

# Feature

## Alexander Ogorodnikov

Over the past eight years, *RCL* has carried several items concerning Alexander Ogorodnikov, a Russian Orthodox Christian and founder of the Christian Seminar.<sup>1</sup> Recent news of Ogorodnikov has given rise to increasing alarm about his condition.

The Christian Seminar — a religious-philosophical discussion group active in Moscow from 1974 — attracted intellectuals, numbering among its members Vladimir Poresh<sup>2</sup>, Lev Regelson<sup>3</sup>, and Tatyana Shchipkova<sup>4</sup>, who described the group as providing

... what I had been unable to find either at academic conferences or in the company of my respectable friends — warm Christian fellowship, completely untrammelled thought, and total immersion in the spiritual realm.<sup>5</sup>

The Seminar's "Declaration of Principles" clearly showed the Slavophile roots of its thinking:

The contemporary global crisis, which undermines those

<sup>1</sup>See "The Christian Seminar" by Jane Ellis in *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 92-101 for an account of the formation and membership of the group. The article includes a brief profile of Ogorodnikov.

<sup>2</sup>A specialist in Romance philology, and a founder member of the Seminar. He was sentenced in 1980 for anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, released in February 1986, and is now under administrative surveillance in Leningrad.

<sup>3</sup>A physicist, Regelson was a co-author (with Gleb Yakunin) of the appeal sent to the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1975 in support of persecuted believers. He assumed leadership of the Seminar after Ogorodnikov's arrest. Tried in 1980, he pleaded guilty to charges of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda and was given a five-year suspended sentence (see *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 9-14).

<sup>4</sup>A specialist in Romance languages who lectured at Smolensk Pedagogical Institute. She was sentenced in 1980 for "hooliganism", and released on completion of her three-year term.

<sup>5</sup>"Has a Soviet Teacher the Right to Freedom of Conscience?" 1978, (see *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 106-09).

historical and spiritual dimensions which embraced the inspiration of the Enlightenment, has brought the world to the edge of disintegration . . . We stand on the threshold of a new era . . . Russia has a special part in these events . . . It is under the eschatological sign that Russian history is unfolding.<sup>6</sup>

Its discussions, however, were wide ranging, and it aimed to give its members a thorough and broadly-based theological education. It also aimed to set up dialogue with other Christian denominations, and to create a community of Christian fellowship, an opportunity to take the Christian life beyond the confines of the activity permitted by the state, beyond, that is, the performance of acts of worship in registered buildings.

While rejecting political action, the Seminar considered active involvement in the struggle for social justice to be a Christian imperative. They sought “. . . to promote to the best of our ability the liberation of the Russian Church from the offensive yoke of state patronage”<sup>7</sup> and stated “The outward action, the deed, done in complete responsibility, is the outward sign of deep spiritual change. We affirm social action as the path towards making spiritual life more profound”.<sup>8</sup>

However, the Seminar did not seek publicity abroad until forced to speak out against harassment, and its activities were in fact confined to private discussion and lectures, and the publication of one issue of a *samizdat* journal for its members, *Obshchina* (Community).

Real harassment of members of the Seminar began in 1976, and in that year Ogorodnikov lost his job and was forced to leave Moscow. In January 1979 he was sentenced to one year's ordinary-regime labour camp for “parasitism”, although at the time of his arrest he had been on his way to register for work. Just before he was due to be released, a further charge was filed against him, this time for “anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda” (partly for his part in the production of a second projected issue of *Obshchina*), and he was sentenced in September 1980 to six years' strict-regime labour camp and five years' internal exile. He served this sentence in Camp 36 near Kuchino, in the Perm region. On 3 April 1986, in Chusovoi, Ogorodnikov was sentenced to a further three years' labour camp under Article 188-3, Part 2 of the RSFSR Criminal Code (“Malicious disobedience to the requirements of the administration of a

<sup>6</sup>“Deklaratsiya printsipov seminarara”, in the Seminar's journal *Obshchina* pp. 8-9. For an examination of the ideas of the Seminar, see article by Philip Walters, *RCL* Vol. 9, Nos. 3-4, pp. 111-22.

<sup>7</sup>*Obshchina*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>Vladimir Poresh “Dai Krovi — priimi Dukh!” (“Give your Blood and Receive the Spirit!”).

corrective-labour institution’’). Under this Article, which was introduced in 1983, additional periods of imprisonment can be imposed on a prisoner solely on the evidence of camp officials.

We now turn to documents which were smuggled out of the camp in May 1986. These provide a commentary on the recent trial, and an account of Ogorodnikov’s experiences.

### *Resistance*

Among the documents is a list of the punishments and hunger-strikes which Ogorodnikov underwent between the day of his arrest in November 1978, and March 1986. The list was compiled by Ogorodnikov himself for the use of his defence counsel in the latest trial. It is a lengthy litany, starkly summarised at its close by a note indicating that, during the period in question, Ogorodnikov spent 411 days in punishment cells, was condemned to three spells in internal camp prison, and spent 659 days on hunger-strike to support his demand for a Bible. The document affords a glimpse of the pressure brought to bear on a prisoner bent on resistance to injustice and so caught up in an endless cycle of protest and repression. The following extract covers a period of four and a half months out of six spent in a punishment cell.

20.02.84. I was forced to renew my hunger-strike<sup>9</sup> as a mark of protest, because all my books had been transferred from the punishment cell locker to the locker in the camp zone, so that I couldn’t change them . . . six days’ hunger strike.

28.02.84. I came off hunger-strike, but I wasn’t given a chance to rebuild my strength.

1.03.84. They forced me to start work. They put me to work producing electrical appliances, where quotas are extremely high. I’d had no chance to regain any strength. Because I couldn’t fulfil the high quotas, I was put on diet 9b, which is officially 1,200 calories, but actually less (this when the United Nations standard is 3,500-4,000 calories a day).

During March and April I fainted from hunger three times. The first time, “doctor” Pchel’nikov didn’t give me a single day off work, although he could see the condition I was in. I called him a hangman, and as a result wasn’t allowed to use the camp shop.

15.04.84 to 22.04.84. Before Easter, I went on hunger-strike

<sup>9</sup>His previous fast (for, among other things, a Bible) had ended two days earlier.

because my books were removed from my cell . . . seven days' hunger-strike.

27.04.84. For persistently failing to fulfil production quotas (actually, for my protests and my hunger-strike demand for a Bible) . . . 12 days' punishment cell.

27.04.84. I fainted from hunger again. I was just skin and bones. By feeding me tranquillisers they brought me to the point of nervous collapse as well. They dressed me in thin isolation cell uniform when I was completely delirious. In my delirium my nerves finally gave way, and I broke a pane of glass in the cell (they'd put me into another, particularly cold, one), and slashed my wrists. I vaguely remember, as if in a dream, that I spent the night in handcuffs. Apparently, I kept shouting through the broken window that they were torturing me, but I remember nothing of that — I found that out later from other prisoners. During the night the cold made me come round a little several times, and then I would sink back into unconsciousness.

28.04.84. I demanded to be taken out of that icebox, and slashed my wrists again with a piece of glass. They took me to another cell.

1.05.84. I slashed my wrists again, in secret. They found me totally unconscious. I came round three or four hours later, on a drip.

25.05.84. I received an official written warning that I might be charged under Articles 188-3, Part 2, and 190-3<sup>10</sup> of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR.

3.06.84. My spell in the punishment cells ended.

6.06.84. For refusing to work, and failing to carry out daily duties (they were, in fact, taking revenge on me for my hunger-strike and suicide attempt) . . . ten days' punishment cell.

4.07.84. For taking part in a gathering of prisoners (I drank tea with Svarinskas — revenge for my suicide attempt) . . . ten days' punishment cell.

### *Preparation for the Trial*

Proceedings against Ogorodnikov, under Article 188-3, Part 2, were set in motion on 15 November 1985. In a list of 21 questions and

<sup>10</sup>“Organisation of, or active participation in, group actions which disrupt public order.” — *Ed.*

statements, again addressed to his defence counsel, Ogorodnikov sets out complaints about his treatment and requests that other prisoners be called to testify in his favour. A further document comprises information taken from the file of evidence for Ogorodnikov's case together with his comments.

In the first of these two documents, responding to accusations that he acted as a ringleader, inciting others to protest, Ogorodnikov requests that his lawyer should "Give a detailed commentary on the charges, showing them up for the sham they are. What criteria are operative here? How are we to determine when we are a 'gathering' or when we are simply a group of prisoners?"

In the second document, Ogorodnikov quotes from extracts from the case against him: "*Indictment from 23.03.83: Violation of regulations. Eight men from Unit 1 were drinking tea. The organiser of the gathering was Ogorodnikov,*" and comments

I was with my own Unit, with my neighbours. We were sitting on our bunks drinking tea. Where else would I drink tea, and with whom? How can there be any violation here? Why is it that when we we're eating in the refectory or the "sarcophagus" we don't constitute a "gathering", but when we're drinking tea we do?

Several extracts from the case-file focus on Ogorodnikov's religious and philanthropic activity:

*Indictment from 15.03.85: at 7.05, Ogorodnikov was in the sleeping area, in the presence of other prisoners, on his knees, praying. By so doing, he was breaking the established routine of the day, and preventing other prisoners from abiding by it.*

Prayer is a crime. I was praying by my bedside — how could I have been in anyone's way? From 7 o'clock until breakfast at 7.20 is my own time, and if I've already made my bed and got washed, then I'm free to get on with my own affairs. It's odd that the charge refers only to 15 March 1985 — I pray every day when I get up.

*Indictment from 21.02.85: Ogorodnikov tried to go into the isolation block.*

There were some people in the isolation block who were ill, and I was simply helping them, fetching books and things for them, or going to the shop for them. They'd put them in the isolation block and there was no-one to attend to them.

At the end of his questions to the lawyer, Ogorodnikov surveys some of the "violations" on which the case is based, and the attendant penalties:

... for a top button undone . . . 15 days  
 . . . for going out of my Unit . . . 5 days  
 . . . for the 50th psalm, handwritten by me . . . 5 days  
 . . . for a lackadaisical attitude to work (Easter, 13.04.85) . . .  
 7 days . . .

Ostensibly, it was for such trivial offences . . . that I suffered 411 days in punishment cells . . . And now here we go again. For the very same petty little offences — for which I've already paid with seven and a half years of my life, for which I've already paid with the loss of all my hopes and all my energy, for which I am paying and have paid with my health as well (which they are squeezing out of me drop by drop) — for those very same offences I am now to be punished again, and cruelly . . . The length of the further term to which you sentence me, and the Article under which you prosecute me, are of little importance — because in any case these are only camouflage, masking the fact that you are simply continuing to persecute me for confessing our Lord Jesus Christ . . . this new three-year term will be followed in its turn by other sentences, until the Lord reaches out and halts the mighty, crushing hand of power.

### *The Trial*

A copy of the court's summing up and sentencing of Ogorodnikov on 3 April 1986 restates the charges: disobeying camp personnel, intentionally violating camp regulations, showing a lackadaisical attitude to work or refusing to work, failing to follow daily routine, intimidating other prisoners, organising gatherings, refusing to take food for no good reason, "and so on". It is noted that "corrective educational measures" were brought to bear on the defendant, and that punishments were imposed. These measures failed to have the desired effect, and so further punishment ensued. A summary of Ogorodnikov's answers to the charges follows, echoing the comments we have quoted above. The document continues:

During the court hearing, it was established that Ogorodnikov was guilty of intentionally disobeying the legitimate demands of the authorities in the corrective-labour colony, and of impeding its smooth functioning . . . Witnesses . . . declared that from the moment Ogorodnikov arrived in camp VS 389/36 he had set out to violate the regulations, that he was a bad influence on other prisoners, and that despite all the measures taken against him, his behaviour had only become worse . . . Later, witness . . . showed

that Ogorodnikov had organised gatherings of undesirables among the prisoners, and had been a bad influence on others. Thus, prisoner . . . had begun to perform religious rites openly, under the influence of Ogorodnikov . . .

Finally:

Ogorodnikov's crime falls under Article 188-3, Part 2, of the Criminal Code of the USSR, inasmuch as he committed a crime while serving a sentence passed on him for the commission of a serious crime. In determining the appropriate punishment, the court takes into account the dangerous nature of the crime. The court considers the fact that Ogorodnikov had previously committed another crime to be an aggravating factor, and finds no mitigating circumstances . . .

The decision of the court was:

To set a penalty of three years' imprisonment in a strict-regime corrective-labour camp. To this penalty will be added that part of the penalty imposed by Kalinin regional court on 6.09.80 which remains to be served — 5 years' exile.

### *Hope Abandoned?*

A letter from Ogorodnikov to his mother indicates the effect of the latest trial and sentencing. The letter is a chaotic outpouring of pain and anger, which affords a shocking insight into the darkest moments of a man who has reached breaking point. Pleas for a merciful execution and references to suicide alternate with the expression of a desperate desire for release from torture into life, and feelings of betrayal and abandonment lead to outbursts of resentment which are countered by expressions of remorse. No previous communication has carried the same tone of hopelessness.

Ogorodnikov is quite clear about how people in his situation can be helped:

Those who commit acts of lawlessness always seek out dark corners, so that in the silence of the dungeons, protected by isolation and secrecy, they can torture us with cold and hunger and the crimes they commit against us, while at the same time holding forth about humanitarian values. Only by speaking out, by turning the full glare of publicity on the deeds of darkness can we be saved . . . To remain silent and indifferent when we suffer repression, when people are bent on breaking down our will to

live by inflicting punishment on us — is to give tacit support to our executioners . . . As far as I know, no-one in the Christian world knows about my hunger-strikes. And it's not that I'm fasting to secure my release! No! I'm fasting simply to get a Bible, a prayer book, and a cross, so that I can draw faith's inspiration from the source of divine Revelation. This fact alone makes a mockery of all Patriarch Pimen's fine words about freedom of religion in our country . . .

Before, I thought that I was needed, that my suffering was not in vain, that my struggle furthered the cause of the Russian religious renaissance, that people were thinking of me, praying for me, defending me — but I have now come to the firm and painful conclusion that people have their own worries, are perhaps afraid, and that I have been forgotten . . .

And if there is to be no hope of an improvement in his situation:

I ask you to appeal to the Supreme Soviet at least to do me the kindness of ordering me to be shot . . . After all, the mortally wounded are finished off, to release them from their suffering: they shoot horses that have been driven into the ground . . .

Finally, in the letter which we print below, Ogorodnikov outlines what he perceives to be the motivating force underlying camp regime, and describes its effects on the human mind and spirit.

#### TO MY FRIENDS

Camp regulations — for the violation of which I have been confined (often without justification) in camp internal prisons, and have now been sentenced for a further three years\* (a sentence which reimposes the original punishments, increasing their severity) — are the alpha and omega of the whole system of corrective penal measures taken

against prisoners. At the root of camp regime lies an immoral and insatiable desire for power *per se*. Camp regime embodies the ideologues' secret intent to create a finished design for the Soviet society of tomorrow. It decrees uniformity in clothing, appearance, behaviour, and way of thinking as an interim measure until full control over these areas can be achieved. Its painstakingly, and absurdly, detailed system of regulations carves up consciousness and living flesh into paragraphs, orders, rules, and secret instructions, regimenting and reducing to uniformity every minute of the day with precision and a kind of inevitability. Camp regime deprives a

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\*In April 1986 Ogorodnikov was resentenced under Article 188-3, Part 2 "Malicious disobedience to the requirements of the administration of a corrective-labour institution". Under this Article prisoners can be resentenced for violating camp regulations.

man of choice, rules out any possibility of his exercising moral choice in his behaviour, and forbids (on pain of severe reprisals) any manifestation of such Christian impulses as mercy, compassion, defence of the persecuted, and love.

This remnant of Stalinism — and prison veterans testify that that is what it is — which was worked out in the silent depths of prison “academies” and tested on several generations of prisoners over almost seventy years of Gulag history, now pushes men beyond the limits of physical and psychological endurance. Today’s version of camp regime has become so totalitarian, so hostile towards the idea of the individual, that in its practical application it is in the process of creating a new anthropological type. The main objects of the regime’s hatred are God, the spirit, the word, and man’s need to live in a cultural context.

Any scribbled thought, any summary of Soviet [literature] or of other books, any scrap of paper with characters inscribed on it, is taken away and confiscated. All the notebooks which I had filled, over seven years, with notes on various subjects (philosophy, philology, history, foreign languages), and even lists of books I had ordered through “Books by Post”, and a notebook listing when I had received or sent off books and letters — have been confiscated.

Since it cannot actually rule over our consciousness and yet thirsts for our souls, camp regime struggles to prevent any objective embodiment of thought, stretching forth its heavy hand to snatch up anything written, seeking by relentless confiscations to wean us away from the fundamentally human urge to put thoughts into words. For if thoughts are not put into words, they disappear in the stream of consciousness, and drift

away in the face of the grey, oppressive, dismal reality of the passing days — days filled with the exhausting work demanded in exchange for rations, with carrying out the requirements of camp regime, and fitful sleep in the stuffy overcrowding of the barracks, crammed from wall to wall with exhausted prisoners.

It is because of this fear of the word, which bursts through the stout walls and the fine mesh of electrified barbed wire, through the maze of warning devices and the high fences, that the censors are tightening their control over correspondence with our families [ . . . ]

Of course, all the prayers that I had written from memory, quotations from the Bible and theological works, and poems, have been taken from me. More than 45 notebooks.

Exhausting slave labour, in return for which we receive rations and foul camp soup, is the basic means used to keep us down. Alongside the camp regulations, mindless, mechanical, monotonous, back-breaking work, with very high production quotas, chains you to the work bench [ . . . ] tormenting you, snuffing out the flame of life itself, stupefying you, reducing you to no more than an automated appendage of your bench. Dragging on the whole day long, such work turns the day into a dismal, agonising nightmare in slow motion [ . . . ] The crippling work, the camp regime, the food, the sleep, the monotony and inescapable predetermination of every action are all designed to bring you down from your rightful status as one made in the image and likeness of God and reduce you to a dull, indiscriminating, slavish, animal-like condition, so that you are capable only of grabbing at any slight chance of filling your clamouring belly.

Camp regime is regulated in such

detail that it is impossible to avoid violating it, especially since the authorities have absolute power, and can provoke a prisoner into breaking the rules without the prisoner having any redress against their caprice. The least violation can result in confinement in a punishment cell. The punishment cell is the educational method most favoured by those who seek to reform us.

When you've been driven into that

grim shut-in space, cut off from the world, hermetically isolated in that deathly silence, broken only by the cursing of the "screws" and the clanking of the keys; when the cold drives you to pace out, in tiny steps, the long, agonising day — it's then that you become most acutely aware that your spirit is imprisoned in your body, and that you are only a pitiful little lump of flesh, tortured by hunger and cold [ . . . ]