Soviet Lutheranism after the Second World War

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Lutheranism in the Soviet Union was in a state of chaos at the end of the Second World War. Following a 22-year hiatus of independence the Baltic nations were reincorporated into the USSR. During the War many Lutherans, including the remaining German element, had fled to the West; others disappeared in Stalin's labour camps. The Lutherans in the Soviet Union outside the Baltic region (mainly the German population in South Russia, the Ukraine, and the Volga Republic but also including Finns and Swedes) were forcibly transported eastward during the War and disappeared from world view. The religious life of these two centres was reduced to a primitive level, and organized church life was severely curtailed.

Because of divergent national interests the Lutherans in the Soviet Union have never constituted a homogeneous religious body. For this reason the account which follows traces the development of the two centres individually.

Soviet German Lutherans

Shortly after the German invasion in 1941 the Soviet government deported its German citizens from its western cities and regions to areas in the east, mainly Central Asia and Kazakhstan. For the next 14 years little or nothing was heard of them.

After Stalin's death in 1953, and following Adenauer's visit to the Soviet Union in September 1955 and the subsequent general amnesty for the Soviet Germans in December 1955, the world learned of the survival of the German communities in the eastern regions. At the same time the West received evidence of a cautious revival of religious life among the more than 1.6 million Germans as well as among the Finns, Swedes, Ests and Latvians scattered throughout this area. Most of the former Lutheran clergy in the non-Baltic areas of the USSR had either died, or fled, or been deported, but the Lutheran faith had survived due in no small measure to the services of a dedicated lay leadership. In the early post-war period the Lutherans shared their worship with other Protestant groups (mainly Baptist) but then gradually established their own separate congregations.[1] Church organization among the diaspora Lutherans since then has been

limited to the congregational level. A precise assessment of the number of nominal Soviet Lutherans outside the Baltic republics today is difficult, but there are estimated to be approximately 1.25 million. It is impossible to estimate how many are professing Lutherans.[2]

The gradual restoration of Lutheran church life since the Second World War has resulted in the establishment of a number of new congregations in the eastern USSR which have been formally recognized by the Soviet authorities. The earliest and perhaps most important is the congregation at Tselinograd (formerly Akmolinsk) in Kazakhstan, re-established in 1953 by Pastor Eugen Bachmann, a graduate of the former Lutheran seminary in Leningrad and the only ordained Lutheran clergyman in the eastern communities. Bachmann served the Tselinograd congregation as well as many of the other Lutheran congregations in its vicinity[3] until he retired and left the Soviet Union in early 1972.[4]

Other registered Lutheran congregations in the USSR are located in the Siberian cities of Novosibirsk, Omsk and Tomsk, Chelyabinsk in the Urals, and Sysran on the Volga River. In Central Asia registered congregations other than Tselinograd exist in the Kazakh communities of Alma-Ata and Karaganda, and in Frunze and Tokmak in Uzbekistan. All told, there are ten registered congregations.[5]

In the eastern Soviet Union there are also hundreds of small unregistered Lutheran groups in practically all towns and villages where Lutherans live; the exact number is unknown. Western Siberia alone is purported to have approximately 300 such congregations.[6] These small congregations depend upon dedicated lay preachers who work at their secular occupations during the week and conduct church services on Sunday. They are indispensable to the continued existence of Lutheranism in the eastern regions. Even so, the gradual aging of the church membership, the increasing alienation of the young, and the lack of a trained ordained leadership makes the future of the denomination uncertain.

Baltic Lutherans

The continuity of organized Lutheranism in the Baltic republics after the Second World War can be attributed to two factors: first, the divorce from the underlying German heritage of the Baltic Churches between the two world wars; and second, the inter-war period of independence which shielded Baltic church life from the anti-religious excesses of the early revolutionary era in the USSR.

Nevertheless, failure during independence to establish a strong national identity left the Baltic Churches in a vulnerable position after the Second World War. A brief respite between 1945 and 1948 gave them time to re-establish and consolidate their church organizations; but intensified anti-religious campaigns from 1949 to 1953 and 1959 to 1964 created great difficulties and resulted in a gradual statistical decline in church life.

As with the Germans, precise statistics among the Baltic Lutherans are difficult to establish. According to the Estonian Archbishop Jaan Kiivit, in 1961 a nominal pre-war Lutheran membership ranging between 800,000[7] and 1,000,000[8] in both Estonia and Latvia had fallen to "about 700,000 in Estonia and a few less, about 650,000, in Latvia".[9] The actual figures were doubtless lower and are certainly so today, although current sources vary. From the mid-1970s to the present, estimates of church membership have ranged from 350,000[10] to 500,000[11] for Latvia, and from 250,000[12] to 350,000[13] for Estonia. The validity of these estimates is clouded by the difficulty of determining whether they represent nominal or actual membership.

The number of Baltic parishes and clergy have also declined, as the table below illustrates. These incomplete figures suggest a sharp drop in the immediate post-war period, a gradual improvement following the 1955 amnesty, another decline as a result of the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign, and a modest improvement in recent years.

	Number of Clergymen		Number of Congregations	
Date	*Estonia*	*Latvia*	*Estonia*	*Latvia*
1940	209[14]	280[15]	—	311[16]
1945	77[14]	66[15]	—	—
1956	—	120[17]	—	—
1957	—	—	170[18]	270[19]
1961	114[20]	115[20]	148[20]	214[20]
1964	60[20]	110[20]	—	—
1974	—	90[21]	120[21]	86[21]
1978	80[22]	100[22]	140[22]	200[22]

Baltic church administration since the Second World War has been based on the old pre-war centralized church organization. The basic component is the parish, several of which are combined to form a diocese. The highest authority in the Church rests in the synod. Day-to-day church administration is vested in the respective republic church consistories headed by the archbishops. Lack of data makes it difficult to estimate the true authority of these bodies or, for that matter, of the Baltic archbishops. Despite the Soviet government's anti-religious position, the State nonetheless supports financially the administrative organs of the recognized church bodies in the Soviet Union by paying the salary of each denomination's head, including the Lutheran archbishops.[23] This arrangement enables the Soviet government to exercise effective control over the ranking church authorities in the USSR.

Baltic church leadership today has moved from a nationalistic, anti-communist attitude to one which recognizes the need for accommodation to preserve church life in its present form. In Estonia the last head of

the free Lutheran Church, Johann Köpp, was replaced by August Pahn, who was elected archbishop in 1945 after Köpp's flight to Sweden. Towards the end of 1945 Pahn fell out with the regime, was accused of collaboration with the Germans and deported. He was succeeded in October 1949 by Jaan Kiivit, a comparatively unknown pastor. The latter's incumbency lasted 18 years and covered the Estonian Church's difficult post-war period of recuperation and beyond. In 1967, although only 61 years old, Kiivit retired abruptly—ostensibly because of ill health, but apparently the basic reason was his policy of independence vis-à-vis the Soviet authorities.[24] His successor was Alfred Tooming, a convinced ecumenist and an ardent advocate of peace, who served for ten years until his death in 1977. Elected in his place is the present incumbent, Edgar Hark, earlier an assessor and deputy archbishop in the Estonian Church.

In Latvia Karlis Irbe, the last archbishop in the pre-Soviet period, was deported with the arrival of Soviet forces in 1944. The post-war Latvian Church attempted to restore church life and to link it with the past by summoning the Ninth General Synod of the Church in March 1948. This body formally elected Gustav Turs as "acting archbishop", although he was less than fully qualified theologically. His election, however, was assured since he was acceptable to the Soviet regime. In March 1968 Turs retired at the age of 77 and was succeeded by Pastor Peteris Kleperis, a member of the Supreme Church Administration. The archbishop-elect, however, died suddenly and thus the Latvian Church was left without a leader. Finally, in February 1969, Janis Matulis, a former parish preacher, was elected archbishop and is still in office today.

The Lithuanian Lutheran Church is often ignored in discussions on the Baltic Lutherans since it is a small minority denomination in that republic. Yet Lutheranism has existed in Lithuania since the Reformation, and during the 1920s, its so-called golden period, the Lithuanian Church reached its peak: some 200,000 Lutherans comprised ten per cent of the predominantly Catholic population, with 135,000 concentrated in and near the then Lithuanian city of Memel.[25] This period ended with the Second World War. Shortly before the War the Protestant Seminary in Kaunas was closed by the Catholic government of Lithuania, and during the War Memel was captured by the Germans, thus depriving the Church of the majority of its constituents. Of the remaining Lutherans, more than 50,000 who had been served by 30 pastors headed by a bishop[26] were resettled in Germany. By this transfer Lithuania lost all but a minority of its Lutheran citizens and the survivors had no leadership. The number of Lutheran churches was gradually reduced so that by 1948 only ten remained.[27]

After Lithuania's incorporation into the Soviet Union the small remaining group of Lutherans sought to restore their denominational life and the Lithuanian Lutheran Church was re-organized. The former Memel region (now Klaipeda) was restored to Lithuania in 1944 after the German

defeat, and the Lutherans still resident there joined the small nucleus in Lithuania proper to create a viable organization. They set up a provisional consistory headed first by a Pastor Leijeris and later by a Mr Baltzies. The first post-war synod was convened in 1955, a new constitution based on Estonian and Latvian models was adopted, and a new spiritual leader, Pastor Vilhelmas Burkevicius, one of only eight Protestant clergymen who had survived the War, was chosen.[28] A consistory was also elected.[29] The problem created by the lack of ordained and trained clergy was solved by the ordination of devout and capable laymen who took on pastoral duties at the weekend.

By 1971 the number of registered parishes had grown to 27, including small mission congregations, which were served by seven ordained pastors and six deacons. The largest parish, with some 4,000 members, is located in Taurage. Here the second post-war synod was held on 23 August 1970 and elected Jonas Kalvanas (Burkevicius had died the previous March) as spiritual leader of the 20,000 Lutherans then living in Lithuania.[30]

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Lutheranism in the Soviet Union today is fragmented and there appears to be little prospect in the existing anti-religious climate of achieving organizational unity even if this were desired by the individual church bodies in the Baltic region or by the German Lutherans, who have no higher formal church organization. All three Baltic church bodies have joined the Lutheran World Federation and have been active in the World Council of Churches. The Soviet authorities have also permitted intermittent contacts with Lutherans abroad. But these factors have not induced unification. A closer union among the Churches is apparently a dormant issue.

The future viability of the separate Lutheran groups in the USSR is uncertain. The impact of militant atheism and official restrictions against proselytism, particularly among the young, make organized church life difficult to maintain. The decline in church membership can also be attributed to the acute shortage of clergy which has placed a great burden on those who remain. This situation is exacerbated by inadequate, or, in the case of the German communities, by a complete lack of facilities for theological training. The acute shortage of religious literature, though improved since 1955, remains a contributing problem. Nevertheless, despite the devastation and suffering during the Second World War, despite the periods of outright persecution and official disapproval in its aftermath, Lutheranism has managed to survive to the present time. A 3,000-member Finnish Lutheran congregation in Leningrad was registered in June 1977 and then dedicated in December—the first such dedication since 1937.[31] This augurs well for the future.

[1]Christel Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union*, Albany, N.Y., 1978, p. 196.
[2]Heinrich Roemmich, "Evangelische Gemeinden in Russland nach einem halben Jahrhundert Sowjetherrschaft", *Kirche im Osten*, Vol. 14, Göttingen, 1971, p. 142.
[3]Heinrich Roemmich, "Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Russland in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart", *Die Kirchen und das Religiöse Leben der Russlanddeutschen*, Heimatbuch, 1969-72, ed. Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland, Stuttgart, 1972, pp. 265-6.
[4]*Le Monde*, Paris, 7 April 1972.
[5]Roemmich, "Evangelische Gemeinden", *Kirche im Osten*, Vol. 14, Göttingen, 1971, pp. 145-6. The author's reference in the source is confusing in that he cites a total of ten registered congregations with their locations, and elsewhere (p. 148) refers to "17 registered" congregations but does not identify them.
[6]*Dein Reich Komme*, March 1970, pp. 13-14; in Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
[7]D. Russell, "My Visit to Russia", *Baptist Times*, 22 October 1970; in Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
[8]Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour*, London, 1974, p. 110.
[9]*Vaba Eesti Sona*, New York, 30 March 1961.
[10]*Glaube in der 2. Welt*, No. 11, 1975, pp. 26-7; in Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
[11]Gerhard Simon, *Church, State and Opposition in the USSR*, London, 1974, p. 139.
[12]Beeson, *op. cit.*, p. 110; *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, Frankfurt/Main, 25 March 1978.
[13]Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
[14]Henry Smith Leiper (ed.), *Christianity Today; a Survey of the State of the Churches*, New York, 1947, p. 226.
[15]Robert Tobias, *Communist-Christian Encounter in East Europe*, Indianapolis, 1956, p. 307.
[16]*Ibid.*, p. 306.
[17]Carl E. Lund-Quist (ed.), *Lutheran Churches of the World*, Minneapolis, 1957, p. 332.
[18]*USSR* (Moscow), No. 15, 1957, p. 55.
[19]Soviet Home Radio Service in German, Moscow, 2 March 1961.
[20]*Current Developments in the Eastern European Churches*, 3, 15, 1962, p. 9; in Lane, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
[21]Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
[22]*Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 25 March 1978.
[23]An émigré publication (*Vaba Eesti Sona*, 30 March 1961) supports the fact that the salaries of top church authorities in the Soviet Union (including members of the Lutheran Church's administration), who are regarded as state employees, are paid by the Soviet government.
[24]Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 140.
[25]Jonas Kalvanas, "Lutheranism in Lithuania: Unknown and Yet Well Known", *The Lutheran Scholar*, Vol. 28, No. 4, October 1971, p. 9.
[26]M. Gelzinis, *Christenverfolgung in Litauen*, Königstein, no date, p. 68; in Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, New York, 1961, p. 263.
[27]*Lithuanian Bulletin*, Nos. 1-3, January-March 1949, p. 4; in Tobias, *op. cit.*, p. 311.
[28]Kalvanas, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
[29]Kolarz, *op. cit.*, p. 263.
[30]Kalvanas, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.
[31]*Suomen Kuvalehti*, Helsinki, 6 January 1978, pp. 26-7.