

Soviet Seventh-Day Adventists

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The Seventh-Day Adventists are a particularly vocal sect outside mainstream Christianity in the Soviet Union. For some years Adventist *samizdat* has been known to exist because of references to it in official Soviet publications. Now at last some of these documents have become available to Western students. As with other denominations, notably the Baptists, the clandestine writings emanate from an unregistered and therefore, in practice, virtually outlawed wing of the sect, known as the "Seventh-Day Adventists of the True Remnant". Their leader, V. A. Shelkov, a prolific writer, has spent 19 years in prisons and labour camps. As well as chronicling hardship and persecution, the documents expound the beliefs of the True Remnant, and so make it possible to reconstruct some of the debate surrounding their separation from the officially recognized wing of the Adventist Church.

Adventism was first introduced to Russia in the 1880s by American missionaries. Despite the repression of non-Orthodox religions during the tsarist period, it flourished until 1905 when it received official recognition. At that time the sect demonstrated its loyalty along with other minority religions. In 1903 the Adventist leaders and other sectarians signed a directive forbidding their members to read revolutionary literature. In 1905 they declared their loyalty to the Emperor, Nicholas II, stating that they believed the monarchy to be ordained by God.¹

After the October Revolution the Adventists, like other religious groups, found it difficult to adjust to the new regime. Some Adventists rejected any relationship with the State whereas the fifth All-Union Congress of the Seventh-Day Adventists, held in 1924, expressed its full support for the new government:

We are convinced that God, in His providence, has disposed the heart of our unforgettable V. I. Lenin and his closest associates and given them wisdom in the capable organization of the only progressive and up-to-date apparatus of government in the world. We delegates of the Fifth All-Union Congress of Seventh Day Adventists

express to the government of the USSR . . . our gratitude and sincere support for all the freedoms it has won.²

This disagreement among the Adventists led to schism. Those who could not accept the Congress's declaration formed a separate organization which called itself the True Remnant and was led by G. Ostvald.

Members of the True Remnant to this day remain implacably opposed to what they have named *gosateizm* – state atheism – and consider themselves to be the only faithful representatives of Adventism in the Soviet Union. Because of their intransigent attitude to the State they refused to accept registration for their congregations as stipulated by the 1929 Law on Religious Associations. They therefore exist illegally and suffer the repressions which all such groups incur.

Like all other denominations the Adventists – both the officially recognized groups and the True Remnant – had to endure the terrible persecution of the 1930s. In addition, the Adventists were accused of collaborating with the enemy during the war (many members of the sect are of German origin). The post-war period of reconstruction, however, was a time of comparative freedom for the Adventists, and a figure of 26,000 is quoted for membership of registered groups alone in this period. The 1960s brought to Adventists as to all religious groups the persecution of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign. In 1960 the central body of the official wing of the Adventist Church lost the right to exist. Atheist sources claimed that its members were found guilty of embezzling the funds.³ Nevertheless, individual congregations have kept their registration. Both these and the virtually outlawed True Remnant retain an important place amongst religious minorities in the Soviet Union.

It appears from the Adventist *samizdat* and other writing so far received in the West that the attitudes of the two wings of the Adventist sect are diametrically opposed. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the schism occurred so soon after the Revolution. The Adventist A. Demidov, once editor of the Adventist journal *The Voice of Faith* (published in Moscow 1925–29), is quoted extensively in a book entitled *Sects, their Faith and Practice*,⁴ by F. Fedorenko, which was published in Moscow in 1965. Demidov's views help to explain what was behind the All-Union Congress's resolution of 1924. According to Fedorenko, Demidov believed that Adventists must be integrated into Soviet society so as to bring salvation to others. He writes:

We [Adventists] must search and find something in common with the atheists in communist Russia: as the divinely established Church in the midst of the raging ocean of socialistic all-pervading atheism, we must not permit ourselves to be swallowed up in it and we must not refuse to search until we find something that we have in common with unbelievers. Our mission is to carry the gospel invitation "to every

nation, kindred, tongue, and people". "Every" includes also the atheistic, unbelieving communist sector of the world. In order to accomplish this we must not stress those things which *divide* us from these builders of the new social order, but rather those things which *unite* us with them.⁵

Demidov agrees with the communist criticism of the Church as the ally, historically, of capitalism and imperialism: "The Church, which has become organically one with despotism and capitalism, . . . has trampled upon the rights of entire nations and of the labouring man".⁶ Furthermore, Demidov asserts, communism has succeeded in establishing social justice where Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism failed, and this gives the Adventists grounds for allying themselves with the communists in their efforts to reorganize society. Although Soviet communism aims at destroying religion, Demidov still hopes that

Communism could still tolerate us as the interpreters of humanitarian, Scriptural-Evangelical ideals; but if these ideas become in any way associated with the accepted Western philosophy which ignores the present colossal social transformation in life and consciousness by well-nigh a third of mankind – we become not only unacceptable, but simply intolerable.⁷

So Demidov sees no fundamental conflict between the social ideals of Christianity and communism. Adventists, he believes, should not try to change the political order but should try to live in peace with those whose convictions differ from their own, and should support those ideals which they share with communists.

Vladimir Andreevich Shelkov, the leader of the Adventists of the True Remnant, holds no such conciliatory view of the Soviet State. Doubtless his years of imprisonment and persecution taught him that for one with beliefs like his a peaceful existence in the USSR is not possible. For him, the alternatives are confrontation or capitulation. The Soviet government, in his view, has abused its God-given powers by invading areas over which it has no rightful authority. The freedom to choose and profess the creed of his choice is a citizen's fundamental right and without it he loses his freedom and dignity. The State must never deprive people of this right. In his essay, "The Only Ideal",⁸ Shelkov describes the Soviet State's policy towards religion as contrary to the will of God. A Christian must oppose this policy, whatever the cost, and on no account must he accept the *status quo*. Shelkov has lived according to these convictions for the past 50 years.

Shelkov was born in 1895 and became active in the Adventist sect from 1923. He was first arrested in Tyumen in 1931, and sentenced to four months' imprisonment followed by three years' exile. He took his family north with him to Berezovo on the Ob. From 1934 to 1945 he was

on the run from the authorities. He lived in 12 different places and managed to continue writing and publishing his work. When arrested for the second time he was sentenced to death. After almost two months in a condemned cell his sentence was commuted to ten years' imprisonment, which was shortened because of illness so that he was released in 1954.⁹ At this time Shelkov was made leader of the True Remnant Adventists. From 1957 to 1967 he spent a further ten years in strict regime labour camps. He is the author of an impressive list of works, including a series of eight books under the general title, *The Just War for Freedom of Conscience against the Dictatorship of State Atheism*. This includes extensive material on the constitutional and legal background of the human rights issue. The remainder of the catalogue of no less than 22 titles given by his *samizdat* biographer contains sermons, doctrinal statements, historical studies of Adventism and Biblical tracts, all produced by the Adventist *samizdat* "publishing house", *True Witness*.¹⁰

Shelkov believes that for Adventists the people of God and the "Kingdom of Heaven" have nothing in common with the kingdoms of this world. To have any association with the Soviet State is a sin and Shelkov condemns the legally recognized part of the Adventist sect for submitting to registration. "The true Seventh-Day Adventists", he states, "[are] free from a spiritually defiling union with the kingdoms of this world, free from worship of the image of the Beast, free from sinful registration and death-bringing statistical surveys, free from each and every error and lie of Babylon the great". A state religion is a contradiction in terms: however worthy it is and however high its ideals, it remains a part of the earthly, destructible regime. The role of the State is to govern, not to meddle in the beliefs of its citizens. In "The Only Ideal" he states:

The ideal government should be impartial. The State should not meddle in the sphere of religion. "Render to God the things which are God's" (Mt. 22:21). The decision whether to believe belongs to the conscience of the individual, and the State ought not to interfere.

The materialism of atheism is in its way a faith, a religion, and therefore should not be an official faith nor be inculcated through state education. It should be a private matter like any religious ideology.

The principle of the separation of Church (and religion) from State and school applies equally to the separation of state atheism from State and school.

Shelkov considers registration to be state interference and therefore condemns it:

The state registration of religious organizations promotes the union of religion with the State, and with it all kinds of state interference in religious affairs, contrary to Lenin's decree of 1918. The leaders of the registered, official religious organizations have today become servants

of the police and apparently fulfil their obligations to the State by betraying their innocent brothers in the faith who differ from them only in that they are free and true to the divine ideal, not bound to officialdom. No religion or church organization should ever be required to become recognized by the government . . .

Such an uncompromising attitude to registration has inevitably led to clashes between the True Remnant and the authorities. These take many forms: house searches, confiscation of property, removal of children, arrest. An Adventist *samizdat* protest document,¹¹ dated 4 September, 1975, reports searches at the homes of three Adventists in Samarkand on 28 August. KGB officers entered the homes of V. K. Novikov, E. Nedavnyaya and V. A. Shelkov, a namesake of the sect's leader. Literature and money were confiscated on the pretext that the officers were looking for forged notes. Although the money and Bibles were eventually returned, other literature was held and no inventory given to the victims. Nikifor Nikolaevich Chernov, arrested on 14 May, 1975 in Kramatorsk, is the subject of a further protest.¹² Chernov is 70 years old and has already served a ten-year sentence. He was involved in the collection and distribution of *samizdat* literature, 114 items of which, painstakingly collected over the years, were confiscated on his arrest. His wife is said to be in poor health.

Two other Adventist *samizdat* documents concern state interference in the religious upbringing of children. The first case is described as follows. In August 1974 two sisters, Maria Floreskul and Orisa Kondryuk, were sentenced to three and two years of prison respectively for bringing up their nephew, nine-year-old Serezha, in the Adventist faith.¹³ The boy's mother, Marta Bondar, had left her non-believing husband and gone to live with her mother and two sisters six years before. In 1973 Marta died, and the family continued to care for Serezha and to teach him their religion. The boy's father, all this time, took no interest in his son and contributed nothing to his keep, until the authorities insisted that he sue for the custody of his son in order to prevent his being influenced by the religious views of his grandmother and aunts. Bondar actually admitted at the trial that he and his new wife did not want to take Serezha into their home, but the case was won and the two women sent to prison. The document points out that the two women were treated in this way because of their religious faith. Neither had committed any offence against the State.

The second case is that of Maria Vlasyuk of Staro-Sinyavsk, whose daughter Svetlana was placed in the care of the authorities.¹⁴ Vlasyuk is accused of keeping Svetlana at home from school on Saturdays (observed by Adventists as the Sabbath), of taking her to Adventist meetings, and of discouraging her from taking part in school social activities. The

religious influence of her home, it was alleged, had had an injurious effect on the child's health and on her progress at school. The mother answered each of these accusations in some detail, declaring some of them to be without foundation, and others, though true, to be insufficient grounds in Soviet law for the removal of her parental rights. Vlasyuk even adds a lengthy appendix showing the girl's school marks, which appear to be exemplary.

The experience of the True Remnant Adventists is similar to that of other unregistered religious groups, as reported in Baptist and Pentecostal *samizdat*. The removal of children from religious parents may indicate the authorities' concern at the continued presence of young people in the sect (again a common factor with churches of all denominations). Under Shelkov's leadership – and his influence is clearly seen in the phrasing of these *samizdat* protest documents – the True Remnant have developed a clear political aim, that of a secular State which exercises no ideological influence. Seventh-Day Adventists look forward to the reign of Christ, and until then, the True Remnant claim, Church and State must be kept quite separate.

In the face of an official philosophy which is implacably hostile to religion, it seems unlikely that Demidov's call for co-operation in order to win influence and respect for the Gospel will have any notable success. Shelkov, in contrast, accepts the role of outcast in order to maintain the clarity of the prophetic voice, and in doing so he has evidently built a vigorous and articulate religious movement.

¹ F. Fedorenko, *Sekty, ikh vera i dela*, "Politizdat", Moscow, 1965, p. 289.

² A. V. Belov, *Adventisty*, Moscow, 1964, p. 45.

³ V. Lentin, "Kto takie Adventisty?", *Politicheskoe Samoobrazovanie*, No. 1, 1963, pp. 72–74.

⁴ F. Fedorenko, *Sekty, ikh vera i dela*, p. 291. Fedorenko is quoting from an article by Demidov entitled "The voice of the Protestant West". This was written around 1960 and is a review of *Christianity and Communism* by Hewlett Johnson (the "Red" Dean of Canterbury). Demidov's article is also mentioned by A. V. Belov in his book *Adventizm* (Moscow, 1968) as a *samizdat* publication circulating amongst Adventist congregations.

⁵ F. Fedorenko, *Sekty, ikh vera i dela*, p. 291.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 292–3.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 294.

⁸ "Yediny ideal", October 1975, *Arkhiv Samizdata* No. 2439.

⁹ Avraham Shifrin, a Jewish émigré, met Shelkov in prison in the 1950s and became fascinated by the man's single-minded zeal. In "Oblako molitvoi nad lagerei" (11 April, 1972) Shifrin writes: "Shelkov and I talked for days on end; later too, in the camps in Siberia and Potma, we lived and worked together. Never did I see him angry, injured or indignant on account of the way he was treated. We lived through terrible times, but he seemed to see them as if they had a hidden meaning and so was always able to maintain an inner attitude of faith."

¹⁰ "V. A. Shelkov – kratkaya biografia", October 1975, *Arkhiv Samizdata* No. 2438.

¹¹ "Protest v Komitet zashchity prav cheloveka", 4 September, 1975.

¹² "Akt proizvola diktatury gosateizma", 19 May, 1975.

¹³ "Zhaloba", 29 August, 1974.

¹⁴ "Zhaloba v verkhovny sud Ukrainskoi SSR goroda Kiev", 1975.