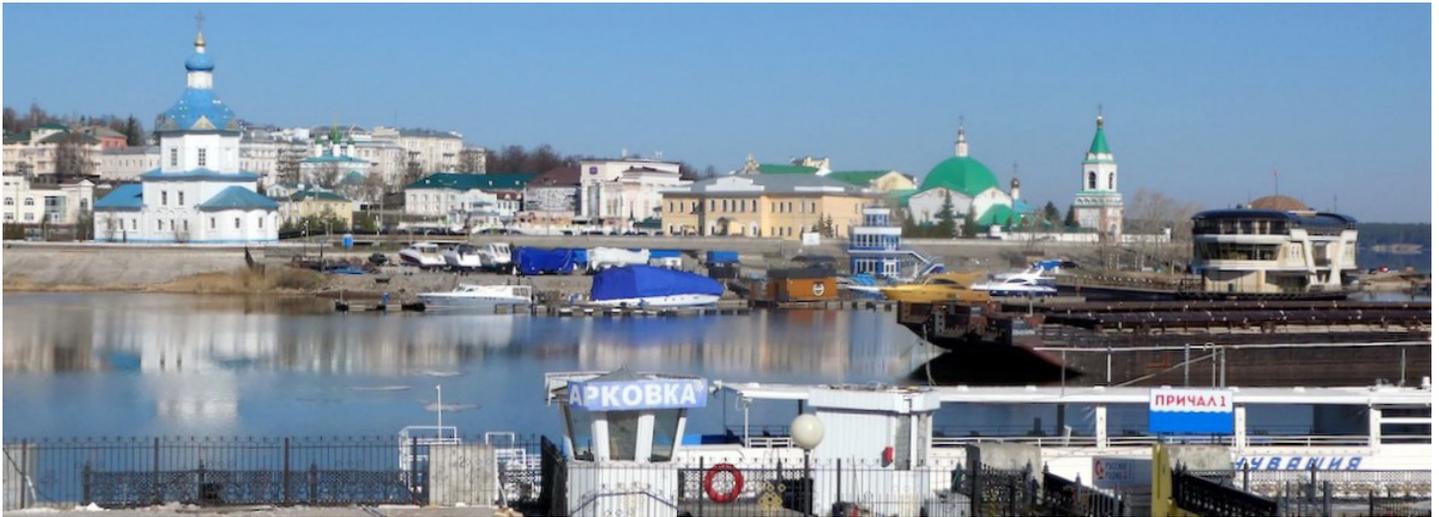




# EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

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Dormition Orthodox Church (left) and Holy Trinity Men's Monastery on the Volga River, Cheboksary (A. KOLOSOVA)

## Mission Along the Volga: The Living Legacy of Nikolai Ilminsky

ALISON RUTH KOLOSOVA

*Editor's note: In Russia, Orthodox Christianity is colloquially tied to Russian ethnicity. Yet prior to the demise of the Russian Empire in 1917, Orthodox missionary efforts reached many minority peoples across its vast expanse, such as the Altai in mountainous southern Siberia and the Mordvin along the Volga River. The current head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, has Mordvin family roots.*

*Remarkable among these missionary efforts was the work of Nikolai Ilminsky (1822-1891), still seen today in the Turkic-language worship of surviving Orthodox communities in the nominally Muslim Russian republic of Tatarstan. Visiting Tatarstan in the early 2000s, the editor met a local Protestant who worked on the first modern Tatar translation of the New Testament. He related that his team had also produced a Tatar edition of the Book of Psalms simply by taking Ilminsky's pre-revolutionary translation and giving it modern orthography.*

*Another focus of Ilminsky's mission were the Chuvash, a Turkic people also settled along the Volga River, approximately 400 miles east of Moscow. In this article, Alison Ruth Kolosova—a long-time resident of the present-day Chuvash Republic—provides a fascinating insight into the lasting impact of Nikolai Ilminsky and his followers.*

The year 2022 will mark 200 years since the birth of the Russian Orthodox missionary, linguist, and educator Nikolai Ilminsky. His modest grave describes him as “the great enlightener of the natives with Christ’s teaching,” while an icon alongside depicts St. Nicholas holding the Gospel open at the words of Matthew 5:16: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” On one side of the page these words are written in Slavonic, as is usual on icons in Russia. But on the other side they are in Tatar, the Turkic language still spoken today by many of the inhabitants of the Republic of Tatarstan, in whose capital, Kazan, the grave is situated.

Ilminsky was a specialist in Arabic and Turkic languages, which he taught in Kazan in the 1840s-1860s. In 1872 he became director of the Kazan Native Teachers’ Seminary, where the first indigenous teachers were trained for native-language schools among the Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples who then formed the majority of the population in the basins of the great Volga and Kama Rivers. As mentor to these teachers and others at schools set up on his model, Ilminsky worked with them to create alphabets for their almost entirely unwritten languages, as well as to oversee biblical and Orthodox liturgical translations that were read, sung, and prayed in village schools. The missionary movement he inspired thus laid the groundwork for a wave of

*(continued on page 2)*

## Ilminsky Mission *(continued from page 1)*

scholarship on the languages, history, and traditional worldviews and rites of the Volga-Kama peoples, as well as the development of an indigenous intelligentsia, which paved the way for a degree of political autonomy for these peoples in the wake of the 1917 Revolution.

Over the last century, however—and particularly during the Soviet era—Ilminsky has ironically been portrayed as an instrument of tsarist colonialism who sought to russify the Volga-Kama peoples and to eradicate their languages and cultures. While one may find a page or two devoted to Ilminsky in histories of Orthodox mission, there has been surprisingly little study of his work and few attempts to grapple with one of the key issues it raises: Did he wish to inculturate Orthodox Christianity among the non-Slavic peoples along the Volga River, or was his aim to assimilate them, their languages, and their cultures into greater Russian culture? Alternatively, is this polarization of his motives misunderstanding the man completely?<sup>1</sup>

The ambiguity of Ilminsky's motivation was curiously reflected in the 2020 celebrations marking the centenary of the Soviet creation of the Chuvash Autonomous Region [Russian: *Oblast'*] in June 1920. In Estonia and Finland, whose independence may also be traced to the collapse of the Russian Empire, similar celebrations in recent years have focused squarely upon national autonomy. But in Chuvashia, the centenary logo proclaims the word “together” (*vmeste* in Russian, *perle* in Chuvash) without clarifying whether this refers to the togetherness of the Chuvash within their own republic, or to the Chuvash remaining firmly together with Russia.

The walls in the center of Cheboksary, the republic's capital, have become an open-air exhibition of 100 Chuvash artists, musicians, and writers who have played significant roles in preserving and developing Chuvash national identity. One key figure is Ilminsky's main Chuvash follower, Ivan Yakovlev (1848-1930). Yakovlev is today remembered as the “Enlightener of the Chuvash” owing to his outstanding contribution to the development of the Chuvash written language and the late-19th-century creation of the first schools where the Chuvash language was used as the teaching medium. These schools promoted literacy, music, craftsmanship, agriculture, and the Orthodox Christian faith. Out of them emerged the first generations of a creative, scientific—and at times revolutionary—Chuvash intelligentsia. Many alumni of these schools are featured among the centenary exhibition, and some were directly responsible for the attainment of a degree of Chuvash political autonomy in 1920.<sup>2</sup>

An imposing monument to Yakovlev—appropriately seated with a large open book on his lap—has long stood in front of the Chuvash National Library. In 1868 Yakovlev founded the Simbirsk Chuvash Teachers' School, where around a thousand teachers were trained for village schools. It was in this communal context that the main Orthodox service books were translated into, and published in, the Chuvash language, and teachers were trained in the art of church choir directing, so that pupils and parishioners could fully participate in Chuvash-language Orthodox worship. After translating the Gospels into Chuvash beginning in the early 1870s, the entire New Testament



**Nikolai Ilminsky (Open Source)**



**Logo for the June 2020 centenary celebrations of the Chuvash Autonomous Oblast'**

(A. KOLOSOVA)

was published in collaboration with the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1908-11. Out of this hotbed of translating, publishing, and musical activity, Chuvash-language Orthodox parish communities with indigenous clergy emerged in towns such as Kazan or Simbirsk [now Ulyanovsk] and many scattered villages, where the new texts were edited by being read and sung in streets and homes.

The vibrant Orthodox Christian community worshipping in Chuvashia today suggests that this 19th-century missionary work has borne fruit. Most Chuvash would describe themselves as Orthodox, despite some Chuvash adopting the Islam of their Tatar neighbors in the wake of Tsar Nicholas II's 1905 decree *On Strengthening the Foundations of Religious Tolerance*, and despite the emergence of Pentecostal and other Protestant churches, many of which arrived on the scene since the 1990s. In villages, where the Chuvash language is still spoken by the majority, Chuvash-language Orthodox worship remains the norm. In larger towns there are many dual-language parishes such as the Church of the Resurrection in Cheboksary, where worship takes place in Chuvash in one half of the church and in Slavonic in the other half. Revised versions of Ilminsky's 19th-century liturgical texts have recently been published, while in 2009 the Russian Bible Society published the entire Bible in Chuvash, partly based upon the translations of Yakovlev and his schools. An impressive Orthodox prison ministry serves throughout the republic, with many laypeople involved in catechetical work among inmates. The appearance is of the Chuvash having adopted Orthodoxy as their own.

In the wake of the 2020 centenary celebrations, however, one Cheboksary clergyman expressed to me his concern about the rise of Chuvash nationalism accompanied by a hostile attitude towards Orthodoxy. Of course, a heightened sense of national identity

would appear natural during the centenary celebrations, and there may be many factors behind hostility towards Orthodoxy. Yet two aspects of the history and legacy of the missionary movement point to latent issues that remain unresolved.

The clergyman's concern reminded me of an earlier conversation I had with a senior scholar at the Chuvash State Institute of Humanities, the republic's leading research institution for Chuvash language, history, and culture. He remarked that the Orthodox faith and the Chuvash indigenous faith are two very distinct phenomena—a statement that arose out of his obvious concern that indigenous worldviews and rites had been lost with the Chuvash conversion to Orthodoxy. Underlying his viewpoint, I would argue, are Soviet interpretations of the impact of Christianization upon the worldviews and rites of both the Slavic and non-Slavic peoples of the Russian Empire. These interpretations may be summed up by the Russian word *dvoeverie* ["dual faith" or "double belief"]: the syncretistic practice of Christian and indigenous, pre-Christian rites.

In the 19th century both the concept and word *dvoeverie* were already in use by some ethnographers and missionaries to describe "pagan," "idolatrous," or "devilish" rites, which they saw as still entwined with Orthodox practices and beliefs among the Volga peoples. Under the influence of Soviet atheism, this led to the creation of a model of folk culture that exaggerated the "pagan" elements in popular piety, but remained silent about the Christian basis of many popular religious practices and beliefs. Such views were based upon the presupposition that there could be no overlap or correlation between indigenous belief systems and Christian cosmology, no common understandings or aspirations to the divine that would enable indigenization of the Christian faith without necessarily uprooting ancient worldviews and rites.<sup>3</sup>

On this point, Ilminsky himself wrote:

Viewing the natives from the psychological viewpoint, it is strange for me that some missionaries persecute with every available method... and try to destroy shamanistic beliefs and rites as if they were positively the work of the devil. In my opinion, these beliefs and rites are no more than the aspiration to the divine and mystical, deeply implanted in human nature by the Creator Himself.<sup>4</sup>

Thanks to Ilminsky's inspiration, many teachers and clergy became the first native-speaker ethnographers to write descriptions of indigenous beliefs and rites, upon which much contemporary Chuvash scholarship is based. Nevertheless, the general tendency of the 19th-century missionary movement to label indigenous practices as "paganism" and automatically alien to Orthodoxy, together with Soviet conceptions of *dvoeverie*, has led some post-Soviet scholars to feel that Chuvash indigenous culture has been uprooted by Orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup>

The labelling of unconventional faith practices as "pagan" is still common among Orthodox believers in Chuvashia. A woman who grew up in a Chuvash village but now lives in Cheboksary once spontaneously commented to me, "But the Chuvash, of course, are still largely pagan." When I asked her to give me an example of this Chuvash paganism, she told me that at the end of Orthodox funerals, villagers would go together to the boundary of the village and communally shout farewell to the soul of the departed. She was considered very strange for refusing to participate in what she now viewed as a pagan practice. I asked her whether there was anything intrinsically more pagan in such a communal "farewell shout" than in the standard practice of saying farewell to the departed by kissing them as they lie in their coffin at the end of the Orthodox funeral service. My question left her deep in thought.

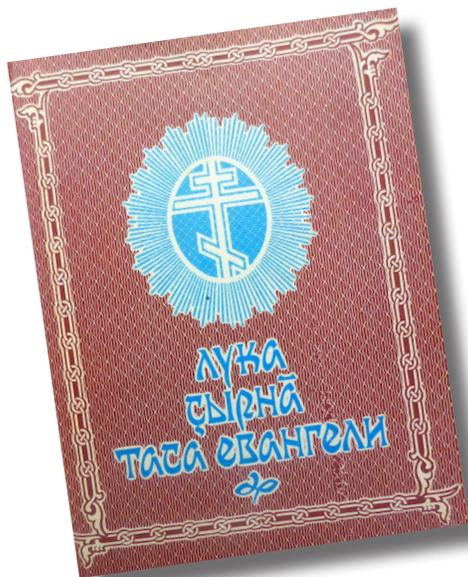


Monument to Ivan Yakovlev in Cheboksary  
(A. KOLOSOVA)

Another controversial practice is that of consecrating salt on Holy Thursday—the Thursday before Easter when Orthodox services recall Christ's Last Supper with his disciples, and devout Orthodox come to church to take communion. During Holy Week in 2019 many of the parishioners at the Church of the Resurrection in Cheboksary could be seen bringing salt from their homes. The priest prayed a blessing over it at the end of the communion service, and the salt was then taken home to be used for domestic purposes. Bringing other natural elements before God for His blessing is common Orthodox practice, such as the blessing of water on the feast of Epiphany, the blessing of the honey harvest on the feast of the Procession of the Precious Wood of the Life-giving Cross, and of apples and other fruit on the feast of the Transfiguration.

On Holy Thursday in 2019, a woman I sang with in the church choir told me that the "Thursday salt" would traditionally have been baked in the stove throughout Lent until it turned black. She pointed out that some of the pots of white salt being consecrated had this "black salt" sprinkled on them, both to recall the tradition and to give the white salt the efficacy of the old rite. Such salt was used, she told me, in popular healing practices connected with curing alcoholism or warding off evil. While such practices may be considered evidence of lingering pre-Christian paganism or of *dvoeverie*, it is worth remembering the vital role played by salt in preserving and curing food, and in healing the physical bodies of both humans and animals, especially before the rise of modern medicine and industrialized food production. We should therefore perhaps not be surprised that a tradition of consecrating salt on one of the most important days of the Orthodox liturgical year has continued among the Chuvash, and that this salt was formerly prepared alongside prayer and fasting during the entire period of Lent.<sup>6</sup>

(continued on page 4)



**Gospel of Luke in Chuvash, published in Cheboksary in 1991. The text is reprinted from the 1911 New Testament that was produced in collaboration with the British and Foreign Bible Society in Simbirsk (now Ulyanovsk). (G. FAGAN)**

Another lingering shadow leading some Chuvash to view Orthodoxy and traditional Chuvash culture as irrevocably separate is cast by a further issue arising from within the missionary movement itself: native church leadership. A number of teachers who trained in Ilminsky’s schools went on to become Orthodox clergy; of 141 graduates by 1890, 19 had become priests or deacons. In the 1890s Ivan Yakovlev increased the amount of religious instruction at the Simbirsk Chuvash Teachers’ School with the aim of training future clergy. By the early 20th century there were modest yet significant numbers of Chuvash clergy in several dioceses. In 1904 there were 36 Chuvash priests serving some 502,000 Chuvash living in Kazan Province, while in neighboring Samara Province that same year, 56 Chuvash priests served some 92,000 Chuvash inhabitants.<sup>7</sup>

Fed by the surge of national consciousness that arose among the Empire’s non-Russian peoples during the 1905 Revolution, anonymous articles appeared in one Kazan radical journal in 1906 suggesting that native bishops should be consecrated for the Volga peoples.<sup>8</sup> While native clergy and teachers discussed the issue among themselves from that point, it was only in 1919 that Yakovlev sent a memorandum to the Missionary Council of the Holy Synod requesting the appointment of a native bishop for the Chuvash.<sup>9</sup> Amidst the post-revolutionary turmoil of the Civil War and widespread famine, there was an ambivalent response to his request, which suggested the current structures were adequate.

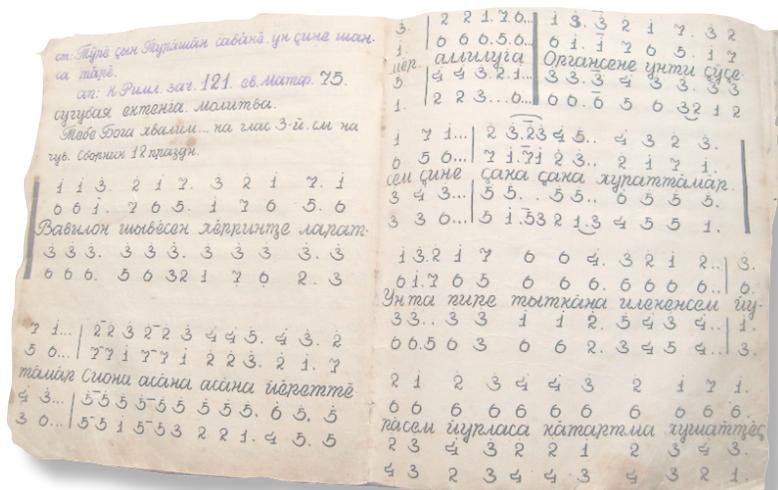
Spurred on by the creation of limited Chuvash political autonomy in 1920, a group of Chuvash clergy established an autonomous Chuvash diocese with two Chuvash bishops. This did not entail full autonomy from the Russian Orthodox Church, but a diocese separate from the Kazan and Simbirsk dioceses, where most parishes on the present-day territory of Chuvashia were located in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were supported in this endeavor by the controversial Renovators, a group of progressive clergy who had taken control of the Russian Orthodox Church after the arrest of Patriarch Tikhon for counter-revolutionary activity in May 1922.<sup>10</sup> Owing to the Renovators’ declaration of

loyalty to the Bolshevik government and their defrocking of Patriarch Tikhon in May 1923, they are now widely considered by Russian Orthodox to be a schismatic group. Consequently, among Chuvash believers, relatively little is known today about Ilminsky’s followers apart from Ivan Yakovlev himself, owing to the tarnished reputation of those Chuvash considered to have betrayed the Russian Church by going over to the Renovators.<sup>11</sup>

During the 1930s mass church closures and persecution of clergy and laity decimated the Orthodox Church in Chuvashia as elsewhere in Soviet Russia. In 1945 a diocese of Cheboksary and Chuvashia was created to coincide with the territorial limits of the Soviet-era Chuvash Republic, but it only had 35 functioning parishes by 1976. Much energetic rebuilding of churches and parish communities took place in the post-Soviet period under the leadership of Metropolitan Varnava (Kedrov, d. 2020), and there are now more than 200 parishes.<sup>12</sup> [Editor’s note: For comparison, the neighboring region of Nizhny Novgorod has a similar number of parishes for nearly triple the population.]

In an effort to resolve the issue of local church leadership and governance, metropolitan districts were created in Russia’s national republics in 2012. The current metropolitan of Chuvashia, Savvati (Antonov), was born in Cheboksary and is a Chuvash speaker, while a bishop within his metropolia also speaks Chuvash. A former auxiliary bishop of the metropolia who is also a fluent Chuvash speaker, Ignati (Suranov), is currently bishop of the northern Russian diocese of Cherepovets. Ilminsky and Yakovlev would no doubt be glad that today’s Chuvash Orthodox have their own indigenous leadership and their own ecclesial metropolia, yet are firmly “together” with the wider Russian Orthodox Church.

Nikolai Ilminsky lived long before the time when the term “inculturation” was coined to refer to the process by which the Gospel becomes “enfleshed” in the language and culture of a people.<sup>13</sup> Discussion of inculturation in recent years typically refers to Christ’s incarnation as the model upon which it is based. According to Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos),



**Musical notation for Orthodox worship in Chuvash. The text is Psalm 137: “By the waters of Babylon...” (A. KOLOSOVA)**

prominent missionary theologian and head of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, “the Gospel... has no difficulty in being incarnated in the specific cultural body of each epoch.”<sup>14</sup> A careful reading of Russian 19th-century missionary texts reveals that within the Russian Orthodox Church, it was almost certainly Nikolai Ilminsky who first used this incarnational language about the cross-cultural missionary process.<sup>15</sup> Crucially, he succeeded in passing on this vision to his disciples. In a 1916 tribute to Ilminsky, the Chuvash priest Mikhail Petrov wrote: “Orthodoxy must be incarnated in the native peoples as creatively and religiously as it has been incarnated in the great Russian people. ... This was Ilminsky’s concern, and here is the center of gravity of his entire system.”<sup>16</sup> Although Petrov’s words suggest that there was still work to be done, they also make clear that both he and Ilminsky envisioned that such a process of incarnation was possible, and that a radical coming “together” of Orthodoxy with the ancient Chuvash language and culture could take place. ♦

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For English-language discussion of Ilminsky, see R.P. Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001, 83, 253; Paul W. Werth, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance and Confessional Politics in Russia’s Volga-Kama Region, 1827-1905*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Following disruptive behavior and revolutionary protests at the Simbirsk Chuvash Teachers’ School in 1907, all first-year students were expelled. Among the protesters was Daniil El’men’, the future architect of limited Chuvash political autonomy, and Konstantin Ivanov, today regarded as the Chuvash national poet.

<sup>3</sup> On  *dvoeverie* , see Stella Rock, *Popular Religion in Russia: “Double Belief” and the Making of an Academic Myth*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007; Eve Levin, “*Dvoeverie* and Popular Religion,” in S.K. Batalden (ed.), *Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993, 31-53.

<sup>4</sup> [In Russian] N.I. Il’minskii, *Kazanskaia Tsentral’naia Kreshcheno-tatarskaia shkola: materialy dlia istorii khristianskogo prosveshcheniia kreshchenskykh Tatar*, Kazan: Tipografiia V.M.Kliuchnikova, 1887, 121-122.

<sup>5</sup> Anton K. Salmin’s classic Russian-language work on the spiritual dilemmas of the post-Soviet Chuvash intelligentsia is *Narodnaia obriadnost’ chuvashei*, Cheboksary: Chuvashskii Gumanitarnyi Institut, 1994. He has recently updated it with *Prazdniki, obiady i verovaniia chuvashskogo naroda*, Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel’stvo, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> The consecration of *chetvergova sol’* or “Thursday salt” was also a practice among the Orthodox Slavs. Among the Finno-Ugric Mari people—neighbors to the Chuvash—salt is consecrated on the feast of the Annunciation. Curiously, however, it is called *Kugeche shinchal*—*Kugeche* being the Mari word for Easter. [In Russian] L.S. Toidybekova, *Mariiskaia mifologiia*, Ioshkar-Ola, 2007, 124.

<sup>7</sup> [In Russian] Nauchnyi arkhiv Chuvashskogo Gosudarstvennogo Instituta Gumanitarnykh Nauk, otd.1, t.178, l.233-236; [in Russian] V. Ivanov, *Etnicheskaia geografiia chuvashskogo naroda*, Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 2005, 151. The appointment of a higher proportion of Chuvash clergy in Samara province may be explained by concern at the numbers of Chuvash adopting Islam in a province with a high percentage of Muslims.

**Salt to be consecrated after Orthodox liturgy on Holy Thursday 2019, Church of the Resurrection, Cheboksary (A. KOLOSOVA)**



<sup>8</sup> [In Russian] *Tserkovno-Obshchestvennaia Zhizn’*, Kazan, 1906, 689, 804.

<sup>9</sup> [In Russian] Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (St. Petersburg), f.831, op.1, d.63, l. 55.

<sup>10</sup> For English-language accounts of the Renovatianist movement, see Scott M. Kenworthy, “Russian Reformation? The program for religious renovation in the Orthodox Church, 1922-1925,” *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, Minneapolis, MN, 2000/2001, vol. 16/17, 89-130; Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovatianism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the creation of a Chuvash national diocese, see Alison Ruth Kolosova, “*Sobornost’*: its concept, praxis and reception by Chuvash Orthodox Christians of the Volga-Kama region in the early 20th century,” *Sobornost’/Eastern Churches’ Review*, 42 (2020), 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Metropolitan Varnava died on 1 June 2020 amidst the coronavirus pandemic.

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of inculturation and incarnation, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, 454.

<sup>14</sup> Metropolitan Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003, 88.

<sup>15</sup> [In Russian] N.I. Ilminskii, “O perevode pravoslavnykh khristianskikh knig na tatarskii iazyk pri Kreshcheno-tatarskoi shkole v Kazani,” in *Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnogo Prosveshcheniia*, 1870, 43-45.

<sup>16</sup> [In Russian] M. Petrov, “Polozhenie inorodtsev v Volzhsko-Kamskom krae i prosvetitel’naia sistema N.I. Il’minskago,” in N.I. Il’minskii, *Sbornik*, Kazan, 1916, 59.

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# Increasing State Restrictions on Russian Protestant Seminaries

MARK R. ELLIOTT

Ivan Smirnov, I will call him, is originally from one of the western republics of the former Soviet Union, but presently studies at a provincial Russian Protestant seminary that authorities have attempted to close. There, he has specialized in the study of the Old Testament and Hebrew, “so naturally the OT books of the Bible have had an impact on me.” Ivan believes it is providential his training has been able to continue: “Our God in His infinite grace has allowed our school to go on as an institution of higher education.” By early 2020, courts had ruled three times that the Russian Ministry of Education and Science “did not have any credible evidence which would give warrant to the state to shut us down.” At one point the seminary’s license was revoked but later reinstated, for which Ivan is thankful: “Praise the Lord for His mercy and protection!”<sup>1</sup>

Since 2018, a string of flagship Protestant seminaries in Russia have been experiencing trial by state inspection that places their very existence in doubt. To date, three have been stripped of their educational licenses, while at least two are fighting similar efforts in the courts. Others also report heightened government scrutiny.

## Lost Licenses

### Moscow Theological Seminary

At the very least, precariousness characterizes the current status of the Moscow Theological Seminary (MTS), the leading pastoral training program of Russia’s Evangelical Christian-Baptist (ECB) Union. Successor to the correspondence course permitted by Soviet authorities beginning in 1968, its residential instruction commenced in the Union’s Moscow headquarters in 1993, shifting in 2002 to its own facility in a renovated elementary school building. At the beginning of 2020, MTS was instructing some 375 students in Moscow and another 555 in eight additional distance learning centers across Russia.<sup>2</sup>

After an inspection of the seminary in October 2018, Russia’s education inspectorate Rosobrnadzor cited MTS for “gross violation of the requirements and conditions of a special permit (license),” leading to court proceedings. During 2019 the seminary’s educational license was twice



Faculty and students outside the Evangelical Christian-Baptist Moscow Theological Seminary, May 2019 (Source: A. MARKEVICH)

suspended for 60-day periods.<sup>3</sup> In mid-February 2020—perhaps in anticipation of a worst-case scenario—Rector Peter Mitskevich wrote in a communication to the entire ECB denomination: “We want to be obedient to God here. It is all in His hands. We will train people to be gospel servants whether it is unofficial in the church, or in an official seminary context.”<sup>4</sup>

Word then came on 27 February 2020 of a Moscow arbitration court’s revocation of the MTS license. The seminary’s stunned Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs Aleksei Markevich later observed,

We do not know who is or isn’t behind these unfair decisions regarding our seminary. As I have already written many times, I personally see that the reason for this is the unbridled Russian bureaucracy, which does not act for the sake of any lofty goals, but simply fulfills the commands: “catch” and “forbid.”<sup>5</sup>

Moscow-based religion scholar Roman Lunkin concurs: “The misdemeanors of which the Moscow Theological Seminary stands accused are purely bureaucratic.”<sup>6</sup> A higher arbitration court upheld the revocation of the seminary’s license on 10 June 2020.

Meanwhile, under the new name of Theological Seminary in Moscow (TSM), MTS was able to obtain a lower-level license for “additional professional education” on 28 May 2020. It resumed instruction using that license in September 2020.<sup>7</sup> Rector Mitskevich reports ongoing efforts in 2021 for the seminary to regain its higher education license but concedes, “If it will happen—it will be a miracle.”<sup>8</sup>

### Eurasian Theological Seminary

In a nearly identical scenario, the Eurasian Theological Seminary (ETS) was also hamstrung by Russia’s educational inspectorate. ETS serves the country’s largest Pentecostal Union—the Russian Allied Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith (Pentecostals), headed by Bishop Sergei Ryakhovsky. Following an inspection over several days in February 2018, Rosobrnadzor ordered the seminary to correct cited violations by 22 March 2018. *Forum 18*’s Victoria Arnold observed:

According to the record... on Rosobrnadzor's website, most of these related to how the seminary was run day-to-day, including an apparent lack of consultation with student representatives, lack of provision of sporting and cultural activities, and the absence of particular documents on its website.<sup>9</sup>

Dissatisfied with ETS responses, Rosobrnadzor took the seminary to court, leading to the issue of a fine equivalent to \$2,300 on 25 April 2018. An unplanned, multiple-day inspection occurred the following week, leading to the suspension of student admissions on 1 June. This was followed by the suspension on 9 August and annulment on 23 November 2018 of ETS's educational license, at which point the seminary was "obliged to stop offering certificated courses."<sup>10</sup>

An official with the Church of God (Cleveland), with which ETS is affiliated, reports that the seminary "did face some extreme inspections on short notice along with just about every other evangelical seminary in Russia." Fortunately for ETS, on 7 November 2019 the seminary received a new license—as in MTS's case, issued by the Moscow City Department of Education and Science and covering "additional professional education." "Again, terminology is different, but we are still in operation," the Church of God official notes. "ETS currently gives training to about 850 people, including residential, extension, and online [programs]."<sup>11</sup>

### **Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria**

Following a July 2019 inspection, Rosobrnadzor similarly cited the Theological Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria—located in Kolbino near St. Petersburg—for insufficient detail on its website. A fine on 26 November 2019 for the same infraction followed. A second unfavorable inspection in May-June 2020 led to the suspension of the Theological Institute's educational license on 23 July 2020, followed by its court annulment on 13 November 2020, effective 6 April 2021. According to *Forum 18*, teaching may continue informally, but the Institute "is unable to issue certificates or admit students to diploma courses."<sup>12</sup>

### **Fighting to Retain Licenses**

#### **Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia**

The Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia—in the process of moving from the village of Novosartovka into St. Petersburg—fears a similar fate. Rosobrnadzor barred new admissions from 11 December 2019, fined Rector Anton Tikhomirov on 5 February and 11 March 2020, and suspended the school's license on 7 April 2020. A court order restored the license, only to see it suspended again on 10 December 2020. Court decisions have twice blocked Rosobrnadzor's moves to annul the license—most recently on 18 March 2021—but it remains suspended, and the state educational inspectorate may yet again seek to have it annulled.



**Peter Mitskevich (VIKTOR BARANOV)**

Rector Tikhomirov characterizes Rosobrnadzor's allegations as "absolutely far-fetched and false, for example: that there is no information on the website about the organization (there is), or there is no information about the deputy director (we simply do not have such a position)." In addition, a citation for a lack of gymnasium and cafeteria are nonsensical, "since we conduct only distance education."<sup>13</sup>

#### **North Caucasus Bible Institute**

The Evangelical Christian-Baptist (ECB) North Caucasus Bible Institute—located in the town of Prokhladny in the southern Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria—has also been subjected to questionable state-imposed penalties. A Rosobrnadzor inspection in June 2018 alleged that the Institute "lacked... proper teaching and assessment tools" and necessary provisions for "sanitation, first aid, and fire safety." This resulted in a fine equivalent to \$2,300, along with a ban on student admissions from November 2018 to November 2020. As of April 2021 the Institute was awaiting a court decision prompted by a renewed state educational inspectorate effort to revoke its educational license.<sup>14</sup>

### **Further Pressure**

#### **Moscow Evangelical Christian Seminary**

The interdenominational Moscow Evangelical Christian Seminary (MECS) is also no stranger to close state oversight. Founded by One Mission Society (OMS), a U.S.-based Evangelical mission agency, MECS was briefly shuttered by Rosobrnadzor in the summer of 2007 for alleged "fire violations and for failing to offer a quality education."<sup>15</sup> MECS recouped and reopened, but it has continued to be the object of Rosobrnadzor inspections, most recently in October 2018. Being one of the last Protestant seminaries to face inspection in 2018, MECS drew lessons from the experience of others. According to MECS President Sergei Chervonenko, "Observing the results of the audit at one of the Moscow seminaries, we understood that the process would be difficult and tried to prepare as much as possible." Harold Brown, OMS missionary and MECS board chair, characterized the most recent lead inspector as "tough," but one who in the end chose not to recommend sanctions.<sup>16</sup>

*(continued on page 8)*

## Russian Seminaries (continued from page 7)

### Tyumen Biblical Seminary

In December 2020 Rosobrnadzor reportedly issued a notably egregious order requiring the Pentecostal Tyumen Biblical Seminary to spell out in writing its procedures for interactions with parents of students under the age of 18, even though the school has no minors enrolled. This “failure,” along with the seminary’s lack of provisions for a student food service and sports—even during the pandemic when authorities have suspended in-person, group instruction—was enough to generate an order for Rector Yevgeny Shestakov to halt new student admissions.<sup>17</sup>

### Justified Regulation or Repressive Measures?

During 2019-20, the author asked a range of Protestant educators and leaders the following:

Is increasing Russian state oversight of private educational institutions, including Protestant seminaries, a justifiable effort to standardize higher education and ensure quality or part of an overall government strategy to bring all sectors of Russian society under closer state supervision?<sup>18</sup>

In response, the leader of one Protestant denomination related a “tough but successful” Rosobrnadzor inspection of his church’s seminary but did not consider it to be discrimination against non-Orthodox. Rather, he viewed the thrust of the state higher education inspectorate as part of the “overall trend in all sectors of society to have more [state] control.”<sup>19</sup> If fighting corruption in higher education is a factor here, Rosobrnadzor has good reason to act. Corrupt practices in higher education, ubiquitous in the Soviet era, have continued unabated since the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> Elizaveta Potapova, research fellow of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, notes that post-secondary education “is particularly vulnerable to corruption” because most faculty are poorly paid, and many students “are willing to pay instructors for better grades, revised transcripts, and more.”<sup>21</sup>



MECS graduation, May 2018 (Source: MOSCOW EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN SEMINARY)

Intrusive inspections are also not confined to Protestant institutions. Theological educator Olga Zaprometova observes that, if located outside Moscow, Orthodox theological schools often face serious challenges from Rosobrnadzor. As a result, many Orthodox, as well as Protestant seminaries, have chosen not to seek state accreditation as too burdensome a process.<sup>22</sup> As theologian John Burgess, author of *Holy Rus: The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia*, has put it, theological educators of diverse confessions dread the weight of “heavy-handed bureaucracy” that accreditation entails. Illustrating the “reality of a highly bureaucratized society,” he notes that state authorities threatened Belgorod Orthodox Seminary with a fine for a minor infraction: its website was said not to be up-to-date.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the ongoing difficulties with state inspections at a host of high-profile Protestant institutions would suggest a pattern of discrimination that goes well beyond a seminary’s purported insufficient attention to state higher education documentation requirements. This author is in receipt of too many communications from too many beleaguered Russian Protestant educators to believe otherwise. In the opinion of attorney Vladimir Ozolin, state restrictions imposed upon Protestant seminaries are part of a more comprehensive effort to exert “pressure... on the non-traditional confessions.”<sup>24</sup> And this takes place against a backdrop of tightened restrictions on general sharing of religious ideas in the wake of the so-called Yarovaya legislation of 2016. In two typical examples from April 2021, Baptists in Belgorod and Kaluga regions were both fined the equivalent of \$67 for handing out Bibles in a shopping mall and conducting Bible study in a private apartment without authorization.<sup>25</sup>

Here is the heart of the predicament facing Russian Protestant seminaries. The Russian state has arrogated to itself sole authority over the life or death of any given institution, but it possesses neither the expertise nor the objectivity necessary to serve as honest gatekeeper.



A recent class at MECS in Moscow (Source: MOSCOW EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN SEMINARY)



KECU's rector, Gennady Pshenichny, with his children  
(Source: G. PSHENICHNY)

## Challenges Ahead

Soon, difficulty obtaining an educational license will not be the only constraint upon Protestant higher education. Back in August 2019, Sergei Chervonenko of MECS had anticipated that the next hurdle Rosobrnadzor would erect would be state verification of the degrees held by higher education faculty, an especially ominous prospect for Protestant seminaries: "In the future they may well introduce requirements to confirm the level of teaching staff in Russia."<sup>26</sup> His suspicion proved prescient, as measures in this sphere are to be introduced in October 2021.

Some precedent exists: the experience of Moscow's Russian-American Christian University (RACU), one of only two Russian Evangelical liberal arts programs to receive state accreditation, along with Zaoksky Seventh-day Adventist University near Tula.<sup>27</sup> (While not mandatory, state accreditation confirms that the activity of a particular higher educational institution meets federal educational standards in one or more subject areas, and grants it the right to issue corresponding government-issued diplomas.) RACU's hard-won accreditation, awarded in 2003, was lost in 2009, in good measure because Rosobrnadzor changed accreditation requirements to no longer credit faculty with Western doctorates in calculating the number of qualified instructors.<sup>28</sup>

Forced reliance upon the Russian state for faculty training was an ominous feature of the pressure experienced by another Protestant institution during the recent wave of Rosobrnadzor inspections: Kuban Evangelical Christian University (KECU) in the southern city of Krasnodar. Originally founded as Lampados Bible College under the sponsorship of the U.S. Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination, this was yet another seminary to have its license temporarily suspended in November 2018. KECU's rector, Gennady Pshenichny, observed in late 2019 that Russian Protestant seminary faculty were beginning to be required to undergo "state-recognized advanced theological training" leading to a "diploma in theological pedagogy" from a secular university, "as absurd as it sounds."<sup>29</sup> Compounding this imposition forced upon KECU, the secular institute affiliated with Kuban State University that offers this new diploma has already doubled the tuition for this mandatory training.<sup>30</sup>



KECU's first class, 1992 (Source: G. PSHENICHNY)

Pshenichny views Rosobrnadzor's overall implementation of oversight as "a profanation of education, relegating it to a piece of paper with a stamp." He openly critiques this state body, which holds a Damocles Sword over the life of his seminary, in a manner that is both searching and courageous:

I would say that ensuring quality is not a top priority of the Ministry of Education. ... The system is set up in such a way that officials have to give account to their supervisors and so they react only as prompted. The inspections are genuinely interested only in checking off their lists and finding faults with the schools so they can report back to their respective supervisors and prove they are effective. The tendency is to stifle initiative anywhere and lay [down a] heavy burden, which creates a façade of uniformity and order. At the same time the discrimination against non-Orthodox faiths, especially evangelicals, has always been there. It is twofold. First, there are those who are ideologically opposed and purposefully malign and denigrate non-Orthodox believers through every means possible. And then there are those who are "strengthening" the hands of the first group through ignorance. The connection with the West does not help.<sup>31</sup>

## New Amendments

Signed into law by President Putin on 5 April 2021, the new amendments to Russia's 1997 legislation on religion will go into effect on 3 October 2021. From that date, would-be ministers or other religious personnel who have been trained outside Russia—including those engaged in mission and teaching—are to complete mandatory "additional professional accreditation in the sphere of the fundamentals of state-confessional relations in the Russian Federation." This applies both to Russian and non-Russian citizens. The additional training must take place either at a religious institution of higher education that holds both state registration and state accreditation for its core study programs, or at a federal institution of higher education, such as a secular university. Further specifics are unclear.<sup>32</sup>

Attorney Konstantin Andreyev interprets the amendments to mean that the type of license a religious educational institution must hold before it can conduct this new training is that recently stripped from MTS and ETS. The licenses

*(continued on page 10)*



## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “Ivan Smirnov,” emails to author, 9 and 12 January 2020. Parts of this article derive from the author’s longer piece under the same title published in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 40, no. 4 (2020), 1-31, used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Mark R. Elliott, *The Arduous Path of Post-Soviet Protestant Theological Education* (Wilmore, KY: First Fruits Press, 2020), 14; Dale Kemp, email to author, 25 February 2020; <https://russianleadership.org/our-ministry/>.

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Arnold, “RUSSIA: Obstructions to Protestant theological education ‘systemic, intentional’?,” *Forum 18*, 25 March 2019, [www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2465](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2465); Roman Lunkin, “Theology for a Select Few: Soviet Déjà Vu for Russia’s Protestants?,” *East-West Church Report*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2019), 11; Dale Kemp, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Peter Mitskevich, “Words from the President—February 2020,” 14 February 2020; <https://baptist.org.ru/en/news/view/article/1539124>.

<sup>5</sup> Victoria Arnold, “RUSSIA: Flagship Protestant colleges stripped of right to offer higher education,” *Forum 18*, 13 April 2021, [www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2651](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2651).

<sup>6</sup> Lunkin, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Arnold, “RUSSIA: Flagship...”; [in Russian] “Bogoslovskaiia seminariia poluchila litsenziu,” <https://mbs.ru/index.php?r=series/item&type=news&item=1593767362>.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Mitskevich, email to author, 28 April 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold, “RUSSIA: Obstructions...”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; Elliott, 163-65.

<sup>11</sup> Church of God representative, emails to author, 4 and 31 December 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, “RUSSIA: Flagship...”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*; Lunkin, 12, Mitskevich, email to author, 28 April 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Hunter Baker, “Is Church Attendance Declining?,” *Christianity Today*, 8 November 2007, [www.christianitytoday.com/news/2007/november/145-42.0.html/](http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2007/november/145-42.0.html/).

<sup>16</sup> Sergei Chervonenko, interview with author, 21 May 2019; Harold Brown telephone interview with author, 22 November 2019; Harold Brown email to author, 25 February 2020.

<sup>17</sup> [In Russian] Olga Sibireva, “Problemy realizatsii svobody sovesti v Rossii v 2020 godu,” *Sova*, 31 March 2021, [www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2021/03/d43946/](http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/publications/2021/03/d43946/).

<sup>18</sup> Mark R. Elliott, emails to Russian Protestant educators and leaders, 8 and 29 October 2019; 4 and 8 December 2019; 9 February 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, email to author, 25 October 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony W. Morgan and Nadezhda V. Kulikova, “Reform and Adaptation in Russian Higher Education: An Institutional Perspective,” *European Education*, vol. 39 (Fall 2007), 59; Andrei Kortunov, “Russian Higher Education,” *Social Research*, vol. 76 (Spring 2009), 206.

<sup>21</sup> Elizaveta Potapova and Stefan Trines, “Education in the Russian Federation,” *World Education News + Reviews*, 6 June 2017, <https://wenr.wes.org/2017/06/education-in-the-russian-federation>.

<sup>22</sup> Olga Zaprometova, email to author, 9 October 2019.

<sup>23</sup> John Burgess, telephone interview with author, 16 September 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold, “RUSSIA: Obstructions...”

<sup>25</sup> [In Russian] “Zhitel’ Belgorodskoi oblasti oshtrafovan za razdachu Biblii v trgovom tsentre,” *Sova*, 12 May 2021, [www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2021/05/d44197/](http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2021/05/d44197/); “V Obninske sluzhitel’ EkhB oshtrafovan za ‘nezakonnoe’ missionerstvo,” *Sova*, 23 April 2021, [www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2021/04/d44107/](http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/harassment/intervention/2021/04/d44107/).

<sup>26</sup> [In Russian] Sergey Chervonenko, “Proverka ot Rosobrnadzora: itogi i mysli,” 23 August 2019, <https://chervonenko.medium.com/проверка-от-рособрнадзора-итоги-и-мысли-b340a766ffc7>.

<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Kulakov, *God’s Soviet Miracles: How Adventists Built the First Protestant Seminary in Russian History* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> John A. Bernbaum, *Opening the Red Door: The Inside Story of Russia’s First Christian Liberal Arts University* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 90-91.

<sup>29</sup> Gennady Pshenichny, email to author, 1 November 2019.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*; Harold Brown, telephone interview 22 November 2019. In a 24 May 2019 interview, Dr. Gennady Sergienko, a senior Moscow-based Baptist pastor, also attested to Rosobrnadzor’s move toward state validation of theological faculty.

<sup>31</sup> Gennady Pschenichny, *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> [In Russian] “Zakonoproekt no. 992354-7,” <https://sozd.duma.gov.ru/bill/992354-7>; Olga Sibireva, “Russia: New Restrictions in the Religion Law: What Should Believers Expect?,” BYU Law International Center for Law and Religious Studies, 23 December 2020,

<https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2020/12/23/new-restrictions-in-the-russian-religious-law/>; Victoria Arnold, “How will retraining of foreign-trained clergy be implemented?,” *Forum 18*, 12 May 2021, [www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2657](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2657).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> [In Russian] “Perechen’ svetskikh i konfessional’nykh vuzov, gde prepodaiut teologiiu,” *Sova*, 1 October 2020, [www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/authorities/protection/2020/10/d42993/](http://www.sova-center.ru/religion/news/authorities/protection/2020/10/d42993/); [in Russian] [https://zda.zau.ru/sveden/files/Svidetelystvo\\_o\\_gosudarstvennoy\\_akkreditacii.pdf](https://zda.zau.ru/sveden/files/Svidetelystvo_o_gosudarstvennoy_akkreditacii.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Andrei Rezhnikov, Artur Priimak, Andrei Samokhin, “Clergy Refuse to Retrain Over Again; Historically Clergy of Most Confessions Received Foreign Education,” *Vzgliad*, 18 September 2020, <https://www2.stetson.edu/religious-news/200918b.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Arnold, “RUSSIA: Flagship...”

<sup>37</sup> Elliott, “The Arduous Path...”, 6.

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# Supporting Russian Christians in Adversity: The 20th-Century Work of John R. Mott and the YMCA

MATTHEW LEE MILLER

After a long process of seeking official approval, the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) began its service among Russian workers and students in 1900. Its *Mayak* [Russian: *Lighthouse*] program in St. Petersburg offered a wide range of athletic, social, educational, and religious opportunities for young men. These reflected those already on offer in the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere from the middle of the 19th century onwards. Following the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, many YMCA workers expanded their efforts in Russia to provide humanitarian assistance to both soldiers and prisoners of war. During the war, YMCA staff formed the largest group of Americans living in Russia. Their service—setting up libraries, promoting athletic competitions, and organizing concerts and classes for men in uniform—came at the request of both the U.S. and Russian governments.

John R. Mott was the primary catalyst for the expansion of the YMCA's work with soldiers across Europe, and specifically in Russia. Raised in a Methodist home in Postville, Iowa, Mott joined the YMCA student ministry during his years at Cornell University, New York. After graduating from Cornell in 1888, he embarked upon a career with the YMCA, and by 1890 was the director of its college and university ministry. He was also among the founders in 1895 of the World Student Christian Federation, an organization that attempted to support and unite student Christian movements throughout the world.

Mott deeply influenced the Russian ministry of the YMCA. While he participated in this work only intermittently, he contributed to it throughout the first half of the twentieth century. His direct involvement began in 1899, when he encouraged the founding of the Russian Student Christian Movement (Russian: *Russkoe studencheskoe khristianskoe dvizhenie*), to which he provided guidance and financial support in subsequent years. However, Mott's most significant influence proved to be indirect, providing guidelines for the direction of the YMCA's Russian ministry: coordinating evangelization, encouraging ministry cooperation, motivating indigenous leadership, supporting Russian Orthodoxy, and providing leadership training.

Mott's conviction that the YMCA should serve soldiers in Russia developed in the early days of the First World War. During the course of the conflict, more than six million soldiers and civilians were held in prison camps across Europe; Russia held 1.5 million of these inside its borders, while 2.5 million Russians went missing in action or were held as prisoners of war in foreign countries. These numbers far exceeded expectations and the resources available for relief services. Such an unexpectedly high number of captives forced combatant nations to find solutions—including the involvement of neutral nations, as was the United States before early 1917.

In September 1914 Mott traveled with others to Europe to inspect the situation and determine the possibilities for wartime YMCA assistance. His group witnessed overcrowded hospitals and difficulties in communication between wounded soldiers and family members. Mott and other YMCA leaders were motivated to help, and to visit those in prison, as taught in the Gospel of Matthew. He resolved to raise millions of dollars and recruit YMCA staff to address the needs they observed. Three months later, Mott met with the International Committee of the YMCA and described to them the tragic impact of the war upon soldiers and refugees. He recognized that the war was a disaster, but—expressing his characteristic optimism—he suggested that it was also an opportunity to serve an enormous number of people across Europe. The main challenge, however, was how to provide relief while maintaining American neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

In January 1915 Mott met with President Woodrow Wilson at the White House to discuss his experiences in Europe. The pair had already met in 1889, at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. At that time, Wilson was a professor at the university, while Mott was a visiting representative from the Student Volunteer Movement, a YMCA-supported body facilitating the service of U.S. college graduates in Christian ministries around the world. On meeting again in 1915 they agreed upon a plan that would “extend relief to war prisoners in both Allied and Central Power countries” and “meet a desperate need... The American YMCA now had the President's support for an ambitious relief program in Europe.”<sup>2</sup>

By May 1915 the United States government emerged as the only entity capable of providing aid to these prisoners of war. The Wilson administration soon realized that non-governmental organizations must participate in the relief program if the U.S. was to respond to the scale of need effectively. The American YMCA answered the government's

request to provide physical, mental, and spiritual assistance by launching the International War Prisoners' Aid program, which assisted prisoners of war regardless of nationality or religious belief. The U.S. program functioned under the auspices of the World Alliance of YMCAs—based in neutral Geneva, Switzerland—and coordinated with other national associations.<sup>3</sup>

In June 1917, three months after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, the United States recognized Russia's Provisional Government. This led to the formation of a U.S. diplomatic mission to Russia led by Elihu Root, a recent U.S. Secretary of State and senator. The mission attempted to evaluate how best to assist the new Provisional Government and to encourage continued Russian participation in the war, the U.S. having entered it on the side of the Allies in April 1917. One of the members of the Root Commission was John R. Mott.



**Russian children in front of local YMCA building, c. 1919 (Source: UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS ARCHIVES)**

During his years at Cornell, Mott had adopted a negative evaluation of the Russian Orthodox Church, but he rejected this after extensive contact with Eastern Christians. Over the years, he established a network of international Christian friendships and frequently expressed his admiration for the Orthodox, emphasizing the YMCA's support for them due to their church's doctrinal foundations, rich liturgy, and perseverance. On his trip to Petrograd in 1917, Mott initiated a variety of discussions with many influential Orthodox leaders.<sup>4</sup> He also secured permission to expand welfare work with Russian troops. On returning to the U.S., he personally began to recruit college students and graduates who had YMCA program experience for this work. Over three hundred Americans came together for this service, working across different levels of Russian society and in many geographical regions.<sup>5</sup>

The American YMCA's service among soldiers shifted significantly as it adjusted to Russia's dramatic political trajectory, particularly the nation's withdrawal from the First World War with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. The revolutionary changes of late 1917 also sharply increased the political tensions experienced by the YMCA. Despite being a non-governmental organization, its relations with the U.S. government contributed to its closure on Bolshevik-controlled territory in 1919. Yet YMCA workers continued to serve among Russian émigrés in creative ways. They supported the further development of the Russian Student Christian Movement, which brought together many young Russian émigrés across Europe. In Paris, the YMCA also supported the Orthodox Theological Institute—initially the only Russian Orthodox educational program of its kind—which ultimately became the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute. A further key YMCA contribution was the YMCA Press, which in time would publish a remarkable variety of Russian-language literary, philosophical, and spiritual books that would never have been permitted inside the Soviet Union, including works by Nikolai Berdyaev, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

John R. Mott received the Nobel Peace Prize for his cooperative Christian ventures in 1946. Yet evaluating the YMCA's Russian service is not a simple task. The present author hopes that a new volume of primary source documents accompanied by his introduction and explanatory footnotes: *John R. Mott, the American YMCA, and Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers/Indiana University, 2020) will be a helpful contribution. This is one of a series of 14 volumes with a similar format highlighting the observations and experiences of a diverse group of American-born women and men who witnessed the outbreak of war and revolution in Russia between 1914 and 1921. Subjects include John Reed; Princess Julia Cantacuzène, Countess Spéransky (née Grant); and Albert Rhys Williams.

The volume on Mott is the first in the series to address the topic of religion directly, with two sets of documents. The first, Mott's *Recent Experiences and Impressions in Russia*, presents several public addresses and letters created during his participation in Elihu Root's mission to Russia from May to August 1917. These historical documents—printed in 1917 but never distributed—describe the Root Commission and offer perspectives on several momentous

events and leaders of the era: the First World War, the February Revolution, members of the Provisional Government, and leading figures in the Russian Orthodox Church. The documents include the proposal for the YMCA to conduct a program of service among Russia's military, Mott's detailed letter reflecting on the country's recent religious developments, and his speech to the All-Russian Congress of Clergy and Laity of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Mott shared these words in his 19 June 1917 address to the All-Russian Congress of Clergy and Laity:

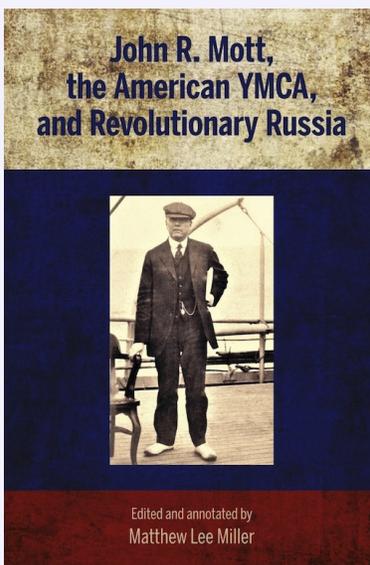
The opportunity of mingling with Russian Christians which I have appreciated most deeply was that which came to me during my two visits to the prisoner-of-war camps in Germany and Austria-Hungary. Possibly many of you do not know that the Christians of America early in the war were given permission to extend the helpful ministry of the Young Men's Christian Association to the prison camps of these countries, and that we have had over thirty wise and unselfish American workers busily engaged throughout the larger part of the war in helping to meet the needs of the Russian prisoners as well as those of the other Allied countries. It would be difficult, yes impossible, to express to you adequately the sense of joy and deep satisfaction it has afforded us to be permitted in this way to become better acquainted with the Russian people and with the Russian soul. Anything which God will permit us to do directly or indirectly to serve the Russian prisoners we will gladly do.<sup>6</sup>

The volume's second set of documents, *Service with Fighting Men: An Account of the Work of the American Young Men's Christian Associations in the World War* (published in 1924), presents the YMCA's official description and evaluation of its work carried out in Russia in response to Mott's plans.<sup>7</sup>

In order to provide context to the reader, the introduction to the volume includes key information on the work of the YMCA in

Russia, the role of Mott as an organizational leader, and a survey of the YMCA's work with soldiers during the First World War.<sup>8</sup> The goal of the introduction is to encourage analysis of the texts, bearing in mind that the Bolshevik Revolution had not yet taken place by the time the first set of documents was written. Mott wrote with idealism and self-confidence—but of course he did not know the future. The second set of documents demonstrates how quickly realities in Russia shifted during his era.

In spite of the many limitations and swirling suspicions, the YMCA was able to improve prisoner-of-war conditions significantly in the locations where it was able to operate. However, YMCA workers could not serve the vast number in need, and made contact with only a small percentage.<sup>9</sup> The YMCA's own evaluations of this work in Russia therefore express ambivalence, in part as its attempts to serve soldiers raised more controversy from more critics than any other aspect of its Russian service. A century on, connections between America and Russia in the fields of faith, culture, and politics continue to raise engaging questions, for which the close experience of John R. Mott should provide helpful historical context. ♦ *(continued on page 14)*



## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Andrew Steuer, *Pursuit of an "Unparalleled Opportunity": The American Young Men's Christian Association and Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy Among the Central Power Nations during World War I, 1914-1923*, doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1997, 45-47.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 48-50.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1-4.

<sup>4</sup> See John W. Long and C. Howard Hopkins, "The Church and the Russian Revolution: Conversations of John R. Mott with Orthodox Church Leaders, June-July 1917," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, vol. 20 (1976), no. 3, 161-180.

<sup>5</sup> Memorandum from Crawford Wheeler to John R. Mott and E. T. Colton, "Report on war-time activities in Russia," 22 November 1919, 3-5. World War I Field Reports, binder 2. Russia, Colton E. T., Reports, Addresses, and Papers, two volumes. Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Lee Miller, ed., *John R. Mott, the American YMCA, and Revolutionary Russia*, Bloomington: Slavica Publishers/Indiana University, 2020, 26.

<sup>7</sup> William Howard Taft, et al., eds., *Service with Fighting Men: An Account of the Work of the American Young Men's Christian Associations in the World War*, vol. 2, New York: Association Press, 1924, 270-282, 419-457.

<sup>8</sup> See also Matthew Lee Miller, *The American YMCA and Russian Culture: The Preservation and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity, 1900-1940*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013; Matthew Lee Miller, "The American YMCA and Russian Politics: Critics and Supporters of Socialism, 1900-1940," in William Benton Whisenhunt and Norman E. Saul, eds., *New Perspectives on Russian-American Relations*, New York: Routledge, 2015, 161-177.

<sup>9</sup> Steuer, 458, 454-455, 473.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### *One Word of Truth: The Cold War Memoir of Michael Bourdeaux and Keston College* by Michael Bourdeaux

London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2019  
328 pp., \$30 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-232-53414-6

MARK R. ELLIOTT

Reading *One Word of Truth* brought back a flood of memories of many of the same people, places, and policy debates that have figured prominently in my professional life, parallel to those of Michael Bourdeaux.

I first met Michael in October 1983, at the beginning of one month of research at his Keston College Library and Archive, located in a suburb of London, England. The back story to what gave occasion for our first meeting dates back a decade, to 1974, when, after I had completed my Ph.D. at the University of Kentucky, my wife and I made our first trip to the Soviet Union. As people of faith, Darlene and I took advantage of our two weekends in the Soviet Union to worship with fellow believers in Moscow and Kyiv. Those brief hours with Christians under duress were unforgettable and life-altering. In Moscow, wandering labyrinthine streets in the vicinity of the capital's lone Evangelical Christian-Baptist church, a lady in Sunday dress passed us, pointed heavenward, and beckoned us to follow her to worship. In Kyiv, following another service, Darlene gave a little girl a pocket calendar with a reproduction of Sallman's *Head of Christ*. You would have thought this was a gift of gold as some forty people in the church courtyard pressed close around to gain a glance at this popular rendering of the Savior.

In sharp contrast to our worship in two living churches was our visit to Leningrad's Kazan Cathedral, converted for use as the Soviet Union's premier anti-religious temple: The

Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism. The hostility to religious belief was on full display, with exhibits exclusively upon negative chapters in church history. Professionally, I came back from the Soviet Union a different person. I vowed, given time, to change course from a research focus on Soviet military and diplomatic history to one devoted to Russian church history and current conditions facing people of faith in the USSR.

Thus, when a sabbatical was forthcoming from my employer for fall 1983, I was off to England and Keston College to study the scope of Western missions that were rendering aid to Soviet-bloc believers. Keston's resources for my project were abundant: vertical files on mission organizations, relevant monographs and serials, an archive of primary sources, including *samizdat* ("self-published," fugitive documents secreted from East to West), and an entrée to an unmatched coterie of specialists. I was thus able to rub shoulders with perhaps the greatest concentration anywhere of scholars and activists keen to publicize the trials and "be the voice" of Soviet-bloc believers. In addition to Michael Bourdeaux, I made my first acquaintance with Russian Orthodox specialist Philip Walters, editor of Keston's academic journal, *Religion in Communist Lands* (later, *Religion, State and Society*); Jane Ellis, later author of two outstanding monographs, *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History* (London: Routledge, 1986) and *The Russian Orthodox Church: Triumphalism and Defensiveness* (London: Macmillan, 1996); Walter Sawatsky, author of the still-must-

read *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981); Michael Rowe, later author of *Russian Resurrection* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), another volume on Russian Evangelicals; Marite Sapiets, later author of *True Witness: The Story of Seventh-Day Adventists in the Soviet Union* (Keston, UK: Keston College, 1990); John Anderson, later author of *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Ginte Damusis, later an ambassador in the service of an independent Lithuania—an eventuality unimaginable in 1983; Sandy Oestreich, later a missionary for decades in Russia and Armenia; and Malcolm Walker, Keston’s indefatigable librarian. At its height Keston College employed 21 specialists who, along with part-time volunteers, could read 19 East European languages (157).

Michael Bourdeaux and his researchers-in-residence have been, above all else, advocates for unfettered freedom of conscience in Communist states. This positive defense of the right to believe was persistently under assault from a surprisingly diverse array of forces making light of or ignoring violations of religious liberty in the Soviet orbit. Those undermining Keston’s advocacy, directly or by implication, included not only Soviet-bloc states and their security services, but also East-bloc captive church spokesmen and most of the international ecumenical movement, most prominently the World Council of Churches and the U.S. National Council of Churches.

Over time the ecumenical movement came to view socialism more favorably than capitalism. This political and economic stance contributed to the employment of what *One Word of Truth* calls “selectivity of ...conscience” (158), which I have long similarly labeled “selective compassion.” This may be defined as a coupling of a justifiable condemnation of human rights’ abuses on the right (by non-Communist, authoritarian regimes) with a shameful downplaying or ignoring of human rights’ abuses on the left (in Communist states). (To be sure, during the Cold War, anti-Communist groups and governments employed the same double standard in reverse: highlighting human rights’ infringements in Communist states while turning a blind eye to the same abuses in right-wing, authoritarian states.)

Representative of Soviet efforts to counter Keston’s truth-telling was a 1969 article in the magazine *Nauka i religija* [Russian: *Science and Religion*] arguing that “Bourdeaux’s scribbles” formed part of “the arsenal of imperialist propaganda, poisoning the minds of people in the West with the venom of anti-Soviet ideas” (119). The Soviet state also pressed Russian churches into service of its disinformation efforts. One year after Bourdeaux’s *Opium of the People* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965) revealed the drastic extent of Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign, for example, Patriarch Aleksy I wrote Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey, attacking the book. In his view “it portrays in a distorted manner our country’s attitude to freedom of conscience” and “falsifies and misrepresents the position of religion and church life in the USSR” (110).

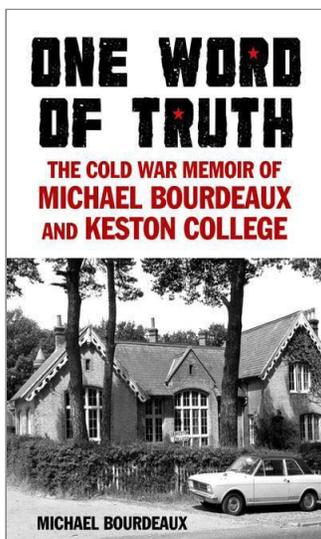
Just as much was required of state-recognized Evangelical Christian-Baptist leaders. On a 1968 visit to England, Moscow ECB pastor and unofficial ECB “foreign minister” Mikhail Zhidkov met with Bourdeaux and pointedly objected to the latter’s defense of unregistered Baptists in his *Religious Ferment in Russia* (London: Palgrave, 1968). For its part, the ECB house organ, *Bratskii vestnik* [Russian: *Fraternal Herald*], could assert, “Not only do the Russian Baptists not consider Communism to be an obstacle to evangelism, but they contend that its socio-economic principles do not contradict the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (197).

One can sympathize to some extent with church spokespersons under duress, pressured to sing the song of their captors. After all, those of us in the West should make allowances in light of the fact that we must contemplate how courageous or cowed we might have been under the same circumstances. It is altogether another matter, however, to absolve church folk in the West who knew better when they alleged greater religious liberty in the East than was the case, and when they lauded the superiority of Socialism. In hyperbolic defense of conditions for believers in Soviet-bloc states, Paul Hansen of the Lutheran World Federation thus contended, “For every story about congregations which come together secretly in the woods, we can tell about thousands of others which gather in their church buildings, with state permission” (215).

Above all, the World Council of Churches came to put the best face it could on Soviet church-state policy. Once the Kremlin permitted churches in the USSR to join the WCC from 1961, it could rely upon its ecumenical representatives to work to suppress any negative publicity regarding conditions facing believers in the Soviet orbit. Thus, at the WCC’s Fifth General Assembly in Nairobi in 1975, in response to the courageous pleas of Father Gleb Yakunin of the Russian Orthodox Church for an ecumenical defense of believers’ rights in the Soviet Union, WCC apparatchiks worked overtime to delay, sidetrack, and undermine such an outcome. For his outspoken rejection of the party line on church-state relations, Soviet courts would later sentence Fr. Gleb to eight years in prison in the 1980s.

Regarding ecumenical relations, Bourdeaux notably lauds the expertise and sagacity of Episcopalian Paul Anderson, who for decades gave the U.S. National Council of Churches a clear-eyed picture of the fraught circumstances of Soviet church-state relations. Anderson’s insightful *People, Church and State in Modern Russia* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1944) was one of the rare, early volumes offering credible documentation on the subject, as did his much later memoir, *No East or West* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1985). (On a personal note, Paul Anderson is the only person Bourdeaux and I have known who was an eyewitness to Lenin’s declaration of the October Russian Revolution. As a YMCA staffer in Petrograd in 1917, he was on hand in the headquarters of the revolution

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## Bourdeaux Review *(continued from page 15)*

in the Smolny Convent when Lenin proclaimed his party's revolutionary uprising [106].) In 1972, the year Paul Anderson retired from the NCC, he visited Keston College and shared his concern with Michael over the "growing pro-Soviet mood in church circles" in the U.S. (130).

The trouble was that most Western ecumenists were to the left of Keston in favoring discretion exclusively (quiet diplomacy), while others to the right of Keston, such as two particularly problematic East European missions, Joe Bass's Underground Evangelism and Richard Wurmbrand's Jesus to the Communist World, practiced combative, public protest that too often conflated the cause of religious liberty and politically charged anti-Communism (103-04). Bourdeaux has frequently been accused of being in the latter camp, which I would argue is a misreading of his motives and actions. As early as 1965 he wrote in *Opium of the People*:

Some take the attitude that any publicity about the real state of affairs in the Soviet Union is likely to make the situation for Christians very much worse. This may have been true in Stalin's time, but it is emphatically not so today. There has been every sign in the last few years that Khrushchev's Russia is sensitive to world opinion.... The Soviet Government would like to have a phantom Church—one which has no members at all within the USSR, but which has powerful international connections which can be used to support Soviet strategy. We must make it known that we see through this. (90).

In Leningrad, police arrested unregistered Baptist Aida Skripnikova on three occasions (1962, 1965, and 1968) for passing out handwritten Bible verses in public and for participation in unregistered worship services. She spent 1965-66 and 1968-71 in the *gulag*. [Editor's note: A similar fate awaits some religious believers in today's Russia. Since mid-2016 the unregulated public (and sometimes private) distribution of religious literature and/or worship has resulted in numerous fines, typically for Muslims and Protestants. Since their national organization was outlawed as extremist in 2017, 29 Jehovah's

Witnesses have been incarcerated for up to seven and a half years, some in labor camps.]

In 1972 Keston published Skripnikova's story of stalwart faith, which Bourdeaux reasonably contends, spared her an additional term in prison (123). Perhaps no case of the persecution of believers better illustrates the efficacy of public protest than the Soviet assault on the Pochaev Monastery in western Ukraine. Employing *samizdat* and his own firsthand, providential interviews with eyewitnesses, Bourdeaux publicized myriad state measures against defenseless Orthodox monks and pilgrims: arrests, confiscation of property, removal of elderly monastics to mental hospitals, conscription of novices into the army, and multiple injections of healthy monks to treat nonexistent dysentery (85-88). These revelations in *Opium of the People* "hit the press with some considerable force." And:

There were consequences. Perhaps the most important was that the Soviets never did succeed in closing down the Pochaev Monastery. World opinion had been alerted, and it seemed that now the Soviets wanted to hold back from such a scandalous act against one of the most influential monasteries of the Russian Orthodox Church. (88).

The Soviet response was instead to convert Pochaev into a Potemkin village propaganda set, pretending to uphold freedom of religion. Yet, at least Bourdeaux's public protest in print had spared the monastery dissolution.

In a sentence, *One Word of Truth* is a rewarding read for anyone wanting to understand conditions faced by Christians in the Soviet Union in the post-Second World War era and the conflicting Western responses to their plight. Thankfully, Michael Bourdeaux was able to see his memoir published prior to his repose on 29 March 2021. ♦

*This review is an abridged version of the author's lengthier piece published in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe 41, no. 3 (2021), 49-70, used with permission.*

**Dr. Mark R. Elliott** is Editor Emeritus of the East-West Church Report.

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