

Baptist Churches in Belarus

By Leonid Mikhovich

Evangelical Christianity reached Belarus from several geographical sources. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, poor peasants moved from Belarus to southern Ukraine in search of employment. After being introduced to the Gospel, some of them converted, returned home and began preaching to their neighbors and relatives. This established the first Christian communities in southeastern Belarus. The Baptist church in the village of Ut', Gomel uyezd Mogilev province is believed to have started in the early 1870s, which suggests that it was the first evangelical church on the territory of present-day Belarus.

In Minsk (capital), church planting began by 1902. Gerasim Andryukhov and his wife arrived there from Kharkov province (Ukraine) that year. In Minsk he obtained a Permit to “sell books and pictures.” This work yielded many fruits.

The planting of churches increased considerably during and after World War I. Returning refugees and military captives, as well as returning émigrés from America, contributed to this ministry.

During the war, some citizens in western regions of Belarus found themselves in Siberia, together with other refugees fleeing from war zones. They were won for Christ in local Baptist congregations and then planted churches in Belarus.

Some Belarusian soldiers during WWI were taken as prisoners to Germany and Austria where they met evangelicals, became believers, and later began to spread their faith at home. Another tie may be traced to America where some Belarusians went in search of employment. They were converted in America and shared Jesus Christ with their fellow countrymen after returning home.

Tatsiana Lisovskaya, who explored the evangelical movement in Western Belarus from 1920-1930, wrote:

Although there were few Protestants (0.9%) among the émigrés who came back to Western Belarus in 1921-1923, their return was one of the most important factors contributing to the development of Protestantism in 1920-30 because the return of Protestants had the goal of spreading their teaching... Based on the list of elders in the churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists compiled by the Polesie Voivodship Office, 16 pastors out of 42 were re-émigrés from the United States and Russia who returned from emigration in 1921-1923.¹

The evangelical movement also continued in territories of modern Poland. For example, Luka Dzekuts-Maley was converted in Bialystok (Poland) after meeting evangelicals; he was baptized in 1912 by German Baptists and moved to Brest in 1921. He actively ministered in Brest and its neighborhood.

After the Bolsheviks came to power, the first Constitution of July 1918 stated that “the right to religious and anti-religious propaganda is recognized for all citizens.” Early Bolshevik policy was supportive of evangelicals’ struggle for religious freedom, but communist policy toward them soon changed. “Sectarians” were accused of counter-revolutionary activity, of opposing the Cultural Revolution, and of ties with western imperialists. In 1925 an all-union anti-religious society “Sojuz bezbozhnikov” (Union of Atheists) was established, which in 1929 was renamed “the Union of Militant Atheists.” At that Congress, the children’s godless movement became “the Young Militant Atheists Organization.” Houses of prayer were closed and remodeled into schools, clubs, kindergartens, cinemas, anti-religion museums, collective farm canteens, barns, archives, and other purposes. Christians of all denominations experienced massive repressions, especially from 1929 to 1937; during this time, many ministers, including Orthodox priests and church members, were arrested, killed or banished as “enemies of the nation.” In 1935 Baptist Union was closed, and the Union of Evangelical Christians actually ceased to exist.

Church historian Dmitry Pospelovsky believes that Belarus had a special place in Soviet political history, as it became the first completely atheistic Soviet republic. The attempts to fight religion were obvious. There were no functioning evangelical churches in the Soviet (Eastern) part of Belarus by the end

¹ Lisovskaia, “Novye protestantskie denominatsii na zapadnobeloruskikh zemliakh v kontse XIX – 20 gg. XX veka: Faktory i putsi poyavleniya,” p. 45.

of 1937, and not a single church had been opened throughout the entire Minsk region by the time the Nazi came in 1941.²

During the war, persecution in the Soviet Union grew weaker because Stalin realized that the USSR needed support from every possible group, including religious groups. In 1944 evangelical Christians and Baptists were able to establish one Union and they began publishing their magazine, *Bratsky Vestnik*, in 1945. But anti-religious policy became tougher again in 1948.

In 1957 “scientific” atheism replaced “militant” atheism. Nikita Khrushchev became famous for de-Stalinization and ending the notorious political purges, but soon he also renewed severe persecution of churches. For example, there had been more than one thousand Baptists in Brest by 1960, but in 1961 the government took away their houses of prayer which they had built on their own. Christians were exiled and imprisoned.

Many authors published books that accused Christians of anti-social sectarian activities and manifestations of fanaticism. Motion pictures represented evangelical believers either as old women whose lives seemed bleak and devoid of all joy, or as “sectarians” who were fanatical zealots. Both at work and in school, evangelicals experienced official and personal insults, oppression, and harassment. Protestant Christians suffered from show trials, and many were put into prisons.

The story of the Vilchynski family is famous in Brest. In 1968 the pastor of an unregistered Baptist community, Vladimir Vilchynski, was sentenced to five years in prison. In 1979 his daughter Galina, aged twenty one, was sentenced to three years in prison because she had been teaching Bible lessons. In 1986, Zinaida Yakovlevna, Vladimir’s wife, was arrested for her Council activity for relatives of prisoners and she was sentenced to two years in prison.³ Persecution took various forms but it did not cease until the celebration of the millenary of the baptism of Rus’. The last prisoner of conscience was a pastor from Odessa, Vitaly Boiko, who was set free only in 1989.

When the Soviet system broke down, Christians got unbelievable opportunities. They started doing evangelistic meetings and worship in clubs, houses of culture, stadiums and movie theaters. Legal opportunities occurred for publishing the Bible, song collections, Christian newspapers and magazines and other Christian books. Dozens of churches and missions were registered. In 1989 Bible courses started and the Bible Institute, Bible School, and Seminary were established in 1991, 1993, and 1997 respectively. However, when the current President Alexander Lukashenko consolidated his power, some limitation occurred again. From the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has been considerably harder to register churches and it has been practically impossible to obtain property for the construction of a church building. It became hard for Christians from abroad to obtain an invitation for practicing religious activity, so most of the missionaries left the country. In the opinion of some experts in our country and in some others, the law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” (from October 31, 2002, №137-3) impairs Christian freedom of conscience and belief. Nevertheless in comparison to the Soviet era, evangelical Christians still possess ample opportunities for evangelism and worship.

Worship

Constant, hostile pressure from outside forces and interference into Christian communities and their ministries resulted in a particular type of worship which was based on opposition and separation from the world. Emphasis on the idea of struggle, on a willingness to suffer for the faith, and on eschatology

² Dmitry Pospelovsky, “Stalin i tserkov’: “konkordat” 1943 i zhizn’ cerkvi” [Stalin and the Church: The “Concordat” of 1943, and the Life of the Church], *Continent* (2000), p. 103

³ Vladimir Vilchinsky, *Nedarom Prolitye Sliozy* [The Tears Shed Not in Vain] (Brest, 2013), p. 3.

Other prisoners’ names could be mentioned in 1960s-1970s. In Dobrush, Gomel region on April 24, 1968, there was a legal trial against the chief “schismatics,” who were active in the village of Ut’. They were Tretinnikov Kuz’ma Nikitovich and Abushenko Nina Korneevna. They were prosecuted and condemned. Tretinnikov was sentenced to 3 years and Abushenko to 2 years of work camps. NARB, Stock 136. – File 1, Case 13, pp. 123-132. On August 15, 1968, there was a court trial against the leaders of Gomel church, Kolesnichenko Mikhail Andreevich, Kozin Nil Petrovich and Frolov Andrey Fedorovich. They were condemned according to art. 139 of the Criminal Code of BSSR and sentenced to three years in prison. *Ibid.*, p. 125. The list is not exhaustive.

illustrates the nature of the conflict of Protestantism these churches have towards the world. Sermons, songs and poems often stress that one must fight against the world, against the flesh, and for salvation. Young people are especially drawn to idealism in songs which summons them to “holy war.” These texts often include such “military” terminology as feat, trial, struggle, give life, army, banners, victory, and battle.

To a certain degree one could even speak of a “psychology of martyrdom”⁴ or a “cult of the Way of the Cross,”⁵ which is evident even during the present time when reading magazines or attending worship services of IUC EBC (unregistered) churches. The appeal to suffering feeds the spirit of worship and the faith of brothers and sisters who continue to speak about persecution taking place in various churches of brotherhood, those who send information about persecution, fines, or bans from the authorities, and who read these aloud at public meetings.

Attention to struggle, suffering, and social protest against the ungodly system naturally results in a strong eschatological component of the worship service. There is significant interest in the book of Revelation, prophecies, millennium, the “end of the world,” and the Second Coming, when suffering will end and Christ will have victory.

Recent decline in persecution in the political context has led to less worship emphasis on the idea of struggle against the world, and a decrease in tension of chiliastic expectations or motifs of suffering.

Education

As a result of bans against theological education and publication of theological literature, the idea of intuitive knowledge appeared superior to analytical knowledge, in which a person could receive understanding without the help of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, or commentaries. Since the Holy Spirit directly reveals the knowledge of truth, then historical, cultural, and contextual analysis do not seem to play an important role. But spiritual preparation, especially prayer and meditation, does play an important role.

Situations change step by step. Many students come to the Seminary to study as pastors, missionaries, music directors, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and biblical counselors. Now around 200 students study at the Seminary; thirty-five of them study in our branch for Russian-speaking churches in Tallinn, Estonia. (In 2002 we joined the Seminary, Institute and College).

Evangelism

Evangelicals spread the Good News during times of both persecution and relative freedom, in public and in secret, in large assemblies and in private. Belarusian Baptists considered spreading the Good News their sacred duty. One of the reasons was eschatological expectations. Brevity of time caused people to place all their life on the altar of Christian witness. Their passion was stirred by the awareness of the inevitable death of unbelievers and their condemnation to eternal bodily torment in hell.

Meanwhile, persistence and passion of call diminished by 2010, and the evangelistic activity of Baptist churches has lost some of its dynamics. Energy accumulated over sixty years from the reinforcement of persecution in 1928 to the celebration of the Millennium of Christianity in Russia in 1988, and expanded with great force in the early 1990s; however, twenty years later its power has declined. After several years of intense activity, weariness has set in against large-scale changes.

Reasons for weariness: (1) The absence of persecution, along with the improvement of the quality of life, has diminished eschatological expectations. (2) The church, especially ministers, has faced the need to resolve many new problems which distract from evangelistic ministry, such as organizational and legal issues related to registration of organizations, and especially the construction of houses of prayer. (3) The church has lost confidence caused by the decreased effectiveness of evangelism in the twenty-first century and the loss of “sheaves” who had been gained before. (4) The human resources accumulated before *perestroika* have been largely exhausted, and the training of new leaders has become a daunting task which can’t be solved solely within the walls of theological schools. (5) Many members who were active in the past as evangelists and missionaries, along with developing new ministries, have transferred to

⁴ T. Nikol’skaya, “Uroki istorii dlya EHB” [History lessons for the ECB], *Mirt*, no. 2 (57) (2007):10.
⁵ Mitrokhin, *Baptizm: istoriya i sovremennost’*, p. 446.

work in educational institutions or Christian missions, which participate in evangelization indirectly, but lack time for personal contact with unbelievers.