

## **BIBLES EAST, LETTERS WEST; RELIGIOUS GLASNOST AND THE AVAILABILITY OF SCRIPTURES IN THE SOVIET UNION**

by Mark Elliott

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"It is the right of every family in our country to own a Bible, and we consider the Bible to be the main book of humanity. No one can consider himself an educated man without having read and studied the Bible, even if he is an atheist." Thus the president of a leading Soviet cultural institution, Mir Kulturi, recently put it to a representative of the United Bible Societies.

Christians, of course, would claim this and much more for the Bible. Even so, it startles longtime Kremlin observers to hear Soviet endorsements for Scripture reading! Hearing such, some in the West are euphoric, others, cynical and disbelieving. On balance, it now is clear, four years into Gorbachev's tenure, that the U.S.S.R. today presents unprecedented opportunities for the distribution of Christian literature. While undoubtedly true, a recent Soviet emigre now working for Radio Liberty provides a more sobering perspective by noting that religious glasnost to date has been "doubly obvious: obviously positive and obviously insufficient."

To provide a basis of comparison it should be noted that Bibles have never been readily available either in the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. Only translated into the vernacular in the nineteenth century, far fewer than a million Russian Bibles were printed prior to 1917--for the most populous nation in Europe.

Mennonite scholar, Walter Sawatsky, estimates that from 1917 to 1986, 4.1 million Bibles, New Testaments, and Gospels were made available to the Soviet population, mostly since World War II and mostly by importation from the West without government permission. In the years 1917-86 only some 450,000 of these Scriptures reached Soviet citizens by legal means.

In contrast, Soviet authorities permitted Bible printings and imports in 1987-1988 which appear to total between 1.2 and 1.3 million. Even recognizing that all importation and production permitted in 1987-1988 were not realized by the end of 1988, Moscow still sanctioned substantially more Scripture imports and printing in these two years than in all previous years of Soviet rule combined (1917-1986).

A March 1989 calculation of Bible delivery and printing plans and permits for the present year suggested a possible total approaching six million copies. In the meantime the Evangelical Christians-Baptists secured a permit to import ten million New Testaments and two million Bibles and children's Bibles supplied by Bibeln Till Alla (BTA-Bibles for All), a Swedish affiliate of ECL/Door of Hope. Adding other prospects for legal Scripture deliveries and printings through 1995 leads to stunning figures: a projected seven-year total of 16,713,000 Bibles and New Testaments. As if such estimates were not eye-catching enough, the American Bible Society announced this past June that the Russian Orthodox Church had seriously tendered a request for 20 million Bibles to the United Bible Societies, the largest challenge ever put to the forty-three-year-old organization.

Oddly enough, at the same time, Scripture confiscations within the Soviet Union and at airport and border customs continue to occur. In March 1988 authorities relieved Christians of 308 New Testaments in an undisclosed European Russian city; in September, 100 Bibles in Lvov; in November, 80,000 copies of the Gospel of John (produced by the unofficial Christian press) near Kharkov; in December, 20 reference Bibles, 10 New Testaments, 6 children's Bibles, and other Christian books at Brest; and in July 1989, 33 Bibles, 11 New Testaments, and quantities of Christian books, tracts, and tapes at the Leningrad airport. Other contrasting reports of smooth sailing and my own experiences of Soviet travel this past spring and summer, with bags unopened in March and substantial confiscations in July, suggest that Soviet customs continue to be arbitrary and unpredictable.

Much clearer is the serious problem that has surfaced with Russian Orthodox distribution of Bibles. First of all, only a small fraction of the Scriptures printed in the Soviet Union or donated from the West in 1988 appears to have been distributed. Of the 100,000 Bibles reportedly printed in the U.S.S.R. in 1988 for the Russian Orthodox Church, by March 1989, only 35,000 had been distributed, according to Metropolitan Pitirim, only 13,000, according to an unofficial source. The French Christian community of Taize has announced the completion of its delivery of one million New Testaments to the Russian Orthodox Church, yet available reports suggest few copies are actually in circulation.

Another serious--and largely unanticipated--impediment to equitable distribution has been the decision of the Russian Patriarch to sell donated Scriptures at prices beyond the reach of many believers. Whereas Protestants are making New Testaments available for 0 to 5 rubles and Bibles for 0 to 30 rubles, New Testaments, when available in Orthodox churches, sell for 20 to 40 rubles, while the three-volume Lopukhin reference Bibles cost anywhere from 150 to 450 rubles per set. Considering an average monthly wage of approximately 180 rubles, it readily becomes apparent why not only Western contributors but ordinary Soviet believers find such prices distressing. Even outright corruption may be a factor with the Patriarchate selling New Testaments to unworthy, state-protected members of local parish committees who then triple or quadruple the price, turning large personal profits. In response, indignant believers have formed an organization called the Group to Promote Free Distribution of Religious Literature.

For the moment parcel post is a novel option for Soviet Bible distribution. A phenomenon of any consequence only since 1988, this unexpected possibility, announced in Izvestiia on March 25, 1988, caught most Western parachurch organizations off guard. At a November 1988 meeting of Christian broadcasters to the Soviet Union held at Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, the topic commanding the most attention was not broadcasting but the avalanche of letters these radio programmers were receiving from the Soviet Union requesting Bibles.

The accompanying chart suggests the dramatic dimensions of the increased letter response to Christian broadcasters to the Soviet Union. (See Appendix.) Evangeliums Rundfunk received 67 letters in 1985 and thousands in 1988. Slavic Gospel Association received 450 in 1987 and 15,000 in 1988. Far East Broadcasting Company received a dozen letters in April 1988 and 1,210 in August 1989, and International Russian Radio received 144 letters in 1985 and 3,150 in 1988.

A random, admittedly unscientific sample of 22 letters received by Slavic Gospel Association on May 17, 1989, revealed the following: seven writers were non-Christians, seven were Evangelicals, three were Orthodox, all but two were in their 20's and 30's, and, to a person, they requested Christian literature and Bibles. A study of 1,097 letters received by Earl Poysti's Russian Christian Radio from April 7 to May 9, 1989, revealed a much higher level of Christian writers (87%). Over half of all letters came from Ukraine (54%), giving credence to this republic's reputation as the Bible Belt of the Soviet Union. In general, the recent rich harvest of letters from the U.S.S.R. to Western broadcasters may reveal a great deal of significant data if properly preserved for future researchers.

Scrambling to meet the requests for Bibles following Izvestiia's March 1988 announcement, Open Doors mailed 80,000 to 90,000 Russian New Testaments before the end of 1988; SGA, some 25,000 book parcels including a Bible and several Christian books. Open Doors estimates that to date some 250,000 Bibles and New Testaments have been mailed to the Soviet Union. Besides Open Doors and SGA a major participant has been Licht im Osten which has reported receipt of as high as 250 letters of thanks for Bibles per day.

More sobering to note, several sources recently have reported increasing incidences of Soviet confiscation of mailed Bibles. Commenting on this new development Walter Sawatsky advises that "Persons mailing books to specific addresses should make certain that the packages reach their destination and not make further shipments before receiving confirmation of receipt." SGA, on the other hand, feels at present that the high cost of registered mail justifies the risk of some confiscation via parcel post.

In summary, the subject of increased Bible deliveries to the Soviet Union presents many novel aspects. As already noted, the present phenomenon includes unprecedented numbers, the sorry specter of Bible profiteering, and the happier phenomenon of Scriptures by mail. Additional observations, as enumerated below, deserve to be noted and merit closer scrutiny.

1. Several Western Protestant gifts to the Russian Orthodox have no parallel in their scope. (Stockholm's Institute for Bible Translation providing 100,000 Lopukhin Bibles to the Russian Orthodox; Open Doors providing one million New Testaments to the Russian Orthodox.)

2. The new opportunities have produced surprising levels of public cooperation between Bible societies and certain parachurch ministries, groups which more often in the past heatedly questioned each other's East European means and ends. 3. A tremendous pentup demand exists for children's Bibles, for other materials appropriate for the burgeoning unofficial Sunday school movement, and for Bibles in non-Russian languages.

4. The present possibility for Bible distribution in the U.S.S.R. is a combination of glasnost (relative openness), an unusually high level of interest in reading the Scriptures among Orthodox, Catholics, and nonbelievers, as well as Evangelicals and the West's economic capacity and will to meet the demand. Ironically, the Western will presently appears to be the weakest link in this historic convergence of opportunities.

5. While Bible imports are likely to continue in quantity, it would seem the only way to meet the extraordinary demand would be through in-country publishing. In March 1989 the present writer published two rhetorical questions which now appear to be on the verge of answers. The questions were: 1)"Might the U.S.S.R. permit the establishment of Christian publishing ventures on Soviet soil?" and 2)"Might the Russian Bible Society re-emerge to reclaim its position as the second oldest in the world after the British and Foreign Bible Society?" In June 1989 the United Bible Societies joined the Russian Orthodox Church in signing a "Memorandum of Understanding" noting two top priorities: "the urgent need for a printing press in the U.S.S.R. for production of Bibles and church literature" and "the establishment of a Bible instrument [organization] in the U.S.S.R."

For those with a mind to assist the Christian community in the Soviet Union, today indeed would seem to be a time neither for euphoria nor cynicism, but for calm gratitude for new opportunities coupled with renewed resolve.