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Among Soviet Baptists

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Cooper, Brian G.
Publisher	Baptist Ministers Fellowship
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Download date	2026-07-17 08:06:16
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/156330

Among Soviet Baptists

Outside the United States and India, the Baptists of the Soviet Union represent the largest single community in the worldwide Baptist fellowship, with some 600,000 adult baptised believers and a total following of at least an estimated two million. They form the largest non-Orthodox Christian grouping in the Soviet Union and the most significant and widespread expression of Protestant Christianity in that vast country. A distinctive characteristic of the Baptists in Soviet religious life is that they are found all over the Soviet Union — throughout European Russia, in the ancient lands of Armenia and Georgia, right across the Ukraine, in the Baltic republics, in the rapidly-developing Siberian territories, in the central Asian lands such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan where most people belong to various Asiatic races, and in the Soviet Far East. "From Archangel to Tbilisi, from Moscow to Vladivostok, we have Baptist churches!", a superintendent once told me proudly. The title 'All-Union' Baptist is very apt.

It has been my privilege to have made six major journeys among Soviet Baptists over the past fourteen years, on ecumenical study visits, for Christian peace events, and on preaching missions: with reference to the latter, at the invitation of the All-Union Baptists I undertook major preaching tours in 1978 (covering Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Novgorod for preaching engagements, with also visits to Orthodox centres at Vladimir and Suzdal) and in 1982 (Moscow, Volgograd, Tashkent and Samarkand). In 1979 I visited Soviet Georgia and preached at the main Baptist church in Tbilisi; I have preached on several occasions at the central Moscow Baptist church.

In this article I am not attempting any definitive statement about Baptist life in the Soviet Union nor any all-embracing definition of Church-State relations; rather, I want to highlight some key characteristics of Baptist church life in the U.S.S.R. today, and some issues that have struck me as particularly significant. I must also state at the outset the fundamental Christian reason for my active interest in Soviet religious life generally and Baptist life specifically: it is that the Gospel of Reconciliation calls us to break down 'the middle walls of partition' in every age, and in our own time of East-West ideological-military division and the Cold War, it is vitally important to build the Christian bridges of reconciliation, peace and mutual understanding, East-West, with our contacts with the Soviet Union and its Churches having a special significance. In the context of both Anglo-Soviet religious relations and British church life, British Baptists have a unique responsibility — and a special opportunity — as the only major denomination in Britain with a sister denomination throughout the USSR. Only Baptists are in the mainstream of Christian life in both our countries. In the global context, the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) is the largest single Baptist body in the Baptist World Alliance, as neither American nor Indian Baptists form a single union. Furthermore, I believe we have much to learn from this Baptist community which has shared fully the sorrows and achievements of the Soviet peoples over the turbulent decades since 1917.

Some historical background, albeit brief, is necessary. Christianity in the Russian lands has been overwhelmingly the saga of the Orthodox Church, from the time Saint Prince Vladimir converted Kiev Rus in 986. Russian Orthodoxy was characterised on the one hand by much deep spirituality, holiness, monastic devotion and sublime artistic achievements, and on the other by a general subservience to the Czarist state, an over-spiritualised understanding of the Faith which accordingly failed to produce a 'social Gospel', and in its latter pre-1917 days, much corruption. Its close involvement with Russian feudalism meant that any modern, reforming political force was bound to clash with it and reduce its powers; as in Russia that force was revolutionary Communism with an atheistic ideology, the conflict was bound to be bitter, and to have repercussions for other religious groups. Yet Protestantism, like so many other Western movements such as the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, had come very late to Russia and was much suppressed by Orthodoxy. Baptists, who recorded the first believer's baptism on Russian soil at Tbilisi, in 1867, and grew rapidly by the missions of Johann Oncken from Germany and Lord Radstock from Britain, generally welcomed the 1917 Revolution as bringing them equality with the Orthodox and much more freedom, and spread much in the 1920s and 1930s. Stalinisation, anti-religious persecutions and the Nazi onslaught then took their toll, but the Second World War proved a turning-point for Russian Christianity, as Orthodox and Baptists alike stood firmly behind their country's resistance to Nazi invasion. I recall, on a visit to Leningrad, being taken around its famous, sombre Piskaryovskoye Cemetery, where some 600,000 soldiery and citizenry lie buried, victims of the long Nazi siege of the city. My Baptist guide told me that almost all the families in the main Leningrad Baptist church (which has over 3500 members) had lost members and relatives in the siege. He declared that through their heroic commitment to their country's cause in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45, "Baptists won the right to be heard again" in Communist Russia. I met a Baptist superintendent in northern Russia who had been released from imprisonment for his faith and went straight into the Red Army, where he won high decorations for valour. In this wartime context the Soviet State and Orthodox Church made a Concordat in 1942; in 1944 the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists was formed, bringing together different evangelical and Baptist streams into one union, which also comprises numerous Pentecostals and the Mennonites. The wartime change in Church-State relations led to the re-opening of many churches and an increasing "normalisation" of church life and opportunities for worship, which continued in the post-war years; the Khrushchev period, however, saw a re-assertion of anti-religious activity, with increased restrictions. The All-Union Baptist leadership always took the view that it should work 'within the system' as long as the Christian conscience was not compromised. Then, and subsequently, it has always taken the path of patient negotiation with the state authorities, rather than opposition; latterly, under the leadership of Rev. Alexei Bichkov as General Secretary, this policy has had considerable achievements, especially in the fields of Bible printing and imports, church building and extension programmes,

and an ever-increasing range of outside contacts, culminating in the visit of Dr. Billy Graham in 1982. Behind the scenes, the All-Union Baptists did much to help those of their brethren who left the Union in the early 1960s as 'dissident Baptists' under such leaders as Georgi Vins, in protest against the Khrushchev restrictions.

Personally, my work has always been within the All-Union Baptists, but I am aware that the distinction between the two groups is not always clear, for in some cities some Baptists worship at both kinds of churches, especially where a so-called 'Reform' Baptist church has registered with the local authorities.

My visits to the Soviet Union, particularly the preaching missions undertaken officially at the invitation of the All-Union Baptists, have usually begun and ended with visits to what is, for me the most remarkable Baptist church anywhere in the world — the central Moscow Baptist church in quiet Little Vuzovsky Street, off the busy Pokrovsky Boulevard and only a few minutes drive from Red Square. With over 5100 members and many others attending, it is certainly the biggest Baptist fellowship anywhere in the U.S.S.R. Its services — morning, afternoon and evening on Sundays, and Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings, too — draw Baptist and other evangelical Christians from all over central Moscow city. It is the 'only' Baptist church in the central part of the Soviet capital (permission has now been granted for a second one, and a suitable site is being sought), though eighteen smaller churches can be found in the outer suburbs and some towns of Greater Moscow. There is a Baptist church close to Moscow's Domododova Airport; the latest to be formed is in the Saltikovka suburb. The central Moscow church is used on Saturday morning for Adventist worship.

I have shared in worship many times at Vuzovsky Street, and had the privilege of preaching to over nine hundred people there on several occasions. I never fail to be moved by the fervour and joy of the worshippers, the beauty of the choral work (the church has three choirs, like most big Baptist churches in the U.S.S.R.) and the intensity of the prayer, both led from the pulpit and freely uttered by members of the congregation. (In many services there is time for free prayer by the congregation, but charismatic expression is strongly discouraged). Many teenagers and usually some children are among the Moscow worshippers; it is quite incorrect to say the congregation is only elderly and mainly female, though many women of all ages attend the services, and make their distinctive contribution. The composition and reading of Christian poetry is a living tradition among Baptist women in Moscow, and in some other parts of the Soviet Union. The Moscow church is usually packed to capacity, with people overflowing from downstairs pews and upstairs gallery seats onto the aisles and staircases and even outside into the street. In Moscow, as elsewhere, worship is long by our standards, with three sermons, Biblical meditations, hymns and choral items, prayer sessions, and various other items including greetings from visitors. Many people take notes on the sermons, to study the relevant Bible passages further at home. Most people

at the Moscow church seem to have a Bible. Russian Baptist worship is rich, intense and warm; its feeling is never slick, but always deeply serious, arising from profound depths of personal and congregational experience. The Communion Service is the high peak of Baptist worship in the Soviet Union: twelve deacons and ministers gather around the Communion Table, for the breaking and blessing of the Bread by the senior minister. The deacons then circulate twelve platters of Bread among the congregation, and worshippers take the Bread as they receive it; the practice is repeated with the wine, with twelve chalices being circulated for the distribution of the Wine. The number twelve of each is to remind worshippers of the first twelve Apostles, to be a spiritual link with the first Communion. It is a profoundly moving service. Other important worship events, such as weddings and harvest festivals, are not too dissimilar from our own practice, though after believers' baptisms, giving bunches of flowers to the newly-baptised believers is standard Russian practice!

Suggestions for prayer and the giving of greetings are another integral part of Russian Baptist worship. I once saw people in the gallery at the Moscow church dropping pieces of paper onto those in the pews below! The papers were passed to the front, to a deacon specially assigned to the task of reading their messages of prayer and greeting, and preparing for the presiding minister an ordered list of prayer and for announcing the greetings, usually from visitors from other parts of the USSR. The function of the presiding minister is most definitely not to conduct a 'ministerial monologue' but to lead the worship in a sensitive fashion, moulding the various elements of the worship and the response of the congregation together in a coherent mode; he does not necessarily preach, though he will usually lead one or more of the prayers. The big Baptist churches in the USSR, such as at Moscow and Leningrad, have a team ministry. Rev. Vasil Logvinyenko, trained as an engineer and formerly Baptist minister at Odessa, has been senior minister at Moscow since 1980; Rev. Michael Zhidkov, who was trained at Spurgeon's College and is well-known in international Baptist circles, was senior minister at Moscow for some years before 1980.

Logvinyenko told me, during my summer 1982 visit, of developments in the Moscow church's life.

"There has been a steady growth in our membership in recent years, with more and more young people, and young couples, coming into membership. The spiritual life of our church has deepened, too: we recently started a monthly Friday morning prayer meeting, in preparation for the Sunday Communion and to pray for revival. Many people attend it. But this renewed emphasis on the prayer meeting is certainly not confined to the Moscow church; most of the churches of our Union have introduced it in recent years. On Saturdays I have special discussions with our young preachers to help them develop their skills and Bible knowledge, but done quite informally. Children can be brought to the services by their parents without any problems, but state regulations do not permit special teaching for the children on church premises — the parents have to do that at home, and that has always been a Christian tradition in Russia."

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(The Russian Orthodox say: 'The Faith is transmitted at the mother's knee', and the absence of Sunday schools makes no difference to them, but my understanding is that the Baptists would welcome a change in this regulation, to permit them to re-establish Sunday school work, which they had for some years after 1917.)

Moscow Baptist church is untypical in that it regularly receives a stream of many international Baptist and other visitors (Richard Nixon worshipped there at the height of his presidential *detente* diplomacy!) from all over the world, and is consequently very well-informed on international Baptist life. Reports on conferences of the Baptist World Alliance, European Baptist Federation, World Council of Churches, Christian Peace Conference and similar bodies are regularly given by Russian Baptist leaders and visitors alike. At Moscow and elsewhere, worship can become very emotional. Saying goodbye to the visiting preacher is always especially emotional, with the whole congregation singing *God be with you till we meet again* and waving their handkerchiefs! This practice is widespread in Soviet Baptist churches: I experienced it in Central Asia no less than in Moscow.

While to my knowledge there is no orchestra at the central Moscow Baptist church, orchestral music and accompaniment of hymns is a distinctive feature of some Russian Baptist churches. When I visited the new church on leafy Pulkina street in Volgograd last year, morning worship featured not only two choirs but also a forty-piece orchestra of violins, flutes, percussion and balalaikas, and the music was of a high quality. I also came across this on my visits to churches in the Ukraine in 1970 and 1978: girls wearing traditional embroidered peasant costumes and playing the bandura, a special kind of balalaika, make a lively contribution to Baptist worship in Kiev and other Ukrainian cities.

In sociological terms, Baptists mainly appeal to what we would term the urban working-class. (In the USSR, as so often elsewhere, Protestantism is primarily the religion of the cities.) Judging by appearances is difficult, for in the Soviet Union there are no obviously poor and no obviously rich people; in congregations I have visited, the young people are often much better-dressed than some of the older folk, and I believe this reflects not only changing tastes and rising affluence for those in their twenties and thirties, but also their rejection of some of the "puritanism" among Baptists of the older generation (among whom the wearing of ties in church is often rejected as egotistical and therefore sinful), and their access through education to a wider range of careers. I once preached at the city of Klin, near Moscow, and was accompanied by a group of young people from the central Moscow church, who were visiting the Klin congregation with a ministry of music and testimony. Over lunch I asked them their secular occupations. All but one, a young woman who worked in a nursery school, were pursuing careers in science and technology, and none felt they had experienced any job discrimination because of their Christian faith, though they readily acknowledged that "all top jobs" were reserved for Communist Party members. In Moscow, the congregation has a sprinkling of professional people including doctors (there is always one on duty during worship in case anyone is taken ill); when I visited the main Leningrad Baptist church in 1978, I learned of the recent decease of a member of the

congregation who had been a Professor of Engineering at Leningrad University and had a major responsibility in re-designing the city's water and sewerage systems. The whole faculty had come to the Baptist church for his funeral. 'Conscientious work' in one's secular calling is a strong emphasis among All-Union Baptists, who see such as the offering of work to God and the means of contributing positively to their society. Some Baptists have gained awards as Heroes of Soviet Labour; some Baptist women have won Soviet Motherhood awards; these achievements are seen as forms of 'witness' in a context of much public indifference and ideological hostility towards religion. Soviet press commentators, pondering the reasons for the steady growth of the Baptist churches, have highlighted with favourable comment the Baptists' strong personal morality, devotion to work and duty, their stand against sexual looseness and alcoholism (although some Russian Baptists practise moderation rather than total abstention from alcohol, the drinking of spirits, especially the national beverage, vodka, is strongly disapproved), and their concern and care for the lonely, elderly and those on the margins of society. The spiritual and pastoral outreach of the Baptists to those whose material needs are well met by the Soviet welfare state is undoubtedly a key factor in their contemporary experience of church growth, both in numbers and Christian maturity. Evangelism is by preaching in the churches and person-to-person contact; such methods as door-to-door visitation, evangelism or religious broadcasting are currently not permitted in the Soviet Union (a lot of Gospel broadcasts are beamed in from outside but their Christian message is often distorted by extreme fundamentalism, weird apocalyptic and anti-Communist politics); weddings, funerals and house-parties to celebrate a family moving into a new home, are also times of Christian celebration and proclamation.

The public situation in respect of religion in the U.S.S.R. is complex and full of contradictions. In schools and colleges, the young people are taught that all religions are the mythologies of the pre-scientific, pre-Communist era. They are also taught to respect the churches and Christian art of a millenium of Russian Orthodoxy, as sublime expressions of the artistic and aesthetic endeavours of the Russian people. Huge sums of public money are spent on restoring and preserving religious monuments; some Orthodox Cathedral choirs are maintained at public expense. The Baptists do not receive, and would not wish to, any such material assistance, but with the Orthodox share this atmosphere of contradiction. On the one hand, the Young Communist League will fulminate against the attractions of religion for the young; on the other, academicians will acknowledge the literary and historical value of the Bible for all educated people. Baptist ministers are dismissed as "the purveyors of dying ideas" yet find coming to them college students who say "we have been taught God does not exist, but we'd like to know from you, why you believe otherwise". "Our Government now acknowledges that our Church is not withering away, but is a living organism", Rev. Alexei Bichkov told me. Most Russian Baptists will not try to analyse the sociological factors helping the revival of religious interest in their country, and they certainly do not interpret it in any anti-Communist political way; most will simply say, "We pray constantly for revival, and God has given us revival!"

Undoubtedly a major factor in Baptist church growth is the very real commitment of church members to their fellowship, not only in terms of Sunday worship but also in terms of a profound and costly dedication of their time and talents. I had an almost amazing experience of this when I visited the main Baptist church in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan in Soviet Central Asia, last summer. This huge 1,300-member church is remarkable because its members are actually rebuilding it by their own labour ("the city authorities are providing the materials, we are providing the workers"), with work teams doing all aspects of the re-construction, under the supervision of one of their own number, a 30-year-old lady construction engineer. The church leaders proudly quote the remark of one of the Tashkent city councillors — "If you want to know about building, go and see how the Baptists do it!" — and there is certainly no trace of amateurism about the church premises, which include a spacious conference hall, a suite of study rooms and a small lending library. When I preached there, the main worship hall, designed to hold nearly a thousand people, was still bare and unfinished; the gallery was full of building equipment; but services were nevertheless being held throughout the process of re-building. Tashkent is not the only Soviet city where the Baptists are building or re-constructing their churches by their own labour; the All-Union Baptists are currently engaged on a major construction and church extension programme in many cities; fine new churches have been established at Alma Ata and other Central Asian cities; elsewhere new premises are rented or purchased. All this represents both a considerable sense of vision by the leadership of the All-Union Baptists, and a very real commitment of effort and money by the members in the churches.

Russian Baptists are willing to use their personal opportunities for church extension. In 1978 I preached at the small church in Novgorod, being privileged to be the first British Baptist to visit there. The fellowship was founded in 1967; it had grown from eighteen to ninety-five members over the first decade; the church did not have purpose-built premises, but used the extended front room of a private house, owned by a non-believer whose wife had been converted to Christ. She, aware of the need for premises, and knowing her house to be in a most convenient location, prevailed upon her husband to have the room enlarged and used solely for worship purposes! (He stood at the door, smiling benignly as we went in for the midweek service attended by sixty people, but he did not participate.)

The relationship of the All-Union Baptists to Soviet society is sometimes described by Western writers in stark terms of opposition and confrontation. My conclusion after several visits and many conversations with Baptists there, is to reject such description as misleading and much over-simplified. The sufferings of earlier decades were severe and real, but, thankfully, the context for the All-Union Baptists today is not Church-State conflict but a situation of continuous negotiation with the government Council for Religious Affairs, in which restrictions are steadily being eased and fresh possibilities are being developed. The current church building programme and increasing facilities for import and internal production of Bibles, are two significant examples. Indifference, and 'consumer materialism', rather



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The other day, I received one of the occasional 'phone calls that come from the local newspaper. Like most papers, it is not averse to the lurid and the sensational; but, to be fair, I must admit that it has treated the West Ham Central Mission very well. We have received sympathetic, and usually remarkably accurate coverage, and we are grateful for that.

Anyway, to get back to this 'phone call. "Any news of the Mission? We have a few column inches to fill, and I wondered if anything interesting had happened." I thought for a few moments, but nothing immediately came to mind. So I thanked the reporter — asked him to keep in touch, and rang off.

After all, he wouldn't consider it particularly important that an elderly lady in 'Rest-a-While' said "I reckon this is the nearest thing to heaven I've ever seen". — No headline there! The Editor wouldn't exactly hold the front page to tell of a very recently bereaved lady, the mother-in-law of one of our local Anglican Clergy, who has felt so loved and valued during her two-week stay with us — "I'd recommend it to anyone" — she told me.

There would be little likelihood of a dramatic increase in circulation because the paper contained the story of folk at Greenwoods or The Parsonage — folk who had been despised and humiliated and rejected by so many, that the love and strength of Jesus seemed an impossible dream until the dream came true through the Mission's ministry.

"Nothing special to report" I said. And the newspaper reporter agreed with me. **BUT YOU KNOW BETTER, DON'T YOU?**

Keep on praying — keep on giving, and encouraging others to do the same.

Yours in His Service,

Trevor W. Davis
Superintendent Minister

than the challenge of philosophical atheism, are the main barriers to Baptist advance. Other obstacles have nothing to do with Communism. In Soviet Central Asia, the vast majority of religious people are Islamic, whether by tradition and family culture, or by actual religious practice as well. The vitality of Islam in regions such as Uzbekistan cannot be doubted by the perceptive visitor. Christians are doubly a minority, both in relation to ideological Marxism-Leninism and to Islamic society. Conversions to evangelical Christianity from Islam are not frequent, but are happening. A considerable revival is under way among Baptists in Soviet Central Asia: while some of the converts are among Russian immigrants from the European regions, others are from indigenous Islamic nationalities. The social pressures in Islamic society against conversion to Christian faith are as strong in the Soviet Union as anywhere else in the Islamic world. The Christian convert can readily experience a total rejection from his family circle, and the church has to be much more than a Sunday worshipping fellowship: "it has to provide a whole new family, a whole new nexus of personal relations, for the new Christian." At Tashkent, I was privileged to meet a young Kazakh girl recently converted to Christ. She had counted the cost and accepted it — and the church was being "a new family" to her.

In other ways we might find surprising, Soviet society inadvertently assists the advance of the Gospel. I recall a conversation I had before morning service with the deacons at the Volgograd church. I was asked to explain why the Church in Britain was numerically in decline, "when you have so many colleges and such fine preachers"(!) I tried to explain about the challenge of secularism in Western society. Then one of the deacons remarked: "The trouble in your country is that you have too much freedom of literature and films. In our society, such things as pornography, nihilism and violence in literature and media are not allowed, for such things are anti-human. They are also anti-Christian." He had no doubt that the suppression of evil cultural influences in this way, through the state censorship system, benefited not only society but also the Church. The Western liberal-democratic tradition to which our British Baptist forbears contributed so much, would reject this approach. However, we must recognise that our Russian Baptist brethren come from a very different historical and cultural tradition, both as Russians and as Christians. While they certainly want the freedom to produce more Christian literature, they generally endorse the secular puritanism and moralism in Soviet culture and believe the exclusion of 'anti-human' and nihilistic tendencies in the arts and media, is a very positive feature of their society. Violence, sexual promiscuity, alcoholism and other forms of anti-social behaviour are customarily portrayed in a negative light in the Soviet media, and Soviet popular entertainment is generally of the 'wholesome' kind. The whole advertising paraphernalia of Western acquisitive society is totally absent from Soviet society, of course. Russian Baptists can be very patriotic, and their approval of such social norms is very much part of that patriotism.

It is my considered view that British Baptists need to develop a relationship with our brothers and sisters of the All-Union Evangelical Christians-Baptists, on a much more regular and systematic basis, than has hitherto been the case. I have been assured more than once by their leaders

that such a relationship would be much welcomed. Dr Ernest Payne and Dr David Russell, as General Secretaries of the Baptist Union, and in various capacities within the Baptist World Alliance and the European Baptist Federation, made several visits among Soviet Baptists; other prominent British Baptists such as Sir Cyril Black and Dr Morris West have also been guests of the All-Union Baptists; British Baptists' concern for those outside the All-Union fellowship in difficulties with the authorities, is much respected; Russian Baptist ministers have trained at Spurgeon's and Bristol colleges, and some All-Union leaders have attended our assemblies; but to my knowledge our Baptist Union has never formally established a policy of regular, mutual, ongoing official contacts. It may well be that Rev. Bernard Green's visit earlier this year may lead in the long term to a fresh appraisal of the situation; I do hope so. For in our continent of Europe so divided by the man-made frontiers of the bloc and ideology, Christians have a very special responsibility to be bridge-builders and 'ministers of reconciliation', and we as Baptists, in Britain and the Soviet Union, have a particular responsibility towards healing the misunderstandings and separations between our respective societies.

Brian G. Cooper

(Brian G. Cooper, MA, BLitt, is founder and director of Christian Action for East-West Reconciliation and European Representative of the London Baptist Association.)

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