious policy" there is little evidence either that Brezhnev took any personal interest in religion or that there was any high level, inner-party debate on religious questions. Leading ideologists still speak of religion as a "survival of the past" destined to "wither away" under full communism, but whether this is taken any more seriously than other aspects of the official ideology must remain open to doubt. Nevertheless, the eventual disappearance of religion is still an officially proclaimed goal and the amount of money, time and effort that goes into anti-religious activity suggests that there is to be no revision of this aspect of Soviet ideology.²¹

As worked out in practice, religious policy under Brezhnev has probably been far less coherent than might appear at first sight. The chief characteristic of politics under the late General Secretary was "reaction": the regime's policies were largely a response to external events beyond their control — in foreign policy this was clearly illustrated in Czechoslovakia, in domestic

policy by the recent "food programme". With regard to religion this has meant a continuation of many of the approaches worked out under earlier leaderships plus responding to manifestations of religious dissent.

In legislative terms the Brezhnev period has witnessed few changes in the *de facto* situation of believers, though the 1975 amendments to the Law on Religious Associations²² made public many of the unwritten regulations that had been applied in practice since the early 1960s.²³ Soviet religious legislation can still be described as "an attempt to undermine the temporal and spiritual power of the various faiths".²⁴ The introduction of a new Soviet Constitution in 1977 brought no change in the fundamental inequality between believers and atheists²⁵ and the hollowness of its provisions was made apparent in the assault on dissent that followed its promulgation.

With regard to the evangelical churches some concessions have been made to the "official" churches and to those "unofficial" churches which have been prepared to accept the registration requirements laid down by the law. Since about 1975 the Council for Religious Affairs has been registering individual Baptist and Pentecostal congregations without requiring that they affiliate to the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptists.²⁶ For those who refuse to register, however, repression has become increasingly harsh and the number of Baptist prisoners has risen from about 40 in 1975 to over 150 in 1982. Similarly harsh persecution has been the fate of the numerous Pentecostals who have sought to emigrate and the reformers amongst the Seventh-Day Adventists.

Political control over the leaders and organisational structures of the officially-recognised churches, a policy consistently pursued since 1945, has continued and strengthened. The extent of this control and the cynical attitude of those who implement it was made plain in a report on the Russian Orthodox Church prepared by the Council for Religious Affairs and addressed to the Central Committee of the CPSU.²⁷ Referring to the Holy Synod, its author, V. Furov, noted that the CRA decided the question of "the selection and appointment of its permanent members". The report gives details of the CRA's supervision of clerical appointments, the selection of church personnel for overseas work, the curriculum of educational institutions and the admittance of students to them, the censorship of church publications, and many other aspects of church life.²⁸ There are, however, limits to such control, since it was this very type of intervention that led to the creation of religious dissent in the early 1960s.

With regard to the future there can be little reason for optimism amongst believers. There has been speculation about some form of officially sponsored Russian nationalist upsurge in which the Orthodox Church would play a key role, but the concrete evidence for this is as yet relatively meagre.²⁹ Similarly, there has been much talk of Andropov as a "liberal", ignoring the

*The report is reviewed on pp. 114-16 — Ed.

fact that it was under his chairmanship of the KGB that the recent assault upon religious dissent was launched and that, according to General Grigorenko, the number of special psychiatric prison hospitals rose from three to thirty.³⁰ Andropov may well be a more flexible politician than many of his colleagues and more aware of the pressing social and economic problems facing Soviet society. Whether he has either the will-power or the political leverage to compel his conservative colleagues to make changes in the sluggish political system must remain open to serious doubt. For believers any change is likely to be marginal and of a cosmetic nature, at least until the present generation of leaders passes from the scene. Their only consolation can be that, though the “mythical Christ figure” is a “vestige of the past”, his followers continue to inspire more devotion than the flesh and blood Andropov.

¹ *Pravda*, 12 November 1982 and 13 November 1982.

² On the Khrushchev period see D. Lowrie and W. Fletcher, “Khrushchev’s Religious Policy 1959-64”, in R. Marshall, ed., *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union 1917-67*, Chicago, 1971, pp. 131-55.

³ A. Blanc, “A Year of Drift”, *RCL* Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 9-15.

⁴ P. Reddaway, “Policy towards Dissent since Khrushchev”, in T. Rigby, A. Brown and P. Reddaway, eds., *Authority, Power and Policy in the USSR*, London, 1980.

⁵ G. S. Anashkin, “O svobode sovesti i soblyudeniia zakonodatelstva o religioznykh kultakh”, *Sovetskoye gosudarstvo i pravo*, January 1965.

⁶ *Komsolskaya Pravda*, 15 August 1965.

⁷ Anashkin, *op. cit.*

⁸ The simultaneous arrest of many Ukrainian intellectuals suggests that the attack on Pochayev was initiated centrally, though the level of brutality was probably of local origin.

⁹ *Pravda*, 8 October 1965.

¹⁰ *Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta RSFSR*, 12, 1966, pp. 219-20. In the months following the promulgation of the March decrees about 170 Baptists were arrested, including many who had been released the previous year.

¹¹ Fuller accounts of this movement are given in two books by M. Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, London, 1970, and *Religious Ferment in Russia*, London, 1968.

¹² Extracts in Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, *op. cit.*

¹³ Extracts in Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets*, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ M. Bourdeaux, *Land of Crosses*, 1979; S. Vardys, *The Catholic Church: Dissent and Nationality in Soviet Lithuania*, 1979.

¹⁵ By mid-1982 54 issues had reached the West.

¹⁶ A. Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejey, “Muslim Religious Conservatism and Dissent in the USSR”, *RCL* Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 153-61.

¹⁷ J. Ellis, “The Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers’ Rights in the USSR”, *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 279-98.

¹⁸ A. Levitin-Krasnov, “Religion and Soviet Youth”, *RCL*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 232-7.

¹⁹ For a discussion of Soviet sociology of religion see C. Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union*, 1978, and W. Fletcher, *Soviet Believers — The Religious Sector of the Population*, 1981.

²⁰ See J. Ellis, “The Christian Seminar”, *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 92-112; P. Walters, “The Ideas of the Christian Seminar”, *RCL* Vol. 9, Nos. 3-4, pp. 111-26.

²¹ For example, in 1970 members of the *Znaniye* Society gave 679,000 lectures on atheist themes: D. Powell, *Anti-religious Propaganda in the Soviet Union*, 1978.

²² *Vedomosti Verkhovnogo Soveta RSFSR*, 27, 1975, pp. 487-91.

²³ cf. I. R. Shafarevich, *Zakonodatelstvo o religii v Sovetskom Soyuze*, Paris, 1975.

²⁴ B. Wolfe-Jancar, “Religious Dissent in the USSR”, in R. Tökes, ed., *Dissent in the USSR — Politics, Ideology and People*, London, 1975.

²⁵ cf. the comments by CRA chairman Kuroyedov, and those of believers, in *RCL* Vol. 6,

Nos. 1 and 4, 1978.

²⁶M. Rowe, "Soviet Policy towards Evangelicals", *RCL* Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 4-22.

²⁷Text of all extracts from Furov Report received in the West in Keston College Archive; extracts from these in *Vestnik RKhD* 130, 1979, pp. 274-334.

²⁸The intervention of the CRA in all aspects of church life is discussed in a forthcoming book on the Russian Orthodox Church by Jane Ellis, and in John Anderson, *The Council for Religious Affairs — Mediator between Church and State or Instrument of Repression?* (LSE, M.Sc. Thesis, 1981).

²⁹One version of this theory is discussed by Darrell P. Hammer in the review article "Russian Nationalism and the 'Yanov Thesis'", *RCL* Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 310-6, though it should be pointed out that Yanov does not discuss the role of the Church in any depth.

³⁰P. Grigorenko, "Looking beyond Brezhnev", *Freedom at Issue*, November-December 1982, pp. 8-11.

WESTERN AID TO THE CHURCH IN THE SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE

a request for assistance for a research project

Dr Mark Elliott, Associate Professor of History at Asbury College, Kentucky, requests the assistance of anyone who could provide him with names of lesser-known groups involved in any aspect of Christian aid to churches in Soviet-bloc countries. Dr Elliott anticipates the publication of a directory of denominations, councils of churches, radio stations, human rights organisations and publicly-established missions involved in some way with eastern-bloc churches. His intention is to publish an analytical study of western organisations which seek to aid Soviet-bloc Christians.

Any assistance will be greatly appreciated. Anyone with information or anyone who wishes to be notified when the directory is published may contact **Dr Elliott at Asbury College, Wilmore, Kentucky 40390, USA, or by telephone: (606) 858-3511 ext. 186 or 858-4458.**