

# Chronicle

## Bibles in the Soviet Union

### *Bible imports*

A tangible benefit of *glasnost'* for Soviet Christians is the import in large quantities of the Bible. Between January 1988 and July 1989 (the time of writing) some 954,500 Bibles and 1,510,000 New Testaments were imported into the Soviet Union, with permission granted for the import of a further 3,688,000 Bibles and an astonishing 13,025,000 New Testaments by the end of 1995. This compares with the legal import and printing in the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1987 of approximately 840,000 Bibles, a derisory figure for an estimated 80 million Christians.

Large-scale Bible shipments began in 1988 and appear, initially at least, to have been a concession granted to the churches to mark the millennium. Early in 1988 the United Bible Societies (UBS) sent 98,000 Russian Bibles and 2,000 Ukrainian Bibles to the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB), at the time the largest ever consignment of Bibles to be allowed into the USSR. Other imports followed: at the request of Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Belorussia, Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, UBS supplied the Russian Orthodox Church with 100,000 Ukrainian Bibles; the Orthodox Church

was given permission to receive from the Institute for Bible Translation and Scandinavian churches 150,000 copies of the *Tolkovaya Bibliya*. This is a three-volume Bible with commentary, known also as the Lopukhin Bible after Professor A. P. Lopukhin, a Russian theologian who began preparatory work but died in 1904 before completion of the project. Seventy five thousand copies of the Lopukhin Bible were imported in 1988 with the other 75,000 to arrive in 1989. The western missionary organisation Slavic Gospel Association reports importing in 1988 a total of 332,000 Bibles and New Testaments to the AUCECB, who received a further 50,000 Bibles from Pentecostal churches in Finland. During a meeting on 1 December 1988 between the Pope and Metropolitan Pitirim of Volokolamsk and Yur'ev agreement was reached to allow the Vatican to send Bibles to the Soviet Union in an official capacity. Soon afterwards the Roman Catholic Church in the USSR received some 209,000 Bibles and New Testaments in Russian and in Latvian. Bibles were received in smaller quantities by a variety of churches — some by individual congregations, others by central church bodies. Amongst the recipients were Latvian and German speaking Lutheran churches, Latvian evangelical churches, the Seventh

Day Adventist Church, the Georgian Orthodox Church, Hungarian speaking churches in Transcarpathia, Estonian churches and German speaking Baptists in Moldavia.

A new stage in the import of Bibles was reached in August 1988 when the Russian Orthodox Church was granted permission to receive one million New Testaments from the mission Open Doors. In January 1988 Brother Andrew, founder and director of Open Doors International, had offered the Russian Orthodox Church a gift of one million New Testaments in honour of the millennium. Almost six months later, in August, Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk wrote to Brother Andrew: 'We would like to thank you for this lavish expression of Christian love, and consider it a pleasant duty to inform you that we have agreed to accept the edition of the Holy Scriptures offered to us.' Whatever discussions and disagreements might have taken place in the CRA over the import of such a large number of Bibles, the granting of the import permit seems to have set a precedent. By February 1989 the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé in France had sent one million New Testaments to the Russian Orthodox Church. Brother Roger, prior of Taizé, first suggested the gift in June 1988 when he attended the millennium celebrations in the Soviet Union. The following November Patriarch Pimen told Brother Roger that he would accept the gift with gratitude. In a special report written in March 1989 for News Network International Dr Mark Elliott reports that 'a low profile Christian ministry' plans to send one million study Bibles to the Soviet Union. In autumn 1988 the AUCECB received permission to import one million New Testaments with psalms from the organisation *Bibeln Till Alla* (BTA — Bibles for All), the Swedish arm of the mission

Evangelism to Communist Lands, known also as Door of Hope. In April of this year a second permit was given to the AUCECB, this time to receive ten million New Testaments and two million Bibles and children's Bibles from BTA between 1990 and 1995. It would seem that an officially registered church body in the Soviet Union will now receive permission from the CRA to import whatever quantity of Bibles has been offered them from abroad.

Other imports have occurred in 1989 and are planned for later in the year: the Catholic church in Lithuania has received the first of 150,000 Lithuanian New Testaments sent by Austrian churches; the Russian Orthodox Church in Kiev is to receive 200,000 Ukrainian Bibles supplied by the US based Ukrainian Family Bible Association; Living Bibles International plan to send up to 250,000 New Testaments; Dr Elliott reports that 'a mission desiring anonymity at present' is to send 200,000 Bibles and New Testaments to the AUCECB in Kiev whilst Christian Solidarity International is to send 750,000 New Testaments.

The first post-war Bible imports began only in the 1970s and were supplied almost entirely by the UBS with a few sent by the Lutheran World Federation. It was not until 1988 that other missionary organisations and churches became involved in sending Bibles to the Soviet Union. In order to receive Bibles from abroad a Soviet church organisation which must, of course, be legally registered with the state, applies, in the first instance, to the CRA for permission to receive the Bibles. The procedure adopted in turn by the CRA is unclear: presumably an import permit is granted by the relevant government department. During his visit to the United Kingdom in November 1988, the then Chairman of the CRA, Konstantin

Kharchev, appealed to British Christians at a public meeting to 'send more and more Bibles'.\* The reasons behind this opening-up of import channels are in all probability the same as those behind the more general relaxation in official attitudes towards religious believers: the pragmatic motive of Mr Gorbachev's need of support from as many sectors of society as possible, and the new view of religion as having some inherent value and usefulness for Soviet society, for example through the participation of believers in charitable work.\*\* It may also be worth noting that the energies of many western missions concerned with the Soviet Union are now directed to raising funds for the import of Bibles. This may leave less time and money available for missions to undertake other activities, such as pastoral visits, evangelism etc.

#### *Distribution within the USSR*

Receipt of Bibles by central church bodies in the USSR is not the final stage in getting copies of the Scriptures to Soviet believers. The churches then have to organise distribution. Although the donor organisations in the west may stipulate certain conditions about how the Bibles should be distributed, for example a certain proportion to go to unregistered congregations, distribution is in the hands of the Soviet churches. In some cases controversy has arisen over the sale of Bibles. Leaders of unregistered Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Moscow and Brest were offered Bibles at a cost of

30-35 roubles per copy out of the shipments received by AUCECB from UBS. It seems that members of congregations within the Union have also been required to pay this amount. As a matter of principle the unregistered Baptists do not sell Bibles and other Christian literature which they produce on clandestine presses or receive from western missions. According to a report from *Friedensstimme*, a western organisation representing congregations belonging to the unregistered Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, the attitude of the registered church leadership is particularly objectionable because the unregistered churches have supplied registered churches with Bibles and other literature at no cost, even though the printing was carried out under risk of arrest. Baptist Union leaders in Moscow are reported to have explained the charge by the need to raise money to host larger than usual numbers of foreign visitors during the millennium celebrations. It is, however, established practice for the Union to sell Bibles and other literature, whether printed in the USSR or imported from abroad. In a telephone interview with News Network International in July 1988 Ulrich Fick, general secretary of the UBS, denied that Bibles were being sold: 'Our partners in the Soviet Union tell us they are not sold but offered as gifts. Our whole understanding is that they do not sell.' Nonetheless the UBS is aware that believers often give money voluntarily in return for Bibles.

Greater controversy has been caused by the sale of copies of the Lopukhin Bible. This was supplied entirely free of charge to the Moscow Patriarchate by Scandinavian Christians and the Stockholm-based Institute for Bible Translation (IBT). In March 1988 the Leningrad *samizdat* journal *Nevsky dukhovny vestnik* (*Nevsky Spiritual Herald*) reported

\*The meeting took place on 15 November 1988 at Methodist Central Hall, London.

\*\*See Jane Ellis, 'New Soviet Thinking on Religion', *RCL* Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 110-11.

that students of theological seminaries and academies received the Bibles free of charge, but everyone else, including clergy, had to pay between 220 and 270 roubles for the three-volume set. The journal accused the Moscow Patriarchate of justifying the sales by a 'naively hypocritical method' — by claiming that when a purchaser parts with a large sum of money in return for a Bible he is officially 'making a donation' towards the needs of the church. In August 1988 a group of Orthodox Christians including Sergei Grigoryants, editor of the *samizdat* journal *Glasnost*, addressed an open letter to Christians in Scandinavia in which they said that some Lopukhin Bibles were being sold by the Patriarchate in Moscow to those holding special 'receipts', whilst others were being sold in the dioceses for around 250 roubles per set. In Moscow, however, they declared that priests, deacons and a number of monks at the Danilov monastery had received the Bibles free of charge. The signatories of the letter recognised that 'it is not the done thing to impose control over the use of a gift' but hoped that the Scandinavian churches might be able to insist on strict controls over distribution of the Bibles. In reply to this letter and to other reports, Boris Arapović of the IBT issued a statement in which he declared that 'The Russian Study Bible, *Tolkovaya Bibliya*, is distributed free of charge by the Moscow Patriarchate.' He reported that of the first 9,000 sets to be delivered to Moscow in February 1988, the Moscow Patriarchate kept 1,600 sets for its own use, 2,700 were given to students and teachers at the Theological Academies of Zagorsk and Leningrad, and to the seminary in Odessa, and a certain quantity to state libraries for public use and to the AUCECB. The rest were given in sets of 35-50 to the 61 dioceses of

the Russian Orthodox Church. Boris Arapović reported that the Patriarchate and the IBT agreed that a considerable share of the means received from this Study Bible will go to the Patriarchate's fund for future Bible printing, while the Patriarchate wants to use part of the funds for restoration of churches recently received from the state. Boris Arapović continues:

The Orthodox church receives donations from those who get this Bible. The Baptists are selling their 100,000 Bibles which they received from the United Bible Societies, at a price of 30 roubles per copy. In our opinion it is correct to do so. Millions want to have a Bible but only a few hundred thousand will receive one.

In an open letter to Boris Arapović Orthodox Christian Valeri Senderov wrote in September 1988 that Russian Christians object neither to the free distribution of Bibles to believers nor to their sale at reasonable prices, but argued that commerce should be acknowledged to be commerce. On 14 October 1988 *Russkaya mysl'* published a document from the Soviet Union alleging that the Moscow Patriarchate had issued a circular numbered 1695, dated 6 September 1988, to the effect that Patriarch Pimen had sanctioned sale of the Lopukhin Bibles at 180 roubles per set. The circular was signed by Metropolitan Vladimir of Rostov and Novocheerkassk, Chancellor of the Moscow Patriarchate. It gave the bank account number into which diocesan administrations had to transfer sales income towards the cost of the Svyato-Troitsky church in Moscow, which is being built to mark the millennium. *Twentieth Century and Peace*, a new English-language journal of the Soviet Peace Committee published in its first ever issue in 1989 a letter from an Orthodox Christian, asking how the sale of the

Lopukhin Bibles at 350-450 roubles per set could be justified. Metropolitan Vladimir of Rostov and Novocherkassk wrote in reply that books presented to the Russian Orthodox Church, including the Lopukhin Bibles, were being distributed among the dioceses, monasteries, church schools, temples and church libraries 'free of charge as well as for money'. He declared that the Russian Orthodox Church spends much on the maintenance of church schools, payment of pensions, restoration of churches and monasteries and broadening the network of church schools and colleges. Metropolitan Vladimir continued: 'There is an agreement with those who presented us with religious literature that we will sell it and spend the money on the urgent needs of the Church, mainly on construction of the Svyato-Troitsky church monument.'

Whatever the arguments on either side, the large quantity of Bibles imported represents a potentially substantial income for the churches, and also for the state through the so-called 'voluntary' donations the official churches have to make to state bodies such as the Peace Fund. It would, however, be unfair and unrepresentative to list only complaints about Bible distribution. Imported Bibles appear to be reaching many different parts of the Soviet Union. Of the first shipments of 100,000 Bibles sent from UBS to the AUCECB in 1988 Bibles were distributed to churches as far afield as Kiev, Tbilisi and Alma-Ata. The AUCECB has about 70 distribution centres for Bibles throughout the USSR. UBS report that as soon as the AUCECB receive Bibles in Moscow, they are allocated on a percentage basis according to the number of church members in a particular area. Cables are sent from Moscow to the distant churches to say the Bibles have arrived, then pastors or other

church representatives travel to Moscow to collect their allocation. Open Doors International held careful negotiations with the Russian Orthodox Church over the distribution of their gift of one million New Testaments. Brother Andrew of Open Doors said: 'We made it clear that of the one million New Testaments we are sending now, they are not to ask more than one rouble as a donation.' Brother Andrew and Metropolitan Filaret agreed to send an initial 1,800 New Testaments to each of the 61 Russian Orthodox dioceses which would be responsible for distributing them to individual Christians.

It is not only through large-scale Bible shipments that the Scriptures become available to Soviet Christians. On 25 March 1988 *Izvestiya* announced a relaxation in customs regulations to allow a variety of items, including books and objects of a religious nature, to be sent through the post from abroad. As a result several western missionary organisations have been encouraging their supporters to post Bibles to the Soviet Union. Mark Elliott reported in March 1989 that Open Doors International had mailed 80,000 New Testaments and Slavic Gospel Association some 25,000 Bibles to individual addresses in the USSR in 1988. These are two of the larger mission organisations but smaller groups are also taking part in Bible mailing. By mid-1989 it could be assumed that as many as 200,000 Bibles and New Testaments had been sent to the USSR. A smaller mission reported that in November 1988 they sent a trial mailing of 66 parcels to the Soviet Union, each containing three pieces of Christian literature. Approximately 50 letters were received in return representing a success rate of over 75 per cent. In addition to mailing, new customs regulations announced in *Izvestiya* on 15 November 1988 make it far easier for

visitors to the Soviet Union to take in books. Although there are reports of religious literature being confiscated from tourists, significant quantities are being taken through customs. It is practically impossible to estimate the amount of religious literature that has been taken into the Soviet Union in this way. This leads to the question of how many Bibles have been taken secretly into the USSR. In his report of 20 March 1989 Mark Elliott comments that unauthorised imports would appear to have dropped off sharply in 1987-88 due to the relative ease of obtaining legal import permits.

### *Bible Printing*

There have been increases in Bible printing in the Soviet Union in the last two years. In 1987 and 1988 the Georgian Orthodox Church printed some 33,000 Georgian Bibles, 3,000 of which were for Georgian Baptists. Material for this venture was provided by UBS. To mark the millennium the Russian Orthodox Church was authorised to print 100,000 Russian Bibles. According to *Komsomol'skaya pravda* of 12 March 1989 these have all been sold and another 50,000 are to be printed. *Izvestiya* of 1 January 1989 reported that 9,000 Ukrainian Bibles were about to be printed. In his report on *The Publishing Activity of the Russian Orthodox Church* presented to the Local Council in June 1988, Metropolitan Pitirim declared that 50,000 copies of the New Testament were in preparation. Estonian Lutherans and Baptists are at present working on a new Estonian translation of the Bible, and are due to print 18,000 copies in 1990. This makes a total of some 111,000 copies of the Bible and New Testament to be printed in the Soviet Union in 1988-90. In addition the Soviet

journal *V mire knig* (*In the World of Books*) has begun to serialise the New Testament with commentary by Byzantologist Sergei Averintsev. Serialisation began in 1988 but was interrupted between January and March 1989, resuming in April 1989. *V mire knig* has a print-run of 105,700.

Since 1968 the Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, the union of unregistered Baptist congregations, has had its own clandestine printing press known as *Khristianin*, (The Christian). The very first *Khristianin* press had gears taken from a bicycle and motorcycle, and rollers and an electric motor taken from a washing machine. Ink was made from burnt rubber boots and boiled moss, to the amazement of Soviet forensic experts. In 1986 Baptists estimated that *Khristianin* had produced about one million pieces of literature in different languages — New Testaments, Bibles, hymn books and pamphlets. The presses are still in operation today — in November 1988 police confiscated from a private car near Khar'kov 80,000 sheets printed by *Khristianin*, proof that *Khristianin's* work is still going on.

The next logical step in providing Soviet Christians with Bibles would be the establishment of a Bible printing press in the USSR. Although still remote, this is now a possibility. UBS reported that in April 1989 they signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding' with the Russian Orthodox Church to the effect that 'the establishment of a Bible Instrument in the USSR is a priority'. The memorandum also notes 'the urgent need for a printing press in the USSR for production of Bibles and church literature', adding that UBS is willing to participate in increasing the capacity of Scripture production in the Soviet Union.

The memorandum was signed by Bishop Vladimir of Podolsk, deputy

head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Rev. Ole Christian Kvarme, general secretary of the Norwegian Bible Society and Dr Boris Arapović, director of the IBT.

UBS states that the Memorandum of Understanding is not a formal agreement but an acknowledgement of the urgent need for more extensive production and distribution of Scriptures in the Soviet Union. It is the first public recognition by the Russian Orthodox Church that it is interested in the establishment of some form of Soviet office or branch of UBS. Dr Hans Florin, UBS regional secretary for Europe and the Middle East, observed that,

One way to narrow the gap between supply and demand of the Bible in the Soviet Union is the establishment of a printing press, similar to the Amity Printing Company in China where the UBS assisted Chinese Christians in setting up a press for scripture production.

He went on to say that a Bible Instrument in the USSR linked with

UBS would benefit from advantages enjoyed by other UBS members. These include translation expertise, technical assistance in production and distribution, the benefits of large-scale purchasing and the sharing of financial and personnel resources.

'Events are moving so quickly, it's hard to keep pace with them,' Dr Florin remarked. UBS is to continue discussions with church and state bodies in the USSR with a view to the formation of a Bible Instrument and to pursue the possibility of setting up a Bible printing press. The establishment or otherwise of a UBS branch and Bible printing press in the Soviet Union will be an indicator of how far the new 'tolerant' attitude towards religion is to go. It is interesting to note that in 1971 the *Khristianin* printing press appealed to the Council of Ministers to recognise their activity as legal. No reply was received.

*Compiled by members of  
Keston College staff*

## Islam and Nationalist Unrest in Soviet Central Asia

At the end of May this year the market in the Uzbek town of Kuvasai witnessed a fight over the price of strawberries. As a result one person died and over 60 were injured. Ten days later bloody inter-communal rioting broke out in various towns of the Fergana valley, violence which within a week had caused over 90 deaths and left hundreds homeless. The victims of this unrest were predominantly Meskhetian Turks,

forcibly deported to the region from their south Georgian homeland in 1944; the instigators of this violence appear to have been native Uzbeks, whose social and economic grievances found a convenient scapegoat in the 'strangers within'. In mid-June similar events occurred in neighbouring Kazakhstan where, yet again, it was non-Kazakh minorities who bore the brunt of the violence.

Official explanations of the unrest