FAITH ON THE MARGINS: JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES IN THE SOVIET UNION AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND MOLDOVA, 1945-2010

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ABSTRACT

EMILY B. BARAN: Faith on the Margins: Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova, 1945-2010
(Under the direction of Donald J. Raleigh)

This dissertation examines the shifting boundaries of religious freedom and the nature of religious dissent in the postwar Soviet Union and three of its successor states through a case study of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The religion entered the USSR as a result of the state’s annexation of western Ukraine, Moldavia, Transcarpathia, and the Baltic states during World War II, territories containing Witness communities. In 1949 and 1951, the state deported entire Witness communities to Siberia and arrested and harassed individual Witnesses until it legalized the religion in 1991.

For the Soviet period, this dissertation charts the Soviet state’s multifaceted approach to stamping out religion. The Witnesses’ specific beliefs and practices offered a harsh critique of Soviet ideology and society that put them in direct conflict with the state. The non-Russian nationality of believers, as well as the organization’s American roots, apocalyptic beliefs, ban on military service, door-to-door preaching, and denunciation of secular society challenged the state’s goals of postwar reconstruction, creation of a cohesive Soviet society, and achievement of communism. In this sense, the state’s view of the Witnesses as a hostile political organization was not without basis. Soviet Witnesses demonstrate that, despite repression, believers could and did construct identities and complex community networks that challenged the state’s control over its citizenry. In fact, religion was a powerful organizing tool for citizens to create meaning in their lives outside of, and in
opposition to, the official ideology.

In the post-Soviet context, this project takes a comparative approach by focusing on the three successor states with the largest long-standing Witness communities: Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova. The Witnesses emerged as one of the fastest growing religions in the region and faced growing criticism and hostility from the Orthodox Church and its supporters, expressed through an “anticult discourse” that framed Witnesses as a threat to democracy, state security, and traditional values. Through legal challenges to their right to practice, the Witnesses became a key player in debates over the limits of religious freedom. Overall, this dissertation demonstrates the centrality of religious pluralism to the region’s shaky and incomplete transition from authoritarianism to democracy.
DEDICATION

To my father, who gave me a love of all things Russian
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my parents, Elizabeth and James, for giving me a happy childhood filled with Russian folk music and folk tales, intellectual curiosity, and twelve years of religious education. This upbringing sparked a lifelong interest in Russian culture and a fascination with religion. I first began my study of the Jehovah’s Witnesses as an undergraduate student at Macalester College. My advisor, James von Geldern, encouraged my research and helped me to start thinking like a historian. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, my advisor, Donald J. Raleigh, helped me transform an undergraduate interest in the Witnesses into a rigorous piece of academic scholarship. I cannot imagine having crafted or completed this project without his tireless guidance and support.

Research for this dissertation was made possible thanks to generous funding from the Social Science Research Council and American Council of Learned Societies (SSRC-ACLS), American Councils for International Education, the United States Department of Education (Fulbright-Hays), and the History Department and Center for Global Initiatives at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Center for Slavic and Eurasian Studies at Duke University, in particular Edna Andrews, for facilitating three yearlong Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowships to study Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian, as well as two summer FLAS Fellowships to attend the Duke in Russia program in St. Petersburg. Additional summer FLAS support from the University of Kansas in 2007 allowed me to begin my archival research in L’viv while studying Ukrainian.
A Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and a Helen Darcovich Memorial Doctoral Fellowship from the University of Alberta made it possible for me to complete writing this dissertation in a timely manner.


It would be impossible to name all the wonderful archivists and librarians who helped me in locating materials and navigating the complex Russian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian archival and library systems. The archivists at the L’viv and Uzhhorod Security Service offices deserve praise simply for letting an unknown American graduate student sift through their files. I owe special thanks to the staff of the Jehovah’s Witnesses at each of the national branch offices and at the international headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. In particular, April Taylor and her colleagues at the Office of Public Information answered dozens of email requests for information. Ruslan Mel’nyk at the Ukraine branch office set up interviews with local Witnesses and offered valuable advice and contacts. Miriam and David Grozescu and Anatolie Cravciuc at the Moldovan branch office went above and beyond the call of duty by setting up dozens of interviews and providing me with information and documents. Their friendship and warmth make me feel at home every time I visit Chişinău. Dozens of Witnesses kindly shared their life stories with me. While I know their perspective on events
as devout believers may differ from mine as a historian, I hope that they can find value in an
historical account of their remarkable history.

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time to reading this lengthy work.

Friends and family encouraged me at every step of my academic career, and helped me
to have a life outside of graduate school. My boyfriend, Michael Paulauskas, expertly managed
both of these tasks and read countless drafts of the dissertation. He knows more about the
Witnesses than anyone should and could probably defend the dissertation himself. My sister,
Madeleine, painstakingly and skillfully edited the entire dissertation and helpfully distracted
me from work along the way. My family gave me a perfect retreat from Chapel Hill where I
could rest my brain and just be at home. And my mother, Elizabeth, provided unconditional
love and clocked ridiculous miles in cars and airplanes making sure I never felt homesick
through my research and years in Chapel Hill.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agitprop</td>
<td>Agitation and Propaganda Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANRM</td>
<td>Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova (National Archive of the Republic of Moldova)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AOSPRM</td>
<td>Arhiva Organizațiilor Social-Politice din Republica Moldova (Archive of Socio-Political Organizations of the Republic of Moldova)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRCA</td>
<td>Soviet po delam religioznykh kul’tov (Council for Religious Cult Affairs)</td>
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<td>CRA</td>
<td>Soviet po delam religii (Council for Religious Affairs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CROCA</td>
<td>Soviet po delam russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi (Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DALO</td>
<td>Derzhavnyi arkhiv L’vivs’kiy oblasti (State Archive of L’viv Oblast)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAZO</td>
<td>Derzhavnyi arkhiv Zakarpats’koi oblasti (State Archive of Zakarpattia Oblast)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECHR</td>
<td>European Court of Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSB</td>
<td>Federal’naia sluzhba bezpeky (Federal Security Service)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GARF</td>
<td>Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State Archive of the Russian Federation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KGB</td>
<td>Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (Committee of State Security)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGB</td>
<td>Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (Ministry of State Security)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MJW</td>
<td>Moldovan branch office of Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
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<td>MVD</td>
<td>Ministerstvo vnestrennykh del (Ministry of Internal Affairs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRM</td>
<td>New Religious Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMR</td>
<td>Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika (Transnistrian Moldovan Republic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSFSR</td>
<td>Rossiiskaia Sovetskaya Federativnaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika (Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic)</td>
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<tr>
<td>RGANI</td>
<td>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (Russian State Archive of Contemporary History)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>RGASPI</td>
<td>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBU</td>
<td>Sluzhba bezpeky Ukrainy (Security Service of Ukraine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILIC</td>
<td>Informatsionno-konsul’tatsionnyi tsentr sv. Irineia Lionskogo (Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSR</td>
<td>Sovetskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika (Soviet Socialist Republic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TsDAHO</td>
<td>Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads’khykh ob’iednan’ Ukrainy (Central State Archive of Social Organizations of Ukraine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TsDAVO</td>
<td>Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshchykh orhaniv vlady ta upravlinnia Ukrainy (Central State Archive of the Executive Organs of Government of Ukraine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TsK</td>
<td>Tsentral’nyi Komitet (Central Committee)</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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INTRODUCTION

“‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the Lord, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.’” Isaiah 43:10.

In Pennsylvania in the 1870s, a man named Charles Taze Russell began publishing startling news. The biblical events of Armageddon foretold in the Book of Revelation would soon begin and the present generation would witness the establishment of Christ’s rule on earth. This millennial prediction brought Russell a wide readership, committed adherents, and ultimately gave birth to a new religion, whose followers were initially known simply as the Bible Students. In 1881, Russell founded the Zion’s Watch Tower Tract Society (renamed the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society in 1896) to oversee his publishing operations. By the early twentieth century, the faith began to garner significant international reach as Russell’s message attracted European converts. In the 1930s, Russell’s successor, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, led the Bible Students to adopt a more hierarchical organizational structure, a heightened sense of urgency in spreading their beliefs to others, and a new name, the Jehovah’s Witnesses. After World War II, the religion achieved a truly

\[1\] Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations refer to the New International Version.

\[2\] The two major legal corporations that govern the Jehovah’s Witnesses deserve a brief explanation. The most important corporation is the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, renamed the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania in 1955. When the organization moved from Pennsylvania to Brooklyn, New York, it formed an additional corporation, the Peoples Pulpit Association, in 1909. This became the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society in 1939, and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., in 1939. It is run as a subsidiary of the Pennsylvania corporation. A third, subsidiary corporation, the International Bible Students Association, founded in 1914, oversees publishing work in the United Kingdom. Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 1993), 229. This work, Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom, is the organization’s most recent official history of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.
global reach with missionaries or offices in nearly every country. Today, the Witnesses claim over seven million members worldwide.\(^4\)

One of these members, Sofiia Fedorivna Derefinako, was a Ukrainian teenager with six years of education living in a village outside of L’viv, then under Polish rule, when she first heard about the Witnesses from her cousin during the late interwar period.\(^5\) Though raised Greek Catholic, Sofiia was intrigued by the religious literature her cousin gave her. She began attending group Bible studies, ultimately becoming convinced she had found the one true faith. She was one of hundreds of Ukrainians in western Poland to convert in the years after World War I. All told, several thousand joined the organization during the interwar and wartime periods in Eastern Europe.\(^6\)

At about the same time Sofiia accepted her new faith, Soviet power arrived in western Ukraine. Sofiia and her husband, a non-Witness, settled in the city of L’viv and started a family. When World War II broke out, the Red Army mobilized her husband, who spent over a year in a German prisoner of war camp.\(^7\) During this time of war, deprivation, and

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\(^3\) For simplicity’s sake, I use the terms “organization,” “Watch Tower organization,” and “Witness organization” interchangeably to refer collectively to the Jehovah’s Witnesses' religion and legal corporations.

\(^4\) Annual statistics from 2010 put the total membership at 7,224,930. This figure refers to the average number of active “publishers,” the term used by the Watch Tower organization to describe members of the faith. *2011 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 2011). The organization’s annual yearbooks publish the "service report" for the prior calendar year.

\(^5\) Derefinako’s (nee Diak) life history is constructed here from the following sources: Archive of Upravlinnia Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukrayini v L’vivs’kiy oblasti (L’viv Oblast Security Service Archive, located in L’viv, hereafter referred to as L’viv SBU archive), spr. P-14905 (her case file), P-31931, and P-33518; Sofiia Derefinako, interview by Ruslan Mel’nyk (Ukraine branch office of Jehovah’s Witnesses), May 21, 2006, Nove selo, Ukraine; and Sofiia Derefinako, interview by author, October 13, 2009, L’viv, Ukraine.

\(^6\) Exact statistics on the countrywide membership of Witnesses in Eastern Europe do not exist for three basic reasons. First, the Witnesses did not develop a clear, consistent policy on counting members until after World War II. Second, prior to the late 1940s, the organization did not consistently publish complete statistics when it did have this information. Third, after the 1940s, state repression made it impossible for the organization to publish data regarding Eastern European countries. My estimates are based on partial data produced by the Watch Tower organization in yearly reports and by the Soviet Union in state reports on the organization.
universal suffering, Sofia and her fellow believers gathered to study the Bible and sustain themselves on their belief in God. With the war’s conclusion, they faced mounting pressure to cease their religious activity. Most did not yield to this pressure. Arrests began by 1946. The Bible study that Sofia had attended began to lose members due to police repression. Sofia’s cousin, who had introduced her to the faith, was arrested along with several others and sentenced to seven years in a forced labor camp in 1947. With so many men serving long terms in forced labor camps, Sofia and other women had to lead their congregations, assuming positions traditionally reserved for men. Sofia did the best she could, warning those gathered secretly in private homes to exercise caution and not to betray one another.

Despite these instructions, Sofia’s name came up in other interrogations of arrested members. In 1950, police arrived in the middle of the night to her apartment, confiscated several editions of the Witnesses’ bimonthly magazine, The Watchtower, and arrested her. Under interrogation herself, she gave little useful information, minimizing her involvement in the organization and providing only the names of those already arrested. With little evidence against her, she nonetheless received a sentence of eight years in a forced labor camp. Sofia found encouragement in the presence of several other Witness women imprisoned along with her. Using a smuggled-in Bible, they continued to study scripture and to celebrate the only holiday recognized by their faith, the yearly commemoration of Christ’s death. In 1956, the state granted Sofia early release, but not the right to return home. Instead, she joined thousands of other fellow believers living in forced exile in small communities across Siberia and other distant regions far from her ancestral home.

7 The sources conflict as to the exact year of her baptism. Under interrogation in 1950, Derefinko claimed to have been involved with the Witnesses only since 1947, but in post-Soviet interviews she stated that she had joined several years earlier. Most likely, the 1947 date was given in order to minimize her involvement in the organization.
For the next several decades, Sofiia guarded her faith against myriad external pressures from state and society. In the city of Abakan in Siberia, she found other believers who formed small congregations that operated underground without the official registration required of all religious organizations by the Soviet state. At great personal risk, the Abakan Witnesses carried on the practice of preaching the faith and finding new converts. In the post-Stalin era, the state arrested many Witnesses but spared Sofiia. Still, local police followed her actions closely and made it difficult for her to maintain a job. Her son, who had grown up without his mother, had no interest in religion, nor initially did her husband. Her husband finally converted to the faith in the 1960s, but her son drowned at an early age, never reconciling with his mother’s convictions. By the 1980s, Sofiia finally retired to her old village outside of L’viv, where, a decade later, she witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of an independent Ukraine.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Sofiia, now an elderly woman, blind and in declining health, felt just as certain about God’s coming kingdom as she had in her youth. Life’s challenges had only strengthened her faith and motivated her to do more to spread her convictions to others. Thousands of fellow Witnesses shared a similar story. They not only survived decades of state persecution, but managed to maintain their religious beliefs, their communities and way of life, and even to find new converts. This dissertation charts their history and tells the story of Witnesses like Sofiia. Equally important, it examines the perspectives of and negotiations between Witnesses and state officials on the proper limits of religious freedom and dissent from 1945 through the first two decades of post-Soviet independence.
As Sofiia’s narrative suggests, the history of Soviet Witnesses begins during the interwar period in the western borderland territories later annexed to the USSR as a result of World War II. Russell’s teachings won a small, but dedicated following in these lands, which included Romanian-controlled Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, Polish-controlled western Ukraine and western Belorussia, Czechoslovak-controlled Transcarpathia, and the Baltic states. Even prior to the war, the organization’s American roots, apocalyptic beliefs, ban on military service, door-to-door preaching style, and denunciation of secular society made it the object of public derision and government attacks in most Eastern European states. After the war, the Soviet state deemed the Witnesses an anti-Soviet organization guised as a religion. Mass arrests of these “enemies of the state” began almost immediately and while believers in this period most likely numbered no more than ten thousand, the state from 1949 to 1951 resolved to exile all Witnesses and their families from the borderland regions to Siberia.

Following Stalin’s death in 1953, the state amnestied many members, but continued to arrest and harass individual Witnesses until the late 1980s. Official policy classified the Witnesses as one of only a handful of religions denied any legal recognition. Despite this persecution, the Witnesses proved surprisingly resilient. They kept their children out of Soviet youth organizations, served prison time rather than complete mandatory military service, printed and distributed illegal literature smuggled in from abroad, maintained a cohesive organizational structure, and kept in regular contact with the organization’s international headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. They also achieved slow but steady growth in their numbers, with at least 25,000 members by 1985.8

8 The 1985 figure comes from the yearly statistics compiled by the Council for Religious Affairs. State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, or GARF), f. 6991, op. 6, dd. 3130-3134.
On the eve of the Soviet Union’s collapse, with a new democratic religious law in place, the Soviet state finally recognized the Watch Tower organization, granting it legal registration in early 1991. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the overwhelming majority of Soviet Witnesses became citizens of the now independent states of Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova. In all three countries, the Witnesses set up legal organizational structures, opened branch offices, appointed new leaders, imported literature from abroad, and made the most of the nascent democratic climate to openly preach and win over new members. As a result of these efforts, the Witnesses emerged as one of the region’s fastest growing religions, proving remarkably adept at adjusting to the changing political and social environment. In 2010, the organization had more than 380,000 members across the states of the former Soviet Union. This included 157,365 members in Russia, 146,387 members in Ukraine, and 19,918 in Moldova.

The Witnesses provide an essential lens for examining the limitations of the Soviet state’s multifaceted approach to stamping out religion. For the Soviet state, religion was a holdover from the country’s capitalist past and an obstacle to building communism. By their refusal to conform or disappear, Witnesses and their provocative religious values and practices presented a serious challenge to the state’s postwar goals of reconstruction, renewed progress toward atheist communism, and the construction of a cohesive Soviet society. In fact, Witnesses represented perhaps the largest and most complex underground organization in the postwar Soviet Union. This suggests the need to reevaluate our focus on

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9 For the Witnesses’ registration in Soviet Ukraine, see 2002 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 2002). For their registration in the USSR, see GARF, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 3164, l. 21.

10 This figure does not include members in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, where the organization is still not legally recognized by the state. In order to protect its members from persecution, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society does not release data for countries where members have no legal standing. 2011 Yearbook, 40-47.
urban, intellectual, and nationalist dissent in this time period and place greater emphasis on minority religious communities and believers. Soviet Witnesses prove that, despite the threat of state repression, religion provided a powerful outlet for citizens to construct identities and communities that did not conform to Soviet ideology.

In the post-Soviet context, the Witnesses offer a window into religion’s role in the transition to democracy, in particular how the Witnesses’ right to practice became a critical battleground for determining the legal boundaries of religious freedom in the region. Ultimately, the history of the Witnesses provides clear proof that the significance of marginal religious groups, as scholar James Richardson writes, “is not in their numbers but in their demonstrations of the limits of tolerance in modern European society.”\(^\text{11}\) The struggles of post-Soviet Witnesses reveal the central importance of minority religions in setting the parameters of democratic freedoms in the transition from Soviet-style authoritarianism.

**Historiography on Postwar Religious Life and Policy**

Historical research on religion in Russia and the Soviet Union has focused primarily on the predominant religion, Orthodoxy, and on Orthodox sects. During the late Soviet era, religious persecution in the postwar USSR received a great deal of international attention, as both politicians and American religious leaders sought to draw the plight of Soviet believers into the larger debate about international human rights and American-Soviet relations in the Cold War. Considerable resources were spent documenting state repression of Christian religious organizations, particularly Protestant denominations that occupied a more marginal position in the Soviet Union and had the benefit of vocal international faith communities

speaking out on their behalf. Numerous books, articles, and reports, many of them not academic, provided valuable information on Soviet religious life. The focus on contemporary conditions meant that scholarly analysis and historical background did not always feature in these works, which drew primarily from press reports, self-published literature (samizdat), and underground sources smuggled out by religious communities. That said, this period produced valuable academic research on the contours of religious communities and Soviet antireligious work during the postwar era.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new wave of inquiry began as political scientists and sociologists attempted to explain and quantify the apparent rise in religiosity in the former Soviet states by examining the shifting dynamics between church and state. The opening of government and former Communist Party archives in these states also made possible new avenues for historical research. Of particular relevance for this dissertation,

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some authors have reexamined the history of Protestantism in Russia and the Soviet Union. Sergei Zhuk, in his monograph, *Russia’s Lost Reformation*, has charted the rise of Protestantism in southern Russia and Ukraine, while Heather Coleman has produced a detailed study of Baptists from the 1905 revolution to 1929. Their works, along with the groundbreaking study by Laura Engelstein of the self-castrators (*Skoptsy*) from the late eighteenth century to their demise in the 1930s, provide models for exploring the changing dynamics of marginal religious communities in response to external political and social changes. Additionally, Tatiana Chumachenko’s monograph on the Council for Religious Affairs from 1943 to 1961 offers valuable insights into the implementation of Soviet religious policy and the internal dynamics of the bureaucratic institution charged with this task.

Despite such advances in scholarship on Soviet and Russian religious history, Witnesses have received only a brief mention in Western sources. In the Soviet era, this may have been due in part to the Witnesses’ rejection of ecumenicalism, which marginalized their cause among the many non-denominational organizations gathering information on state repression of religion. Prior to 1991, published information in the West on Soviet Witnesses was limited almost entirely to Walter Kolarz’s 1961 work, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, which contains a brief overview of the organization’s history based on Soviet press reports.

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In the post-Soviet era, the Witnesses’ struggle for legal recognition in Russia has attracted intermittent foreign press coverage, but limited academic attention outside of the region.¹⁹

In contrast to their Western colleagues, however, scholars in the former Soviet Union have shown considerable interest in documenting the history of Witnesses. Prominent religious scholar Mikhail Odintsov has published a collection of archival documents concerning Soviet Witnesses. Religious scholar Sergei Ivanenko’s works include an overview of Witness beliefs and practices and a short history of the organization based largely on Watch Tower publications and the author’s interviews with members.²⁰ Nikolai Gordienko has produced a slightly more detailed history of the Witnesses from their initial arrival in tsarist Russia through the early 1990s.²¹ Konstantyn Berezhko, a Ukrainian historian, has authored a microhistory of the Witnesses in Zhytomyr oblast (region), while A. I. Artem’ev’s scholarship covers the organization’s history in Kazakhstan.²² Pavlo Rurak and Oleg Gol’ko, both Witnesses, have provided autobiographical accounts of their experiences in the Soviet era, while Gol’ko has written more broadly about the organization’s history in

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the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{23} With the exception of the two autobiographical works, all of these authors limit their research to a largely descriptive history of the organization’s activity and its persecution by the state. In contrast, my focus in this dissertation is based on understanding why the state responded as it did and how the organization and its members negotiated their own place within Soviet society in light of their beliefs and changing social and political conditions.

\textbf{Religion as Dissent}

Religion offers a new angle for exploring issues of identity and dissent in the Soviet Union. Scholars have debated the limits of Soviet citizens’ ability and desire to forge identities separate from or in opposition to the official ideology. Some of the most innovative post-1991 work on Soviet society, primarily focused on the Stalin era, has occurred as part of this exploration of Soviet subjectivity, a term borrowed from Michel Foucault, who heavily influenced this new field of inquiry in Soviet history.\textsuperscript{24} Ronald Grigor Suny provides a succinct definition of subjectivity as “the way in which a person experiences and understands his or her identity” in relation to the modern state.\textsuperscript{25} Earlier scholarship suggested either that the Soviet state had largely killed autonomous identities through fear and repression or that

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Soviet man had developed a dual nature by using the Soviet system to his own advantage while privately rejecting its ideology. In a major critique of both concepts, Stephen Kotkin argues that citizens learned to “speak Bolshevik,” i.e. to use the language of the official ideology in their public lives. This burgeoning scholarship called on historians to reconceive the Soviet Union as a mobilizing and self-mobilized modern civilization, and not as a solely or primarily coercive state populated by a fearful citizenry unable or unwilling to publicly resist the official ideology.

Moreover, rather than view Soviet citizens as passive victims, some scholars contended that historians should recognize their roles as willing and eager participants in the state project. In this regard, Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin extend Kotkin’s argument further, suggesting that the terminology of “speaking Bolshevik” problematically repeats the existing conception of Soviet citizens as leading dual lives. In contrast, Hellbeck asserts that Soviet citizens “thought Bolshevik” in their private lives as well as spoke it publicly in their interactions with state and society. Similarly, Halfin advises historians to accept “the possibility that people mean what they say even when their language is ideological through and through, that they can strive to change themselves rather than just alter the reality around them to fit their interests.” Like Hellbeck, Halfin posits that citizens actively integrated their own identities to fit within the Soviet collective.

The scholarly focus on Stalinism as a distinct civilization has left open the question as to how, or if, these models of subjectivity apply to the post-Stalinist Soviet Union.

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26 Kotkin defines his term, “speaking Bolshevik,” in the context of the Stalin era as “the obligatory language for self-identification and as such, the barometer of one’s political allegiance to the cause.” Stephen Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 220.

27 Igal Halfin, Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), ix.
Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak offers some possible answers, noting that many scholars have reproduced problematic binary categorizations of Soviet life, “such as oppression and resistance, repression and freedom, the state and the people, official economy and second economy, official culture and counterculture, totalitarian language and counterlanguage, public self and private self, truth and lie, reality and dissimulation, morality and corruption, and so on.” He critiques the tendency to portray the “unofficial” and “counterculture” half of reality as uniformly “good,” while suggesting that everything associated with the state and officialdom was just as uniformly “bad.” Instead, as with scholars of the Stalin era, Yurchak advocates for a more nuanced understanding of how Soviet citizens interacted with the state, one that avoids simple boundaries between the two categories and does not privilege dissent and resistance over other forms of subjectivity.  

Certainly, all of these scholars have provided a necessary corrective to the previous overemphasis on dissent and resistance in Soviet life. This new historical model also complements the existing scholarly image of postwar political dissent. Most works focus on the urban dissident movement, which emerged from educated Soviet citizens who grew up within Soviet reality and were heavily invested in the outcome of its ideological project.


Like most Soviet citizens, these dissenters did not adopt a uniformly dual identity, leading separate private and public lives, and most participated, to some extent, in the Soviet project. Many, if not most, “spoke Bolshevik” and they negotiated with, rather than rejected, the state and its ideology.

Yet the Witnesses provide a starkly different image of dissent that the Soviet state also classified as political. Moreover, they challenge the emphasis in recent scholarship on how Soviet citizens negotiated and compromised with the state, rather than how they dissented and resisted. In fact, Witnesses refused to conform with even the most basic cultural and political norms of Soviet life. Many Witnesses had only a basic education and lived in rural areas on the peripheries of Soviet society. Their children did not join the Pioneers or participate in after-school activities, their youth did not serve in the military, and their adults avoided movie theaters, clubs, houses of culture, village and work meetings, and refused to vote in elections. They largely avoided reading Soviet fiction or Soviet newspapers and magazines, and did not generally watch Soviet television. Their religious beliefs told them that the Soviet state, along with all other secular institutions and governments worldwide, would face imminent destruction during Armageddon. Until that time, their goal was to follow the Bible instruction to remain “no part of this world.”

Because Witnesses did not heavily invest themselves in Soviet cultural institutions or ways of life and were already marginalized from broader society, unlike other Soviet subjects, they openly refused to conform to the system. Thus, while educated professionals circulated samizdat (self-published literature) in the cities, Witnesses ran massive

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30 John 17: 14, 18: 36.
underground printing operations to distribute thousands of copies of *The Watchtower* each month across the Soviet Union. They took great personal risk in meeting in secret several times a week to discuss this illegal literature. More boldly, they organized a highly complex underground organization, with its own finances, leadership structure, and internal reporting system that kept careful record of the organization’s work and membership. While intellectual dissidents exercised caution in sharing their views with others who could denounce them, Witnesses spoke about their beliefs to complete strangers hoping to convert them to the religion. Not surprisingly, Witnesses made up one of the largest categories of political prisoners in the post-Stalin Soviet Union, with up to a hundred or more arrested and convicted each year for refusal to serve in the military and for illegal religious activity.31

To be sure, religion could serve as a mobilization force for the official ideology. Edward Roslof’s study of Renovationism, though it does not directly engage the subjectivity debate, demonstrates that a significant segment of the Russian Orthodox Church did not see Orthodoxy as incompatible with the modernizing goals of the Soviet experiment.32 Similarly, Coleman has suggested that Russian Baptists “promoted a vision of a Russia where one could be at once . . . both Baptist and socialist,” freely employing revolutionary language and combining it with religious understanding.33 Yet Soviet Baptists also spearheaded protest

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31 By the 1960s, relatively few Witnesses were convicted under state crime statutes against treason and anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. Archival data on total convictions under various statutes is not readily available, but limited documentation on state crimes provides a few figures. A 1960 report from the RSFSR procuracy singles out the Witnesses as accounting for roughly 25 percent of all cases under Article 70 (anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda) during that period. GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 556, l. 1-2. The following year, Witnesses made up 10 percent of all such cases, and the only cases involving a religious organization, for the first quarter. GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 750, l. 4. For all of 1961, Witnesses comprised roughly 16 percent of all such cases. GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 450, l. 47.


33 Coleman, *Russian Baptists*, 5.
demonstrations against the Soviet state in the late Soviet era and engaged in some of the same practices as the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{34} The variegated relationships of religious communities to the state reinforces the need to recognize the heterogeneity of subjectivity in the Soviet Union, where religion could provide the foundations both for resistance to and participation in the Soviet ideological project.

In sum, Witnesses may have represented only a small fraction of Soviet society, but the state saw them as a serious danger to the social and political order. In fact, one scholar has dubbed the Witnesses “the perennial bête noire” of the Soviet state.\textsuperscript{35} Another notes the Soviet government’s “inordinate attention” focused on the organization.\textsuperscript{36} Rather than dismissing the state’s focus on the Witnesses as misplaced paranoia, this dissertation contends that the Witnesses did represent a real threat by their refusal to participate in Soviet society and to acknowledge secular authority. More broadly, it argues for the need to appreciate the importance of religion and religious communities in shaping Soviet citizens’ identities. The Witnesses demonstrate the myriad ways in which religion powerfully shaped individuals’ relationship with the Soviet state and society.

For the post-Soviet era, Witnesses offer a unique perspective on the development of freedom of conscience and religious tolerance in the Soviet Union’s successor states. In this period, the Witnesses’ experiences cannot be understood without reference to a broader, global framework, as the Witnesses’ religious beliefs, insular culture, and open proselytism have placed them on the margins of acceptable religious practice since the religion’s


\textsuperscript{36} Powell, \textit{Antireligious Propaganda}, 92.
inception over a hundred years ago. In fact, they have been a target of persecution in almost every country in which they have appeared. Numerous scholars have noted how court decisions involving the Witnesses have shaped the boundaries of freedom of conscience in Western democratic countries. My dissertation builds on this model and applies it to the states of Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia, offering a basis of comparison for examining the legal challenges faced by the Witnesses in these countries. This approach avoids the potential pitfall of viewing state repression of the Witnesses purely as an example of Russian or Soviet exceptionalism.

Recent scholarship regarding new religious movements and minority religions in Europe and North America places the strong backlash against Witnesses by local communities, politicians, and, in particular, Orthodox churches in context. This framework makes it possible to delineate what is unique about the post-Soviet responses to the Witnesses and what fits within larger Western trends. Europe in the 1990s offered an appealing formula of toleration for traditional religions, combined with hostility toward new religious movements, which was frequently expressed within an “anticult discourse” that

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itself borrowed heavily from the earlier American anticult movement of the 1970s. European and American anticultism provided a critical model for former Soviet states in framing attacks on marginal religions within a democratic discourse, while recent restrictions on the Witnesses’ right to practice in several European nations supplied useful examples for the organization’s critics. Further, Russia’s continued influence on other former Soviet states meant that, as Russia took the lead in adopting stricter legislation and promoting anticult rhetoric in its press, other countries in the region followed suit. This dissertation examines the international flow of ideas, rhetoric, and public policy on freedom of conscience between Europe and former Soviet states.

A Note on Sources

Until 1991, the Jehovah’s Witnesses were an underground organization in the Soviet Union, with no legal standing, no right to publish or distribute materials, and no registered houses of worship. The Soviet state struggled to gather accurate, up-to-date information on Witnesses, while Witnesses in turn did everything in their power to make their activities difficult to trace. As such, tracking the Witnesses’ history requires casting a wide net in gathering reliable sources. Archival records constitute the largest source base, in particular materials from the national state and former party archives in the capital cities of Moscow, Kiev, and Chișinău. For local documentation, this dissertation draws on records from two

39 For Moscow, this included GARF, as well as the Rossiiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, or RGASPI), and the Rossiiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, or RGANI). For Kiev, this included the Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vysshychkh orhaniv vlyady ta upravlinnia Ukrainy (Central State Archive of the Executive Organs of Government of Ukraine, or TsDAVO) and the Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromads’khykh ob’iednän’ Ukrainy (Central Archive of Social Organizations of Ukraine, or TsDAHO). For Chișinău, this included the Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova (State Archive of the Republic of Moldova, or ANRM) and the Arhiva Organizațiilor Social-Politice a Republicii Moldova (Archive of Socio-Political Organizations, or AOSPRM).
oblast capitals in Ukraine: L’viv (capital of L’viv oblast) and Uzhhorod (capital of Zakarpattia oblast). L’viv served as a central hub of Witness life in the immediate postwar period and the suburb of Briukhovychi is the current location of the Witnesses’ branch office in Ukraine. Zakarpattia oblast had the highest concentration of Witnesses throughout the Soviet era, and the second highest number of members in Ukraine as of 2010.40

In both regional and national state archives, relevant materials appear primarily in two collections. First, the Council for Religious Cult Affairs (CRCA), and its successor organ, the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), the governmental agency responsible for monitoring religious life and overseeing the legal activities of registered religious organizations, kept tabs on local Witness communities. Their archives hold yearly estimates of total membership, reports on illegal gatherings, and documentation of criminal trials of Witnesses for activities related to their religious beliefs. Second, Witnesses were the target of relentless atheist propaganda and agitation, particularly by the Communist Party’s Agitation and Propaganda Department (or Agitprop), the Knowledge Society (or Znanie, a mass organization of volunteer lecturers), and the Communist Party’s youth and young adult organization, the Komsomol.41 These institutions sponsored lecture series and other events to promote atheism, exchanged and published advice on successful (and unsuccessful) methods of atheist propaganda for Witnesses, and recorded their interactions with believers in the course of their agitation work.

40 In L’viv, this included the Derzhavnyi arkhiv L’vivs’ki oblasti (State Archive of L’viv Oblast, or DALO). In Uzhhorod, this included the Derzhavnyi arkhiv Zakarpats’ki oblasti (State Archive of Zakarpattia Oblast, or DAZO). As of May 2010, Zakarpattia oblast had roughly 14,600 members, second only to Donets’k oblast. Statistics provided by Ruslan Mel’nyk of the Ukraine branch office of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

41 The Council of Minister created the Knowledge Society in 1947 and tasked it with spreading scientific and political knowledge to the population through lectures, exhibits, speeches, and mass media. It also took over the responsibilities of the Union of Militant Atheists as the primary purveyor of atheist propaganda. Its full name is “the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge.” GARF, f. R-9547, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 1-5.
Although Witnesses faced numerous criminal investigations and trials throughout the Soviet era, most documents from security, police, and criminal justice files remain classified in both Russia and Moldova. Ukraine, however, has declassified many personal files of individuals repressed for political crimes and later rehabilitated by the state. The vast majority of convictions under “political” statutes (i.e. crimes against the state) occurred during the Stalin era, as a result of which available files on repressed persons are limited almost entirely to this period. Regional security archives in L’viv and Zakarpattia oblasts have made available dozens of files on repressed Witnesses. Most files contain information on several Witnesses, as the state generally investigated and tried them in groups, not as individuals.\textsuperscript{42} Published document collections provide a final archival source, primarily for materials relating to the 1949 and 1951 exiles, which remain largely inaccessible in the archives.\textsuperscript{43}

The post-Stalin era brought about sustained press and scholarly interest in atheist topics and these publications offer another major source of documentation on the Witnesses. Under Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev’s leadership (1953-64), atheist propagandists, agitators, and scholars began to tailor their work to address the specific beliefs and practices of individual religious communities. Since few Soviet citizens had even heard of the Witnesses in the 1950s, this necessitated the production of brochures, pamphlets, books, and films describing the basic tenets of Witness beliefs and history, as well as methods for combating

\textsuperscript{42} In both oblasts, the archives are located in the offices of the Ukrainian successor to the KGB, the Upravlinnia Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukrainy, or SBU. The SBU also oversees a national archive in Kiev, but because personal files are generally housed according to the person’s place of birth or location of arrest, and only a handful of Witnesses ever lived in Kiev during the Soviet era, a search of the national archive yielded no relevant materials.

\textsuperscript{43} Odintsov, Sovet ministrov; V. I. Pasat, Trudnye stranitsy istorii Moldovy (Moscow: Terra, 1994); and T. V. Tsarevskaja-Diakina, ed., Istoriia stalinskogo gulaga: Konets 1920-x--pervaia polovina 1950-x godov, vol. 5 (Moscow: Rosspen 2004).
this organization and its belief system. While Witnesses appeared only rarely in national newspapers, regional and district papers in areas with high concentrations of Witnesses devoted an inordinate amount of attention to the organization and its members. As a source, newspapers offer valuable insights into the local activities of Witness communities, their clashes with authorities, and the constructed image of the Witnesses as a serious threat to state cohesion and public order. For the post-Soviet era, this dissertation similarly draws on newspaper and journal articles from both secular and religious presses, as well as on multiple published polemical works against the Witnesses.

Third, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society provides a rich source of published materials from its inception to the present. Religious literature plays an unusually central role in Witness religious life and activity, as demonstrated in Soviet territories where members took great risks to smuggle, reprint, and distribute it. Several publications in particular, whose press runs span the entire period covered by this dissertation, offer a valuable source for understanding what the organization knew about its Soviet members, how it understood events within a specific religious perspective, and what strategies it recommended to members for responding to persecution. Annual yearbooks publicize the worldwide missionary work of the organization and identify obstacles to free practice of the faith through country reports. More important, two bimonthly magazines, *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, serve as the primary literature used in the religion’s proselytism work and religious services and are translated into most major languages. The *Watchtower* prints articles

44 In particular, I culled several hundred articles from the regional newspapers *L’vovskaia pravda* (L’viv oblast), *Zakarps’ka pravda* (Zakarpattia oblast), *Prykarpats’ka pravda* (Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast), and *Vostochno-Sibirskia pravda* (Irkutsk oblast); and from numerous Moldavian district newspapers. I also gathered articles from papers at the national level, particularly from Ukraine and Moldavia.

45 *The Watch Tower* has been published under multiple titles. The original version, *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*, changed titles in 1909 to *The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*, then
primarily on biblical interpretation and proper conduct for Christians. Published under various titles over the years, *Awake!* offers human interest stories on topical issues.

Additionally, in the post-Soviet era, the Witnesses’ official media website posts regular press briefings and legal documents on developments in freedom of conscience for Witnesses in the region.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society has published multiple first-person narratives of Soviet members in its magazines and produced a documentary film on Soviet Witnesses entitled *Faithful Under Trials*. With cooperation from the national branch offices in L’viv and Chişinău, I conducted a select number of interviews with members to supplement the organization’s published testimonials. The Moldovan branch office also made available dozens of short autobiographies written by members in the 1990s. While interviews and autobiographies do not constitute a major source for this dissertation, they make it possible to confirm basic facts about the lives and activities of Soviet Witnesses and offer a contrast to the state-centered perspective gained from archives.

Although the Witness organization does not maintain a public archive for researchers either at the international or local level, its international press office and the national branch offices in all three countries were extremely generous with their time and in making me

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aware of all available published and archival resources for my research. In addition to facilitating interviews with Soviet-era members, the director of the Moldovan branch, Anatolie Cravciuc, granted me access to his office’s large collection of legal documents regarding post-Soviet challenges to the Witnesses in Moldovan courts, in particular in the Transnistria region. The media representative for the Ukraine branch office, Ruslan Mel’nyk, provided press briefings and newspaper clippings.

Ultimately, the challenge of this dissertation has been to construct a narrative history of the Witness organization that is both analytical and compelling, and one that accurately reflects the motivations and beliefs of both state actors and the Witnesses. By looking at the margins of society through the story of a small religious community, I show that historians can learn a great deal about the state as a whole, its control over its citizenry, and its priorities in enforcing cultural norms and political conformity. At the same time, the experience of the Witnesses shows the level of freedom available to citizens not to conform, to create alternative communities and cultures, and to push the boundaries of control established by the state. The story of the Witnesses demonstrates that, even in the most repressive of societies, there is always room to challenge, to create spaces for dissent, and to construct meaning outside of official norms.

Note on Transliteration

Eastern Europe in the twentieth century experienced multiple border shifts, the birth and death of states, and a resultant battle over national and ethnic identities and place names. Ironically, Jehovah’s Witnesses are probably one of the few populations in Eastern Europe who have little interest in these debates. For them, loyalty to their faith transcends borders
and is the only meaningful affiliation. This position frustrated Soviet officials and presents historians with the challenge of how to spell individuals’ names and how or whether to assign them to national or ethnic categories they refused to acknowledge. Oftentimes, archival sources differ significantly as to the spelling and national identity of Witnesses. With this in mind, I have minimized instances where I identify Witnesses by name, since this information adds little if anything to our understanding of their broader history. When necessary to name Witnesses, primarily key figures in the organization, I have relied on archival and secondary sources to determine their nationality and render their name accordingly. When in doubt, I have indicated as such in the text.

Regarding place names, I have assigned a single form to all place names throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Thus, all place names within the Ukrainian SSR and Ukraine are transliterated from Ukrainian, all names within the Moldavian SSR and Moldova from Romanian, and all names within the rest of the USSR and the Russian Federation from Russian. To give an example, L’viv is spelled L’viv, and never L’vov. Similarly, Chişinău is referred to as such, except in the pre-Soviet era. Lastly, I use the established English transliteration for historical figures and places such as Moscow, Crimea, and Kiev.

**Overview of Chapters**

*Faith on the Margins* comprises eight chapters and covers the period from 1945 to 2010. Chapter 1 provides a short history of the Witness organization’s genesis in the United States, its basic beliefs and institutional structure, and early leadership and development. It describes the organization’s international growth and the interwar creation of local religious
communities in Eastern European territories annexed by the Soviet Union as a result of World War II.

Chapter 2 addresses Witness religious life and conflict with the state during the Stalin era, from the creation of an underground Soviet Witness organization to the first wave of Stalinist repression, and, finally, to the mass exiles of nearly all Witnesses and their families to Siberia in 1949 and 1951. It pays particular attention to how Witnesses negotiated the difficult terrain of police interrogations in line with their religious beliefs and need for survival.

Chapter 3 focuses on the state’s establishment of a new religious policy after Stalin’s death in 1953 and on its hard-line measures against Witnesses, such as raids on homes and printing operations, criminal trials, and KGB infiltration. It likewise explores the Witnesses' organized response to these measures and its construction of a viable underground network.

Chapter 4 interrogates the Witnesses’ everyday practice of their faith and their understanding of modern life and Soviet ideology within the framework of their beliefs during the post-Stalin era.

Chapter 5 investigates the post-Stalin state’s multifaceted approach to antireligious agitation and propaganda, official discourse on the Witnesses in Soviet publications, and methods employed by agitators to convert Witnesses into atheist builders of communism. It also accounts for how Witnesses challenged atheist agitators and contested official constructions of their religion.

Chapter 6 charts the Witnesses’ path to legalization from the late Brezhnev era until the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. It identifies reasons why the state chose to pursue registration of the Witness organization and conflicting notions of what this registration
would entail. In addition, it charts the changing landscape of political life under Gorbachev and the increasing space for non-conformity and religious expression during the final years of the Soviet Union.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine the transition to post-Soviet life after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the massive growth in Witness membership in post-Soviet states, state and societal reactions to this phenomenon, and the redrawing of boundaries for freedom of conscience by independent states. Chapter 7 covers the post-Soviet transition in Russia, while chapter 8 focuses on Ukraine and Moldova.
CHAPTER ONE

JEHOVAH’S SERVANTS IN SOVIET LANDS: A PREHISTORY

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” John 15:18-19.

This Bible passage perhaps provides the best summary of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ place in the modern world. The Witnesses have defined themselves as a community set apart from the world, yet required to engage it in order to spread their beliefs to others. Their proselytism both reinforces their unique identity and triggers hostility from those unreceptive to the Witnesses’ message. Witnesses believe this opposition marks them as true Christians and affords them an opportunity to experience a tiny fraction of the persecution Christ endured to bring salvation to mankind. Throughout their history, this belief has brought them intense state and societal opposition, but also the resolve to withstand such antagonism.

The story of the Witnesses in the Soviet Union cannot be understood outside of the context of the organization’s beliefs and worldwide development. This chapter therefore provides a brief history of the Witnesses and an overview of their fundamental beliefs and practices. It charts their worldwide expansion in the early twentieth century and how they made converts and formed communities in territories that later would be annexed by the Soviet Union as a result of World War II. Some aspects of their faith and practices will be covered in later chapters where they are relevant to specific issues in the Soviet or post-Soviet periods.
From Pennsylvania to the Russian Empire

The Witnesses’ history begins in the late 1800s in the United States, during a prolonged period of widespread millennial anxiety and prophecy in American religious life. Their beliefs formed within this context and borrowed from the ideas of other apocalyptic religious movements of this time, in particular the followers of William Miller, who had earlier proclaimed that the world would end in 1844. Miller believed that, at that moment, Jesus Christ would set up a perfect kingdom and rule over those deemed worthy to live in his paradise. Many of Miller’s followers faithfully awaited the coming apocalypse, and its failure to occur as predicted brought Miller widespread ridicule. The event became known as the Great Disappointment. Despite the setback, many followers retained their faith in apocalyptic prophecies, forming new religious sects, most prominently, the Adventists.47

Adventism had a powerful impact on Protestant thinkers inclined toward millenarianism or chiliasm. In the 1870s, the Adventist message reached a young Pennsylvanian businessman, Charles Taze Russell, who, along with another man, began to publish new calculations for Armageddon.48 Russell believed that, in 1874, Christ had returned not in the flesh, but rather in spirit form to gather a select group of worthy Christians for his kingdom. Christ’s return meant that the establishment of the millennial kingdom on earth had to be near at hand.49 Russell preached that Christians must recognize God by what


48 Russell made several date-specific predictions during his life. Like Miller, he refused to be deterred by the failure of certain events to occur as he had calculated. Instead, he felt the dates simply had a different meaning than he had initially understood. M. James Penton, Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 22-23. Penton’s work perhaps is the best (though biased) comprehensive history of the Witnesses. Penton wrote Apocalypse Delayed after he had left the Watch Tower organization.
Russell considered his proper name, Jehovah. In 1881, he began to publish a regular magazine, *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*, to propagate his interpretations of scripture.

Russell’s followers, who were known as “Bible Students,” used public talks and Bible studies to spread Russell’s teachings to wide audiences. His organization also printed mass copies of his booklets, books, and speeches. These two methods—literature distribution and free Bible studies and talks—formed the permanent and central missionary strategy for the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Russell himself toured the United States and Europe to further promote his message and to establish a wider audience. By the turn of the century, he had converts throughout the US and had established a sizeable base in Europe, especially in England and Germany. In 1908, the association bought property in Brooklyn and established its permanent headquarters there, where it still remains a prominent part of the Brooklyn skyline.

Based on his reading of the Bible, by the mid-1880s, Russell pinpointed 1914 as the pivotal year for mankind. When Armageddon failed to materialize that year, Russell and his followers reinterpreted the significance of 1914. They now believed it marked the end of the “Gentile Times,” a term they used to mark the date of Christ’s invisible return to rule as king in heaven and the casting out of Satan from heaven to earth. This event ushered in a period of tribulation that would end with God’s defeat of Satan in the battle of

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49 *Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers*, 46.


52 Many of Russell’s followers expected that they would be immediately taken into heaven in 1914. Ibid., 61-62.
Armageddon. An earthly paradise would be then established for all true Christians. The 1914 doctrine established for the Bible Students a strong and enduring belief that all existing political and religious institutions would meet their demise in the near future, probably in their lifetimes. It also helped to attract attention and more people to the religion. The 1914 date had particular resonance given that World War I began that year, bringing with it worldwide upheaval and uncertainty about the future.

With the Bible Students expanding their global range, Russell’s message began to reach the Russian Empire. An 1887 issue of The Watch Tower reported that the organization had mailed literature to Russian territory. Russell visited Kishinev (now Chişinău, the capital of Moldova) in 1891 during an extensive tour of Europe, but concluded with disappointment that he saw “no opening or readiness for the truth in Russia.” Upon his return to the States, he complained about the “intolerably tight grip” of the tsarist government on its subjects, having been subjected to intense scrutiny at every step of his journey. The organization, perhaps heeding the pessimistic conclusions of its leader, continued to send sporadic literature to interested persons, but did little else to develop roots in Russian society. Twenty years later in 1911, Russell traveled to L’viv (now located in Ukraine) to give a talk on “Zionism in Prophecy,” but the angry shouting of local Zionists drowned him out. A few attendees requested information, but the trip, as with the one to Kishinev, did not immediately yield converts or a new local chapter of the organization. Russell himself wrote

53 Ibid., 138-39. The Witnesses believe that not only they, but also those who lived in centuries prior to the founding of their organization, will be offered a chance to live in the millennial kingdom. “Questions Often Asked by Interested People,” Official Web Site of Jehovah’s Witnesses, http://www.watchtower.org/e/jt/article_08.htm (accessed February 25, 2010).

54 Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers, 406.

of his visit: “God alone knows what his providences may be in connection with these experiences.”

The Russian religious climate presented a unique challenge for Russell and his ideas because the Russian Empire already had a religious movement known colloquially as the “Jehovists” (Iegovisty) based on the writings of Nikolai Sazontovich Il’in from the mid-1800s. Both Russell and Il’in’s followers championed the use of “Jehovah” as God’s proper name, predicted an imminent Armageddon, rejected all other established Christian religions, and mistrusted worldly government, although they differed greatly in their other beliefs and practices. Despite state persecution of followers and the exile of Il’in to the isolated Solovetskii monastery in northern Russia, Il’in’s writings gained traction in parts of the Russian Empire, including Ukraine and the Russian heartland. The Il’in movement survived well into the Soviet era, although harsh persecution ultimately destroyed all but a few of these religious communities. In a sense, Russell had found curiously fertile ground in Russia, as Il’in had already paved the way for Bible Student theology. At the same time, this situation caused enduring confusion among locals and officials, who found it hard to distinguish between the two groups. In the Soviet era, officials often referred to both groups as “Jehovists,” only compounding the problem.

Despite initial setbacks, Russell did win his first convert in Russia, and it came from an unlikely source. Semion Kozlitskii, an Orthodox seminarian, met Russell after traveling in

56 2002 Yearbook, 121-22.

57 The Solovetskii monastery is located on the Solovetskii Islands in the White Sea, and was used as a place or prison or exile during both tsarist and Soviet times. For information on Il’in and his beliefs, see A. Shamaro, “Obshchechelovecheskaia religiiia shtab-kapitana Il’inca,” Nauka i religiiia, no. 11 (1960): 26-31; and A. T. Moskalenko, Sovremennoy iegovizm (Novosibirsk: “Nauka,” Sibirskoe otdelenie, 1971), 18-33.

58 For clarity’s sake, many Soviet officials referred to Il’in followers as Il’inists (Il’intsy) and Witnesses as Rutherfordists (Ruterfordisty) or as Russellists (Russelisty).
the United States in 1874. Fully convinced of the truth of Russell’s message, he returned to Russia to tell others in the Orthodox Church what he had learned. Not surprisingly, he clashed with church officials, who ultimately had him sent into permanent exile in 1892 for his heretical views. Spending the remainder of his life in Kazakhstan, he raised two sons, one of whom adopted the faith of his father. Without any access to literature or other believers, however, the faith largely died with Kozlitskii and his son, Andrei. Russell’s beliefs did not return to Kazakhstan until the post-World War II era.  

While Kozlitskii resigned himself to a life in exile, events in St. Petersburg, Russia’s capital, soon ushered in a potential opening for Bible Students. The 1905 Revolution prompted the first declaration by Tsar Nicholas II (1894-1917) of limited religious tolerance in the empire. While the decree did not allow non-Orthodox religions to proselytize, the Edict of Religious Toleration did recognize the right of subjects to accept a faith other than Orthodoxy. It also allowed non-Orthodox faith communities to legally meet, publish literature, and establish prayer houses. Under these eased restrictions, Russell visited Finland and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society received official registration there from the tsarist government in 1913. The advent of World War I, followed by the February and October Revolutions of 1917 and Civil War, however, prevented the organization from establishing any missionary presence.

59 A. I. Artem’ev tracked down Kozlitskii’s granddaughter, still living in northern Kazakhstan, in the 1990s. Kozlitskii’s story is also reported in the works of Ivanenko. Artem’ev, Svideteli Iegovy, 33-34; Ivanenko, Svideteli Iegovy, 105, and O liudiakh, 78, 123-24.

60 A copy of the registration documents appears in Gordienko, Rossiiskie svideteli Iegovy, 224, 29. For Russell’s trip, see 2008 Yearbook, 75. In 1915, the Finnish branch office sent back its 1914 report, describing the publication of Russell’s writings in Finnish and detailing the large number of public meetings and other preaching work completed prior to the outbreak of war. Kaarlo Harveta, “Report from Finland,” The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence, January 15, 1915, 31.
Transforming Bible Students into Jehovah’s Witnesses

The interwar period saw the total transformation of Russell’s Bible Students into modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses. After Russell’s death in 1916, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, Russell’s legal counsel, took over leadership of the organization. Rutherford saw the need for sweeping changes to create a unified hierarchical structure to oversee operations. While many within the ranks balked at the new rules, stricter controls, and mandatory obedience to appointed elders, the changes made possible a much more cohesive religious organization with greater ability to expand its global reach and to win new members. In 1931, Rutherford issued a new name for Russell’s followers, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, that symbolized the commitment of all members to spread Jehovah’s teachings.

Under Rutherford, the organization developed many of its modern features. Based on passages in Revelation, both Russell and Rutherford preached that a select 144,000 believers would ascend to heaven to rule with God after Armageddon. While Russell had focused on recruiting members to this select cohort, Rutherford devoted greater attention to the millions who would enjoy eternal life in an earthly paradise. As such, he placed greater emphasis on proselytism, in which all members now had to engage, and began the door-to-door distribution of The Watch Tower. Rutherford founded a second magazine, The Golden Age, later called Awake!, to cover more secular topics and human interest stories, albeit from a biblical perspective. Organizational leaders, known as elders, became appointed, not

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62 The Watch Tower organization has used several names over the years to refer to the two classes of Christians. The 144,000 have been known as the “anointed remnant,” “anointed class” or “little flock” and are said to have “heavenly hope.” Those with “earthly hope” have been referred to as the “great crowd,” “great multitude,” “the Jonadabs,” or “the other sheep.” Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, 71-72. The 144,000 figure comes from passages in Revelation 7:1-9 and 14.

63 Ibid., 60.
elected, as part of a new administrative model called “theocratic government.”64 Large-scale assemblies and conventions acquired more importance as venues to announce new literature, pass resolutions, baptize new members, and gather as a faith community.65

During Rutherford’s tenure the Witnesses developed into a distinct religious organization that increasingly stood apart from, and in opposition to, all other Christian faiths, finding them abhorrent deviations from the original church. Then, as now, Witnesses do not subscribe to the immortality of the soul, the divinity of Christ (whom they describe as God’s first creation), the Trinity, or the existence of hell. Members follow Christ’s instruction to be “no part of this world” and expect persecution for this stance. Likewise, they believe that God has allowed Satan to gain control of earthly institutions, churches, and governments, irreparably corrupting them. According to the Witnesses, this state of affairs will end in Armageddon with God’s defeat of Satan. Because of this view, Witnesses do not vote, serve in the military, hold public office, or engage in ecumenical activities with other churches. They accept medical treatment, but since 1945 have rejected blood transfusions, even when doing so could cause or hasten death.66 They live with the hope that they will soon enjoy Christ’s millennial kingdom on earth, and with the responsibility of spreading their message to as many persons as possible so that others may share in paradise on earth.

64 Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, 62-63.
65 Ibid., 58-59.
66 This position was announced in a July 1945 issue of The Watchtower. In the 1920s and 1930s, the organization also published articles against vaccination in its magazines, but these disappeared by the late 1930s. From 1967 to 1980, the organization told members to abstain from organ transplants, before declaring the matter a personal decision for each individual. Ibid., 66, 84, 112-14.
Communism and the Bible

Despite the initial lack of missionary success in Eastern Europe, the Bible Students nonetheless steadily printed information about the region in their publications. In the early years, Russia and the Soviet Union appeared primarily as a land shrouded in mystery, wonder, and danger.67 As the organization had little direct contact with this distant territory, it based its views largely on conjecture and second-hand reports. Its magazines, which featured news briefs from around the world, reprinted stories on such divergent topics as homeless children and economic growth.68 The organization had little interest in Soviet religious repression, as it had no visible practitioners of the faith there. When the subject of religion did arise, the coverage tended toward critical articles on the Russian Orthodox Church. Showing little sympathy for their plight, a 1922 article wrote, “Disobedience to Christ’s command has inevitably, in this day of judgment . . . brought upon the Greek clergy great hardships, and upon the Russian Church system its destruction.”69

Both Russell and Rutherford saw world events as illustrations of unfolding biblical prophecies. Rutherford in particular readily commented on current affairs when he felt they had religious significance. This included the cause of communism and socialism, revolutionary movements, and growing calls for economic and social justice. For Rutherford, communism and socialism rested on the false belief that man could achieve lasting justice

67 Some of the organization’s news briefs on Russia were sensationalistic and bordered on the bizarre, from an alleged deadly nervous disorder said to afflict key Party leaders, to the breeding of a race of giant rats in Russia. “Communist Exhaustion in Russia,” The Golden Age, 1929, 483, and “Getting Rid of Rats in Russia,” The Golden Age, 1929, 581.


69 “Babylon is Fallen—in Russia,” The Golden Age, November 8, 1922, 82. The organization uses the term “Babylon the Great” (Revelation 17-18) to refer to all other Christian churches, which it feels have betrayed true Christianity. In this and other articles, the persecution of clergy in the Soviet Union was often depicted as at least partially justified. One article praised the arrest of Catholic priests for treason. “A Glimpse at the News of the World: Russia,” The Golden Age, April 23, 1924, 460.
and peace on earth. In fact, only God could accomplish these goals and would do so at the appointed time described in the Bible. Revolution, by its nature, was therefore an affront to God.

The organization itself took a strong stand against both communism in theory and the Soviet Union in practice. In 1921, a Bible Student convention passed the following resolution:

Bolshevism, as a great menacing monster, is knocking at the door of every nation, and the destruction of all law and order is threatened. To prevent such terrible disaster and to save the people from indescribable suffering is the tremendous problem, which, we submit, requires more than human wisdom. We therefore suggest that the heeding of Divine wisdom and the adoption of the Divine remedy as prescribed by God’s holy Word is vitally essential at this time.70

Rutherford echoed the resolution in a fiery address in 1922. He described the coming Armageddon in graphic detail: “Pictured from the prophetic words of the Lord, I see a mighty upheaval, a veritable avalanche of blood and fire, starting in Russia and sweeping over the earth.”71

In addition to his speeches throughout the US and in Europe, Rutherford was a prolific writer, and his views on world events circulated in dozens of books and booklets printed in massive press runs of over a million copies. These works, as much as The Watch Tower, provided the basis for Witness theology and Bible study through the 1930s and early 1940s. They enjoyed a longer legacy in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, as World War II cut off access to new publications. Through the late 1940s and early 1950s, many Soviet Witnesses still relied primarily on these works in practicing and preaching their faith. They

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played a critical role in shaping members’ views on the Soviet government and communist revolution after the war.

Most importantly for later Soviet adherents of the faith, Rutherford’s 1928 volume entitled *Government* laid out clearly his position on Soviet ideology. In it, Rutherford wrote:

> All who calmly and soberly view developments well know that bolshevism can never result in a satisfactory government of the people. Bolshevism is doomed to certain and complete failure. The same must be said of communism. Such radical movements for the establishment of a government of the people can never bring peace, prosperity and happiness to the peoples of the nations.

Directly after this condemnation, he continued: “It is said that the government of the United States of America comes nearest of any on earth to being an ideal government. No honest man understanding the conditions in the United States can claim that it is a satisfactory government.”72 These passages later came back to haunt Soviet Witnesses, appearing in dozens of anti-Witness publications in the Soviet era. The first passage substantiated state claims of the organization’s political aims, and the second passage frequently appeared without its second sentence, making it seem as if the Witnesses claimed that America had an ideal government. Together, critics saw these statements as proof of the organization’s pro-American sympathies, its secret collusions with foreign security services, and of its inherently political, and not religious message.73 In the immediate postwar period, the L’viv security services questioned several Witnesses at length about their ownership of the Rutherford book and later used it as evidence against them in court.74

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72 Later in the same work, Rutherford writes that “the soviet government has not been a success and never can be, and is far from being satisfactory to the people who have tried it.” J. F. Rutherford, *Government* (Brooklyn: International Bible Students Association and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1928), 13, 245.

*Government* highlights an enduring dilemma for Witnesses in the modern world. In their eyes, they maintain a neutral position regarding all politics. Indeed, for them, both of the statements cited above make a common point—that worldly government cannot establish lasting justice and peace for mankind; only God can do so. Yet it is hardly surprising that, for those outside the organization, these statements carry a political message. More broadly, the Witnesses’ choice not to participate in or endorse any government, though done for religious reasons, had real political implications. As became increasingly clear in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, neutrality was inherently political.

Ironically, Rutherford’s statements brought him into equal trouble with the authorities in capitalist countries. His sharp attacks on organized religion, and Catholicism in particular, led many to label him and the Witnesses as communists. In the United States, the Supreme Court ruled that public schools could expel Witness schoolchildren who refused to say the pledge of allegiance before later reversing the decision.75 In the 1930s through the early 1940s, mobs attacked Witnesses in the US as they went about their door-to-door preaching work.76 Similar violence occurred in Canada, along with the arrests of many members and the conviction of a few for sedition, culminating in a wholesale ban on the organization in 1940. By the end of the 1940s, the violent persecution in the US had largely subsided as the Supreme Court passed several landmark rulings protecting the Witnesses’ right to practice

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74 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32773, ark. 20-21; spr. P-31931, ark. 22; and spr. P-31365, ark. 97-98.


76 By 1941, over 1,500 Witnesses had been the victims of 335 attacks in the United States, according to statistics compiled by the American Civil Liberties Union. Ibid., 10.
and preach their beliefs. In Canada, state persecution of Witnesses ended with court decisions in their favor in the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{77}

Rutherford’s confrontational style had an impact on the theological focus of believers. Christ’s prediction to his disciples that “if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” had particular resonance with the faithful during the interwar and wartime eras.\textsuperscript{78} For them, persecution demonstrated that they were true followers of Christ—unlike other Christians who did not face similar opposition. While opposition tested their beliefs, it also gave them a renewed trust in Biblical prophecy and the value of their proselytism work. Overall, under Rutherford, Witnesses learned two valuable lessons: a true Christian expects hostility from the outside world and never gives in to adversaries, regardless of circumstances or potential danger.\textsuperscript{79} A 1934 \textit{Watch Tower} article told readers, “Where the law of this world contravenes God’s law the faithful must obey God’s law at any cost.”\textsuperscript{80} Opposition set an important precedent for how the organization reacted to government challenges to its right to practice. Whenever possible, it fought through the legal system, but never let state policy, no matter how repressive, stand in the way of keeping the faith.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 12-13. For scholarship on the Witnesses in Canada, see Kaplan, \textit{State and Salvation}; and Penton, \textit{Jehovah’s Witnesses in Canada}.

\textsuperscript{78} John 15:20.

\textsuperscript{79} This position came to prominence under Rutherford and has remained essentially the same to the present day. For example, Rutherford told followers during a 1929 radio talk that “the true Christian delights to tell the truth, and because he tells it faithfully and joyfully he is the target of the enemy and is subjected to all manner of reproach and persecution at the hands of Satan the Devil and the clergy who represent the Devil.” J. F. Rutherford, “Ministry of Reconciliation,” \textit{The Golden Age}, 1929, 283-84. In comparison, a 1984 article told readers that such tests allow God to “sift out from among his people those who are disloyal, while preserving in their ranks individuals of unquestioned loyalty and wholehearted love for God.” “Happy Though Persecuted!,” \textit{The Watchtower}, May 1, 1983, 16.

\textsuperscript{80} “Lions’ Mouths, Part 1,” \textit{The Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Kingdom}, December 1, 1934, 359.
A Missionary to the Soviet People

With the 1942 appointment of the organization’s third president, Nathan H. Knorr, the Witnesses became a truly global enterprise with a developed missionary strategy to reach all countries. Until then, the organization conducted foreign proselytism work primarily through missionaries sent abroad to distribute Watch Tower literature and preach the religion’s distinct theology. Many of these individuals had no formal training or knowledge of the local conditions, and the success rate of such endeavors varied widely. In some countries, primarily in Western Europe, this approach yielded large, self-sustaining communities. Elsewhere, it failed to extend beyond a few isolated individuals and faltered when the missionaries returned home. In the Soviet Union, the latter happened.

Early efforts in the Soviet Union ran into a sea of problems, from state opposition to wartime chaos and instability.81 One Polish Bible Student inadvertently found himself on Soviet soil after he and his family embarked on a preaching trip to Russia on the eve of World War I. When the war began, the borders closed and they were unable to leave. By the time the family finally returned to Łódź (now part of independent Poland) in 1921, three of their children had died from disease and the father had narrowly avoided arrest by the new government.82 At the same time in 1921, the Polish branch office in Warsaw sent other missionaries into Soviet territory while war still raged between the two infant states. Not surprisingly, a subsequent report on the trip described the experience as a total failure, a result it blamed on state opposition and “the conditions of gross darkness which exist

81 A 1915 issue of The Watch Tower published the unlikely story of a Hungarian Bible Student forced into wartime military service. Coming face-to-face with a Russian soldier during battle and not wanting to kill him, he tried instead to knock the bayonet from his hand. Then he noticed that the Russian soldier was doing the same thing. The two men stopped and realized that both were wearing Bible Student pins. There, on the battlefield, they shook hands, pulled out their Bibles, a photo of Russell, and a songbook. “A Letter of Deep Interest,” The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence, July 15, 1915, 216.

82 2008 Yearbook, 75-76.
there.” Nonetheless, Brooklyn continued to receive mail from interested persons asking for publications and had some limited success in shipping literature to these addresses in the Soviet Union. A 1923 letter from inside the Soviet Union informed the organization of “the great need of spiritual food” after authorities had confiscated all of the previously sent books.

One Russian, “Brother Trumpi,” wrote to the organization in 1926 expressing the belief that it might be possible to get official state permission to legally import literature. In response, Rutherford decided to send an official representative, George Young, to assess the situation. A former Presbyterian, Young had left the church after reading Russell’s sermons and devoted his life entirely to spreading Russell’s teachings around the world. In the 1920s, the organization sent him on missions to Latin America and Europe. Then, on August 28, 1928, he arrived in the Soviet Union.

Young could not have chosen a less opportune time. Stalin had consolidated power within the Communist Party, the country stood on the eve of collectivization, and the state was on the brink of enacting a new religious policy. In 1929, it announced the Law on Religious Associations, which instituted a strict registration process for all religious organizations and made any activity outside of officially recognized bodies illegal. It also banned religious instruction of minors and religious charity work. In addition, changes to the

84 Gordienko, Rossiiskie svideteli legovy, 22-23.
85 The same letter reported that five people had been baptized in Russia that year. “Annual Report Nineteen Twenty-Three,” The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence, December 15, 1923, 376; and 2008 Yearbook, 78.
86 2008 Yearbook, 82. A 1925 report in The Watch Tower notes that the Watch Tower organization attempted to send a representative into Soviet Ukraine, but the man failed to gain entrance into the country. “Annual Report for 1925,” The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence, December 1, 1925, 368.
constitution barred the distribution of religious propaganda. Protestant religions, which had previously enjoyed some freedom to operate under Soviet power, now found themselves no longer welcome and subject to intense persecution. In October, Young sent a letter back to his family telling them, “I have had some interesting experiences but do not know how long I will be permitted to remain.”

Despite these inauspicious conditions, Young reported that he had managed to connect with Bible Students in Kharkiv and had even held a small three-day convention in the city. He announced that he had received permission from local authorities to print and distribute two booklets. Young most likely misunderstood the officials because soon after, the Soviet state forced him to leave the country. They had no tolerance for a roving preacher.

A year later, the organization published Young’s detailed report of his experiences in The Golden Age. Despite the official guarantee of religious freedom, Young noted that the Soviet state did not abide by this principle. He described the government’s promotion of evolutionary theory and the atheist character of the state as major obstacles to establishing a strong Christian presence among the local population. For Young and the organization, the major religion prior the revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church, did not count as Christian. In fact, the report partially blamed the church’s doctrines for the rise of atheism and Darwinism in the Soviet Union. Young believed the church had turned people away from the true faith and led them to seek answers elsewhere in revolutionary ideology. While


89 2002 Yearbook, 139.
acknowledging Soviet repression of the Orthodox Church, Young derided the religion as “unscriptural” and its beliefs as eliciting “a strong feel of revulsion” among the population. He closed by affirming that mankind, including the Russian people, must wait for deliverance from God and not attempt to establish an earthly paradise on their own. He wrote: “Even were it possible for the highest aims of earthly governments, whether republican, monarchical, socialistic or soviet, to be realized, yet death reigns over us all. In a few years poor feeble man . . . withers like a grass in the field, and, like a helpless worm, sinks into death.”\textsuperscript{90} With this pessimistic pronouncement on the Soviet project, the organization’s first foray into the Soviet Union ended.

Later prewar attempts to preach on Soviet territory achieved little, if anything. Upon Young’s return to the United States, the organization appointed Danyil Starukhin, a Ukrainian, to oversee all organizational work in the Soviet Union. He failed to make any headway in winning registration for the organization.\textsuperscript{91} A third attempt by Anton Koerber, who traveled to Russia in 1935, also brought no progress toward legalization.\textsuperscript{92} By 1939, while the organization continued to produce Russian-language literature, primarily for converts among the Russian émigré population in the West, it had few real members in the Soviet Union and no local structure.\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{90} George Young, “Progress in Modern Russia,” \textit{The Golden Age}, 1929, 356-61.

\textsuperscript{91} According to the Witnesses’ official history of their organization in Ukraine, Starukhin had participated in a debate about the Bible with Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii in the early 1920s and later served time for his beliefs. \textit{2002 Yearbook}, 139-40.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{2008 Yearbook}, 86.

\textsuperscript{93} From 1929 to 1934, the organization also broadcast Russian-language radio programs into Soviet air space from its Estonian branch office. Ibid., 85-86.
**Bible Students in Interwar Eastern Europe**

Interwar missionary efforts had far more success in Eastern Europe and created self-sustaining communities of believers in areas later annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II. Three territories had primary importance in this regard. First, an independent Poland controlled eastern Galicia and Volyn’, territories which later became Soviet western Ukraine. Second, an enlarged Romanian state oversaw the formerly tsarist Bessarabia until its annexation to postwar Soviet Moldavia. Romanian-controlled Bukovina ultimately formed part of Chernivtsi oblast in postwar Soviet Ukraine. Third, interwar Czechoslovakia governed Transcarpathia until the region’s wartime annexation to Soviet Ukraine as Zakarpattia oblast. All of these regions experienced an influx of missionaries and Bible Student literature in the 1920s, followed by escalating obstacles to their work in the early to mid-1930s.

Much smaller communities of believers formed in other soon-to-be Soviet lands, namely Polish-controlled western Belorussia and the newly independent Baltic states. Bible Students appeared in western Belorussia by the mid-1920s and gained at least a few hundred converts by World War II. In the Baltic states, the organization transmitted radio programs in Estonia and established a local office in Latvia, winning a small number of converts in the region in the face of state opposition in the 1930s. Missionaries also traveled to Lithuania and held small conventions there, despite the difficulties posed by martial law in the 1930s. In comparison to their Moldavian and Ukrainian counterparts, however, both the Baltic and western Belorussian communities had far fewer members and did not recover well from the
harsh persecution and exile of the early postwar period. These territories contained only a small number of Witnesses until the post-Soviet era.\textsuperscript{94}

The Watch Tower organization directed its interwar efforts in these territories through two primary offices: the Central European Office in Bern, Switzerland, and the Northern European Office in Copenhagen, Denmark. These two bodies conducted most of the printing work in regional languages, allotted personnel to aid in the missionary work, and provided oversight. To make its message accessible to the local population, the organization translated its primary publications into dozens of European languages, including Romanian, Hungarian, Russian, and Ukrainian. It also printed testimony cards in multiple languages to aid missionaries who did not speak the local tongues.\textsuperscript{95}

The earliest converts were those who had left Eastern Europe seeking work and better living conditions and joined the faith while abroad, primarily in the United States or Canada. The interwar era offered them a chance to serve as the first missionaries of their faith in their villages and towns. These individuals returned home to spread their new beliefs to neighbors and family members, creating an organic and local element to early missionary work that helped bring positive results. It enabled these communities to withstand the growing hostility to their religion and to survive into the Soviet era.


\textsuperscript{95} \textit{1933 Year Book of the International Bible Students Association} (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Peoples Pulpit Association, and International Bible Student Association, 1932), 108-09.
Disillusionment with traditional churches motivated some conversions to the Bible Students and later to the Witnesses. For instance, one Ukrainian man joined in 1939 after he shared his complaints about Catholic priests with a local Witness, who gave him a book that discussed how priests were enemies of God. A Polish citizen, Antoni Pleszar, wrote to The Watch Tower in 1938 to express his dissatisfaction with the Catholic faith of his parents. He recalled how, “being wearied with the confusion of all kinds of interpretation, and with continued thirst for knowledge of the truth,” he prayed to God to grant him help. Soon after, a Witness from the Łódź office visited his home. The Witnesses eagerly published such sentiments, which reinforced their condemnation of the Vatican and Roman Catholicism. Later, the involvement of local priests in wartime military efforts led some to join the Witnesses. When a Catholic priest promised several military draftees in Transcarpathia salvation for killing communists, one of the men recalled the Watch Tower publications he had read before the war and subsequently joined the faith in 1945. At least a few converted from Protestant religions that had a strong local presence. This trend continued into the Soviet period, when Witnesses won many of their converts from Baptist and Adventist communities.

At the same time, some early converts felt similar dissatisfaction with their new religion after Rutherford’s consolidation of power. As a result, the organization experienced

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98 2002 Yearbook, 144.

99 For one example of a wartime conversion from the Baptists to the Witnesses, see G. Apakitsa, “Chem zhe vy verite,” Novaia zhizn’, December 7, 1976, 2, 4.
heavy turnover in members both in the United States and abroad. For example, Pavlo Moshuk joined the faith in the US before returning to Stanislav region (Poland) in 1921. At this time, Rutherford propagated the idea that 1925 might very well usher in the millennial kingdom and the resurrection of the New Testament patriarchs to life on earth. The organization’s early 1920s campaign was entitled “Millions Now Living Will Never Die.”

Like many others, Moshuk actively participated in spreading this message. But when 1925 passed without incident, he apparently disappeared from the fold. Two years later, the Romanian branch office in Cluj also had difficulties with its appointed representative. In 1930, it reported that, due to this man’s “unfaithfulness,” members “have been scattered and their confidence greatly shaken.”

Most of those attracted to the faith in these regions appear to have come from among the peasant or working-class segments of society in villages and towns. The Romanian branch office provided one explanation for why their recruitment came primarily from small towns. It was apparently easier to win over local police in such situations and to gain permission to hold public meetings. In this early period, “pioneers” who volunteered full-time in missionary service did the bulk of the proselytism. In Eastern Europe, the organization found it hard to convince people to serve as pioneers, as few members could afford not to work. A 1932 report from Lithuania noted, “Conditions in this country are so

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100 Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, 57-58.


102 1930 Year Book, 128; and 1927 Year Book of the International Bible Students Association (Brooklyn: International Bible Students Association, 1927), 115.


104 During Russell's time, the organization used the term "colporteurs" to refer to pioneers. Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers, 558-60.
bad that most of their [pioneers’] time has to be spent in ordinary work in order that sufficient food may be obtained.”105 Czechoslovak representatives expressed frustration that their members could not afford to travel to distant locations and that the organization did not have the funds to subsidize them. The Romanian branch office wrote to The Watch Tower in 1920 thanking Rutherford for a gift of twenty-five dollars. The overseer in charge of outreach to ethnic Hungarians used the money to buy a proper suit to wear during his preaching work.106

Many Soviet publications would later claim that early converts had been bought off by the organization, which allegedly promised five dollars to anyone who joined and more to those who agreed to recruit others.107 These charges likely stemmed from the fact that, during this period, the organization did not generally give away its literature for free, as it does today. Instead, it suggested that individuals make a modest contribution to cover printing costs.108 In direct contrast to Soviet accusations, literature costs actually represented a serious obstacle to preaching work in Eastern Europe. First, donations did not cover expenses. Several reports from local members to Brooklyn stressed the difficulty of finding money to print and distribute literature. They noted that many who showed interest could not afford to contribute any money for the publications.109 One 1924 report from Romania stated that most

105 1932 Year Book, 146.


108 The organization always dictated that those too poor to make a contribution be given the literature free of charge. It finally ended the contribution policy entirely in 1990. Since then, it had provided all literature for free with no donation expected or requested. Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers, 347-50.

people “are so poor that they cannot afford to pay very much for books.” A Polish report the following year suggested that perhaps they should switch to offering free literature in order to reach more people. These documents also reveal the poor backgrounds of most members, for whom buying a single book represented a major hardship and demonstrated the seriousness of their commitment to this new faith.

Watch Tower beliefs and social attitudes may also have helped to explain the religion’s appeal among the poor. Both Russell and Rutherford incorporated attacks on big business and capitalism into their publications, showing clear sympathies for the plight of the working classes. In a 1929 radio broadcast on the eve of the Great Depression, Rutherford railed against the “oppressive hand” of American corporations and the “silent and cruel power” of “Big Finance.” More than other Christian denominations, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society stressed the impending arrival of God’s kingdom—which would bring justice, peace, and an end to all material want. And unlike other forms of Christianity, they believed that paradise would take place on earth, not in heaven.

In this regard, the faith had similarities with communist ideology, which may partly explain why many people suspected its followers of communist sympathies and why the Soviet state found the religion so dangerous. Witnesses were not entirely unique in this

112 Penton writes that Russell saw capitalism “as essentially greedy and exploitative with a tendency to ruin the earth.” Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, 151.
114 Similarly, Christine King has argued that the clash between the Nazi and the Witness worldviews, both of them “non-democratic, anti-liberal and uncompromising,” helps explain why the Nazi state saw the Witnesses as a serious threat and persecuted them with such ferocity. Christine Elizabeth King, The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity, vol. 4, Studies in Religion and Society (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 176.
regard. Historians have examined how other Soviet religious movements shared common ground with communism. Coleman has written about how early Soviet Baptists attempted to chart their own Christ-driven “path to socialism” in the wake of the February Revolution. Roslof has examined “red priests” who supported the Soviet state and tried to dramatically reform the Orthodox Church. Yet an important element distinguishes these cohorts from the Bible Students, and later Witnesses. While the revolution served as a rallying cry for some Baptists and Orthodox priests to participate in building a new, better world and reform their own faith communities, Witnesses saw it as evidence of man’s hubris and an attempt to meddle in affairs best left to God. This view left less room for compromise and collaboration with the state.

When Soviet propaganda discussed the initial rise of Witnesses in Eastern Europe, it cited the oppressive conditions of capitalism as the leading cause. One work blamed “the socio-political and economic oppression and difficult cultural conditions of life for the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples under bourgeois Polish rule” as having led directly to a rise in Christian sects. According to his logic, the oppressed classes sought out religious sects as a means to protest against the ruling church and state. This trope played a prominent role in explaining why members of the working class and peasantry would have joined a religious movement. As will be discussed in later chapters, this view colored how the Soviet state dealt with Witnesses in its western borderlands.

115 Coleman, Russian Baptists, 224.
116 Roslof, Red Priests.
117 Korotkaia et al., Iegovizm, 13.
Russell made his earliest, and perhaps strongest inroads in future Soviet territory in Poland. The first community of Bible Students formed as early as 1910 in response to a visit by Russell to Warsaw. Restrictive tsarist religious policy, followed by World War I and war with the Soviet Union, made it hard to find new members until the 1920s.\textsuperscript{118} After Polish independence, Brooklyn reestablished steady contact with followers there and made a serious commitment to proselytize in Poland, including the territory of Galicia in eastern Poland, with its large Ukrainian population. One of the first converts to the Bible Students there, Safat Boruts’kyi, joined the faith after returning from abroad to the L’viv region in 1921.\textsuperscript{119} He began to preach and recruit new members, who then served as local leaders for the Galician Bible Students.\textsuperscript{120} Growth in L’viv was strong enough to justify the establishment of a small city office in the mid-1920s.\textsuperscript{121} In 1926, \textit{The Watch Tower} reported that forty-two people participated in the L’viv Memorial service that year.\textsuperscript{122} In 1932, the Polish branch office moved from Warsaw to its permanent location in Łódź.\textsuperscript{123} After World War II, L’viv became the epicenter of Soviet Witness activity, and its leaders continued to report to Łódź.

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\textsuperscript{119} M. T. Kuts, \textit{Armageddon} (Lviv: Kameniar, 1966), 20. Kuts based his history of the Witnesses in Ukraine on archival sources from L’viv oblast. Another man, arrested in 1950 in L’viv, named Boruts’kyi as the person who converted him into the Witnesses in 1925. By this time, Borutsk’yi was serving time in the Soviet prison system. L’viv SBU archive, spr. R-31504, ark. 18.
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\textsuperscript{120} One Soviet source cites him as having emigrated to the US and joined the Witnesses there before returning to Polish Ukraine. This is not confirmed in archival documents. F. I. Garkavenko, \textit{Chto takoe religioznoe sektantstvo} (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1961), 59.
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\textsuperscript{121} \textit{2002 Yearbook}, 126.
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\textsuperscript{122} This figure does not represent all those who attended the service, but only those who partook of the bread and wine, symbolizing their position as one of the chosen 144,000. In other words, these were highly committed members in the faith. “Additional Memorial Reports,” \textit{The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence}, September 1, 1926, 270.
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\textsuperscript{123} \textit{1994 Yearbook}, 191.
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for instructions and literature. This Polish channel largely closed in the early 1950s with the arrest of its leaders.

The Watch Tower organization’s arrival in Poland met with strong resistance both from the state and from Catholic clergy, who denounced it as preaching a false religion. Some believers suffered violent attacks during their proselytism work.124 As early as 1923, the annual report from Poland noted that Bible Students there could no longer find meeting halls to rent in Galicia, and that members had been reduced to gathering in secret in the woods.125 State opposition grew by the mid-1930s. In 1933, for example, Polish members suffered roughly 100 incidents of state interference in preaching work and another 41 instances of mob violence. These episodes increased dramatically in the next few years.126 Also in 1933, the organization began to rely on local printers in Łódź after the government blocked importation of some of its literature. In a common tactic across Eastern Europe at this time, Witnesses regularly changed the names of their publications to avoid confiscation.127

In Czechoslovakia, the Watch Tower organization did not have as early or as rapid success as in Poland, reporting in 1927 that “the conditions in that country are not favorable.”128 Three years later, it saw no improvement and blamed the influence of the

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124 Ibid., 194.
125 “Annual Report Nineteen Twenty-Three,” 381.
126 1994 Yearbook, 196.
127 Ibid., 198-99.
128 1927 Year Book, 86.
Roman Catholic Church. The local overseer for the organization also cited the desperate poverty of the existing members, who “do not have proper clothing besides their frocks.” Several German volunteers spearheaded the proselytism work and allowed the organization to distribute a large quantity of literature to the local population. Moreover, after the 1933 ban on Witnesses in Germany, some German Witnesses took refuge in Czechoslovakia.

Pessimistic early reports notwithstanding, the organization managed to find willing converts in several towns in Transcarpathia, a region with a diverse mix of Hungarian, Ukrainian, German, Romanian, and Slovak populations. The experiences of one man, Shandor Bara, shed light on the conversion process. A Hungarian by nationality, Shandor had moved to Argentina in 1927 in search of work. Five years later, he married and returned home to Transcarpathia. In police interrogations after World War II, he claimed that, upon his return, his wife, already a Witness, convinced him to join the faith and renounce the Catholic Church. He may also have come into contact with the Watch Tower organization while living abroad. At around the same time in the early 1930s, the organization built its first meeting houses in the region in the villages of Dibrova, Bila Tserkva, and Solotvyno. In 1932, the country office held its first major convention in Prague with 1,5000 in attendance. Mounting difficulties in Germany forced the Czechoslovak branch office to

129 The 1930 report indicated that “while the work has made some progress in Czechoslovakia, the scope thereof is not great. It is estimated that 80 percent of the population are illiterate, and especially ignorant with reference to the Bible. This is doubtless due to the fact that is has long been under the domination of the Roman priests.” 1930 Year Book, 93.

130 1931 Year Book of the International Bible Students Association (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Peoples Pulpit Association, and International Bible Student Association, 1930), 131.

131 Archive of Upravlinnia Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukrainy v Zakarpatt’i oblasti (Zakarpattia Oblast Security Service Archive, hereafter Zakarpattia SBU archive), spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 15.

132 2002 Yearbook, 130.

133 1933 Year Book, 110.
adopt greater self-sufficiency by printing its own literature in country and relying much less on foreign missionaries. As a result, the branch experienced strong growth during these last years before the war, particularly in its eastern regions, where in 1937 it noted: “It is quite probable that a greater witness is being given amongst the Russian-speaking people in Czechoslovakia than in any other part of the earth just at the present time.”

In Bessarabia, located in eastern Romania, the Bible Students made similar advances due to the efforts of a few missionaries and active local converts. In 1919, they found perhaps their first Bible Student in Ilie Groza, whose neighbor had just returned from abroad with some Bible literature. Groza and his family began to hold home meetings to discuss what they read and included another village family as well. Two years later, the *Watch Tower* published a report stating that there were already almost two hundred followers in Bessarabia. Russell’s message spread to Bukovina in northeastern Romania as early as 1924 and Brooklyn began to mail publications to over 200 local persons. By 1931, the area already had over fifty active proselytizers of the faith. For example, Alexandru Ardeleanu joined during this time after coming into contact with American missionaries. He began to receive Watch Tower publications by mail and became the first convert in the village of

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135 *1937 Year Book of the Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Peoples Pulpit Association, and International Bible Student Association, 1936), 146.


Local believers, along with foreign missionaries and returning émigrés, headed the proselytism efforts into the 1930s. In Khotyn, Oleksii Sandyga led the northern Bessarabian Witnesses during the 1930s. In Romanian territories, believers faced serious restrictions on their actions upon their arrival after World War I. The Bible Students first set up an office in Cluj to oversee operations, but ran into continual state and clergy opposition. Annual reports to Brooklyn note the difficult conditions. In 1926, the state banned *The Watch Tower* in Bessarabia, forcing it to publish under a series of other titles to avoid confiscation. A 1927 report stated that police had broken up local meetings and arrested hundreds of male members, including almost all of the most active proselytizers. The remaining members had to meet clandestinely in the woods. Many of these methods for operating underground developed by Bessarabian believers in the interwar era would become standard practice in the Soviet era.

Still, the organization managed to negotiate a fragile, semi-legal existence through a new office in Bucharest, opened in 1932. However, police harassment and raids continued.

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139 The Soviet state arrested Ardeleanu and sentenced him to twenty-five years in 1946 before releasing him into permanent exile along with other Moldavian Witnesses in 1949. His family still lives in northern Moldova and belongs to the Witness faith. His story was told by his granddaughter, Galina. Galina Măcuță, interview by author, May 18, 2009, Chișinău, Moldova.

140 V. F. Gazhos, *Evoliutsia religioznogo sektantstva v Moldavii* (Chișinău: Shtiintsa, 1975), 78. Sandyga and his son were later arrested in the immediate postwar period in Ukraine for leading a youth study group of Witnesses. ASPROM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 314, f. 64, 68.

141 The 1927 report states: “The governing powers have made it almost impossible to work.” *1927 Year Book*, 115.


143 *2004 Yearbook*, 81-82.

144 *2005 Yearbook*, 88; and AOSPRM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 314, f. 64.
By 1936, the annual report noted, “In no part of the earth do the brethren work with greater difficulties than in Rumania.” Finally, in 1937, the Ministry of Religions publicly announced a total ban on the Witnesses and their literature. A year later, with Romania now under the dictatorial rule of King Carol II, the state shut down the Bucharest office and arrested several leading members.146

Throughout Eastern Europe, opposition to the Watch Tower organization stemmed in large part from its vocal rejection of other religions, primarily the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Its followers attracted attention for their refusal to attend local church services or celebrations and for their children’s non-participation in religious classes in the local schools. Similar to the situation in United States and Canada, suspicions that the Witnesses harbored communist sympathies were widespread in Eastern Europe at this time. One Polish newspaper accused members of “being covert Communists who sang Bolshevik songs, were trained in the Soviet Union, and received payment from there.”147 In Rutherford’s 1937 book, Enemies, he writes:

The scarecrow held up throughout the lands now is that of Communism, and it is the papacy that is behind that scarecrow movement. Everyone who dares tell the truth about the Roman Hierarchy is by that organization denounced as a Communist. The facts are that Communism has been encouraged by the Jesuits, the secret order of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy, and then used as a camouflage or scarecrow to frighten the people to unite in a movement contrary thereto, and which latter movement is clearly controlled by the papacy.148

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145 1936 Year Book, 176.
146 2005 Yearbook, 93.
147 1994 Yearbook, 194.
148 J. F. Rutherford, Enemies (Brooklyn: International Bible Students Association and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1937), 164.
The Watch Tower organization overemphasized the role of organized religion, and Roman Catholicism in particular, in orchestrating the persecution of its members. The organization’s literature saw the Vatican as the ultimate overlord of Europe, secretly masterminding religious policy for all European governments in order to repress true Christianity. The Nazis, for example, repeatedly appeared as “agents of the Roman Catholic hierarchy.” Fascism, too, was “merely a tool and a dupe of the Jesuits.” If many states could not apparently distinguish between Witnesses and communists, Witnesses showed a similar inability to differentiate among fascists, Nazis, and even communists, all of whom they saw as pawns of the Catholic Church.

Despite opposition, the number of people who joined the Watch Tower organization in these future Soviet territories grew steadily in the 1920s and 1930s. The conversion of one person often spread throughout the family, then to the neighbors, leading to small areas with remarkably high Bible Student or Witness presence. Wilhelm Scheider, the head of the Polish branch in the interwar period, compared the growth to “mushrooms after the rain.” Until the 1940s, annual reports focused primarily on literature distribution and meeting attendance, making it hard to provide accurate counts of baptized members for the interwar period. Also, as the organization has noted, “the seriousness of Christian baptism was not fully appreciated” during the interwar period and thus, many active converts did not get baptized until much later. A 1934 report did state that over 600 people were in active

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149 1937 Year Book, 181.


151 2002 Yearbook, 135.

service in Poland and over 400 in Romania. These members distributed more than 250,000 items of literature the previous year. According to the 2002 Yearbook, by 1939 the Polish branch had over 1,100 members, about half of them Ukrainians in Galicia and Volyn’. For Czechoslovakia, the 1935 report listed an average of 600 people in active service.

Since not every member participated in proselytism at this time, the actual figures for membership during this period were likely much greater. One Soviet-era source states that, by the end of the 1920s, more than 70 Bible Student groups functioned in Polish Ukraine and Transcarpathia. Over 370 people attended a Memorial service in 1927 in Transcarpathia alone. In May 1926, the Bible Students held their first convention in the village of Velyki Luchky in Transcarpathia with 150 participants. They conducted 20 baptisms of new members. Other conventions followed in L’viv, Volyn’, Uzhhorod, and Solotvyno, and elsewhere.

These communities, which formed largely on familial and village networks, were remarkably strong and committed to the faith. Despite a multitude of Soviet efforts to wipe out these Witness strongholds, the seeds planted by Bible Students in the 1920s could not be uprooted. In Moldova, the early village communities in Tabani and Caracușeni continue to

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153 1934 Year Book of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Peoples Pulpit Association, and International Bible Student Association, 1933), 111.

154 Their source for this information is an internal report sent by Polish branch overseer Wilhelm Scheider. 2002 Yearbook, 136.

155 1935 Year Book of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Peoples Pulpit Association, and International Bible Student Association, 1934), 103.

156 Kuts, Armageddon, 21.

157 Memorial services are held annually and are open to the public. The organization keeps statistics on attendance, which is typically significantly higher than the actual membership of the organization.

158 2002 Yearbook, 128-29.
have some of the heaviest concentrations of Witnesses in the world. In 2003, 25 percent of villagers in Caracușeni, for example, were Witnesses. Similarly, throughout the Soviet period, Transcarpathia had by far the highest number of Witnesses of any region in the Soviet Union.

**Into the Lion’s Den: World War II**

As Eastern Europe shifted increasingly toward authoritarian governments in the 1930s, the Witnesses found themselves subjected to heightened state interference. It became more difficult to print and distribute literature, hold public talks, and rent office facilities. In some areas, even meeting in small groups became a real challenge that required ingenuity and a certain level of courage. In 1938, the state shut down the Polish branch office in Łódź. Romanian Witnesses suffered more, with mass arrests and police raids of homes to uncover illegal literature. Hostility toward the Witnesses also peaked in other parts of Europe. In Germany, Witnesses incurred the ire of the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler for their political neutrality and their distribution of anti-fascist publications calling attention to religious persecution in the German state. This also coincided with growing tension between Witnesses and the Canadian and American governments.

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159 In Tabani, roughly 15 percent of villagers were Witnesses as of that same year. *2004 Yearbook*, 76-77.

160 In 1985, the CRA counted 59 groups and 3,381 members in Zakarpattia oblast. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3130, l. 102. To give one specific example, the village of Bila Tserkva had 43 partakers at its 1925 Memorial—a very high figure for the time. In 1965, the village boasted 143 adult members—the second highest in the district. “Memorial Reports,” *The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*, August 15, 1925, 248, and DAZO, f. 1490, op. 2, spr. 57, ark. 99.

161 *1939 Year Book of the Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Peoples Pulpit Association, and International Bible Student Association, 1938), 155-56.
The rise of opposition worldwide had a significant net effect on the organization’s tone, already rather strident against worldly government and organized religion. It became even more defiant immediately following the German state’s closure of Witness offices in Magdeburg. A Watch Tower article portrayed the German government as “deliberate manslayers or persecutors who are of Satan’s organization,” noting that God would destroy them for what they had done to true believers.\textsuperscript{162} The organization, correctly anticipating that even greater persecution would soon follow, began to instruct members how to practice the faith underground. Articles from this time described in clear language what the organization expected of all members when dealing with unjust governments and state persecution. They advised Witnesses that if thrown in prison, they must preach from their cells and continue spreading the faith upon release.\textsuperscript{163} A 1938 article was even more dire:

The fanatical religionists may kill us now, but the faithful unto death God will immediately resurrect to a perfect and glorious life. Jehovah’s witnesses,\textsuperscript{164} anointed and commissioned of the Lord to perform certain duties, know that they must die sometime in order to prove their integrity and to enter fully into the spiritual kingdom of the Lord. They are determined, therefore, to die in faith and faithfully devoted to God in the performance of duty, and, having this faith, they are blind to everything save that of doing the will of God.”\textsuperscript{165}

Steady coverage of German persecution of Witnesses provided Eastern European Witnesses a glimpse of their own future.\textsuperscript{166} In 1933, the Nazi government banned the

\textsuperscript{162} “His Kindness,” The Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Kingdom, August 1, 1934, 232.

\textsuperscript{163} “Prisoners, Part 3,” The Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Kingdom, October 1, 1935, 295.

\textsuperscript{164} The organization did not begin capitalizing the word “witnesses” in its name until the 1970s.

\textsuperscript{165} “Jeremiah,” The Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Kingdom, January 1, 1938, 9.

\textsuperscript{166} In the past decade, there has been scholarly interest in the history of Witnesses in the Third Reich. Several monographs have been published on the subject, and the Witness organization has also published multiple articles in its publications, as well as a video intended for general audiences. The most comprehensive work thus far is Detlef Garbe, Between Resistance and Martyrdom: Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Third Reich, trans. Dagmar G. Grimm (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008). Other notable works include Michel Reynaud and Sylvie Graffard, The Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Nazis: Persecution, Deportation, and Murder:
organization, shut down its branch office in Magdeburg, and by 1936 began sending Witnesses to concentration camps. Unlike other concentration camp prisoners, German Witnesses could regain their freedom—they simply needed to sign an official document renouncing all ties to their religion. Most refused. Even under threat of arrest and imprisonment, they continued to publicly distribute illegal literature, including publications attacking the Nazi state for its religious intolerance. A 1934 article instructed: “To obey Jehovah’s law the faithful anointed cannot hide themselves nor can they have an excuse to sit quietly in their homes and hum hymns and read books.”167 Witnesses took this command seriously. By 1945, roughly 1,200 German Witnesses had lost their lives due to Nazi persecution.168

With the advent of World War II, Eastern European Witnesses found themselves face-to-face with the same hard choices as their fellow believers in Germany. In 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact divided Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union, and Soviet troops occupied eastern Galicia. Soviet forces quickly shut down all legal operations of the Witnesses, closing meeting places and local offices. The Witnesses’ 1941 Yearbook reported ominously that “Poland has sunken into appalling darkness” and that Brooklyn had lost all contact with its branch office. It expressed confidence, however, that its Polish

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167 “Lions’ Mouths,” 360.

168 There is some disagreement among scholars as to the number of those imprisoned, interned, and killed during the Nazi regime. I am relying on the most recent and extensive study of the German Witnesses by Detlef Garbe. He concludes that of the 25,000 to 30,000 members in 1933, roughly 10,000 were imprisoned, and 2,000 of these people were sent to concentration camps. By the war’s end, approximately 950 had died in the camps and another 250 by execution. Garbe, Between Resistance, 484.
brethren would “be able to stand upright.” In June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, occupying eastern Galicia and Volyn’ until the arrival of Soviet troops in 1944. The pact also led to the 1940 Soviet takeover of Bessarabia and Bukovina until Romanian occupying forces arrived in the summer of 1941. While Romania had already banned the Witnesses prior to the occupation, the war significantly ramped up persecution. Only Witnesses in Transcarpathia did not experience an early wave of Soviet control, as this territory instead fell under Hungarian control after the 1938 Nazi annexation of Czechoslovakia. Hungary issued an official ban on the Witnesses in December 1939.170

The war had a devastating effect on the local population in all of these territories. The Axis powers rounded up and slaughtered the Jewish population, along with suspected communists and other categories of people. It also sent large numbers of civilians to work as slave laborers for the Reich, including some Witnesses.171 Widespread violence, civilian casualties, and food shortages created a climate of fear and uncertainty. Some Witnesses were injured or died due to air raids, food shortages, illness, or wartime violence. For example, one woman spent the war in L’viv until a shell fragment hit her during a bombardment and left her unable to work.172 One Witness buried his wife, son, and two of his wife’s two siblings due to famine during the war.173

169 1941 Yearbook of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1941), 190.

170 Prior to wartime expansion, Hungary had already outlawed the distribution of Witness literature in 1925, forcing it to publish under other names to avoid state interference. In the late 1930s, the state arrested and imprisoned many members. The Witnesses held meetings in secret in small groups to avoid repression. 2002 Yearbook, 142. See also 1996 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1996), 75-77, 80.

With the advent of occupation, Witnesses lost all contact with Brooklyn and had to navigate through waves of persecution without direction or guidance from headquarters. By necessity, the organization went entirely underground in these years. It did not reemerge in Soviet-controlled territories until 1991. Until the 1950s, many members sustained their faith on the same publications they had owned since the 1920s and early 1930s. With so many people displaced from their homes, Witnesses struggled to maintain cohesion and unity. They met at home in small groups and continued to speak about their faith to others. When possible, they conducted baptisms in secret in local rivers, a practice that continued into the Soviet era.

Information about the wartime leadership of the organization remains murky, in part because the various regional branches no longer had access to the two major European offices. As a result, the organizational structure was fractured in some areas. Poland maintained the most coherent organization and its wartime leaders ultimately morphed into the first Soviet governing committee once the war ended. During the war, however, its reach generally extended only to Polish territories under the German General Government. Stanislav Burak oversaw activities for occupied western Ukraine, having served as the Galician country servant prior to the war. Born in 1900, Burak joined the Witnesses in the

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172 DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 2, ark. 114. This is one of several MGB case files transferred to the L’viv regional archive in the post-Soviet era.

173 Malyniak, Pravdu skazhu, 6-8.

174 The 2005 Yearbook, which provides a history of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Romania, notes that after the 1940 German occupation, “correspondence between Romania and the Central European Office in Switzerland virtually ceased.” 2005 Yearbook, 95.

175 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 142. One Witness stated that her wartime baptism was done in her bathtub, although this seems much less common. L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31365, ark. 26-27.
1930s. He is recognized as the first head of the Soviet Witnesses. Until his arrest and death in Lukianovskii prison in Kiev in 1947, Burak attempted to maintain some sense of structure and order in a period of chaos and uncertainty about the future. According to one source, he called a conference of leaders in western Ukraine in 1940 to parcel out territorial appointments for Witness elders who could then better minister to a divided flock.

Most of the information on Burak’s tenure comes from two problematic sources, namely postwar KGB interrogations and statements from either former members or members of the so-called “opposition,” comprised of a faction of Soviet Witnesses who broke off from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society’s authority in the late 1950s. In a 1961 internal memo circulated among Witnesses in Zakarpattia oblast, oppositionists attacked the legacy of the first Brooklyn-appointed leader, likely as a way of undermining trust in the current leadership. They accused Burak of promoting a confrontational strategy with the Nazi occupying forces. Based on a mistaken belief that Armageddon would occur in 1942, Burak allegedly instructed members to store grain and livestock and to refuse draft cards. As a result, members were swiftly and brutally repressed. Petro Tokar’, who assisted Burak during the initial postwar era until his 1947 arrest, made similar claims under interrogation, stating also that the organization had removed Burak from the leadership following 1942 and

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176 One Soviet source cites him as having emigrated to the US and joined the Witnesses there before returning to Polish-controlled Ukraine. This is not confirmed in archival documents. Garkavenko, *Chto takoe religioznoe sektantstvo*, 59.

177 Ivanenko, *O liadiakh*, 132. I have been unable thus far to make use of Burak’s MGB case file, but have identified its location—in the Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast SBU archive. I intend to access this file during follow-up research in Ukraine.

178 This information comes from the 1947 interrogation of a Witness who attended this conference, L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 203-08.

179 Police in the region confiscated this memo, which was authored by “Bible Students in the defense of Truth.” DAZO, f. 1490, op. 2, spr. 35, ark. 16-25.
only allowed him to reassume this position after the postwar arrest of another leader, Pavlo Ziatek.\textsuperscript{180}

Although it is impossible to determine the veracity of these claims, they reflect a real and enduring division among members as to how to interact with the state. In a related example, one former Witness claimed that, in 1941, he and other leaders sent out a delegation to confront the local German occupying forces only to have all the delegates killed by these men.\textsuperscript{181} This story, though perhaps embellished, fits in with the tactics of bold opposition to the German regime employed by Witnesses in the 1930s. While former Witnesses and the oppositionists framed Burak’s and other leaders’ motives as cynical and cruel, they were in keeping with the organization’s own instructions not to compromise with governmental authorities. Unable to receive more detailed instructions from Brooklyn, Burak and the initial leaders preferred to err on the side of resistance. Once instructions did reach the Soviet Union after the war, tactics softened in order to avoid detection and to shield members from avoidable arrests.

The dispute over draft cards highlights the most dangerous aspect of Witness resistance during World War II—their refusal to serve in the military or to work in war industries. Each wave of invasion led to mandatory military drafts of all able-bodied men. The drafts exposed the Witnesses to arrest and imprisonment and, in some cases, execution. Parfin Palamariuc of Bukovina, along with ninety-nine other Romanian Witnesses who resisted the draft, received a death sentence from a Chernivtsi court in 1942. Eight of the men were shot, and two renounced the religion before the rest received a commutation to twenty-

\textsuperscript{180} L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 21-24.

\textsuperscript{181} V. A. Il’in, \textit{Propovidnyky armagedonnu} (Kiev: Molod’, 1961), 35.
five years. Some Witnesses from Transcarpathia ended up in concentration camps for refusal to serve in the Hungarian Army. Many Witnesses suffered harsh beatings from the police, who saw them as having betrayed their homeland. One man, arrested after refusing to take a military oath into the Romanian Army in 1943, recalls that police beat him so badly that his wife did not recognize him.

None of the wartime states had any tolerance for foreign-based religious organizations that impeded the war effort and preached a radical message that rejected national allegiances and patriotism. In Soviet-occupied zones, Witnesses were suspected of being Nazi sympathizers, while, in Axis-controlled territories, they were seen as communists. In one case, German police accused a Witness man of communist loyalties in 1942 after he ignored a call for volunteers for the local gendarme. The police imprisoned him in Chełm, Poland, until local villagers intervened with a petition stating that he was not a communist, but rather a Jehovah’s Witness, and he was released. Most Witnesses did not share this man’s good fortune. One Moldavian Witness was only twenty years old in 1944 when Soviet authorities arrested him and made him dig his own grave. They demanded that he and other Witnesses give out information on their leaders. When the Witnesses refused, the soldiers marched several of the men out of eyesight and fired their weapons so that the Witnesses

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182 Parfin was liberated by the Red Army in 1945, only to be arrested by the Soviet authorities. Nicolae Palamarciuc, interview by author, December 9, 2009, Chișinău, Moldova, and 2004 Yearbook, 91-92.

183 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 16.

184 Questionnaire for Efrem Platon, courtesy of the Moldova branch office of Jehovah’s Witnesses (hereafter MJW). The Red Army liberated Platon in August 1944. Seven years later, he was arrested by Soviet authorities.

would think the men had been executed. When this failed to scare the Witnesses into talking, authorities imprisoned the men in concentration camps.  

Women did not escape arrests either when they refused to report for labor conscription intended to aid the war effort. For example, in the village of Fetești in Bessarabia, Simion Ursu and his wife, Maria, were arrested in the fall of 1941 and imprisoned until 1945. During this time, their five children under the age of fifteen lived at home without parental supervision. Another woman and her daughter from the same village ended up in a concentration camp; the daughter did not survive. When one Witness returned from two and a half years in prison in late 1944, some of her five young children did not remember her. Men also faced arrest in such instances. One young man received five years in 1944 for refusal to work in a mine that had been mobilized for the Soviet war effort. It is impossible to determine how many men and women suffered this fate, but the existing evidence suggests it was not a rare occurrence.

In Romanian-controlled territories in particular, Witnesses suffered police harassment and arrest for refusal to participate in local religious life through the Orthodox Church. Local clergy reported Witnesses to the police for not attending church, and some Witnesses were beaten and arrested by police on this basis. In the village of Clococenii Vechi, police arrested several young Witness men after local church officials accused them of being communists for not going to church or making the sign of the cross. After the men refused to renounce their faith, the police beat them and then sent them to Chișinău for a court hearing. At the

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186 Questionnaire for Constantin Cazac (MJW).
187 Questionnaires for Maria Pleșca and Simion Ursu (MJW).
188 Questionnaire for Melania Negru (MJW).
189 Prior to this event, he had also been arrested for refusal to serve in the Romanian Army. Questionnaire for Vladimir Lungu (MJW), and 2004 Yearbook, 77.
trial, one of the men argued that he could not be a communist because communists do not believe in God or in Jesus Christ. This defense was unpersuasive. The court fined the men, told them to attend church, and released them.190

For the organization and its members, the wartime persecution seemed to confirm that the current “system of things” was coming to a close, and that little time remained before God would deliver them into an earthly paradise free from the suffering and hardship that now encompassed their lives.191 Indeed, the 1941 Yearbook concluded by expressing doubts that there would be another issue next year, noting, “All the surrounding circumstances . . . indicate that the battle of Armageddon is near at hand.”192 This event also promised to issue out justice to those who had persecuted the Witnesses and thus taken a stand against God and for his adversary, Satan. A 1940 article published in response to the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia in 1940 declared of Joseph Stalin: “All hail to the Creator’s purpose to obliterate all such beastly murderers in the impending battle of Armageddon!”193

Among the rest of the population, Witnesses preached that the current chaos could not last much longer. They met an increasingly positive reception to their message. Witnesses sought out those who had suffered wartime losses, had serious illnesses, or experienced other extreme hardships. The Witnesses promised these people that by converting, they could have their loved ones restored to life and their needs met in the coming millennial kingdom. For those struggling to find order amid the chaos, the Witnesses offered a close-knit faith community and a support network. One believer, who later left the organization and became

190 This story is recounted by the son of one of the men in his autobiography. Rurak, Tri aresta, 14-19.
191 2002 Yearbook, 143.
192 1941 Yearbook, 246.
an outspoken opponent of the Witnesses, recalled that he joined in 1943 in part because of the “comforting ‘ideas’ of the Jehovahists,” who promised him a paradise on earth.\textsuperscript{194}

According to multiple sources, World War II saw a substantial growth in Witness membership in occupied Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{195} A 1971 sociological study by the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast showed that 28.5 percent of current Witnesses had joined in 1941-45.\textsuperscript{196} Ivan Pashkovs’kyi’s conversion story is typical of many male wartime recruits. Born to poor Ukrainian peasants in a village in the Lublin region of Poland, he finished only five years of education at the village school before he began working on the farm alongside his father. He met and joined the Witnesses during World War II, and spent most of the war as a forced laborer for Nazi Germany. After the war, he was arrested in 1947 and sentenced to death before having his sentence commuted to twenty-five years (due to the state’s suspension of the death penalty). Released early into exile in Siberia in 1956, he later headed the governing committee of the Soviet Jehovah’s Witnesses. From 1963 to 1972, he oversaw the organization’s work inside the Soviet Union. He served on the first legally registered country committee in 1991, and died five years later.\textsuperscript{197}

Sources also show that some wartime conversions happened in POW and concentration camps, where German Witnesses were interned and had contact with Russian prisoners. One man joined the Witnesses after being sent to a POW camp in Germany, where a Witness shared with him a vision of a coming paradise without national divisions or war.


\textsuperscript{195} DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 4, ark. 28; and L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31931, ark. 15.

\textsuperscript{196} The study was based on a survey of 473 Witnesses and also showed that 20.4 percent had joined prior to World War II. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 378, l. 65.

\textsuperscript{197} Pashkovs’kyi’s story can be found in TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 637, ark. 42-46; L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341; and in Ivanenko, \textit{O liudiakh}, 247.
Upon liberation, he refused to return to uniform in the Red Army and was given seven years in prison by a military tribunal in Ukraine.198 Michel Reynaud and Sylvie Graffard’s work on Witnesses under the Nazi regime claims that German Witnesses baptized 227 Russian women and 73 Ukrainians at the Ravensbrück concentration camp.199 Many of these members may not have retained their faith after the war when they returned to Soviet territories and lost contact with other Witnesses. Those from the western borderlands were the most likely to be able to find fellow Witnesses to sustain their faith. One woman first met the Witnesses in the Stutthof concentration camp in Germany and was baptized. After the war, she returned to her native Ukraine and later served eleven years for anti-Soviet activity under Soviet rule.200

**Conclusion**

The interwar period laid the foundation for the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ subsequent entrance into the Soviet Union by creating self-sustaining Witnesses communities in several regions along the Soviet Union’s western borders. In the Soviet period, these Witnesses remembered their earlier interwar and wartime experiences of persecution by multiple authorities as faith-affirming and instructive. Some members had been accused of communist sympathies only to serve time for alleged capitalist sympathies a short while later. For example, under Romanian rule, Ion Ursoi received a death sentence, later commuted to twenty-five years, for refusal to serve in the military. The Red Army liberated him from

198 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 293, ark. 110; TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 23, spr. 24, ark. 67-79; and Il’in, *Propovidnyky armagedonnu*, 20-22.


prison only to promptly reimprison him for refusing to serve in the Soviet armed forces.\textsuperscript{201}

The experience of persecution by multiple regimes taught Witnesses how to respond to state pressure and solidified their belief that worldly governments cannot be a force for good and that only God can provide just rule. It also strengthened their view that there was little meaningful difference between fascism and communism.\textsuperscript{202} Witnesses expected persecution as “true Christians” and thus when this occurred, it served as an affirmation of their faith.

The Witnesses’ persecution under previous, non-socialist governments was an inconvenient fact for Soviet state-sponsored propaganda against the organization. For a state promoting the unique sacrifice and triumph of its people and its ideology in World War II, it could not acknowledge the Witnesses as fellow victims of Nazi atrocities.\textsuperscript{203} As a result, Soviet sources either ignored the war years or falsely claimed that the Nazis had in fact supported the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{204} The latter approach offered an easy explanation for how the organization gained members during wartime. More important, it created an association with Nazism that made Witnesses into a dangerous fifth column. This had particular resonance in the postwar era. Amir Weiner has noted how the postwar state tied citizens’ inclusion in the Soviet body politic to their wartime activities. The state demarcated Nazi collaborators as

\textsuperscript{201} 2004 Yearbook, 89-90.

\textsuperscript{202} A 1940 \textit{Watch Tower} article on totalitarianism proclaimed: “Communism, Fascism, and Nazism, although different in name, are all one and the same thing, and are all against God and his Theocratic kingdom, and all put the state forward as the supreme power, and all defy Almighty God and punish those who insist on serving God according to his Word, the Bible, rather than man.” “First Defeat of Totalitarianism,” \textit{The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom}, May 1, 1940, 140.

\textsuperscript{203} For works on the importance of World War II in the postwar Soviet order and the war as a legitimizing event for Soviet ideology, see Amir Weiner, \textit{Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and Nina Tumarkin, \textit{The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia} (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

\textsuperscript{204} One 1965 work, for example, argues that the Nazi occupying forces viewed Witnesses in Ukraine, Belorusia, and Moldavia as a useful tool to distract the local population from resistance. F. I. Fedorenko, \textit{Sekty, ikh vera i dela} (Moscow: Politizdat, 1965), 201.
“eternal enemies,” a label that justified their violent removal from Soviet society. The Witnesses’ wartime record as draft dodgers put them in a vulnerable position in this regard and helps make sense of why the Soviet state responded with such hostility to this religion.205

As the war drew to a close in 1945, many Witnesses, along with their neighbors, found themselves within the borders of an expanded Soviet Union, which now encompassed the Baltic States, eastern Poland, Bukovina and Bessarabia, and Transcarpathia. Convinced that Armageddon was just around the corner, most Witnesses steeled themselves for more persecution under their new rulers, certain that they would not have long to endure. In the end, this new era lasted much longer than they anticipated, and tested not just their faith, but their organizational skills in maintaining community under incredible pressure.

205 Weiner, Making Sense, 137.
CHAPTER TWO

“I WILL BE HIS WITNESS UNTIL DEATH”: JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES IN THE POSTWAR STALIN ERA

“I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.” 2 Samuel 22:4.

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” Acts 8:4.

The Second World War ushered in a new era for Jehovah’s Witnesses in Eastern Europe. Massive forced resettlement and the redrawing of national borders turned thousands of Witnesses into Soviet citizens. The Soviet Union, with its enormous contribution to the war effort and heavy casualties, expected and received major concessions to strengthen its position in Eastern Europe. Poland’s prewar borders shifted westward, while the Soviet Union gained control of the Baltic states and Poland’s eastern regions (including eastern Galicia and Volyn’). Czechoslovakia ceded Transcarpathia, and Romania relinquished Northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union. All of these aforementioned territories became part of an enlarged Soviet Ukraine. The Soviet Union also asserted its rule over the Romanian territory of Bessarabia and combined it with its prewar Moldavian region to create Soviet

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206 This passage also graced the dedication page of a 1937 work by Rutherford. Rutherford, Enemies, 3.

207 A 1946 Watch Tower publication on the Soviet annexation of the western borderlands cited this verse in its discussion of Witnesses in these territories. “Side Lights on Russia,” Consolation, April 10, 1946, 9.

208 The Soviet Union divided Galicia and Volyn’ into the Soviet Ukraine oblasts of L’viv, Ternopil’, Stanislav (later Ivano-Frankivs’k), and Volyn’. Transcarpathia became Zakarpattia oblast, while Northern Bukovina formed the nucleus of an enlarged Chernivtsi oblast.
Moldavia. In addition, the Allied Powers agreed to massive forced population transfers to create more ethnically homogenous nation-states in Eastern Europe. This included the resettlement of ethnic Poles and Ukrainians within the new boundaries of Poland and Soviet Ukraine, respectively.

The Soviet Union’s eastward expansion swallowed up the prewar Witness communities in the western borderlands. At a Baltimore assembly of Witnesses in February 1946, Watch Tower President Knorr told the crowd that “at least 1,600 of Jehovah’s witnesses had been taken into Russia and were now there very busily engaged in preaching the Theocratic message in that distant land.” In reality, the figure was closer to 6,000 Witnesses, a fact corrected by the organization in later publications and in line with Soviet sources. Knorr’s address established the organization’s optimistic view of Soviet expansion as an exciting opportunity for believers to enter a formerly inaccessible territory. An article appearing in Consolation (the interim title given to The Golden Age from 1937 to 1946) a few months after Knorr’s speech stated, “Jehovah’s witnesses rejoice in the good news that in the dispersions incident to the war several hundred of Jehovah’s faithful witnesses have been scattered all over Russia and Siberia, and it is certain that at this moment

209 The Moldavian territories located on the right bank of the Dniester River were an autonomous republic within the prewar Soviet Union. With the annexation of Bessarabia, the Soviet state raised the region’s status from an autonomous to union republic and created the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in 1940. Charles King, The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 94.

210 Pavel Polian, Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), 41-42.

211 “The Northeastern Assembly of Jehovah’s witnesses,” Consolation, March 27, 1946, 10.

they are everywhere preaching the word.” A Watchtower article from the same year bore the subheading: “Russia Penetrated.”

Brooklyn’s positive outlook notwithstanding, Soviet power and the territorial changes greatly disrupted the close-knit faith communities. Many ethnic Polish Witnesses moved into the interior of Poland, while ethnic Ukrainian Witnesses from Poland resettled into Soviet Ukraine. The organization advised members facing possible resettlement that, if asked about their nationality, they should state that they are Christians and do not recognize other nationalities. Since this strategy was unlikely to prevent resettlement, the organization suggested that the believer entrust the matter to God, as “surely God has other great tasks for him.” The Łódź office offered similar advice to Polish members, citing Judges 7:7: “let the other men go, each to his own place.” Ivan Pashkovs’kyi, one resettler who heard this advice, recalled years later how he understood this verse to mean that “for us, our ‗place‘ was wherever Jehovah sent us.” To prepare for resettlement, Pashkovs’kyi and others carefully concealed literature in their belongings. As a parting gesture, they baptized eighteen individuals. As soon as Pashkovs’kyi and the other Witnesses reached Soviet Ukraine, they began to preach—even to the local authorities. Pashkovs’kyi then took charge of an

213 “Side Lights on Russia,” 9. A 1947 Polish branch office report stated that 7,384 persons attended the Memorial service in 1946. As non-members also attend, the audience total is always significantly higher than actual membership. The branch office estimated Russian membership at 4,040 that year. 1947 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society, International Bible Students Association, 1946), 217.

214 “Reconstructive and Relief Work in Europe,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, February 1, 1946, 47.

215 Katherine Jolluck’s study of Polish deportees gives the figure of 980,000 to 1,080,000 civilian deportees forcibly resettled from Poland into the USSR. This does not include those conscripted into the Red Army or those arrested or taken as prisoners of war. Katherine R. Jolluck, Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union During World War II (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 9.

216 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-30139, ark. 91.
underground printing operation, for which he suffered arrest in 1947 and served nine years in the Gulag.\textsuperscript{217}

Cut off from steady access to Brooklyn or to other European branch offices, Soviet Witnesses struggled to adapt to new conditions, while continuing to practice their faith as they had prior to the arrival of Soviet power. For Witnesses, state-sponsored persecutions of members continued with little, if any, interruption as power shifted from one government to another. This constant climate of terror was the norm for the members who joined in the immediate prewar or wartime periods, since they had never experienced any semblance of religious freedom. Witnesses transferred their old skills of underground religious activity learned under previous repressive regimes to the new, Soviet setting. A sense of security and calm proved similarly elusive for the population at large in the western borderlands. A devastating famine in 1946-47, concentrated in Ukraine, resulted in the widespread starvation of an already weakened populace.\textsuperscript{218} Moreover, while victory was declared in May 1945, the Soviet state faced stubborn partisan resistance in the newly annexed territories, primarily from nationalists who refused to accept Soviet control. Wartime violence and chaos continued for several years. The ongoing partisan activity fueled state suspicion of its new citizens’ loyalties and heightened police repression of all forms of dissent.

Witnesses differed from other Soviet citizens in the immediate postwar era in that they did not share in the widespread hopes for liberalization and improvement of living conditions. Elena Zubkova writes that “everybody expected changes after the war. These

\textsuperscript{217} 2008 Yearbook, 88-89; and L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 114, 310.

expectations infused the whole society, enabling people to survive and to hope that a new and better life would soon begin. “Seeing the world in much different terms, Witnesses believed humanity had suffered, fought, and died since the time of Adam and would do so until Christ’s establishment of the millennial kingdom. Until then, there could be no lasting peace and no true justice. While other Soviet citizens may have anxiously awaited more peaceful times, Witnesses counted down the days until Armageddon and the destruction of the current system. The fact that Witnesses managed to convince others to adopt their worldview complicates current notions about postwar Soviet society during late Stalinism.

This chapter examines relations between the Soviet state and the Witnesses in the postwar era until Stalin’s death in 1953. First, it addresses how the organization, both in Brooklyn and in the Soviet Union, responded to changing circumstances in light of its religious beliefs and conditions on the ground. Second, the chapter discusses the state’s response to the Witnesses, its knowledge of the organization, its assessment of the threat Witnesses posed, and the methods that it used to repress this form of religious belief. Lastly, the chapter analyzes how individual Witnesses conducted themselves under the difficult conditions of postwar life and persecution, both in practicing their faith and in dealing with arrest, interrogation, prison, work camps, and exile.

Creating a Soviet Witness Organization

Major changes took place in the worldwide Watch Tower organization during the war and its immediate aftermath. Following Rutherford’s death in 1942, Knorr guided the Witnesses into the postwar era. That year, the organization had an estimated 115,240 active

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members worldwide.\textsuperscript{220} Knorr’s tenure (1942-1977) saw an increased emphasis on global missionary efforts. In 1943, the Watchtower Bible School of Gilead opened in Patterson, New York to train members for overseas appointments within the organization.\textsuperscript{221} The organization invested in new branch offices and printing equipment, while Knorr and his secretary, Milton Henschel (Watch Tower president from 1992-2000), toured Europe in the winter of 1945-46 to reestablish contact with the European Witness communities and assess their needs. The time and money spent on foreign proselytism paid off in steady postwar expansion. Membership grew in nineteen European states from roughly 74,000 in 1947 to more than 227,000 in 1955.\textsuperscript{222}

Like his predecessor, Knorr publicly affirmed the organization’s opposition to communism. In a keynote speech given to a crowd of over 80,000 people at an international convention at Yankee Stadium in the summer of 1950, Knorr blamed Christendom for the success of communism. He declared that the failure of Christendom to meet the spiritual needs of the population had driven people to seek out other ideologies as a substitute for God. Members in attendance unanimously adopted a resolution condemning communism and the persecution of Witnesses by communist governments, while countering critics’ claims that the Witnesses were themselves communists.\textsuperscript{223} Under Knorr’s leadership, communism frequently appeared in Watch Tower publications as a false religion led by Stalin, the counterfeit messiah. A 1950 article proclaimed that “this ‘red’ religion, like the orthodox

\textsuperscript{220}Penton, \textit{Apocalypse Delayed}, 84.

\textsuperscript{221}“Watchtower Bible College Opens,” \textit{The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom}, February 15, 1943, 60.


‘isms,’ is just another demon religion sponsored by the Devil.”224 Ironically, if the Soviet state viewed the Witnesses as politics guised as religion, Witnesses saw Soviet communism as religion masquerading as a political ideology.

At the war’s close, Soviet Witnesses did not yet exist as a single, unified organization; instead, there were scattered communities of Polish, Romanian, Czechoslovak, and Baltic Witnesses, all under Soviet rule. Prior to the war, these members had received oversight and literature from their countrywide branch offices, whose officials then reported to regional European offices and to Brooklyn. After the war, the Łódź branch office quickly assumed primary responsibility for the Soviet Witnesses, acting as the middleman between them and Brooklyn. Following a visit to the organization’s European offices in November 1945, Knorr released information from Łódź that many of its prewar members “have now been transferred into the depths of Russia” and that a similar fate had befallen prewar Romania’s Bessarabian members. He concluded: “Thus it can be seen how, in the Lord’s providence, he can raise up witnesses in any land, there to hold high the banner of truth and make known the name of Jehovah.”225

With information filtering in from Łódź for the first time since before the war, the Watch Tower organization could finally assess the postwar condition of its membership both in Poland and the Soviet Union.226 In 1947, an article in Awake! (the new title given to the bimonthly magazine, Consolation) eagerly announced that the upcoming yearbook would have the first ever report on Soviet Witnesses. The announcement read in part: “Russia! With

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224 “Russia’s Red Religion: Proof that Communism is Just Another False Religion,” Awake!, July 22, 1950, 8. A 1955 article similarly described communism as “a false religion that receives its power and authority from none other than the Dragon, Satan the devil.” “Communism or Christianity: Which Will It Be?,” Awake!, March 22, 1955, 6.

225 “Reconstructive and Relief Work,” 47.

all its impervious walls! Yet the gladsome message of God’s kingdom has found its way within!”227 In contrast to this upbeat pronouncement, and to Knorr’s enthusiastic vision of a new era of Soviet proselytism, the Łódź postwar reports reflected the arduous conditions of postwar life and persecution. In the 1948 report, the Polish country servant mourned that “reporting on Russia this year grieves my heart” and referred to the “great persecution” underway against Witnesses.228 In 1949, his report stated that a quarter of Soviet Witnesses lived in forced labor camps or in exile in Siberia and Kazakhstan.229 By 1950, communication with Łódź had become so difficult that the office could no longer provide any data beyond rough estimates of total members, noting that it had “very little news” on the Soviet situation.230

Direct Polish oversight ultimately proved an unworkable solution for the Soviet Witnesses, as mounting persecution both in Poland and the Soviet Union made it increasingly difficult to smuggle out reports and to smuggle in instructions and literature. For long-term survival, the fragmented, newly Soviet communities needed to reorganize themselves as a single countrywide entity and create a coherent organizational structure with a clear hierarchy and uniformity in beliefs and practices. The Polish branch thus aided the Soviet communities in establishing a more independent structure, which mirrored that of the worldwide organization, but with some significant modifications to account for the unique conditions of Soviet life underground. In the immediate postwar period, European Witnesses

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229 Ibid., 224.

had been organized into “companies” of several dozen members, later renamed “congregations.” Several companies formed a circuit, several circuits in turn made up a district, all of which were under a countrywide branch committee that then reported to the world headquarters in Brooklyn. Within a single company, members held large meetings three times a week and conducted book studies in small groups.

In the Soviet Union, police surveillance made it impossible for Witnesses to gather in companies on a regular basis. Instead, almost all meetings were held at the study level, which became known as a “circle.” Circles comprised roughly a dozen members, often no more than a single family and its neighbors, who met in members’ homes to study literature, teach basic beliefs and practices, and provide spiritual guidance. Five to twenty circles formed each “group,” which was the rough equivalent of a company or congregation. A similar number of groups then formed a “stref” (“zone” in Polish) of comparable size to a circuit. Several circuits made up an okrug (district), whose overseers reported to a country committee headed by the country servant. In 1951, the Soviet Witness organization had 3 districts, 12 circuits, 181 groups, and 1,071 circles. Slight alterations or variations notwithstanding, this model remained the basic organizational structure for Soviet Witnesses until their

231 Starting in 1938, the organization used the term “company” to refer to its individual congregations, before later switching to the term “congregation” after 1950. Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, 64; and Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers, 206. In 1946, the Soviet Union had an estimated 118 companies. 1947 Yearbook, 218.

232 R. Mel’nyk, discussion with author, June 21, 2007, Briukhovychi, Ukraine.

233 The Polish names given to the organizational units, and used throughout the Soviet period, reflect the initial Łódź leadership of the Soviet Witnesses. For example, a circle was known as a “kilko.” A circuit was also sometimes referred to as an “obvod.” E. M. Bartoshevich and E. I. Borisoglebskii, “Iskuplenie i zhertvy,” Nauka i religiia, no. 4 (1960): 42. For sources on the organizational structure, see also L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 21-24; and Imenem boga jegovy (Moscow: Gos. izd. politicheskoi literatury, 1960), 57-58.

234 This information comes from Mariia Veretel’nyk, who served as secretary to the country servant until both were arrested in 1952. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 3, ark. 15.
legalization in 1991.\textsuperscript{235} It allowed for a clear hierarchy and created order among the disparate congregations across the Soviet Union, but it also exposed the leadership to great danger by marking certain individuals as authorities in the organization. The Soviet state targeted these leaders for arrest and imprisonment.

Jehovah’s Witnesses do not recognize a clergy-laity distinction between members, but rather appoint “elders” to administer their congregations and “traveling overseers” to supervise the operation of congregations within a given circuit or district.\textsuperscript{236} Similarly, in the Soviet Union, each rung of the organization, from circle to district, had a responsible member, or “servant,” appointed by his superiors, who reported up the chain of command through the country committee, which then reported to Łódź or Brooklyn. Despite the constraints of operating underground, Soviet Witnesses adhered to the same basic standards of accountability practiced by their congregations worldwide. To remain active in the Witnesses, all members engaged in proselytism and submitted regular tallies of time spent in this work to the appointed elders (i.e. servants). In the Soviet Union, as elsewhere, the elders consolidated this information and passed it up the hierarchy for use in monthly and yearly country reports.\textsuperscript{237} Under Knorr, this practice allowed Brooklyn to keep closer track of its membership, proselytism efforts, and literature distribution.

Reporting created a major potential hazard, however, since these documents, if discovered by the police, could seriously compromise the organization. Soviet Witnesses took measures to minimize this risk and to shield elders from arrest by employing a large

\textsuperscript{235} Some Soviet sources suggest an organizational level between that of the group and the circuit. See I. Panachevnyi and L. Chemortan, “Protsess v Tabanakh,” Sovetskaia Moldaviia, September 6, 1959, 2, 4, and Bartoshevich and Borisoglebskii, “Iskuplenie i zhertvy,” 42.

\textsuperscript{236} “How are Jehovah’s Witnesses Different?,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, October 15, 1974, 630, and Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers, 222-24.

\textsuperscript{237} Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 2, ark. 247, 262-64; t. 3, ark. 1.
network of couriers who relayed reports and literature, generally written in code, between the various leaders.238 This allowed them to stay in contact without frequent face-to-face meetings and limited the information known by any single believer, restricting how much he or she could divulge if arrested and subjected to interrogation. Many knew no one outside of their immediate circle of a dozen members.

Early leadership of the Witnesses fell to members in western Ukraine, perhaps as a result of the Polish branch office’s oversight. In 1945, the Watch Tower organization appointed Pavlo Ziatek as the Soviet Union’s first country servant. Ziatek had been a Witness since at least 1929 and was considered a member of the 144,000, the “anointed class” who would ascend to heaven to reign with Jesus Christ.239 Born in 1905 in Boryslav, a large town southwest of L’viv (then part of Poland), Ziatek spent the war in eastern Poland under Nazi occupation. With the arrival of Soviet power, he adopted an undocumented, transient existence to avoid arrest.240 Despite this precaution, he enjoyed only a brief tenure as country servant before his arrest in early 1946. His assistants, Stanislav Burak and Petro Tokar’, both from western Ukraine, assumed responsibility for the organization until their arrests a little

238 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 235-36; t. 3, ark. 332.

239 Ivanenko states that Ziatek was baptized in 1925, while Ziatek himself gave 1929 as his date of baptism under interrogation. Ivanenko, O liudakh, 165; L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-30139, ark. 10-11; and Derefinko, interview by author.

240 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-30139, ark. 3, 7, 12.
over a year later.\textsuperscript{241} The leadership then changed hands once again, this time to a Polish resettler, Mykola Tsyba. His tenure extended from 1947 until his arrest in 1952.\textsuperscript{242}

The arrest of so many responsible members created the need for women to fill positions of authority usually reserved for men. The international organization allowed only men to serve as elders and overseers (still the practice today), but the Soviet situation led to more flexibility on gender roles. In particular, many women served as circle leaders and couriers and, less frequently, as group leaders, positions that carried significant personal risk.\textsuperscript{243} They also worked in literature production and distribution. Most prominently, Mariia Veretel’nyk, Tsyba’s assistant during his tenure, oversaw the difficult task of keeping Tsyba safe from police detection by finding housing and places for him to meet with other members. She prepared countrywide reports on membership and proselytism and briefly led instructional lessons on how to conduct effective proselytism, known as “theocratic service courses,” in L’viv oblast.\textsuperscript{244} Later Soviet propaganda portrayed her as Tsyba’s girlfriend. In fact, many Witness men and women, particularly those in leadership or missionary roles, delayed marriage or remained single during this period. The presumed proximity of Armageddon made marriage and childbearing matters of secondary concern.\textsuperscript{245}

\textsuperscript{241} 2002 Yearbook, 156, 58. Under interrogation in 1947, Tokar’ claimed that he assumed the position of country servant after Ziatek’s arrest on his own initiative, with Burak as his assistant. More likely, and also according to the Watch Tower organization, Burak was given the official title as country servant, and Tokar’ was his assistant. DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 2, ark. 141-42.

\textsuperscript{242} Tsyba’s name is sometimes also spelled “Tsiba” in sources; I have chosen to use “Tsyba” as this is the version that appears in official Watch Tower publications. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 3, ark. 12-15, 38.

\textsuperscript{243} L’viv SBU archive, spr. 32341, ark. 40-42.

\textsuperscript{244} “Pod maskoi very “ Krasnoe znania, October 6, 1957, 1, and L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31504, ark. 23, 49, 70.

\textsuperscript{245} President Rutherford’s 1941 work, Children, for example, addresses family matters through conversations between a fictional young couple. The man, John, tells the woman, Eunice: “We can well defer our marriage
leadership roles assumed by women meant that they also became frequent targets of arrests. The state arrested Veretel’nyk along with Tsyba and convicted them both in 1952.\footnote{246}

The establishment of a Soviet country committee did not negate the need for contact with Łódź and Brooklyn, although it did make Soviet members less dependent on those offices. The committee still relied on Łódź to secure new Watch Tower publications and directives from Brooklyn. Not enough literature arrived through resettlers from Poland to provide a long-term solution to the ongoing problem.\footnote{247} To obtain new issues of The Watchtower, Awake!, and other publications, the Soviet organization gathered donations and sent clandestine payments, primarily through Łódź in the Stalin era, to finance literature deliveries.\footnote{248} Couriers smuggled money, literature, and instructions across the border, risking arrest or death for their actions.\footnote{249} One man, after making several successful smuggling runs, apparently drowned, or perhaps was shot, while attempting to cross the Bug River into Poland.\footnote{250} Transcarpathian and Moldavian Witnesses used prewar contacts in Czechoslovakian and Romanian Witness communities to obtain small batches of literature.\footnote{251}

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until lasting peace comes to the earth. Now we must add nothing to our burdens, but be free and equipped to serve the Lord.” J. F. Rutherford, *Children* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc., and the International Bible Students Association, 1941), 366. According to Penton, this position changed under President Knorr by the 1950s. Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed*, 262-66.
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\footnote{246} Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 3, ark. 332.

\footnote{247} DALO, f. 3258, spr. 25018, t. 1, ark. 62.

\footnote{248} Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 168-70.

\footnote{249} Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 2, ark. 262-63.


\footnote{251} Zakarpattia SBU archive, t. 1, spr. 149957, ark. 88, and Questionnaire for Alexandru Gheorghita (MJW). A history of the Polish Witnesses published in the 1994 Yearbook notes that Soviet Witnesses “tried to establish contact with the organization through Slovakia, but this proved to be extremely difficult.” 2000 Yearbook, 206.
Once items of literature arrived in the Soviet Union, the organization had to find ways to reproduce enough copies for its membership, a particular challenge given the organization’s ethnic diversity. To reach most of their members, they needed literature printed in Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Romanian, and the Baltic languages. Elders spent much of their time coordinating printing and translation work. They gathered donations to purchase printing equipment on the black market. However, given the crowded quarters of Soviet apartments, finding safe locations to store and use the printing equipment presented a serious challenge. While some initial printing took place in apartments, a safer option proved to be rural locations. Elders constructed secret underground bunkers in Witnesses’ backyards or nearby forests. Skilled labor was needed to run the operation, as well as a continual supply of printing paper and ink—commodities not readily available to average citizens. Once printed, couriers distributed a few copies of the literature to each group or circle. Individual believers then reproduced the literature by hand so that each household had a copy. Each stage of the printing work involved significant risk and was extremely vulnerable to police detection. Until the Khrushchev era, access to new literature was sporadic at best and most members relied heavily on their existing stock of prewar literature.

The country servant, Pavlo Ziatek, oversaw the creation of these initial Soviet underground printing presses, created in L’viv oblast shortly after the end of the war. Police confiscated the first set of printing equipment, stored in the home of Ivanna Haletovych,

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252 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 307-08.

253 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 2, ark. 250; t. 3, ark. 41.

254 This is evident from the lists of literature seized during police searches of Witness homes. L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 86-91, 126-27; spr. P-31365, ark. 97-101.
during an early 1946 raid that also resulted in Ziatek’s arrest.\textsuperscript{255} A second printing press, set up at roughly the same time, operated in the cellar of a longtime member and pensioner, Mariia Shkoda, in L’viv. Elders likely chose Shkoda, an older woman, in part because she would draw less immediate suspicion. Two young members ran the actual operation and lived in her home. Police raided her home in the middle of the night in June 1947 and arrested her and the two printing press operators.\textsuperscript{256} Under Tsyba’s leadership, Witnesses constructed additional bunkers and other hiding spaces in western Ukraine to store important documents, funds, printing equipment, and literature. Tsyba’s secretary estimated that from 1948 to 1950, the organization printed 133,000 items of literature on their presses.\textsuperscript{257}

Brooklyn-produced literature remained the centerpiece of meetings, which were held at least once a week, more often two or three times a week, depending on the ability of members to gather in secret. In order not to arouse suspicion, meetings rarely involved more than a single circle and were held late at night or early in the morning. Soviet Moldavia’s procuracy (prosecution office), in the course of gathering evidence against local Witness leaders, recorded 192 circle meetings for April 1947 alone. The actual figure was almost certainly higher.\textsuperscript{258} In some areas, elders attempted to hold periodic assemblies of members and conferences among appointed leaders, although such events carried a high risk of discovery and required a great deal of coordination. In Zakarpattia oblast, groups as large as

\begin{itemize}
\item [255] L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-30139, ark. 19, 27, 33.
\item [256] DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 1, ark. 14.
\item [257] Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 3, ark. 41.
\item [258] ANRM, f. 3085, d. 144, f. 14.
\end{itemize}
200 people gathered in the unpopulated wooded areas between villages, but such incidents were relatively rare.259

Both Soviet and Witness documents from this time period suggest that Witnesses continued to proselytize in their communities and succeeded in finding new members. By 1946, more than 8,000 people regularly attended meetings, and over 10,000 books and pamphlets had been distributed among the population. The Łódź branch office reported that Soviet Witnesses spent more than 130,000 hours proselytizing that year.260 According to the Witness organization, from 1946 to 1949, roughly 4,000 people converted to the faith.261 By the end of 1949, an estimated 10,000 people were active members.262 That same year, Soviet Witnesses visited close to 50,000 people and held more than 6,000 Bible studies with potential converts.263 Beginning in 1951, the organization suspended the practice of publishing statistical data for Soviet territories in its annual yearbooks to protect these members from further persecution. Instead, it printed a composite figure for the Eastern European states where Witnesses had no legal status.264

The figure of 10,000 members in 1949 likely represents only those persons who had undergone baptism, which, by the postwar era, had become a necessary rite of passage of all

259 For large-scale meetings, see L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31504, ark. 183, and Zakapattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 173, 180, 197.


262 Ibid.

263 Data on proselytism and studies comes from information given by Mariia Veretel’nyk in 1952. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 3, ark. 1.

264 This practice began with the 1953 Yearbook, after two years without any statistical data. 1953 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, International Bible Students Association, 1952), 31.
Witnesses worldwide. Witness baptisms are full water immersions performed by an elder, usually in swimming pools during conventions. This made it difficult to conduct baptisms under heavy police surveillance. Soviet Witnesses continued the wartime practice of using local lakes and rivers, typically in the early morning or late at night to avoid attention. The difficulties involved meant that some members were not baptized until several years after they had begun practicing the faith. Witnesses do not set a specific age for baptism, but instead restrict it to those mature enough to understand and commit to the faith. Thus the statistics do not include those who attended meetings but had not yet resolved to undergo baptism, or the children of adult members not yet capable of making this decision. The total number of people who attended meetings regularly, read Witness literature, and considered themselves adherents to the faith, certainly exceeded official membership totals.

Proselytism methods varied little from those used during the war and immediate prewar period. Witnesses preached to friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. They lent or sold organizational publications to interested people and then visited them to discuss what they had read. Owing to literature shortages, some members made their own fliers with handwritten Bible quotes and brief theological messages, and passed them out to the public. One such flier proclaimed the coming battle of Armageddon, promising that all “people of good will” will be protected from this destruction. In line with Knorr’s increased emphasis on missionary work, a 1945 issue of Informer (Informator), a newsletter published by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society and circulated in the Soviet Union, stated that all

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266 Police found several such documents upon the arrest of one female Witness in 1949. L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31931, non-paginated folder in back of file.
members, including those not yet baptized, must use all available free time in “theocratic service,” i.e. proselytism. In 1943, Knorr instituted “theocratic ministry schools” in all congregations worldwide to teach members how to engage in effective proselytism. This practice filtered gradually into the Soviet Union in the postwar era.

Given the postwar conditions, the organization advised Soviet members to avoid preaching to known opponents of the religion and to leave only a single brochure with interested persons. Even with such precautionary measures, Witnesses faced the possibility of denunciation every time they spoke about their religion to others. A single report to the police could result in the arrest and conviction of a Witness for anti-Soviet activity. In fact, denunciations formed the backbone of many postwar cases against the Witnesses. To limit this risk, Witnesses exercised discretion in interacting with people who expressed an initial interest in the religion, studying with them in private rather than inviting them to circle meetings, until they felt certain the person had made a serious commitment to the faith.

Sofiia Derefinko, for example, recalls her cousin taking her to a wartime meeting in L’viv led by Ziatek, who, fearing Sofiia would betray them, instructed her cousin to study with her alone until baptism. She and Ziatek later joked about the awkward circumstances in which they met. Ultimately, she did attend meetings and, when arrested in 1950, gave the police little useful information.

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267 This document was confiscated from the home of a L’viv Witness in early 1946. L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-30139, ark. 87.

268 Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, 83.

269 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-37858, ark. 134.

270 Derefinko, interview by author, and Derefinko, interview by Mel’nyk.

271 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-14905.
Many Witnesses faced the additional obstacle of family members who did not agree with their religious beliefs or practices. The conversion of one person, after all, put the whole family in danger of reprisals from the state. When one woman joined the Witnesses, her angry husband demanded that she leave the religion immediately. When she refused, he left her and their two children and moved in with another woman, only returning after she promised to renounce her faith. In fact, however, she continued to practice her beliefs in secret until her arrest in 1950. Brought in for questioning, the husband detailed how she had ignored his wishes, even how he beat her in an attempt to force her into submission. Yet even some fiercely opposed family members eventually joined the organization, as happened in the case of Derefinoko, whose husband was baptized while living with her in exile in 1955.

Those who joined the Witnesses after 1945 had much in common with prewar members. Converts frequently came from existing Witness families or joined the organization as a family. Most were peasants, unskilled laborers, pensioners, or sellers at local markets. Few had more than four years of education at a village school. They typically had belonged to other churches or had been raised in religious households prior to joining the Witnesses. In later years, Witnesses, dispersed throughout the Soviet Union, converted a significant number of Russians and members of other Soviet nationalities. In the Stalin era, however, the majority of members were Ukrainian and Romanian. While Soviet propaganda portrayed religious communities as composed primarily of women and elderly members,

272 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-33518, ark. 86-89.

273 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-14905, ark. 67, and Derefinoko, interview by author.
neither seems to have been the case for the Witnesses in the Stalin era. Both women and men, for example, were arrested in considerable numbers. A 1947 Ministry of State Security (Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti, hereafter MGB) report for L’viv oblast states that, of the twenty-seven Witnesses they arrested that year, just over half were between eighteen and twenty-three years old. Overall, the Witnesses found converts among those not strongly invested in Soviet power or its institutions. These individuals had less to lose by joining a religious organization and were more receptive to the Witnesses’ message against secular authority.

Soviet Citizens or Jehovah’s Witnesses?

The sovietization of the western borderlands after the war introduced new institutions and modes of life. The state extended its network of Party committees and village councils (soviets) to oversee local government and life. Collectivization of agriculture began in earnest in 1946 and continued through the late 1940s. The first national postwar elections to the Supreme Soviet were held in February 1946. Education officials remodeled and expanded the existing school systems so that schools provided an ideologically sound education for children and youth in conformity with the rest of the Soviet Union. National cultural life was sharply constricted in favor of Russification policies. In short, nearly every

274 This information is drawn primarily from Ukrainian SBU files, which provide basic biographical details on arrested members and their families.

275 RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 32, d. 444, l. 6.

276 Zubkova, Russia After the War, 74.

277 For example, 3,400 new schools were built in Ukraine by 1950. Paul R. Magocsi, A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 695.
aspect of daily life in the western borderlands underwent a major transformation in the immediate postwar era.

The Witnesses faced the serious question of how to adapt to these changes while remaining faithful to their beliefs. Their initial stance on sovietization was informed primarily by wartime experiences and without direct oversight from Brooklyn. During the war, Witnesses had affirmed their worldwide commitment to political neutrality when it came to wars and conflicts, refusing to serve in the Red Army as it advanced westward toward Berlin. After 1945, when the Soviet state amnestied many of these men, some returned from prison to their villages with an even greater resolve in their faith. They told their fellow villagers that God had saved them, while those who disobeyed God by serving in the military had died. Survival strengthened many Witnesses’ faith, as they believed that God had spared their lives as a reward for resisting military conscription.

Beyond the military service question, however, Soviet Witnesses lacked a coherent position in regard to cooperation with the state and its institutions. Cut off from the rest of the worldwide organization, local members had to make major decisions without outside guidance. It was a difficult position for them to be in, since they understood their faith dictated that the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society decide these matters. In Soviet Ukraine and Moldavia, members smuggled out questions to both the Łódź office and Brooklyn about what to do under these bewildering circumstances. While they waited for a response, however, events demanded that elders make temporary rulings for communities to follow.

Ultimately, the early Witness leadership extended the wartime policy of non-cooperation with state institutions. Religious doctrine had a critical role in shaping this

278 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 22, ark. 28.
decision. For Witnesses, the Bible provided clear instruction on church-state relations. They deferred to Romans 13:1, which states, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” Early Watch Tower publications had interpreted “governing authorities” (also translated as “higher powers”) to mean that mankind, including Witnesses, must obey state laws except when doing so would violate God’s laws. In 1929, however, the organization concluded that “governing authorities” refers instead to Jehovah and Jesus Christ. While both interpretations required some adherence to secular laws, the 1929 view suggested a more radical position toward governments and steered members away from any involvement in, or even acknowledgment of, secular authority.279 A 1949 article declared, “All the nations of the earth are against God and his kingdom. It is therefore impossible for a person to be in full accord with the governments of this world and at the same time to be in full harmony with God’s kingdom under Christ. He must serve one or the other of the masters, and there can be no compromise.”280

In practice, non-cooperation with the Soviet state meant that Witnesses refused to vote in local elections, register for the draft, sign petitions, or buy state bonds intended to finance reconstruction and the military. They avoided working in large state institutions, particularly those with any connection to the military. They generally did not join collective farms. As a rule, they did not take part in any Party or state measures, nor join unions, clubs, or organizations. A sizeable percentage did not obtain passports. Virtually none signed the postwar petitions against nuclear war. Some lived an itinerant existence, traveling from

279 Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, 139.

280 “Obedience to God or to Men?,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, December 1, 1949, 365.
village to village to proselytize, and living off donations or the sale of goods at local bazaars.\(^{281}\)

In this respect, the Soviet Union’s subsequent categorization of the Witnesses as a serious threat had a basis in reality. Witnesses fundamentally undermined the state’s postwar goals of integrating the western borderlands and transforming its population into patriotic, loyal Soviet citizens. For the Witnesses, concepts of citizenship and nationality had no meaning; only obedience to Jehovah held any importance. Vasyl’ Bokoch expressed the sentiments of most Witnesses when he stated, “I live on Jehovah God’s earth. I do not recognize any government territories or any governments, except the government of Jehovah God.” When asked, most Witnesses refused to identify themselves with a specific nationality.\(^{282}\)

Similarly, in Soviet elections where the goal was 100 percent participation and approval of candidates, the blatant refusal by Witnesses to vote, even if they constituted only a small minority of the electorate, threatened the legitimacy of the process. To avoid harassment by polling officials, one Witness couple left their home early in the morning on elections and spent the entire day walking around the city. They returned at midnight only after the polls had closed. Their housing manager told the police that they lived “as though Soviet power did not exist for them.”\(^{283}\) Indeed, for many Witnesses, it did not. Dmytro Vasylyshyn, arrested in 1947, told his interrogator, “I do not recognize the existing government order, but only the theocratic order for which I have voted.” Witnesses like Vasylyshyn believed they had cast their vote for God at baptism; to vote in Soviet elections

\(^{281}\) Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 12-14, 36-37, 51.

\(^{282}\) Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 11, 14.

\(^{283}\) L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-33989, ark. 42, 74.
would be to deny God’s authority. One Witness told officials at his local polling station, “It doesn’t matter to me who is in power” and expressed his unwillingness to vote for any earthly government. He told the officials that they could “do what they wanted with him,” even put him in prison, but he would not vote. Authorities did eventually arrest him and sentenced him to twenty-five years in a labor camp.

In rural areas with high concentrations of Witnesses, the organization could represent a major affront to sovietization of the western borderlands. For example, the Transcarpathian village of Bila Tserkva, located on the Romanian border, had an estimated three to four hundred members in 1949 when the MGB launched an investigation into Witness activity there. Police interrogated dozens of local Party officials, school teachers, and neighbors, who alleged that local Witnesses leaders were primarily rich peasants (kulaks) undermining collectivization by their refusal to join the newly created collective farm (kolkhoz) and their influence over other believers to do the same. One Witness allegedly stated, “Let them hang me, but I’m not joining the kolkhoz. We Jehovah’s Witnesses will never join the kolkhoz and you can stop agitating to us.” This man’s brother similarly declared, “Why should I join the kolkhoz when the kolkhozes will soon perish [i.e. during Armageddon]?"

One Party official from the village noted that as a result of Witness opposition, only 60 of the

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284 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-37858, ark. 15. Witnesses frequently stated that they had already “voted for God” and could not vote again when asked why they refused to participate in elections. L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31365, ark. 18-19.


286 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 2, ark. 225, 400.

287 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 176-87.

288 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 199-200.
420 households (*dvory*) had joined the kolkhoz.\(^{289}\) After the arrest of several high-profile members, the local soviet submitted forms to the police listing how many acres of land and how many heads of livestock each arrested Witness possessed.\(^{290}\)

Several informants, including the local school teacher, noted with concern that the Witnesses kept their children from integrating into everyday Soviet life and instilled in them hostility toward Soviet power. The daughter of one Witness refused to sing the Soviet anthem, telling her teacher that the Bible taught her not to “serve two masters.” At an induction ceremony into the Young Pioneers (the Party organization for school-age children), another Witness child threw off the Pioneer scarf, crying, “Don’t, don’t, take it off!” The school director noted that the children did not want to read patriotic poems or stories about the Red Army, and that he had information that the parents held meetings to indoctrinate youth into the faith. He cited cases where his students, when asked where they live, responded “on earth” so as to avoid saying “in the Soviet Union.”\(^{291}\) When questioned about this fact, one Witness, the father of two children, stated simply, “Jehovah directs my children.”\(^{292}\)

The school situation in Bila Tserkva reflected the Witnesses’ broader attitude toward secular education. Witnesses did not allow their children to join youth organizations or participate in extracurricular activities. For them, schools represented a serious danger to a child’s religious upbringing and parents sometimes withheld their children from school or withdrew them after they had received a basic education. In the Stalin era, police handled

\(^{289}\) Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 2, ark. 229-31.

\(^{290}\) Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 2, ark. 355-61.


\(^{292}\) Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 48.
most conflicts between schools and Witnesses by arresting members and collecting evidence from teachers and school administrators.

For the state, incidents such as those in Bila Tserkva proved that Witnesses represented a “hostile political formation” attempting to destroy Soviet power. The Witnesses, in turn, saw the state as a corrupt and satanic institution destined for destruction by God in the impending apocalypse. These two views could not be reconciled. Witnesses provoked the ire of the state not only because of their refusal to participate in Soviet life, but also because their commitment to proselytism led them to share this belief with others. Attempts to convince or compel Witnesses to take part in Soviet institutions often provoked strong affirmations of faith. One Witness, asked to sign up for a state bond at work, told his boss that soon God would destroy all existing power on earth, establish his own authority, and save only those who believe in him. Such openly provocative statements and actions exposed Witnesses to arrest and long sentences in labor camps. After one Witness in Stanislav oblast declared publicly that she intended to vote for Jesus Christ in the spring 1950 elections, the Ukrainian security services arrested her.

As early as 1947, the Watch Tower organization advised Soviet Witnesses to adopt a more moderate approach to state relations through a set of instructions known as the “Ten Points,” sent through the Łódź office. By early 1948, the Soviet country committee had translated and reprinted the Ten Points, distributing copies to regional leaders who then shared the information with their circles. The instructions, meant to provide guidance on series of specific issues raised by Soviet members, advised them to accept Soviet passports,

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293 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 94, ark. 75.
294 L’viv SBU archive, spr. 27858, ark. 201-02.
295 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 77, ark. 60.
register for the draft (although not to actually serve in the Red Army), and join collective farms. Not everyone accepted this apparent change in direction. Dmytro Shelever, a circuit leader in Zakarpattia oblast, refused to recognize the memo as valid, instead accusing a fellow circuit leader of forging the document and of apostasy. Many members sided with Shelever and his position, causing a serious rift in the organization that resolved itself only with Shelever’s death in 1949.296 To sort out the situation, country servant Tsyba appointed a responsible member, Bohdan Terlets’kyi, to renew channels of communication between the oblast and the country committee, to appoint group and circle leaders, and to reunify the organization around the Ten Points.297

By the end of the Stalin era, almost all Witnesses had adopted the fundamental guidelines outlined in the Ten Points. While the instructions dictated greater caution and obedience to basic state laws, they did not eliminate most of the grounds used by the Soviet state to arrest Witnesses. Witnesses continued to refuse to serve in the military, to vote, to sign petitions, to enroll in trade unions, or let their children join Soviet youth organizations. They also preached this message to others. These actions fueled the state’s harsh repression of the Witnesses.

Soviet Religious Policy in the Late Stalin Era

Hoping to further reconcile Witnesses with the state, the Watch Tower organization broached the possibility that an understanding could be reached with the Soviet government, particularly since several Eastern European states under the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence still had functioning branch offices. Perhaps if the Soviet authorities had accurate

296 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 18-20, 66-67.

297 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 118.
information on Witnesses and their purely religious goals, the Brooklyn leadership reasoned, they would realize that Witnesses posed no danger to the state. With this in mind, Knorr sent instructions through Łódź in 1948 to have Soviet members petition the government for registration and the right to worship. In 1949, several men from Ukraine were tasked with delivering this document. The petition, available in the Ukrainian state archives, describes the Witnesses’ core beliefs and practices, most importantly their call to preach the good news of God’s kingdom to all people, to print and study religious literature, and to hold Bible studies and meetings. It declared that the Soviet Witnesses were all “loyal citizens of the USSR” with no political intentions. The petition asked for legalization of the organization and freedom of worship for its members, which it overestimated at 20,000.298

The Witnesses’ attempt to gain legal standing speaks both to the status of church-state relations in the postwar era and the Witnesses’ own unique relationship to secular authority.

World War II saw the transformation of Soviet religious policy. Stalin loosened restrictions on the largest religion in the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church, allowing it a limited legal existence, and followed this step by opening a path to legalization for other religious organizations. In the fall of 1943 and the spring of 1944, the state formed two new bodies, the Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs (Sovet po delam Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi, hereafter CROCA) and the Council for Religious Cult Affairs (Sovet po delam religioznykh kul’tov, hereafter CRCA), to oversee the regulation of religious life.299 Government-appointed commissioners administered the councils in each oblast or krai

298 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 2, spr. 181, ark. 90-96.

299 Both councils were initially under the control of the Council of People’s Commissars, and later of the Council of Ministers. Tatiana Chumachenko has written an excellent work on the Council on Russian Orthodox Church Affairs: Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years.
(region) and in every union republic. A chief commissioner for the USSR oversaw the entire operation and conveyed policy initiatives. During the postwar era, these councils served as the face of Soviet religious policy for believers and were responsible for the registration of religious communities and the collection of data on religious believers and communities.  

Stalin’s wartime modus vivendi with the Russian Orthodox Church developed gradually into a broader state mandate to register religion and bring it under closer state control. Registration of religious associations had been first instituted in the Soviet Union under the 1929 Law on Religious Associations, which allowed groups of no less than twenty citizens to form a religious association, hold services, conduct religious rites, and use state buildings for this purpose.\textsuperscript{301} The postwar era, however, made this right, already granted in principle, a reality for a select number of religious communities. As in the 1929 law, the registration process required each religious group (a minimum of twenty adult members) to submit a request to the newly created CROCA and CRCA. Approval came with many strings attached: no meetings outside of approved houses of worship, notification to the state of all religious rituals (such as baptisms), no special instruction of minors in religion, no proselytism, no charitable work, and no printing or distribution of literature without prior state consent and oversight, to name just a few.

For the Witnesses, registration as defined by the state would have required the organization to encourage members to fulfill all civic responsibilities and participate in civic life by serving in the military and voting. These terms fundamentally undermined the basic practices and beliefs of the Witnesses—a religion based on proselytism, literature study, and

\textsuperscript{300} GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 1, l. 4.

non-participation in public life. Further, the CRCA did not consider all religions eligible for registration and stated that those whose beliefs and actions are of an anti-state or fanatical character were not to be registered. It included “Jehovists” specifically in this categorization.  

The Witnesses’ 1949 petition, therefore, represented a fundamental misunderstanding by the organization as to the parameters of Soviet registration. Several sources confirm that a delegation of Witnesses attempted to deliver the petition to the Ministry of the Interior through the CRCA. They traveled first to Moscow, were rebuffed, and then went to Kiev where they also had no success. As the petitioners refused to compromise on any aspects of their beliefs and practices, state officials in both locations summarily dismissed the request. Soon after, the men involved were arrested. A separate group of men submitted a parallel petition to the Estonian Supreme Soviet, and met with similar rejection. After this resounding failure, Knorr abandoned the goal of registration for the Soviet Witnesses for the time being.

The Soviet state understood better than the Witnesses that the organization did not meet its guidelines for religious groups. In a 1947 memo to the Ukrainian security services, 

302 Other groups named under this category were Reform Adventists and the Orthodox Old Believer sects, the Skoptsy and Khlysty. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 506, l. 184.

303 “Communist Leaders Fear Bible Truth,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, April 1, 1956, 217, and Bartoshevich and Borisoglebskii, Imenem boga Iegovy, 155.

304 Oleg Gol’ko has a unique version of this event, claiming that, in Moscow, the men met with the deputy chair of the Supreme Soviet Presidium, who offered the organization registration if it would provide information on all its members and agree to propagate communist ideology. The deputy then had the men wait while he conferred with Stalin. When he returned, the deputy informed the Witnesses that Stalin had declared, “Either sign the agreement on our terms, or else . . . .” The men ignored the threat and left. Gol’ko, Sibirskii marshrut, 77-80.

305 See Rurak, Tri aresta, 63; and “Half a Century under Totalitarian Tyranny,” Awake!, February 22, 1999, 11-12.
the CRCA expressed its view that the “Jehovists” were a sectarian group hostile to Soviet power and, as such, not eligible for registration. The Witnesses were not the only religion without legal recognition. In 1949, there were an estimated 1,703 unregistered religious groups in the USSR, including 598 Muslim groups, 298 Old Believer groups, and over 750 various Protestant groups. While Witnesses do not consider themselves Protestant, the Soviet state categorized them as such. Most Soviet believers belonged to religions theoretically eligible for registration, such as Baptists and Muslims, but had been denied approval by the CRCA. The rest, the Witnesses and many Old Believer sects, comprised a “religious underground” defined for the CRCA by anti-Soviet fanaticism and ineligible for registration.

The CRCA provided the Soviet state with the bulk of its information on potentially subversive or dangerous religious communities. The CRCA served as the clearinghouse for information on religious organizations outside of the Russian Orthodox Church, from synagogues to mosques to Baptist prayer houses. In general, the CRCA had the difficult task of assessing the current state of Soviet religious belief. This was of particular importance given that wartime expansion had fundamentally altered the prewar religious situation through the state’s acquisition of churches and faith communities in these territories. By 1949, four out of five registered prayer houses in the USSR were located in areas either occupied during World War II or annexed during the war. Witnesses represented one of

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306 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 2, spr. 29, ark. 9.

307 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 111, l. 50. The CRCA specifically listed Witnesses, Skoptsy, Zionists, Reform Adventists, and other minority religions as belonging to the religious underground. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 497, l. 88.

308 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 111, l. 48.
several religions with which Soviet authorities had no prewar experience and which they quickly marked as dangerous and anti-Soviet.

Scattered reports of Witness activity did not take long to reach the newly created CRCA. In July 1945, a CRCA memo, sent to then Ukrainian Party chief N. S. Khrushchev, included the Witnesses on a list of all known religious organizations in Ukraine. That said, it took the council some time to sort out the Witnesses’ beliefs and practices in detail. The Witnesses’ confusing resemblance to the Il’inist sect made matters even more complex. The Ukrainian CRCA could not even decide on the organization’s proper title for almost a year. The July 1945 memo listed Witnesses both as “Bible Students,” their pre-1931 name, and “Bodachi,” a colloquial Polish term for the Witnesses derived from the Polish verb “to study.” The same report separately mentioned a group of “Jehovists” in Kiev oblast, almost certainly a reference to the Il’inists, and not the Witnesses. Follow-up reports confused the matter further, using “Apocalypsists” (Apokalipsisty) to refer to Il’inists and “Russellists” (Russelisty) to refer to a group it categorized as distinct from the Witnesses. By May 1946, the Ukrainian CRCA had figured out that Bodachi, Bible Students, Russellists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses referred to the same organization, although CRCA documents continued to employ all of these terms throughout the Stalin era before settling on “Jehovists.” The Moldavian CRCA took even longer, still issuing reports

309 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 23, spr. 1639, ark. 14-19.
310 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 23, spr. 1640, ark. 200.
311 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 23, spr. 2846, ark. 15.
referring to Witnesses as “Millenialists” (Mileonisty) as late as 1948. The inability to sort out various millenarian groups made it difficult to identify precise locations of Witnesses.

Despite this confusion, the state quickly gathered information about the Witnesses’ most provocative beliefs and practices. The Witnesses’ conscientious objection to military service was likely the most well-known fact about the organization, appearing in almost every CRCA report. Several reports also made note of the Witnesses’ hostility toward secular government and their refusal to vote in local elections. In 1946, the Ukrainian CRCA sent instructions to its regional commissioners asking that they devote special attention to identifying Witnesses. It cautioned that the organization represented a “very dangerous group with connections to Banderists and Ukrainian-German nationalists.” The CRCA requested that commissioners immediately send any available information to the Kiev office. In response, the L’viv commissioner informed the CRCA that he knew of over 500 “Bodachi-Russellists” who rejected state power and refused to comply with military service and state laws. He stated that in areas with high concentrations of Jehovists, local officials had noticed abnormally low levels of dairy and grain requisitions, a claim repeated by other Ukrainian oblast CRCA commissioners. A 1946 Volyn’ oblast CRCA report estimated that it had about 275 Witnesses, mostly people who joined since 1938. The Volyn’ commissioner noted that the Witnesses claimed to have no leaders other than Jesus Christ and the Bible.

312 ANRM, f. 3305, inv. 2, d. 2, f. 47, also d. 4, ff. 47-48.
313 The Ukrainian CRCA had fairly accurate information about the Witnesses’ concentration in western Ukraine, identifying Witness communities in the oblasts of Ternopil’, Rivne, Volyn’, and Chernivtsi. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 23, spr. 1639, ark. 14-19; spr. 1640, ark. 200-01.
314 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 18, ark. 22-23; spr. 22, ark. 127-28.
315 DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 6, ark. 27-28, 84-85, and TsDAVO f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 18, ark. 23.
316 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 22, ark. 28.
same year, the Zakarpattia oblast CRCA identified six villages with 730 Witnesses total, including 300 estimated members in the village of Grushevo alone. Overall, the CRCA developed a clear portrait of the organization as one defined by anti-Soviet and anti-state fanaticism.

In an effort to eliminate unregistered religious groups, the CRCA apparently considered the possibility of encouraging believers to join registered organizations such as the Baptists. A 1948 memo from the deputy chair of the all-union CRCA to the Moldavian commissioner asked him to explore the viability of using the registered Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist organizations to influence underground sects such as the Reform Adventists and Millennialists. The L’viv commissioner likewise noted in January 1950 that he had encouraged local Baptist leaders to meet with Witnesses in order to convince them to join the registered Baptist organization and to abandon “blind fanaticism,” noting that this plan had some success but still needed more development. However, such an approach had its weaknesses. One Moldavian report suggested that Witnesses had begun falsely identifying as legal Baptists to shield themselves from persecution. Ultimately, this method did not move beyond the experimental stage, for reasons not entirely clear in the available sources. With or without state endorsement, however, both Baptists and Witnesses proselytized to one another and saw one another as potential converts.

317 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 22, ark. 127-28.
318 ANRM, f. 3305, op. 2, d. 4, ff. 28-29.
319 DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 13, ark. 18.
320 Pasat, Trudnye stranitsy, 590-93.
Information about the Witnesses increased significantly once the MGB arrested and interrogated large numbers of members starting in 1946 and 1947. Indeed, the security apparatus and the CRCA relied heavily on one another during this period, as both struggled to make sense of this new religious community and to assess its potential threat. Certainly, the CRCA did not have access to ongoing investigations and interrogations of Witnesses contained in the MGB’s internal files. But both the MGB and the CRCA shared a common view that Witnesses represented a serious danger to state security and could not be granted legal status as a religious organization. Reporting on the sectarian situation in the fall of 1946, the Moldavian Central Committee (TsK) sent word to its MGB office that several illegal sects existed in Soviet Moldavia, namely the Innokentists, the Reform Adventists, and the “Jehovists” or “Millennialists.” The report stated that Jehovists, concentrated primarily in the northern districts, held “extremely fanatical views” and considered all governmental power to be godless and satanic. A 1947 CRCA briefing estimated that Moldavia had up to 2,500 members overall, correlating closely with a detailed report from the Moldavian procuracy the following year that identified Witnesses in 21 villages, comprising 23 groups and 243 circles.

Similarly, the Ukrainian MGB for L’viv oblast prepared a report in late 1947 asserting that the region had as many as 1,000 members, most of them young. These believers, it noted, did not recognize any authority other than Jehovah God and Jesus Christ. As such, members refused to participate in elections or to join kolkhozes, largely avoided work in state institutions, did not pay taxes, and lived primarily off speculation or income.

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321 The Ministry of State Security, or MGB, took over responsibility for internal state security in 1946. In 1951, it was briefly merged into the Ministry of Internal Affairs until 1953, when it became the Committee for State Security, or KGB.

322 Pasat, Trudnye stranitsy, 590-93; and ANRM, f. 3085, d. 144, inv. 1, f. 13.
from the sale of anti-Soviet religious literature. The following year, the Ukrainian CRCA instructed its regional commissioners to inform the regional interior ministry offices and police about all known religious groups. In response, the all-union CRCA in Moscow praised Ukraine’s initiatives and reiterated the responsibility of oblast commissioners to prepare concrete materials on all religious believers and leaders of illegal religious organizations, and to pass on this information to the security organs. It also advised the CRCA to issue warnings to leaders of non-registered religious organizations and to let the local police and Party executive committees handle administrative actions against these individuals.

Neither the Communist Party nor the state devoted serious attention to atheist propaganda during the late Stalin era, despite occasional rhetoric exhorting Party members and agitators to conduct such work. Most of the state’s meager efforts occurred through the Party’s youth organization, the Komsomol, and through the Knowledge Society. A 1950 report from the Party agitprop department noted that the Knowledge Society, through its publishing house, had printed few lectures on atheist themes, and what it had printed was of dubious quality and unconnected to specific problems in Soviet society. The lack of literature on religion in general, and unregistered religions in particular, meant that neither the Knowledge Society nor the Komsomol had sufficient information to conduct effective

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323 The report was prepared for the Komsomol, given the large number of youth among the Witnesses, and intended to shame the Komsomol into more aggressive action against sects. RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 32, d. 444, ll. 5-8.

324 DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 9, ark. 107-08.

325 DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 15, ark. 149-50.

326 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 286, ll. 3-4.
atheist propaganda. As a result, both groups largely ignored the problem, giving only sporadic lectures to local populations during the Stalin era.\footnote{327 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 6, ll. 124-30.}

Komsomol and Party officials recognized the potential threat posed by religious proselytism among Soviet youth. A 1950 memo from Moldavian TsK Secretary Leonid Brezhnev expressed concern about the exposure of youth in Moldavia to “alien influences, in particular the influence of religious organizations,” and recommended that the Komsomol and Pioneer organizations strengthen their efforts to combat religious ideology.\footnote{328 AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 9, d. 266, f. 146.} A 1947 Komsomol plenum in L’viv oblast directly blamed weak atheist propaganda for the growth of sectarian believers such as the Witnesses. Yet beyond vague calls to instill patriotism and improve lecture quality, even L’viv, the center of Soviet Witness activity, showed little initiative to correct the problem.\footnote{329 RGASPI, f. M-1, op. 32, d. 444, ll. 19-26.} The CRCA, for its part, told its commissioners to be patient as Party and government institutions developed concrete, mass political propaganda and agitation to combat religious belief.\footnote{330 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 497, ll. 96-97.} In the meantime, the state relied almost entirely on repressive measures against unregistered religious organizations.

**Faith under Interrogation**

In the final months of World War II, Soviet police and security services began to gather data on individual Witnesses and to arrest members, primarily men who refused to serve in the Red Army. By 1946, the security apparatus widened its scope to include all Witness believers. Relying in large measure on denunciations made by neighbors and local
Party activists, the state arrested and interrogated Witnesses in an attempt to glean details about the organization’s structure, printing operations, leaders, and its ties both to Witnesses in neighboring European countries (namely Poland and Romania) and to the worldwide headquarters in Brooklyn. Through interrogations and confiscation of organizational reports and Watch Tower literature, the state expanded its knowledge of the Witnesses to fuel further arrests. The MGB arrested hundreds of members in the immediate postwar period and few of these Witnesses escaped long camp sentences.

Declassified MGB case files from Ukraine make it possible to detail the remarkable postwar cat and mouse game between the Witnesses and the security organs. Such materials are not available for Soviet Moldavia, where the security service archives remain closed to researchers. Although historians know a great deal about the fabrication of cases against individuals for anti-Soviet activities and organizations during the Stalin era, the Witnesses offer a rare opportunity to see how the state dealt with a real underground organization. The state did not need to invent fantastical crimes for the Witnesses, nor did Witnesses need to confess to such crimes—the truth was enough to convict them. Some Russian scholars have portrayed the postwar repression as “absurd,” stating that the Witnesses broke no laws and were harmless religious believers terrorized by a ruthless state.\(^{331}\) In fact, Witnesses repeatedly violated Soviet laws, which forbade the formation of non-Party organizations, the holding of private meetings, the performance of religious rituals by an unregistered religion, and the smuggling and distribution of religious literature. Framing the Witnesses primarily as random victims does a disservice to the very real crimes (as defined by Soviet law) the Witnesses committed in order to practice and defend their faith under Soviet rule.

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\(^{331}\) See, for example, Gordienko, Rossiiske svideteli Iegovy, 25-26; and Ivanenko, O liudiakh, 131.
Where Witnesses saw religious practices and beliefs, interrogators saw anti-Soviet political activity. A private gathering of a dozen individuals to discuss a *Watchtower* article on God’s destruction of earthly governments may have been a religious service to Witnesses, but it is hardly surprising that the Soviet government ascribed far more sinister motives to the event. Similarly, when Witness leaders smuggled reports to Brooklyn on their preaching activities and members’ treatment in Soviet prison camps, the state felt such acts constituted espionage and treason. In general, the security services had no understanding or interest in theological issues surrounding Armageddon and did not differentiate between religious beliefs and political ideology. It is also fair to say that even though Witnesses saw their actions as politically neutral, the wholesale rejection of Soviet institutions and norms did in fact constitute a political act that the state saw as a serious threat to the Soviet project in the western borderlands.

L’viv and Zakarpattia oblasts, with the highest concentrations of Witnesses, suffered especially heavy arrests. MGB case files from these two regions offer a representative case study of state methods against suspected Witnesses, which closely conformed to a set pattern. First, the regional security organs gathered materials from the CRCA, the local Party organizations, and informants. The latter were often arrested or convicted Witnesses whom the police had convinced to give information on their fellow believers. Second, the MGB conducted late-night searches of Witnesses’ homes, hoping to find illegal literature, clandestine meetings, or other members living without documentation. Third, once sufficient evidence had been gathered, the state arrested Witnesses and sent them to regional security prisons for interrogation. Many, if not most, arrests of Witnesses occurred in groups, and interrogations could drag on for several months to determine the precise ties among...
individuals. In cases involving leaders or large numbers of defendants, the MGB often preferred to transfer the suspects to Kiev to be handled by republic-level ministry officials.

L’viv, the center of early postwar Witness activity, was not surprisingly the MGB’s first target for mass arrests. In February 1946, police arrested several Witnesses, most importantly the country servant, Ziatek, after another Witness, already in custody, gave out the address of the woman with whom Ziatek lived at the time.332 Under repeated questioning, Ziatek claimed to be a rank-and-file member with no knowledge of the organization’s structure or leadership. Instead, he used interrogations to preach to investigators about Christ’s kingdom.333 At his trial, he told the court: “I belong solely to God and do not speak against the government because, according to God’s law, I should do good to all, even to those who do evil to me.” He received ten years in a forced labor camp.334 Ziatek’s refusal to supply any information saved the remaining leadership in Ukraine from immediate arrest.

More sweeping arrests in L’viv followed a year later, after the MGB arrested Petro Tokar’, then assistant to the new country servant, Stanislav Burak, in late June 1947.335 Under interrogation, Tokar’ provided detailed charts of all known Witnesses in the L’viv area, their positions in the organization, and, if known, their addresses and physical characteristics. In particular, he directed the police to the printing press in Mariia Shkoda’s cellar and offered several possible locations where Burak might have been staying illegally. Sure enough, a police raid in July 1947 of a home in the nearby village of Zbois’ka yielded

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332 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-30139, ark. 48.
334 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-20130, ark. 121.
335 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 2-106.
the arrest of Burak.\textsuperscript{336} The information given by Tokar’ led to the largest wave of Witness arrests in the immediate postwar era. It dealt a severe blow to the organization, temporarily decapitated the leadership, and cut off the supply of literature. It may also have had international reverberations, as Tokar’ provided addresses for Polish Witnesses in Łódź, including Wilhelm Scheider, the head of the branch.\textsuperscript{337} Here, the Witnesses’ hierarchical structure proved a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it did offer a much more unified hierarchy better able to resist attempts at repression and later KGB infiltration. It also shielded lower level members during interrogations, since they had no information on organizational activity outside of their own small circle. On the other hand, it left the organization vulnerable in the case of high level arrests, as with Tokar’. Even when Witness leaders refused to cooperate, police often found detailed reports during searches and raids that, although coded, contained critical information on the organization.

By the late 1940s, the Witness organization in L’viv had been utterly decimated, its leadership arrested in concurrent waves of arrests, and its printing operations discovered and shut down. Many of the remaining leaders had gone underground, avoiding their homes in order to escape the state’s clutches. They lived off the charity of other members who hid and fed them under great personal risk.\textsuperscript{338} A 1950 CRCA report praised the state’s measures against the Witnesses, while noting that the organization still has “not been completely liquidated.”\textsuperscript{339} While the L’viv community managed to slowly revive in the decades after Stalin’s death, it did not return to its former strength until the waning days of the Soviet

\textsuperscript{336} DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 2, ark. 38.

\textsuperscript{337} DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 2, ark. 147.

\textsuperscript{338} DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-31931, ark. 35, 47.

\textsuperscript{339} DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 13, ark. 18.
Union. Instead, the organization moved its leaders and resources elsewhere. Continued growth of the organization, and the increasingly far-flung communities within its control, required a more developed structure less dependent on a single leader.

The limited archival information on arrests in Moldavia shows that the security organs conducted mass arrests in 1947 and 1948 to wipe out the existing leadership. The MGB detained circuit leader Constantin Shobe, his two assistants, and several group and circle leaders in the northern districts. Shobe had previously received a twenty-five-year sentence from the Romanian authorities for his Witness activities under occupation, but had been liberated by the Red Army in 1944, as had one of his deputies. Arresting Shobe and thirteen others in 1947, the Moldavian MGB expanded the case to include other members based on information from those already in custody.\(^{340}\) Shobe’s successor lasted only a short time before the state arrested and convicted him as well.\(^{341}\)

By the late 1940s, the repression of Witnesses extended beyond the Soviet Union’s borders into future Warsaw Pact countries. The sovietization of Eastern Europe sharply constricted the limited freedoms enjoyed by citizens of these countries in the immediate postwar era. This included the right to freedom of conscience. Witnesses occupied a tenuous existence in the region, barely tolerated by the authorities. Polish security services already in 1946 raided the Polish branch office and briefly detained its staff. While the office continued to operate, the state placed its leaders under constant surveillance.\(^{342}\) In late 1948, the Czechoslovak branch office was shut down, and its officials arrested and sent to labor

\(^{340}\) ANRM, f. 3085, inv. 1, d. 143, ff. 17-20.

\(^{341}\) ANRM, f. 3085, inv. 1, d. 144, ff. 14-15.

\(^{342}\) 1994 Yearbook, 215-16.
camps.\textsuperscript{343} In 1949, Romanian authorities closed the Bucharest office.\textsuperscript{344} A year later, Hungarian police raided the Budapest branch office and began to arrest its leaders.\textsuperscript{345}

This period coincided with the start of the Cold War, making it perilous for the Witnesses to maintain such close ties to their organization’s headquarters in the United States. The most devastating blow occurred in the spring of 1950 with the liquidation of the Łódź office and the arrests of its leaders, whom the state publicly tried and convicted of American espionage.\textsuperscript{346} That same summer, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) officially banned the Witnesses and launched mass arrests of members.\textsuperscript{347} Show trials of the Witness leadership in Poland and the GDR in 1950 increased the pressure on the Soviet organization, while cutting it off from its primary source of literature and instructions in Łódź. The courts, which convicted the Witnesses of treason and espionage, also created an impetus for similar convictions of Soviet Witness leaders. A 1951 CRCA report to the TsK described the Witnesses as a “primary source for the recruitment of spies, saboteurs, and other foreign intelligence agents,” and referred to the Polish and GDR cases as evidence.\textsuperscript{348}

In sum, the state hoped to sever the transnational ties between Witness organizations in Eastern Europe that had existed prior to World War II. Further, in the post-Stalin era, the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{343} 2000 Yearbook, 176-77.
\item \textsuperscript{344} 2006 Yearbook (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 2006), 113.
\item \textsuperscript{346} M. Iarovoi, “Posobniki podzhigatelei voiny poimany s polichnym,” Izvestia, July 1, 1950; and 1994 Yearbook, 222.
\item \textsuperscript{347} 1999 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1999), 78-80.
\item \textsuperscript{348} RGASPI, f. 17, op. 132, d. 497, l. 73.
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organization’s American connections played a major role in demonizing Witnesses as Cold War stooges for the Soviet Union’s number one enemy.

In the wake of arrests in L’viv oblast, the remaining responsible members sought other locations as bases for their activities, namely in Stanislav (later Ivano-Frankivs’k) and Zakarpattia oblasts. After the 1951 exile of Witnesses from western Ukraine discussed later in the chapter, which excluded Transcarpathia, arrests of Witnesses there increased in intensity. In 1952 and early 1953, the MGB arrested key organizational leaders, primarily in Zakarpattia and Stanislav oblasts, including country servant Mykola Tsyba, his secretary, Veretel’nyk, several circuit and group leaders, and their couriers. The arrests netted a huge quantity of printing equipment, literature, and donations, wiping out much of the organization’s printing capacity for the immediate future.

The interrogation records of arrested Witnesses offer a valuable window into the relationship between the Soviet state and Witnesses and how each saw the other. Yet they must be treated with caution. The records include only a summary written by the interrogator at the conclusion of each session. These sources therefore need to be read with a careful eye not only to what is said, but also to what is absent. As many of the Witnesses spoke only Ukrainian or Polish (in L’viv oblast), or Hungarian or Romanian (in Zakarpattia oblast), and interrogations took place solely in Russian, Witnesses often relied on a translator or their own rudimentary Russian language skills. Thus they had no way to affirm the veracity of the protocols they signed at the end of each interrogation session. In addition, interrogators used a variety of tactics to coerce information from accused Witnesses. Face-to-face meetings

349 2002 Yearbook, 172.

350 The 1953 trial of Tsyba and others, for example, contained a list of confiscated goods, including five typewriters, printing blocks, country committee documents, lists of arrested and exiled Witnesses, private correspondence, and 85,000 rubles, among other things. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 3, ark. 332.
between informants and the accused, and between accused members, were employed as a means of pressuring Witnesses to admit to certain actions.

Interrogators also used physical pressure to force arrested Witnesses to admit to crimes. This included sleep deprivation and near starvation, as well as physical abuse. While Soviet interrogation records do not directly address these violent practices, implicit signs of their use can still be found by careful readers. For instance, nearly every arrested member initially refused to divulge information on the organization. Yet days or weeks later, after multiple interrogation sessions, some Witnesses changed their minds and started talking. It is reasonable to assume that this change resulted in large part from the extreme duress suffered by individuals. Questioning also took place at all hours of the day, sometimes in the middle of the night, and stretched for long hours at a time. Moreover, one Witness leader, Burak, died under investigation in Lukianovskii prison in Kiev. This should say enough about the tactics used against accused Witnesses.

While official Watch Tower publications in the post-Soviet era emphasize the stalwart resistance of their Soviet members under investigation, this approach carries with it a value judgment that historians would do best to avoid. For Witnesses, true Christians are always “faithful under trials,” and this distinguishes them from other believers who they feel compromised with Soviet authorities. A 1950 *Awake!* article stated that Witnesses “will not knuckle under to communism, nor submit their organization to Red overlordship, nor will they swear allegiance to communistic governments, with or without face-saving

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351 Gol’ko, *Sibirskii marshrut*, 75, 125; and 2008 *Yearbook*, 93.

352 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 247.

353 In 2001, the Witnesses produced a video documentary on Soviet-era persecution of Witnesses entitled *Faithful under Trials*. 
reservations.” Yet what did “face-saving reservations” mean? Resistance came in many forms, and sometimes demanded compromises in order to protect the organization. Existing scholarship on the Witnesses has tended to adopt the Witnesses’ narrative without critical examination and to privilege resistance at the expense of what was certainly a more complicated scenario. This means that the voices of those who did compromise have been entirely absent from the history. Watch Tower literature assumes that those who did not meet certain standards of resistance are somehow not real Witnesses, or that they are of a lower moral quality. This interpretation separates Witnesses into two camps (those who resisted, and those who did not), when the lines between the two were hardly that clear. In the course of a single investigation, the same person might resist, compromise, and yield. Indeed, the Witnesses showed remarkable creativity and ingenuity in developing a myriad of strategies for coping with interrogations.

With this consideration in mind, it is possible to examine the diverse ways that Witnesses responded under interrogation. Since the prewar period, Watch Tower literature taught that persecution and arrests offered opportunities for evangelism. The Ten Points reiterated this notion, advising members to use their testimony during court trials to declare their fealty to Jehovah. At the same time, it cautioned Witnesses not to give out the names of other members, and, when necessary, to take responsibility for all charges upon themselves in order to avoid the arrest of others. Compromise, it noted, never honors Jehovah and must be avoided. The sense that persecution had a purpose doubtlessly helped Witnesses to remain steadfast in their belief under pressure. Oleksii Tsygan, arrested at the age of twenty-three, told his interrogator that Witnesses have always faced persecution by secular


355 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 3, ark. 332.
authorities, and he did not fear sharing the fate of his fellow believers who had already been sent to Siberia. Like Tsygan, arrested Soviet Witnesses almost universally expressed their faith in Jehovah and their adherence to the Witness organization when questioned. A 1949 report on Russia published by the Polish branch office noted that “because the Lord’s people do not hide their faith or stop from mentioning the name of Almighty God, the opposers [i.e. Soviet officials] have an easy job” of convicting Witnesses.

Many Witnesses preached the news of Christ’s millennial kingdom to their interrogators. One woman, for example, told her interrogator that Soviet power, along with all governments, will be destroyed in Armageddon since they are all unjust, do not fulfill God’s commandments, and, as such, are against God’s kingdom. When an interrogator asked Pavlo Rurak why his God had not saved him from arrest if he was indeed all-powerful, Pavlo replied, “Tell me, please, if I were free at this moment and wanted to speak with you about the Bible here at the MGB, would it be possible?” The interrogator responded no. Pavlo then quoted from Matthew 10:18: “Christ said, ‘On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.’” For Pavlo, God had facilitated this arrest so that he could preach his faith to his captors who otherwise would not have heard this message.

Beyond acknowledging their faith and basic beliefs, however, almost all arrested Witnesses initially refused to answer any other questions (although few maintained this stance throughout the entire investigation). Witnesses frequently stated to interrogators that

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358 L’viv SBU archive, spr. 31365, ark. 29-30.
359 Rurak, Tri aresta, 45.
their faith did not allow them to give information regarding the organizational structure and leadership. One arrested Witness, who had already admitted her own role in the organization, repeatedly refused to name leaders, telling her interrogators that it is a secret of God’s kingdom and betraying this secret would go against her religious beliefs. The similar language used by multiple Witnesses to defend their actions and shield the organization strongly suggests that the country committee had successfully disseminated the Ten Points instructions to members on how to act when questioned by local authorities and when subject to police interrogation. One former Witness admitted under interrogation that she had been told to “hold firm” and not betray others if arrested. Witnesses who rejected or perhaps were not yet aware of the Ten Points demonstrated equal resistance under interrogation. These members faced an even greater risk of arrest due to their refusal to join collective farms, register for the draft, or obtain passports, all actions that had been recommended in the Ten Points to avoid police detection. For them, signing forms, draft cards, or identity papers represented an indefensible endorsement of a corrupt and satanic state. Once arrested, they similarly refused to sign interrogation protocols, to the deep frustration of their interrogators.

Most Witnesses, realizing that a strategy of total non-cooperation could not save them or their already arrested fellow believers from being convicted, and that the police already had considerable knowledge of their activities, eventually opted for damage control. They tried to limit the broader harm done to the organization and its unarrested members. This approach varied greatly depending on the circumstances of the case and the means available.

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360 DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, ark. 24, 27, 28-30.

361 L’viv SBU archive, spr. 31931, ark. 80-81.

362 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 2, ark. 380.
to specific individuals. For example, when asked to provide names of other Witnesses, some identified members they knew to have already been arrested, or who had died or emigrated to Poland. Some asserted that they had no leaders other than Jehovah God. Those who did give out new names often identified only rank-and-file members to protect elders. Others took responsibility for actions likely performed by others in order to shield them. For example, after the raid on the printing operation in Shkoda’s cellar, Pashkovs’kyi, who helped operate the press, took full responsibility, identifying himself as the mastermind behind the operation. The other two people involved in the press stubbornly refused to admit to anything beyond the undeniable facts established during the raid. Witnesses often claimed to have found literature in order to avoid naming those who had given it to them. One man asserted that he found several publications in an abandoned home near Krakow while en route to being repatriated from a German work camp in 1945.

These strategies certainly minimized the harm done to the broader organization, but did nothing to help individual Witnesses escape punishment. It took little effort on the part of the MGB to convict Witnesses. Almost all members attended circle meetings at private homes to study the Bible and religious literature. Likewise, every Witness spoke about the faith to someone else. When faced with such clear evidence of specific activities, Witnesses frequently invented stories to account for their illegal actions. One Witness, arrested in 1946 for her involvement in an underground printing operation, justified having printing ink in her home by saying that she had bought it by mistake, confusing it with floor paint. She claimed

363 See, for example, L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-37858, ark. 91-95; P-31365, ark. 35; P-29147, ark. 94, 100.

364 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-29147, ark. 75.


366 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-33989, ark. 11-12.
that the printing equipment she owned belonged to her deceased husband, and that the 10,000 rubles confiscated by the police came from selling clothes. When police raided a study circle in 1947, the homeowner claimed that everyone just happened to come by her home at the same time. One man dropped by to sell flour, another to borrow money to buy medicine, another to give the homeowner a box she needed to mail a package, and another to pick up a frying pan she had borrowed. Others relied on their low levels of education as a weapon of defense, pleading ignorance about the content of literature, claiming not to have actually read it or not to have really understood it. One man initially told interrogators that he was illiterate and therefore unable to read the Bible. He later admitted under pressure that he did possess basic reading skills and had on occasion read the Bible himself, but only rarely as it was difficult for him.

Witnesses employed similarly creative tactics when it came to questions about their baptism into the organization. In the eyes of the state, baptism represented an act equivalent to joining an anti-Soviet organization. Baptism into a non-registered religious organization was a dangerous affront to Soviet law, but performing such a baptism carried even stiffer penalties as it identified the person as a leader, and not merely a member of the organization. One Witness, accused of performing a 1948 baptism, claimed that he had simply invited the two other people involved to go swimming in a local pond that day. In an exceedingly rare turn of events in such investigations, authorities released the man due to a lack of compelling...
evidence. Others who were ultimately convicted stated, “Jehovah God baptized me,” or said that they had baptized themselves. Some Witnesses took advantage of having only recently become Soviet citizens due to wartime annexations. They changed the dates of baptisms so that they occurred prior to the arrival of Soviet power. This in theory meant that the Soviet Union had no jurisdiction over such actions. On a practical level, such tactics rarely helped members avoid conviction, but they did protect other members from facing a similar fate.

Only a few Witnesses abandoned the organization after their arrest and provided detailed information on their former fellow believers. Some were arrested after already having distanced themselves from the organization and thus had less incentive to resist demands for information. In one case, the police interrogated a young woman who had recently been expelled from the Witnesses for courting a young man who did not belong to the faith. She also had a long history of mental illness and hospitalization. Given these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that she ultimately told the police what she knew about several Witness leaders and her older sister, a courier in the organization.

In some instances, Witnesses both cooperated and stonewalled at various intervals during their interrogations. The case of Ivan Nan, arrested in 1949 in Zakarpattia, offers insight into members’ internal conflict over how to maintain their religious principles in the face of extreme pressure. Under repeated interrogation, Nan admitted to his interrogator that

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371 It is possible, if not likely, that he was later arrested again, although I did not find further evidence of him in the SBU archive. L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32494, ark. 88.

372 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 23, 79.

373 For example, one Witness stated that his family members had been baptized and had bought their literature during Polish rule. L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-29147, ark. 129-30. For a similar situation, see also Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 333-34.

he had participated in a mass baptism of members in the Tissa River, even naming the
baptizer in charge of the ceremony. For Nan, this began an agonizing personal struggle not
just to undo the damage he had done, but more importantly to salvage his own salvation. He
felt certain he had betrayed the organization. During an all-night interrogation the following
day, he cried out to his interrogator: “By my action, I have committed a great crime against
Jehovah God and will be punished at Armageddon. I have violated my sacred oath as a
Jehovist that a Jehovist should not give evidence against another Jehovist, nor give evidence
on the sect’s actions. Thus, from this day forward, I no longer consider myself a Witness.”

Believing himself beyond redemption, he divulged further information about a secret
meeting held in the woods and named the meeting’s organizer. Four days later, he recanted
these statements, saying “I was not in control of myself; the devil controlled me. I was not
speaking with my own voice, but with that of the devil who had possessed me.” Yet throughout his interrogations, even when it seemed he had rejected any hope of salvation, he
refused to sign the interrogation protocols. This act, in keeping with his religious beliefs that
demanded no acknowledgement of earthly government, suggests that Nan still considered
himself a Witness. At trial, he had this to say: “I ask only that Jehovah God hear me.” For
Witnesses like Nan, their actions placed them in a murky position of having broken their
vows not to betray the organization without having rejected the organization’s underlying
beliefs.

The case of Petro Tokar’, whose cooperation with the police led to mass arrests in
L’viv, demonstrates the difficulties that men like Nan faced if they wished to remain in good
standing with the organization despite divulging information. Like Nan, Tokar’ provided

375 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 1, ark. 175.
376 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 2, ark. 402.
statements to the police that placed other members in danger and led to their arrest and conviction. He also remained firm in his adherence to his religious beliefs, not wanting to lose his faith as a result of his actions. At trial, Tokar’ refused to cooperate with the authorities or to repeat his earlier statements against fellow believers. Instead, he reaffirmed his commitment to his religion. He received a sentence of twenty-five years and was one of the few Witnesses not to be granted any sentence reduction during the post-Stalin era. Still in prison in 1971, during a review of the initial 1947 case, he once again gave information on several of his co-believers, although in much less detail (citing the difficulty in remembering names after so much time had elapsed).377 Interviewed in the 1990s for a history of the Ukrainian Witnesses published in the 2002 Yearbook, Tokar’ stated that he had been tricked by the police into giving out information in 1947. He said the police told him they needed membership rolls in order to register the organization.378 The original case file does not reflect this version of events, instead showing that Tokar’ initially refused to give any names and did so only under repeated interrogation. The example of Tokar’ reflects the awkward position of Witnesses who had failed to live up to the religion’s standards of non-cooperation with the police and may have found it hard to acknowledge this fact to their fellow believers.

The Tokar’ case also demonstrates the importance of the court trial for Witnesses. It represented the final opportunity for them to bear witness for their faith, even if only to the few officials present at the closed hearings. The state tried Witnesses either through special sessions of the MGB or through the oblast courts.379 It charged Witnesses under statute 54-1a

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377 DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 4, ark. 35-37.

378 2002 Yearbook 158-59. According to Oleg Gol’ko, Tokar’ also claimed to have been tried as a Latin American spy. This charge does not appear in any of the interrogation or trial records, nor is it referenced in later post-Stalin appeals by Tokar’ for early release. Gol’ko, Sibirskii marshrut, 70-72.

379 DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 2, ark. 268-301.
(treason) and statutes 54-10 and 54-11 (anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation). Conviction was a foregone conclusion. Sentences ranged from seven to ten years for low-level members to twenty-five years for high-profile leaders or those involved in literature printing and distribution. Most served these sentences in forced labor camps in Siberia and the Far East.

While understanding that their testimony would have little if any effect on the verdict and sentence, most Witnesses, even those who had cooperated to some extent with the MGB, used the trial to defend themselves and their faith. A 1949 trial in Zakarpattia of seven Witnesses provides one example. Defendant Dmytro Marynchan warned the court that God would punish those men who persecute the Witnesses, while his co-defendant, Vasyl’ Bokoch, justified his actions by stating that he had followed God’s instructions. Vasyl’ noted that he lived on Jehovah’s land and recognized only his authority and that of Jesus Christ. Another defendant, Ivan Ona, told the court that all he wanted was to serve Jehovah. All of the defendants refused legal counsel, opting instead to rely solely on “Jehovah’s protection.” They each received twenty-five years and confiscation of their property. At other trials, Witnesses used their day in court to proclaim how persecution only strengthened their belief in God. At a 1951 trial, defendant Hryhoriy Holiash told the court, “I was, am now, and will always be a Jehovah’s Witness. God knows all, sees all, and is almighty.” Anton Voitsekhovs’kyi declared, “I am very happy that I am being tried. I am certain that the hour will come when all powers will obey the one kingdom,” a reference to his belief that Jehovah would soon establish a millennial kingdom under the authority of

380 Article 54 in Soviet Ukraine’s penal code corresponds to Article 58 in the USSR’s penal code.

381 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 2411, t. 2, ark. 397-402.

382 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-33989, ark. 74.
Jesus Christ. His daughter, Bronislava, stated, “I am happy to be a Jehovah’s Witness and I will be His witness until death.”

Upon conviction, Witnesses struggled to survive and maintain their faith in the harsh environment of the Gulag. Some, primarily elderly members, died before completing their lengthy sentences. As for nearly all Stalin-era political prisoners, camp life combined dangerous, grueling labor with meager rations and inhuman living conditions. Most Witnesses had the good fortune of finding fellow believers in their camps. They also preached and found converts among other political prisoners. Given the extreme difficulty in smuggling in literature to the camps and prisons, Witnesses relied primarily on memory and a few handwritten texts for their religious studies and proselytism efforts.

Pavlo Rurak, arrested in 1951 and sent to a camp in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, recalled how he and other Witnesses held secret meetings to maintain their faith, and how his sister managed to sneak a copy of the New Testament into a package she mailed to him, a “miracle” given the close police inspection of packages.

In the Stalin era, hundreds, if not thousands of Witnesses experienced Soviet life from behind the barbed wire of camps and the bars of prison cells. They learned to adapt their faith to these conditions and to find ways to spread their beliefs and practice their religion. To

383 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31504, ark. 310.
384 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-29147, ark. 274; and DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, ark. 338.
386 See, for example, questionnaire for A. Gheorghiţa and Alexandru Rotari (MJW).
their fellow prisoners, they offered a chance at spiritual redemption and a community willing to accept those cast out from Soviet society. Some prisoners joined the organization after hearing the Witnesses’ message. After Stalin’s death, as his successor Khrushchev began to dismantle the Gulag, the state gave many Witnesses early release from their sentences, while it arrested others for illegal religious activity. In short, camps and prisons became an enduring feature of Witness life and communities throughout the Soviet era.

**Operations North and South**

In 1949 and 1951, the Soviet state, unable to liquidate the Witnesses through targeted arrests, undertook two mass exiles of all known Witnesses and their families to Siberia. Together, the two actions represent the largest mass exile of an entire religious community in the Soviet Union. This was not the first time the state had used this form of repression against a religious group, having exiled an estimated 1,000 True Orthodox Christians, a splinter group from the Russian Orthodox Church opposed to cooperation with the Soviet state, from Riazan’, Voronezh, and Orel oblasts in 1944. However, the 1949 and 1951 exiles of Witnesses were on a significantly larger scale. All told, the state removed over 10,000 Witnesses, many of them children and elderly citizens, from their homes and sent them in cattle cars to “special settlements” in distant outposts, primarily Siberia. Told the exile would be permanent, Witnesses began the difficult task of rebuilding their lives in new locations.

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390 Archival documentation of both operations remain largely classified. However, several document collections have published important materials from the Russian and Moldovan state archives relating to the operations. These works include Odintsov, *Sovet ministrov*; Pasat, *Trudnye stranitsy*; Tsarevskaia-Diakina, ed., *Istoriia stalinskogo gulaga*; and N. L. Pobol’ and P. M. Polian, eds., *Stalinskie deportatsii, 1928-1953* (Moscow: MFD, Materik, 2005).


392 Odintsov, *Sovet ministrov*, 47.
The Witness exiles represented only one aspect of the Soviet state’s broader plan for sovietization of the western borderlands. As implemented by the state, sovietization involved not only integration of its inhabitants into the Soviet body politic, but also the removal of people deemed a threat to this process. In addition to arrests, the Soviet state used mass deportations to eliminate categories of suspect people from its borders. This approach had a long history in the Soviet Union, having been employed during the Civil War to punish Cossack populations for their collaboration with White forces, during collectivization to liquidate the kulaks (“rich” peasants) and quash rural resistance, and from the mid-1930s onward to cleanse border regions of suspect nationalities.  

In the aftermath of Soviet occupation and subsequent annexation of the western borderlands, the state used exile to remove economic, political, and national elites, whom it felt represented a threat to sovietization. From 1939 to 1941, the state sent hundreds of thousands of ethnic Poles and Germans, along with suspected counterrevolutionaries and nationalists from western Ukraine, the Baltic states, and Moldavia, to resettlement areas primarily in Siberia and Central Asia. After the war, the Soviet state used targeted exiles to remove Ukrainian partisans or partisan sympathizers and their families, along with kulaks and other suspect social classes from the western borderlands. As part of these operations, Soviet Moldavia implemented plans for to create special settlements for alleged kulaks and counterrevolutionaries in Siberia and other distant regions of the Soviet Union. The Moldavian exile, code named “Operation South,” received Politburo approval in early 1939. 

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393 Polian, Against Their Will, 59-103.
394 For a detailed chart of all Soviet deportations, see Ibid., 327-33.
395 Ibid., 332-33.
396 Pasat, Trudnye stranitsy, 343-44.
The state, deciding that members of religious sects represented a significant danger to its sovietization efforts, included these communities in the 1949 order. While the existing documents do not list specific religious sects, Witnesses certainly represented the largest group out of 4,832 sectarians and their families scheduled for exile. At least a few Witnesses were also exiled not for their religious affiliation, but because they were labeled as kulaks or former merchants.

The state intended the deportations to remove ongoing resistance to Soviet power and collectivization. By targeting the wealthier elements of society, it provided much needed land, livestock, and goods to the collective farms, since the state confiscated the property of exiled individuals. As with earlier collectivization campaigns in the Soviet Union, the state also applied the term “kulak” to an assortment of people whom it felt threatened the existing political and social order. After the war, the Soviet state identified kulaks as a “key element of resistance” to the establishment of Soviet power. By deporting them, the state hoped to destroy the lingering partisan and insurgent elements in the western borderlands. Regarding the state’s motivations, Alexander Statiev has argued convincingly that:

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397 Ibid., 341, and Odintsov, Sovet ministrov, 18-19.

398 The initial exile order included 345 families and 4,832 people from illegal sects. Subsequent materials do not specify how many of these individuals were in fact exiled as planned, but do suggest that the actual exile figures were slightly lower. Pasat, Trudnye stranitsy, 392-94, 455-56.

399 Ibid., 375.

400 Ibid., 436-38.


Most Soviet deportations were pragmatic actions of a state facing an insurgency challenge and unrestrained in its choice of coercive means. Ideology played an important role in the Soviet security policy. In some cases, it limited the scale of the deportations but in others it escalated them far beyond rational limits, which only fuelled resistance.403

Building on Statiev’s argument, the deportation of Witnesses arguably represented a “pragmatic action” against an insurgent group that refused to recognize Soviet power or conform to Soviet laws, carried out by a state that saw exile as a more efficient and less violent means of eliminating resistance than mass killings.

The Moldavian MGB, charged with carrying out Operation South, relied on its staff and on local police to conduct the necessary advance preparations and compile lists of exilees. In the spring of 1949, it negotiated train transport to designated exile locations, primarily the regions of Kurgan, Tiumen’, Irkutsk, and Altai.404 Officers set up conveyance routes for all persons on their lists from their homes to the loading stations. According to official instructions, officers were to visit their assigned addresses on the night prior to exile. Upon arrival, they were to inform the family that they were being sent into exile, warn them of the consequences of resistance, and then suggest items to pack, such as buckets, saws, and axes to be used as tools.405 Authorities allowed exilees to pack only essential items. Officers would then escort the family under guard to the nearest train station. There, the exilees would be loaded onto trains equipped with soldiers and minimal medical personnel.406 The MGB struggled to keep the plan secret, a difficult task given the reliance on local police, who

403 Ibid., 978.
405 Pasat, Trudnye stranitsy, 423-25.
406 Ibid., 412-15.
leaked information by accident or tried to shield friends and family members who belonged to the targeted categories by warning them in advance.\textsuperscript{407}

Operation South scattered Moldavian Witnesses across the Soviet Union, fracturing the close-knit communities that had existed since the interwar period. The vast majority of Witnesses were sent to Kurgan and Tiumen’ oblasts. Following Operation South’s completion, the MGB prepared reports on local reactions to the exile to gauge the popular mood. It found that the exile had provoked widespread fear and anxiety among the population, especially among religious believers. One study of religious believers includes a statement from a Witness whose relatives had all been subject to the exile, while he had been left behind. He remarked, “Don’t worry, soon they will no longer punish us,” and expressed belief that the Soviet Union had already begun mobilizing for a new world war. Other believers quoted in this study belonged to religious organizations not subject to exile. They expressed the fear that the state intended to use this form of persecution against other religions in the future. A Baptist believer, for example, voiced plans to change his address and to start selling his property.\textsuperscript{408}

Carried out on July 6-7, 1949, Operation South encountered serious shortcomings as a result of the great speed of its planning and execution. The exile targeted an estimated 11,000 families and 33,000 people, about a third of whom were children.\textsuperscript{409} One source estimates that 345 exiled families were Witnesses.\textsuperscript{410} Almost a quarter of all persons who had been

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{407} Ibid., 407-10.
\item \textsuperscript{408} Ibid., 507-08.
\item \textsuperscript{409} The exact figures, based on limited available archival materials, vary among sources, but all are within a close range of one another. Ibid., 455-56; and King, \textit{The Moldovans}, 96.
\end{itemize}
slated for exile dodged the order, many of them having been tipped off in advance, while others received exemptions due to their status as kolkhoz members or decorated World War II veterans. Some of those on the rolls were already deceased or too infirm to travel.\footnote{Ibid., 487-93.} A memo sent in late summer 1949 by the Moldavian TsK to the USSR TsK asked for clarification as to how to deal with those persons who for various reasons had not been sent into exile as planned.\footnote{Ibid., 538.} Without clear instructions from Moscow, Moldavian officials were not sure what to do with individuals whom the state classified as a threat to state order.

Continued arrests of Witnesses, both in Moldavia and elsewhere in the western borderlands, highlighted the fact that Operation South had failed in its goal to eliminate subversive religious sects from this territory. Thus, in late 1950, Soviet MGB Minister V. S. Abakumov pressed for approval of a second, broader mass exile of all Witnesses from the western borderlands. In a top secret report to Stalin, Abakumov detailed how previous efforts to eliminate the Witnesses through mass arrests had failed to destroy the religion. In contrast, the organization showed some signs of growth. Abakumov suggested the exile of 3,048 families and 8,576 persons, including 6,140 persons from Ukraine, 394 from Belorussia, 52 from Latvia, 76 from Lithuania, 250 from Estonia, and 1,675 from Moldavia.\footnote{Odintsov, Soviet ministrov, 44-45.} Documents from the Moldovan state archives suggest that the total number of people exiled likely exceeded the original figures put forth by Abakumov, as 2,617 people were exiled from Moldavia alone, compared to the initial goal of 1,675.\footnote{Ibid., 53.} The Watch Tower organization puts
the total number of those exiled at 9,500.\textsuperscript{415} As stated earlier, Transcarpathia was not included in the 1951 exile order. Unlike the rest of the western borderlands, Transcarpathia had not been part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and thus had not been occupied by the Soviet Union prior to the 1941 Nazi invasion. This fact likely made the Soviet state view the region as distinct from other western borderlands. For reasons not clear from the documents, it spared Transcarpathian Witnesses from the mass exile.

Once approved by the Council of Ministers in February 1951, the plan became known as “Operation North,” and closely mirrored the format of the 1949 exile. Thanks to both published archival records and Witness sources, a more detailed picture exists of the 1951 exile than that of its predecessor. Before dawn on April 1, 1951, soldiers visited the homes of Witness families, allowed them to pack only the bare essentials, and transported them to local train stations where they loaded them onto cattle cars bound for Siberia. The rest of their property was confiscated and given to the kolkhozes and local soviets.\textsuperscript{416} It took weeks for the long train convoys to reach their final destinations in Irkutsk and Tomsk oblasts. Many of the wagons lacked toilets.\textsuperscript{417} Some Witnesses went into exile while pregnant and a few gave birth en route to their settlements.\textsuperscript{418} No one apparently made an attempt to flee.\textsuperscript{419} A later report smuggled out by Soviet Witnesses to Brooklyn stated that its members had been “carried off to the vast taiga, the forest region of Siberia, and settled in a camp for the

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\textsuperscript{415} 2002 Yearbook, 169.
\textsuperscript{416} Odintsov, \textit{Sovet ministrov}, 46-47.
\textsuperscript{417} Pasat, \textit{Trudnye stranitsy}, 634.
\textsuperscript{418} 2004 Yearbook, 113, 18.
\textsuperscript{419} Pasat, \textit{Trudnye stranitsy}, 170.
\end{footnotesize}
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purpose of having them cut wood. The brothers left behind have great difficulties to take care of things, yet they do all they can to go ahead."

The story of Alexandru Guriță illustrates how exile was experienced and understood by individual Witnesses. Born in 1945 in northern Moldavia, Alexandru was six years old when the exile happened, only a short time after his parents finished constructing a new home in their village. The family had joined the Witnesses in 1946 upon learning about the faith from a family friend. At 3:00 AM on the night of April 1, Alexandru awoke to bright lights that seemed to come from the direction of the train station. His parents went outside to check on the livestock and determine the source of the disturbance. A few moments later, his father, Matvei, came back inside and told the family, “Get ready. Prepare your things.”

Months earlier, a relative in local government had warned him of the coming exile, telling him that if he did not abandon his faith, he and his family would be sent to “live with the polar bears.” Matvei had not heeded the warning and showed no surprise when an officer and three soldiers arrived and ordered the family to pack what they could carry.

At daybreak, the soldiers loaded the family onto a truck and took them to the train station along with all the other Witnesses from their village. While the trains waited until nightfall to depart on the long journey to Siberia, the family’s relatives gathered to cry and see them off. Matvei and his wife assured their relatives that Jehovah would take care of them. Then they boarded cattle cars with a layer of straw on the floor and a hole in each corner that would serve as toilets for the next few weeks. Not wanting to scare his young son, Matvei told Alexandru that they were going to L’viv, as they had on previous occasions, to sell oil at the local market. At each stop en route to Tomsk oblast, Alexandru asked his father

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if they had reached L’viv yet. At some of the larger train stations, the family noticed other trains from Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine. Witnesses from across the many cars sang songs together to lift their spirits. Alexandru recalled with pride that he did not see anyone cry on the journey, a fact he contrasted with the experience of his uncles, who were deported as kulaks in 1949 and allegedly cried the entire trip. During our 2009 interview, he pulled out a photograph of Witnesses taken shortly after their arrival in Tomsk oblast. They are smiling and laughing in the picture.421

The recollections of a little boy in the midst of such upheaval represent just one of dozens of stories of the April exile retold by surviving Witnesses. Most of the stories mirror closely the descriptions provided by Alexandru. They note the instant camaraderie among Witnesses, many of whom had no idea until that moment that so many others shared their beliefs. They recall hanging cloth banners from the car windows proclaiming, “We are Jehovah’s Witnesses” and singing religious songs to encourage one another.422 The fact that they alone had been singled out among all other believers for special persecution seemed clear evidence that they were God’s true Christians. In this sense, while the exile tested the limits of their physical endurance, it also strengthened their spiritual faith. Just as the Watch Tower organization saw the wartime annexation of the western borderlands as God’s way of spreading the truth of the Bible to Russia, many Witnesses saw exile as an opportunity to preach their beliefs in Siberia. One man, exiled along with his family during Operation South, remembers his father telling him how Jehovah would “arrange matters so that people in far-off Siberia would hear the truth,” and that exile made this a reality.423

421 Alexandru Guriţă, interview by author, July 2, 2009, Chişinău, Moldova.
422 2002 Yearbook, 169, 75.
Some recent Witness narratives of the events suggest that Witnesses were given the option of renouncing their faith in return for removal from the exile lists.\footnote{2008 Yearbook, 109.} This parallels the earlier experience of German Witnesses, who could sign a formal renunciation statement to avoid imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp. The German example, widely covered in Watch Tower publications in the last few decades, may have influenced how Soviet Witnesses remembered and constructed their own history. In fact, Operations North and South did not allow for any exemptions from exile for those who renounced their faith. Soviet soldiers charged with transporting the Witnesses to the trains may have told some members to deny their faith out of a mistaken belief that they could save people from further persecution once in exile. They may have simply wanted to goad Witnesses into denying their faith.\footnote{This view has been most prominently voiced by Vasilii Kalin, the head of the Russian branch office of Jehovah’s Witnesses, who himself was exiled with his family as a very young child. He recalls that the soldier who came for them told his father that they just needed to sign a document to avoid exile, even telling them that they could sign and still remain believers “in their hearts.” Kalin’s parents refused. See materials from round-table discussion at the “50th Anniversary of Operation North” conference held in Moscow on April 5, 2001, and published in Odintsov, Sovet ministrov, 196-97, and “Exiled in Siberia!,” Awake!, April 22, 1999, 21. Ivanenko also repeats this information in his work. Ivanenko, Svideteli Iegovy, 114.} Regardless, soldiers were not authorized to exempt anyone from exile on this basis. Even if Witnesses had been given this choice, it would likely have made little difference. As one Witness told the soldiers sent to round up his family in 1951, “I am confident that no matter where you take us, our God, Jehovah, will be with us.”\footnote{The exile did provide for exemptions due to serious illness or disability, active Red Army service, kolkhoz membership, decorated service in World War II, or if the family had no other members able of work. However, these exemptions were not always honored and many elderly and infirm individuals were still sent into exile. Pasat, Trudyanye stranitsy, 539-40.}

Once in exile, Witnesses struggled to survive in the utterly foreign environment of Siberia. Early MVD reports on the 1949 exile described conditions in the special settlements

\footnote{2008 Yearbook, 109.}

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\footnote{“Exiled in Siberia!,” 21.}
as “extremely difficult.” Several families crowded together into a single room and slept on the ground with no bedding. Some lived in chicken coops or dilapidated barracks.\textsuperscript{427} Others lived in crude homes dug into the earth (zemlianki) before constructing their own modest homes. They tried as much as possible to reconstruct the same living conditions and way of life they had known in their Ukrainian and Moldavian villages. For example, Galina Măcuţă, born and raised in exile in Tomsk oblast, recalled how the local population borrowed from the Moldavian settlers, preparing new culinary dishes and constructing their homes based on methods learned from their new neighbors.\textsuperscript{428} Witnesses shared not only recipes and other traditions, but also their faith, winning converts from among locals as well as other deported special settlers in Siberia. The latter, having suffered similar persecution by Soviet authorities, may have been particularly willing to hear the Witnesses’ message of redemption. For example, Oleg Gol’ko’s family, exiled from Ukraine as kulaks after World War II, met Witnesses when they appeared in their exile settlement in 1951. The family eventually joined the faith.\textsuperscript{429}

The MGB closely surveilled the Witnesses’ settlement communities, conducting regular checks to ensure that no one left the area without permission. Freedom of movement was limited to within the assigned district. To prevent escapes, no one could settle near railroads or borders.\textsuperscript{430} Many of the adults were assigned to work in the timber industry in the harsh cold, sometimes leaving their young children alone all day. One Witness, born in exile, recalled how her father returned home one day from work to find his baby daughter with her

\textsuperscript{427} Pasat, \textit{Trudnye stranitsy}, 508-09.

\textsuperscript{428} Măcuţă, interview.

\textsuperscript{429} Gol’ko, \textit{Sibirskii marshrut}, 21, 35-36.

\textsuperscript{430} GARF f. 9479, op. 1c, d. 573, ll. 16-18, 174, 342.
clothes literally frozen to her body.\textsuperscript{431} In the summers, the insects could be as brutal as the winter frost.\textsuperscript{432} Since the exile was permanent, young children and those born in the settlement communities were added to the exile lists once they reached adulthood.

The exile operations failed to eliminate the Witnesses from the western borderlands, in large part due to the hasty execution of the exile process. Many members escaped exile for a variety of reasons. Some were not home or in town during the roundups.\textsuperscript{433} A few lived without documentation in order to avoid detection, primarily those holding responsible positions within the organization.\textsuperscript{434} Members serving time in prison and forced labor camps also managed to avoid being exiled and were sometimes mistakenly released to their villages instead of being sent to join their fellow believers in Siberia. A March 1952 memo from the Supreme Soviet of the USSR clarified that all such persons had to join their families in exile after serving their sentences but in reality, this did not always occur. It also made it easy for someone to fall through the bureaucratic cracks if the person’s family did not belong to the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{435} In short, the mass exiles demonstrate the limits of control that the Soviet state lacked had over its citizens and that at times it struggled simply to keep track of individuals and enforce its rules. This became a long-term problem for the Soviet Union in dealing with the Witnesses.

The state’s exile lists did not always include newer members, particularly unbaptized individuals, who then carried on the faith in the western borderlands. To cite one such

\textsuperscript{431} Măcuță, interview.

\textsuperscript{432} Gol’ko, \textit{Sibirskii marshrut}, 47.

\textsuperscript{433} Ibid., 204.

\textsuperscript{434} Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 3, ark. 332.

\textsuperscript{435} Pobol’ and Polian, eds., \textit{Stalinskie deportatsii}, 766-77.
example, members of the Gojan family in northern Moldavia had undergone baptism only a short time before the 1951 exile and their names did not appear on the lists. When they discovered that the rest of their village congregation had disappeared overnight, they initially thought that perhaps the end of the world had arrived. They realized the truth about what had happened when they received letters sent by those in exile. Some individuals spared from exile chose voluntarily to join their fellow believers and family members, preferring this option to the isolation of remaining behind. Some of these people were not Witnesses themselves but belonged to or married into Witness families.

The state mistakenly included at least a few people on its lists who had been Witnesses, but had left the organization prior to the exile. The Rusnac family, for instance, was exiled in 1951 based on information from two men who claimed that the family had ties to the Witnesses since 1935 and had not voted in recent elections. When the family protested the exile in 1953, a follow-up investigation found that they had only briefly been involved with the Witnesses and had quit the religion after the arrival of Soviet power in 1940. In fact, the family patriarch had voted and served as an agitator prior to elections. The MGB recommended that the family be allowed to return from Tomsk oblast to its native village in northern Moldavia. Other families who appealed their exile in this manner were not so lucky, but the Rusnac family’s story suggests that the state did attempt to enforce the legal parameters of the exile.

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436 Maria and Iacob Gojan, interview by author, May 5, 2009, Chișinău, Moldova.

437 See, for example, Questionnaire for Anton Pântea (MJW).

438 ANRM, f. 3085, inv. 1, d. 704, ff. 8-11, 24-26; d. 785, ff. 10-11.

The example of the Gojan family points to the heavy burden now shouldered by the remaining skeletal communities in the borderlands. The organization demonstrated a remarkable ability to replenish its leaders as quickly as the state managed to identify and arrest them. For example, when the newly appointed head of the Moldavian Witnesses suffered arrest in February 1952, he was immediately replaced by another member, who himself was then arrested a few months later, followed by another man whom police discovered hiding in a bunker in northern Moldavia in early 1953. Witnesses also took advantage of being excluded from exile to organize printing work and to strengthen their communities. They showed little inclination to abandon their religious practices. In November 1952 in the village of Răuțel, Witnesses held a “congress” for members from across ten districts in Moldavia at the home of one of the participants. An MGB raid resulted in the confiscation of a large quantity of religious literature, as well as the detainment of thirty-five persons, of whom fifteen were eventually arrested. Such incidents illustrate Witnesses’ firm resolve to adhere to their faith regardless of the circumstances.

Those left behind carried the additional burden of supporting their fellow believers now living in the harsh conditions of Siberia, and of collecting information to send to Brooklyn to inform the international Witness leadership of what had happened. In the late 1940s, the Soviet country committee already began keeping track of arrested and exiled members. Fellow believers offered what aid they could to those in exile, labor camps, and prisons, sending care packages of food, sometimes with literature concealed inside.

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441 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 121, ark. 178.


443 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-37858, ark. 126-27.
Providing for their arrested and exiled members carried significant risk. Some members suffered arrest and convictions in part for their role in mailing packages to believers in the camps. Under Burak’s brief tenure as country servant, the country committee distributed forms for members to fill out on relatives or friends who had been exiled or arrested. The forms asked for information on arrest dates, sentences, camp locations, living conditions, and any letters that arrested members had sent to their relatives. These documents circulated among members for several years, and some of this data was smuggled across the border to Łódź. Arrests of members in L’viv and Zakarpattia oblasts led to the discovery of some of these reports, which were subsequently used as evidence of espionage.

Few of these reports actually reached Brooklyn, and the Soviet press provided no information on internal Witness persecution, not even acknowledging that Witnesses existed in the Soviet Union. A brief 1950 Izvestia (News) article describing the arrest of the Witness leadership in Poland contained no mention of parallel round-ups of Witnesses in Ukraine and Moldavia. The Stalin-era leadership evidently had no desire to broadcast its persecution of Witnesses or to use it for propaganda purposes. Even during the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaigns in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which resulted in the widespread publication of anti-Witness propaganda, the exiles remained a state secret. As a result, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society had limited knowledge of the internal situation in the Soviet Union during the late Stalin era. A 1948 Watchtower article reported, “There are several thousand of Jehovah’s witnesses in Russia, hundreds of them have been sent to Siberia and put into work

444 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31931, ark. 82; P-29147, ark. 115-16.
446 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 149957, t. 1, ark. 126, 212-13.
camps, because they prefer to serve God rather than men and to proclaim a new kingdom of righteousness, a new world that will be governed by a righteous overlord, Christ Jesus, and not by Communist rulers.\textsuperscript{448} The two exiles shortly after the article’s publication dealt a serious blow to channels of communication between Brooklyn and the Soviet Witnesses. The organization apparently was not fully informed of either the 1949 or the 1951 exile until as late as 1956. That year, \textit{The Watchtower} announced that it had recently received information about the 1951 exile in the western borderlands, which it reprinted in some detail along with accounts of arrests and camp life.\textsuperscript{449} As with the prewar and wartime repression of Witnesses, the organization saw Soviet persecution as a test of members’ faith and as a sign that Witnesses were indeed the only true Christians, since the satanic Soviet state had singled them out among other religions. \textit{The Watchtower} told believers that “no question about it, the totalitarian monstrosity exerts a great pressure upon those who would stand by their Christian principles. But can they be truly said to be Christians if they do not follow Christ Jesus? He did not compromise.”\textsuperscript{450} The organization disregarded the repression of other religions. One \textit{Watchtower} article stated, “True, some religious clergymen have been jailed in these Communist lands. But these were not for righteousness’ sake. . . . They were imprisoned because of political reasons.”\textsuperscript{451} Another article similarly noted that Witnesses “do not rush to the public press with cowardly sob stories to get world sympathy or agitate a crusade,” as other Christians allegedly had.\textsuperscript{452}

\textsuperscript{448} “Why They are so Different in 1948,” \textit{The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom}, January 1, 1948, 5.
\textsuperscript{449} “Communist Leaders Fear Bible Truth,” 212.
\textsuperscript{450} “Is Compromise Excusable?,” \textit{The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom}, August 15, 1953, 483.
Likewise, the organization continued to sporadically blame other religions for masterminding the state’s attacks on Witnesses. This reflected the real persecution of Witnesses by other religions prior to and during World War II, and their continued animosity toward Witnesses. A 1949 Polish report on western Ukrainian Witnesses charged that “the Greek Catholic clergy are the ones that mainly persecute the brethren in this territory.”\(^{453}\) The Vatican remained the Witnesses’ main target, with the organization going so far as to speculate in 1951 that “if Russia ever surrenders her own selfish ambitions of world domination to those of Vatican City, you may expect to see the blood-red paw of the Kremlin clasped with that of the pope, who will let bygones be bygones.”\(^{454}\) Such sentiments showed little understanding of the internal dynamics between the Soviet Union and other Christian religious organizations. They also reflected the Witnesses’ utter rejection of ecumenicalism. In the post-Stalin era, when international religious leaders and ecumenical organizations showed increasing interest in the issue of Soviet religious freedom, the Witnesses did not participate and in turn, received little international attention or support for their plight. Post-Soviet Watch Tower publications have tempered their earlier statements on other Soviet religions to reflect a more nuanced and accurate view of the power dynamics between churches and the state. They highlight examples where local religious leaders denounced Witnesses to the authorities, but do not suggest that religious leaders orchestrated the repression of Witnesses by the Soviet state.\(^{455}\)

\(^{452}\) “Religion’s Last Stand,” *Awake!*, May 22, 1949, 11.

\(^{453}\) *1949 Yearbook*, 222-23.

\(^{454}\) “Papal Rome’s Friends in Modern Times,” *Awake!*, January 8, 1951, 12.

\(^{455}\) See, for example, *2002 Yearbook*, 165.
The organization stood firm in its belief that Jehovah God would ultimately reward those who had been persecuted for their faith and punish those responsible. In regard to the imprisonment of Witnesses in Siberian work camps, the organization declared of Jehovah: “Vengeance is His! He will repay harsh totalitarians at Armageddon!” This judgment, it specified, “includes Russia, and her red religion of Communism.”

Conclusion

The remarkable activity of postwar Witness communities suggests a need to rethink the boundaries of dissent and conformity in the late Stalin era. Certainly, this period represents the height of religious repression of Witnesses in the Soviet Union. The Gulag reached a peak in the number of prisoners in these years, among them hundreds of Witnesses. At the same time, the sheer existence of such a highly organized underground network of believers demonstrates that sovietization did not occur without resistance and it did not fully eliminate alternative forms of social order and beliefs from its western borderlands. For those citizens willing to risk their lives, daily existence could depart quite significantly from official norms. While postwar studies have recognized the importance of intellectual and national forms of dissent, from Ukrainian partisans to dissident writers, the Witnesses represent an overlooked category of religious dissent. Far from simply motivating believers to pray and worship in secret, religious faith led Witnesses to organize a complex underground organization, run dangerous smuggling operations, and distribute illegal literature printed on secret presses. Equally important, it spurred Witnesses to reject the sovietization of their minds and deeds, spurning all forms of conformity with Soviet power even under threat of death.

456 “Religion’s Last Stand,” 11.
In this regard, the Soviet state’s response to Witnesses does not constitute a random act of violence against a group of passive religious believers. Rather, the Witnesses offered a serious affront to the state’s attempt to impose order on the western borderlands. Witnesses did not vote, serve in the military, join the Party or its youth organizations, go to meetings, buy state bonds, or join collective farms, even rejecting Soviet passports in some instances. Unlike for many of its political prisoners, the Soviet state did not need to invent crimes committed by the Witnesses. The believers were, by the deeply undemocratic standards of Soviet law, a vast criminal network hostile to the Soviet state. Whereas the state’s goal was total obedience to the official ideology, even a few dissenting voices could subvert the system. This was particularly true in rural areas, where Witnesses had strong communities and made up a larger percentage of the local population.

Framing the Witnesses as a site of resistance to Soviet power is less about recognizing the fact that they did resist, but rather in understanding how they resisted. Criminal case files reflect the myriad creative methods employed by Witnesses to shield themselves, family members, and the Witness organization from persecution, while remaining, as much as possible, faithful to their religious beliefs. Stalin-era interrogations could be places of contestation, where both sides attempted to inscribe meaning to a set of actions and statements. In this context, it was possible for individuals to resist, conform, yield, and collaborate, sometimes within the same interrogation. It is important not to privilege one of these strategies, but to instead recognize the choices people made when placed in the most difficult of circumstances.

On a practical level, the Soviet Union made a monumental error in its decision to arrest and exile the Witnesses. It had taken a small, relatively isolated community of
believers and resettled them in disparate regions within the Soviet interior. As The Watchtower aptly put it, “The government has paid their [the exiled members’] fare to new territories to preach the Kingdom message.”457 This allowed for a strong missionary effort in Siberia and created new converts in areas that had never known Witnesses. A 1948 Awake! article proclaimed:

> There is a power operating in strange, mysterious Siberia far stronger, more invincible than the iron will of the Soviet Kremlin; a power that is making it possible for the Siberians . . . to hear the message of that established and reigning Kingdom. The proclaimers are themselves prisoners and exiles, consigned to Siberian labor camps for being real witnesses of the Most High God.458

The post-Stalin Soviet Union would not repeat this mistake and instead developed new strategies to deal with the Witnesses and to eliminate or contain religious belief in its territories. Yet the Witnesses proved their enduring ability to adapt to new circumstances and survive in changing conditions.

457 “Communist Leaders Fear Bible Truth,” 216.

CHAPTER THREE

RELIGIOUS POLICY AFTER STALIN: STATE REPRESSION AND THE WITNESS ORGANIZATION’S RESPONSE

“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”
James 4:4

“When the government changed, the officials changed loyalties, but we remained the same.”
Victor Popovych, Jehovah’s Witness since 1967.459

The death of Stalin in 1953 ushered in a new era in Soviet religious policy and religious life. Under Stalin’s successor, N.S. Khrushchev (1953-64), the state brought renewed urgency to eliminating religious belief, a task that had been neglected during Stalin’s last years. This neglect was a small part of Khrushchev’s broader criticism of Stalin, which reached full fruition with the 1956 “Secret Speech” denouncing Stalin’s “personality cult.” Khrushchev based his critique in large part on a perception that the Party had strayed from its original, Leninist principles and needed to return its focus to the building of communism.460 The state’s proclaimed intention to liquidate religion in the near future had direct roots in this larger ideological framework. Khrushchev had declared at the Twenty-first Party Congress in 1961 that the current generation would live to see communism by 1980. When he set this goal, he understood that certain preconditions would have to be met.

459 2002 Yearbook, 203.

460 Historian William Taubman writes that Khrushchev may have viewed the antireligious initiative “as a form of de-Stalinization in that it abandoned Stalin’s compromise with religion and returned to Lenin’s more militant approach.” William Taubman, Khrushchev: The Man and His Era (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 512-13.
This included the creation of an atheist society. Khrushchev’s vision imbued atheist work with a renewed sense of priority and justified the continued repression of religious believers as necessary to the all-important task of achieving communism.

The new religious policy, what I call “the Khrushchev system,” created two basic dichotomies. First, it divided all religions into registered and unregistered organizations. Registered organizations had to conform to the strictures of the state’s laws on religious cults and consent to strong governmental oversight. Unregistered organizations had no right to exist and faced criminal prosecution of their leaders and active members if they continued to operate outside of the law. By allowing registration for some and not for others, the state hoped to “divide and rule,” eliminating religion as a source of independent authority. Second, the state separated “rank-and-file” or “ordinary” believers from leaders and fanatics. The former had to be patiently convinced to abandon their faith, while the latter had to be isolated from society through coercive measures. The government intended to pit believers against one another by offering better treatment to some, but not all. It encouraged members of religious organizations to believe that a few bad seeds in their leadership were at fault for inciting conflict with the Soviet state and for preventing registration. It also represented the state’s attempt to justify, both to its own citizens and to the outside world, why it continued to imprison believers despite endorsing freedom of conscience in principle.

While opponents ousted Khrushchev from power in 1964, much of the Khrushchev system remained in place until the Gorbachev era. Under Leonid Il’ich Brezhnev (1964-82), the state no longer promised a clear date for achieving communism, however, making the battle against religious belief one of lower priority. Yet it employed much of the same

461 Ibid., 508-13.
rhetoric about religion and continued to deny registration to certain religious organizations. As anthropologist Alexei Yurchak notes about this era, “The form of ideological representations—documents, speeches, ritualized practices, slogans, posters, monuments, and urban visual propaganda—became increasingly normalized, ubiquitous, and predictable.”\textsuperscript{463} Yurchak’s words offer an apt description of religious policy and atheist work after Khrushchev. The ossification of policy and rhetoric until the late 1970s limited the state’s ability to respond effectively to evolving religious conditions and did little to eliminate religious belief among its citizens. This chapter lays out the basic features of the Khrushchev system and explores the hard-line tactics of official religious policy, including police tactics, KGB infiltration, arrests and imprisonment, and the end of the mass exile. It also describes how the Witness organization responded to these tactics and administrative changes in the organization.

\textbf{Khrushchev’s Antireligious Campaigns and Policy}

Religious policy in the Soviet Union stood at a crossroads in 1953. In the late Stalin era, the state had allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to resume a limited legal existence, and granted some local religious organizations the right to register and operate within the confines of the law. At the same time, the wartime annexation of the western borderlands had resulted in the sharp increase in the number of churches in the Soviet Union. The Stalinist state fiercely repressed religious believers whom it felt represented a threat to Soviet power, but it made minimal investment in atheist or antireligious propaganda. The result was a growth in religious belief at a time when Soviet society was supposed to be making renewed progress toward a communist utopia after the deprivations of World War II.

\textsuperscript{463} Yurchak, \textit{Everything Was Forever}, 14.
In the spring of 1954, the Communist Party’s’ agitprop department assessed the neglected state of antireligious efforts, reporting to Khrushchev on the “unsatisfactory state” of atheist work. The department blamed the Party for the rise of both Russian Orthodoxy and various “religious sects.” The Party, it concluded, had wrongly assumed religion would die a rapid and natural death in a socialist society. This had led to a passive attitude toward atheist work, resulting in a dearth of public lectures and published articles and books on this subject. The report cited the western borderlands for the especially low amount of atheist work in these regions. 464

The state officially announced its recommitment to atheist work in a July 25, 1954, Pravda editorial, ushering in the so-called “Hundred Days Campaign.” 465 Denouncing previous “passivity” toward religious belief, the state called for an active “struggle” against religion. It demanded increased promotion of the natural sciences and a materialist worldview and the exposure of the falsity of religious superstitions and prejudices. This was a battle, the editorial informed readers, “between science and superstition, between darkness and light.” Previous propaganda, it noted, had been divorced from real life and offended the feelings of believers. The new atheist methods would do neither—they would be both concrete and tactful. In this sense, the decree harkened back to the earliest Bolshevik policies on religion, which also criticized offenses to religious sentiments. 466 The Party called upon all state and Party institutions to participate in a unified front for atheism. It named schools, the Komsomol, the Ministry of Culture, and the Knowledge Society as key fronts in this new

464 RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 650, ll. 18-24.

465 Joan Delaney Grossman notes that while the editorial was published only on July 24, a secret resolution outlining the shortcomings in atheist work was adopted by the TsK on July 7. Grossman, “Khrushchev’s Anti-Religious Policy,” 375.

campaign.\textsuperscript{467} A September editorial in \textit{Moskovskaia pravda} (Moscow Truth) tied the campaign directly to communism, stating: “The overcoming of religious survivals in the consciousness of workers, their adoption of a materialist worldview, will speed the progress of our society forward to communism.”\textsuperscript{468} Similarly, an August editorial in \textit{Sovetskaia Moldaviia} (Soviet Moldavia) declared of believers: “We need to patiently, in a comradely way help them to free themselves from religious survivals and become fully conscious and active builders of communism.”\textsuperscript{469}

Despite the warning against offending religious sentiments, the Hundred Days Campaign proceeded to do precisely that as local officials struggled to demonstrate progress in the fight against religious belief. This period marked the first mention of the Witnesses in many local and regional papers, as newspaper editors attempted to fulfill the Party’s call to make propaganda specific to local conditions. The Transcarpathian regional paper \textit{Sovetskoe Zakarpat’e} (Soviet Transcarpathia) featured the Witnesses prominently in an article on local Christian communities. The article reflects the basic flaws of the Hundred Days Campaign in its strident attacks and wild accusations against believers. In particular, it includes a detailed denunciation of the Witnesses, whom it accused of preaching the creation of a theocratic state and sabotaging collectivization. More problematically, it alleged that the Witnesses had actively collaborated with Ukrainian partisans and fascists during the wartime occupation of Ukraine, and that Witnesses had ties to American espionage. In the mad rush to produce concrete results in the campaign, many individuals, like this journalist, borrowed heavily from what little atheist propaganda had been produced in the late Stalin era. In the case of the

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\item\textsuperscript{467} “Shire razvernut’ nauchno-ateisticheskuiu propagandu,” \textit{Pravda}, July 24, 1954, 1.
\item\textsuperscript{468} “Bol’she vnimania nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagande,” \textit{Moskovskaia pravda}, September 5, 1954, 1.
\item\textsuperscript{469} I. Nemeshaev, “Marksizm-leninizm o religii,” \textit{Sovetskaia Moldaviia}, August 10, 1954, 4.
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Witnesses, this meant information from their postwar trials in the USSR and in Eastern Europe. Disregarding the instructions of the Party not to offend religious sentiments or undermine the loyalty of religious citizens, this article managed to do both. It even claimed that Witnesses had attempted to roast a young girl alive as a human sacrifice to Jehovah before villagers intervened to save her life.470

By November 1954, the Party realized the need to pull back from its original call to action. On November 20, the TsK passed a new resolution, published in Pravda the following day, blaming newspapers, lecturers, and local officials for treating believers in a rude manner, using coercive measures against believers, and interfering in internal church matters. It stressed that atheist work should be carried out only by qualified personnel. The Hundred Days Campaign had accomplished its goal of returning attention to antireligious work, but it had little progress to show in the actual reduction of religious belief. While the November editorial stated that officials and agitators simply needed to correct their tactical mistakes and not abandon atheist efforts, the latter is how officials and agitators at all levels perceived it. The Russian Republic (RSFSR) Knowledge Society, for example, noted the following year that atheist lectures had declined despite the TsK directive not to abandon these efforts.471 The antireligious campaign, it seemed, had ended as abruptly as it had begun.472 For the next two years, the Party-state invested little effort in atheist education.

Internal struggles for power among the Party leadership and other urgent domestic concerns


471 GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 22, l. 4.

pushed the antireligious efforts onto the back burner. Dimitry Pospielovsky has described this period as “the most ‘liberal’ for the Christians since 1947.”

By 1957, however, the Party gradually began to return its attention to atheist matters. The timing coincided with Khrushchev’s triumph over an attempted ouster and the resultant elimination of all major challenges to his rule. In the aftermath of the so-called Anti-Party Group’s defeat, Khrushchev had a greater mandate and freedom to enact reforms as he saw fit, including the renewal of the antireligious campaign. The institutions named in the original Hundred Days Campaign became the major players in atheist work for the next three decades. The Knowledge Society assumed the work of the now defunct Stalin-era institution, the League of Militant Godless, incorporating more atheist topics into its lectures to educate the public. In 1957, it doubled its lectures on atheism over the previous year, hosting both a ten-day seminar at the all-union level and several dozen republic-level and regional seminars to discuss proper approaches to atheist propaganda.

Within a year, more organized efforts between institutions developed to tackle the problem of persistent religious belief. A spring 1958 conference brought together individuals from the agitation and propaganda department of the TsK, the Knowledge Society, the Komsomol, the CRCA and CROCA, newspaper editors, and publishers. The conference participants acknowledged that many people mistakenly thought the November 1954 resolution cancelled out the July resolution. As a result, these institutions had largely

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473 Pospielovsky is referring here primarily to the Russian Orthodox Church, but the statement holds true for other Christian denominations. Pospielovsky, The Russian Church, 330.

474 Tatiana Chumachenko cites these factors in accounting for the gap between the two antireligious campaigns. Chumachenko, Church and State, 136.


476 RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 59, ll. 27-28.
abandoned their atheist work and allowed religious organizations to strengthen their proselytism activities.\textsuperscript{477} Now those gathered pledged to correct the problem through renewed efforts. In 1959, the Knowledge Society began publication of the journal \textit{Nauka i religiia} (Science and Religion), followed soon after by a Ukrainian-language journal, \textit{Voyovnychyi ateist} (Militant Atheist, later renamed \textit{Liudyna i svit}, or Man and the World).

While the state may have pledged to avoid the pitfalls of the Hundred Days Campaign, in reality this second wave of antireligious work proved even more damaging to believers and definitely offended religious sentiments. Despite voicing a commitment to persuasion over coercion, the state did not abandon the latter form, particularly in regard to unregistered religious groups. The state was also not above using interventionist tactics to reduce the strength of registered religions, including the Russian Orthodox Church. Indeed, a critical component of the second antireligious campaign was state closure of churches. In total, the government shut down over five thousand Russian Orthodox churches as well as most of the Church’s few remaining monasteries, convents, and seminaries. These measures disproportionately affected the western borderlands, whose recent annexation to the Soviet Union meant they had more churches and more believers than the rest of the country. Churches in Ukraine, Moldavia, and Belorussia accounted for five-sixths of those that lost their registered status during the Khrushchev era.\textsuperscript{478}

The more limited space for Russian Orthodox worship had the unintended and, from the state’s perspective, undesirable effect of pushing believers from registered churches into unregistered religious organizations. Toward the end of the closures in 1963, the Moldavian

\textsuperscript{477} RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 91, ll. 30-31.

\textsuperscript{478} Nathaniel Davis, “The Number of Orthodox Churches before and after the Khrushchev Antireligious Drive,” \textit{Slavic Review} 50, no. 3 (1991): 612-20.
Komsomol noted that the locales without an active Russian Orthodox Church had the highest
density of “sectarian” religious belief. It suggested that some Orthodox believers who found
themselves without a local church joined unregistered sects instead. An inspector for the
Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) who visited Moldavia in early 1966 suggested that the
reduction in Orthodox churches had in fact encouraged the growth of sectarianism in the
western borderlands. He gave an example from Fălești district where the number of churches
had decreased from fifty in 1946 to nine in 1966. In the same period, Baptist membership
more than tripled, while Witnesses, Pentecostals, and other minority religions also increased
their numbers. The inspector complained that these groups were much harder to deal with
than the Russian Orthodox Church and more stalwart in their beliefs. The Moscow CRA
official reading the report, however, underlined not these remarks, but instead the inspector’s
comments offering an alternative explanation that blamed the religious situation on the
legacy of private land ownership.

At the same time that the state shut down thousands of churches, it elevated the
importance of registration as the only acceptable channel for organized religious worship. In
March 1961, the government passed new instructions for the CROCA and the CRCA on how
to apply the 1929 Law on Religious Associations, which had established the original
registration guidelines for religious organizations under Stalin. In accordance with the law,
groups of twenty or more adult believers had the right to petition for registration. If approved
for registration, they could then legally hold worship services in designated “prayer houses,”
appoint ministers (sluchiteli), and collect voluntary donations among their members to cover
costs directly related to the group’s operation.

479 AOSPRM, f. 278, inv. 5, d. 163, ff. 28-29.
480 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 8, l. 102.
The instructions also identified numerous restrictions on what registered religious groups could and could not do. For example, they could not encourage members to ignore their civic duties (such as military service and voting) or tell members not to participate in the political, cultural, and social life of the country. They could not use prayer houses to give political speeches. They could not use donations for philanthropic purposes or create committees or subgroups unrelated to religious rituals. Special prayer meetings for children, youth, and women, were prohibited. Registered religious groups could not hold prayer services outside of approved buildings without permission. The government reserved the right to examine periodically the group’s financial records, property, and other relevant documents. In short, the state offered the carrot of registration to religious groups in exchange for greater state control and a narrower sphere of acceptable religious practice.

Historian Philip Walters has correctly labeled the new policy as one of “divide and rule,” defined as the “granting [of] concessions to registered congregations and even whole denominations, while dealing harshly with unregistered and dissident groups.” The instructions made it clear that no religion could exist without registration and affirmed that the state had not changed its attitude toward religious organizations it considered hostile to Soviet power. Most importantly for the Witnesses, Article 23 of the instructions stated that those sects whose actions and beliefs “carry an anti-state and fanatical character” did not qualify for registration. The list of such groups included, but was not limited to, “Jehovists,” Pentecostals, True Orthodox Christians, the True Orthodox Church, and Reform Adventists. While the instructions and Article 23 were not made public, this information circulated among the CRCA, whose republic and oblast-level officials clarified to their

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482 GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 120, ll. 1-12.
lower-ranking employees that under no condition were “Jehovists” and other named religious organizations to be granted registration.\textsuperscript{483}

The secretive nature of the 1961 instructions allowed the state to claim, as it did repeatedly in the post-Stalin era until the advent of glasnost, that the state granted full freedom of conscience to all believers. This was hardly the case. First, some religions that the state was willing to register on a local level as individual congregations, such as the Baptists, struggled with whether to accept the restrictive conditions that came with registration. As a result, while some Baptist congregations sought and received registration, others refused and formed an illegal network of unregistered groups, known as “\textit{Initsiativniki}.”\textsuperscript{484} Equally important, a significant percentage of Orthodox, Baptist, and Muslim religious groups that actively sought registration were continually denied at the local level. By 1961, the state had registered only 4,424 out of the 10,910 religious groups identified by the CRCA and CROCA.\textsuperscript{485} This disparity shrank gradually over the next two decades. By 1985, 12,438 groups out of 15,202 had registration.\textsuperscript{486}

The public’s ignorance of the secret instructions gave the state greater freedom to justify its continued persecution of minority religions such as the Witnesses. Antireligious propaganda and the Soviet media explained the Witnesses’ unregistered status as something the organization itself wanted. According to this logic, the Witnesses preferred a “conspiratorial” underground organization in order to carry out their political goals without

\begin{footnotesize}
483 See, for example, DAZO, f. 1490, op. 2, spr. 35, ark 3; spr. 44, ark. 17, 60-61.

484 For a detailed discussion of the schism between Baptist communities, see Simon, \textit{Church, State and Opposition}, 154-75, and Lane, \textit{Christian Religion}, 146-63.

485 GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 428, ll. 39-43.

\end{footnotesize}
state hindrance.⁴⁸⁷ Some publications claimed that the state had, in fact, offered to register the organization and that the Witnesses had refused.⁴⁸⁸ In one such account, a local Witness leader allegedly responded to an invitation to register by the executive committee of the city soviet in Nevinnomyssk as follows: “I’d rather jump off a bridge into the Kuban [River].”⁴⁸⁹ Overall, the Soviet media suggested that practically all Soviet religious organizations had accepted registration and abided by Soviet laws regarding the limits of legal religious activity. Only the Witnesses rejected the state’s generous terms.⁴⁹⁰

In truth, Soviet Witnesses saw the legal issue much differently than how the media portrayed it and had hopes that Khrushchev’s new religious policy might allow for a limited free practice of their faith. The death of Stalin made it easier for Brooklyn to resume contact with Soviet believers. The organization began publishing reports on the Witnesses’ life in Siberian exile and in the prison camps. President Knorr saw potential in the new Soviet leadership and felt it advisable to seize this opportunity for legalization. He believed the outcome might be different than it was ten years ago when the organization made the same request to Stalin. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society drafted a petition to Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin asking that the government grant Soviet Witnesses the right to establish open channels of communication with Brooklyn, receive and distribute literature

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⁴⁸⁷ See, for example, V. Gazhos, “Novye tendentsii v ideologii sovremennogo religioznogo sektantstva,” Kommunist Moldavii, no. 5 (1976): 19.

⁴⁸⁸ See, for example, A. Baratsevichius and V. Butkus, “Kto takie ‘slugi Iegovy’? Tainye sborishecha,” Sovetskaia Litva, February 28, 1973.

⁴⁸⁹ Levnin, Brat’ia Brulkinskikh apostolov, 18.

⁴⁹⁰ See, for example, V. V. Konik, Tainy religioznynkh missii (Moscow: Molodaia gyardiia, 1980), 111-12.; V. Il’inskii, “Pod maskoi khodataev,” Sovetskaia Kirgiziia, February 7, 1982, 4; and Bartoshevich and Borisoglebskii, Imenem boga Iegovy, 155.
from abroad, and practice their faith without hindrance.491 At district assemblies worldwide from June 1956 through February 1957, a total of 462,936 Witnesses signed copies of the petition, which various branch officials attempted to deliver to Russian embassy representatives in their home countries.492 The entire petition was mailed to Bulganin on March 1, 1957.493

The petition contained a “statement of facts” meant to convince the Soviet government that the Witnesses’ religion did not represent a political danger to the country. It stated that:

Jehovah’s witnesses are recognized as reliable, trustworthy, conscientious workers. Thus they do their proper duty as citizens of the country in which they live. They are intelligent people who do not believe in all the oppression and misinstruction by false religions. They do not steal, they do not get drunk and thus slow down production, and they will never engage in any sabotage work.494

In an attempt to emphasize further that Witnesses have no interest in political affairs, it noted that members “do not engage in any subversive activity and espionage. They are not nationalists, selfish capitalists or imperialists. As true Christians they could never be such, nor could they fight for any political doctrine or ideology, be it communist, democratic or capitalist.” As evidence of this fact, the document referred to the persecution of Witnesses in other countries as communists because of their “neutral position” on politics.

While the petition sought to reassure the Soviet government, it made no offer to modify Witness practices or beliefs in order to reach a compromise on legalization. In fact, it

491 This was not an opportune time to appeal to Bulganin, who was removed from office in the spring of 1958.
494 A copy of the entire petition is available at GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d.79, ll. 44-48.
reiterated the right and responsibility of its Soviet members to preach their faith to others, noting that they “will continue doing it [proselytism] at the peril of their lives, under persecution and opposition.” Similarly, the petition stated directly that Witnesses cannot comply with mandatory military service. The petition ended with a declaration that until the Soviet state agreed to meet with a delegation from Brooklyn, the organization would “inform the world about Jehovah’s witnesses in Russian prisoners, penal camps and deportation centers.”

The Soviet Union, with no intention of granting the Witnesses any legal toehold in the country, most likely read this petition as further proof that the Witnesses represented a serious danger and could not be trusted. Indeed, for state officials, the petition demonstrated that Soviet members of this organization had sent a foreign organization sensitive information on the country’s prison system. The petition cited detailed information on the 1951 exile and on the location and numbers of Witnesses in forced labor camps across the Soviet Union. It asked that the state free these individuals and allow them to organize religious communities. In the eyes of the state, Soviet Witnesses had slandered the Soviet Union and appealed for help to an anti-Soviet organization located in the heart of the United States, its superpower rival.

The Soviet government never acknowledged having received the petition and issued no official response to the matter. The CRCA received several copies of the petition, however, all forwarded by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) from Soviet embassies worldwide.495 The Witnesses, noting the absence of any action on the government’s part, summarized the situation as follows: “To the rulers of the Kremlin there is no God. They just

495 The CRCA received versions of the petition and cover letters from Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Pakistan, among others. GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 79, ll. 7-48.
worship themselves and the state and try to make slaves of all the people. And especially do they try to make slaves of those who believe in a Kingdom of righteousness that will bring peace and prosperity to all mankind.” The 1957 registration attempt had, like its 1949 predecessor, failed to achieve any consensus between Brooklyn and Moscow, and only furthered mutual mistrust. Neither party would seriously revisit the registration question until the mid-1980s. That said, a few individual Witnesses made periodic appeals to the Soviet government to stop the persecution of Witnesses, but without a specific plea for registration or legalization and without the approval of Brooklyn. For example, one Witness sent a letter to the Supreme Court of the USSR in 1959 detailing incidents of violence against Witnesses in Ukraine that year.496

As promised in the petition, the Watch Tower organization continued to publish detailed information in its annual reports about the arrest and imprisonment of Soviet Witnesses.497 State attempts to block the communication channels between Brooklyn and Witnesses had only sporadic success. In 1958, the TsK cited “sectarian organizations from Brooklyn” as one of the major sources of the illegal importation of religious literature into the USSR.498 A 1960 report listed Awake! and The Watchtower among the most commonly imported religious literature sent through the mail.499 Witnesses demonstrated an equal ability to smuggle out literature and reports. At the 1958 Divine Will International Assembly of Jehovah’s Witnesses held at Yankee Stadium, a Swiss delegate delivered a report on behalf of Soviet bloc countries and played a taped message from the Soviet Union for the

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496 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 5116, ark. 322-24.
497 1957 Yearbook, 253-54.
498 RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 88, l. 83.
499 RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 158, ll. 32, 46.
crowd. The recording comprised two songs and “a message of hope and warm Christian love and greetings” from Soviet members.\textsuperscript{500}

**Khrushchev-Style Justice**

Beyond the new religious policy, the Khrushchev era saw major changes in the state’s views on and treatment of dissent that directly impacted the Witnesses and other religious believers. Most Witnesses heard about these developments from within the Gulag or from remote areas of exile in Siberia. In the camps, many struggled simply to survive their prison sentences. One man, who spent fourteen years in the Gulag before his release in 1954, reported that, of the fellow believers in his camp, “Many died. I have often witnessed some of these half-starved slaves, almost sinking from weakness themselves, carrying one of their companions away on a plank, who had been frozen or died of hunger at his job.”\textsuperscript{501}

Witnesses may have felt a spiritual meaning behind their plight, unlike other prisoners, but they suffered just like everyone else. By the end of the Stalin era, more than five million Soviet citizens lived in camps and special settlements, and these systems were becoming unsustainable. In the spring of 1953, the state began making plans to dismantle them.

To take the issue of special exile first, at around the time of Stalin’s death, there were 2,753,356 “special settlers,” the highest number recorded in the Soviet Union since the settlements began.\textsuperscript{502} As of May 1953, the MVD recommended drastic revisions to the settler policy, suggesting the release of almost all categories of people currently living under this directive and the discontinuation of mass exile as a method of punishment. The following

\textsuperscript{500}“Divine Will International Assembly of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom*, October 1, 1958, 591.


\textsuperscript{502}Polian, *Against Their Will*, 185.
year, the Council of Ministers issued orders to liquidate most special settlements. This included the oldest settlements, made up of kulaks deported during collectivization. From 1955 to 1957, the Council signed a series of decrees releasing various exiled nationalities from the settlements and allowing them to return to their native lands.\(^{503}\)

Yet while the MVD acknowledged the non-sustainability of mass exile and called for a massive reduction in special settlers, it nonetheless assessed each settlement community individually. The MVD advised that Witnesses remain in exile.\(^{504}\) In fact, the Witnesses represented one of the few groups that the state still felt it could not risk returning to the general population. The other remaining settlements were for Ukrainian nationalists, alleged bandits and their families, those who served in the Anders Army in World War II, and those exiled for "especially dangerous" crimes.\(^{505}\) By late 1957, less than 200,000 people remained in the special settlements.\(^{506}\) The MVD continued to enforce the Stalin-era conditions of exile for these groups and added exiled Witness youth to the police registries once those individuals reached adulthood.\(^{507}\) The refusal of Witnesses in exile to modify their beliefs or practices likely played a major role in the MVD’s decision.\(^{508}\) Further, the concentration of

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\(^{504}\) As of January 1, 1956, 7,327 Witnesses lived in the special exile settlements. GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 925, l. 153.

\(^{505}\) Polian, *Against Their Will*, 183. During World War II, the Soviet state allowed for the creation of the Anders Army, a separate Polish fighting force consisting of Polish refugees and prisoners of war. After the war, the state allowed the Anders Army permission to evacuate its soldiers from the Soviet Union. Many of those who remained behind were subjected to postwar forced exile. Jeff Schatz, *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 174-78.

\(^{506}\) GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 925, l. 172.

\(^{507}\) ANRM, f. 3085, inv. 1, d. 704, ff. 89-90.

\(^{508}\) GARF, R-9479, op. 1, d. 725, ll. 67-83, cited in Pobol’ and Polian, eds., *Stalinskie deportatsii*, 771-72.
so many Witnesses in a few isolated areas made their communities more noticeable to local officials.

Although Witnesses as a group did not win immediate release from exile after Stalin, the state did take seriously individual appeals for the removal of special exile in light of extenuating circumstances, such as wrongful exile and advanced age. In one such case, the Moldavian KGB and procuracy recommended lifting the exile order from a family that had been resettled in Tomsk oblast in 1951. Their review of the family’s appeal noted that, while one female family member had briefly attended Witness meetings in 1948-49, she had never been baptized into the religion and no one else in the family had had any involvement with the religion prior to exile. The state agreed with the family’s petition that they had in fact never been Witnesses and had been exiled largely by mistake. In another case, the Moldavian KGB and procuracy recommended the removal from special exile of an elderly couple who lacked any family members in Kurgan oblast to care for them. Two of their sons, both not Witnesses, petitioned the state, vowing to support their elderly parents back in their home village of Cotiujeni in Moldavia.\(^{509}\) Overall, the state, courts, and MVD reviewed numerous appeals of exile. In 1956, at the peak of this review process, they ordered the release of 1,121 Witnesses from exile.\(^{510}\)

The Witnesses were among the last categories of special settlers left in the Soviet Union, a fact that says a great deal about how the state viewed them and their potential threat to Soviet society. During the Khrushchev era, some state officials already questioned the wisdom of the policy. A report from the agitprop department of the All-Union Komsomol in 1962, for example, stated that “the practice of mass exile to Siberia of sectarians is generally

\(^{509}\) ANRM, f. 3085, inv. 1, d. 785, ff. 10-11, 51-53.

\(^{510}\) GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 925, l. 153.
incorrect and in need of serious corrections.” It remarked that children raised in the exile communities were likely to become fanatical sectarians.\textsuperscript{511} Similarly, the RSFSR agitprop department in 1964 complained that atheist work in Irkutsk oblast suffered from the fact that, when Party agitators did convince Witnesses to leave the organization, they remained under the exile restrictions along with the rest of their former fellow believers. Agitators thus had a hard time convincing Witnesses of the benefits of renouncing their religion.\textsuperscript{512} Finally, in September 1965, the Supreme Soviet released the Witnesses from special exile. The decree ended administrative surveillance of the Witnesses and restored their freedom of movement, but it did not acknowledge wrongdoing by the state. The order specifically stated that the state would not return any property to exiled persons. Further, Witnesses could return to their home villages only with the permission of the local authorities.\textsuperscript{513}

The post-Stalin transformation of the Gulag introduced liberalizing reforms that directly benefitted Witnesses, but it did not end the criminalization of their religious beliefs and practices. At the time of Stalin’s death, the massive network of prisons and forced labor camps held roughly two and a half million prisoners, including over a half million “political” prisoners, the largest number ever in Soviet history.\textsuperscript{514} Immediately following Stalin’s death, Lavrentii Beria, the head of police and a potential successor to Stalin, issued broad amnesties to a million of these prisoners.\textsuperscript{515} Widespread uncertainty, fear, and anticipation, fueled by Beria’s amnesty and speculation about who would succeed Stalin, provoked unrest in the

\textsuperscript{511} RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1111, ll. 8-9.

\textsuperscript{512} RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 77, l. 23.

\textsuperscript{513} The decree also applied to other religious minorities still under exile. Corley, \textit{Religion in the Soviet Union}, 255-57.

\textsuperscript{514} Taubman, \textit{Khrushchev}, 241.

\textsuperscript{515} Applebaum, \textit{Gulag}, 478-79.
camps. Prisoner uprisings in Noril’sk, Vorkuta, and Kengir in 1953 and 1954 challenged the viability of the system, but were ultimately met with brutal police repression.516

The Witnesses in the camps, like those in exile, viewed the initial reforms with a sense of caution, because their commitment to neutrality in all political matters did not allow them to participate in prisoner riots for better conditions. At the Kengir camp in Kazakhstan in early 1954, roughly eighty Witnesses watched as their fellow inmates took control of the camp. The Witnesses, who refused to take up arms in defense of the uprising, found themselves in a “prison within the prison,” locked in a barracks on the edge of the camp by the rioters.517 When troops stormed into the camp on the fortieth day of the uprising, they spared the Witnesses from the bloodshed that followed. One Witness who lived through these events reflected that the revolt taught him to “wait on Jehovah” and not seek solutions to problems elsewhere.518

As millions of prisoners won release from the Gulag, the state also began to question the underlying merits of politically motivated convictions in the Stalin era. Beginning in 1954, and gaining serious momentum after Khrushchev’s Secret Speech two years later, the TsK undertook comprehensive reviews of convictions for state crimes. Within less than a year of the speech, review commissions had “rehabilitated” over 600,000 people, declaring them innocent and restoring their civil rights.519 Overall, the vast majority of political prisoners won release from their sentences, if not political rehabilitation, and returned home.

516 See Ibid., 484-505.

517 Rurak, Tri aresta, 65-66.

518 N. Gutsulyak, “Awaiting a Kingdom That is ‘No Part of This World’,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, March 1, 2007, 8-11.

519 Applebaum, Gulag, 506-09.
to their families. Among these former prisoners were many Witnesses. Soviet society did not always welcome returnees and often treated them with suspicion or fear.\textsuperscript{520}

The Soviet state maintained its view of the Witness organization as anti-Soviet, dangerous, and criminal in character. In this regard, Witnesses constituted a unique class of political prisoners and returnees. Unlike most of those convicted of state crimes, the Witnesses had been tried largely for activities they did commit and continued to engage in upon release from labor camps. As a result, the state saw no basis for rehabilitating the Witnesses, which would have been tantamount to decriminalizing their activities. In the state’s view, Witness cases represented one instance in which the state had justly and legally applied state crime statutes. After 1953, where the state saw fault in these cases was not in the conviction, but in the overly severe nature of the sentences.\textsuperscript{521} On this basis, most Witnesses received sentence reductions that allowed them to leave the camps by the mid- to late 1950s. For example, the Ukrainian Supreme Court ordered the early release of several convicted Witnesses due to the advanced age of one man and the fact that all of the individuals had been only rank-and-file members of the organization with no prior convictions.\textsuperscript{522} Other Witnesses had simply completed their original sentences of seven to ten years by this time.\textsuperscript{523} Some, primarily older individuals, had died in the camps.\textsuperscript{524}

\textsuperscript{520} For discussion of the “moral panic” that resulted from the post-Stalin wave of Gulag returnees, see Miriam Dobson, \textit{Khrushchev’s Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 39-43.

\textsuperscript{521} L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31931, ark. 126-31, 40.

\textsuperscript{522} L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 292-302.

\textsuperscript{523} L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-30139, ark. 136.

\textsuperscript{524} L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-29147, ark. 274, and DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 3, ark. 312; spr. P-32492, ark. 112.
In a few instances, the state proved unwilling even to grant sentence reductions. Most notably, several state agencies, including the Kiev oblast commission on state crimes and the Ukrainian procuracy, reviewed the case of Petro Tokar’ beginning in early 1955. They all found no basis for leniency and early release. A Supreme Soviet commission eventually granted his co-defendant early release in 1956, but Tokar’ served the entire twenty-five years of his 1947 sentence. However, this case represents the exception, rather than the rule. A few Witnesses who had renounced their faith appealed their original sentences in lieu of their change in circumstances. One man, living under exile in Krasnoiarsk krai, noted of his religious faith that both he and his wife had “got[ten] rid of that nonsense from our heads a long time ago and have started on the path of being Soviet people and obeying all Soviet laws.” In his appeal, he complained that murderers, thieves, and wartime collaborators had already been amnestied and freed, but not the Witnesses. The state denied his request to have the conviction overturned and the exile status removed.

As a whole, when Witnesses left the camps, they did so as marked individuals, still guilty in the eyes of the law. Most had no choice in where to settle: the state released them directly into the special settlements. This happened most commonly when released prisoners had immediate family members living in the settlements, but oftentimes ex-prisoners with non-exiled families were also sent into exile. One Witness woman, arrested in 1947 and released in the mid-1950s, had to settle in Krasnoiarsk krai after having been denied the right to return home to L’viv. Her elderly mother, who had cared for her granddaughter for the past seven years, was too frail to make the long journey by train to Siberia to return the young girl. The state nevertheless denied the grandmother’s request to allow her daughter the

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525 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-32341, ark. 310.

526 DALO, f. 3258, spr. P-25018, t. 3, ark. 374-77.
right to resettle in L’viv. In a few cases, the state allowed Witnesses to return to their home villages or to relocate to other locations in the Soviet Union after serving their sentences. This was most likely the result of bureaucratic error. These individuals often found that, despite this freedom, local officials refused to grant them registration permits to live in their communities, forcing them to live illegally or move somewhere else. As a result, many of them chose voluntarily to move to the settlement communities, where they could be with their families and fellow believers.

While many Witnesses regained their freedom, others were already in the process of losing theirs through new arrests and trials. Simply put, the actions that led to Stalin-era convictions remained illegal after Stalin’s death. The state may have dismantled much of the Gulag, but it had no intention of legalizing what it saw as political dissent. Through the late 1950s, the state continued to apply state crime statutes (primarily Article 58) to Witnesses, resulting in a new round of trials and lengthy camp sentences. Some of those arrested had only a few years prior been given early release from the camps for earlier convictions. Vasile Ursu, for example, enjoyed only a month of freedom in 1957 before the state rearrested him and sentenced him to seven years. Similarly in a 1959 trial in Mykolaїv oblast, three of four defendants had previous convictions for anti-Soviet activity, and two of those had additional convictions for refusal to serve in the military during World War II. Historian Walter Kolarz has suggested that the year 1957 marked the start of an “anti-Jehovist

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528 2004 Yearbook, 106.
529 2004 Yearbook, 105.
530 TsDAHO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 293, ark. 104-20.
campaign” characterized by a significant number of arrests for state crimes that continued into the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{531} This coincided with the return of the broader antireligious campaign.

Eventually, the state began to reduce its reliance on Article 58, using other legal means to eliminate religious dissent. By the end of the Khrushchev era, the courts tried few Witnesses under Article 58, a change that mirrored the steep reduction in the number of convictions for anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda during the Khrushchev years.\textsuperscript{532} Still, among those convicted for state crimes, Witnesses figured prominently among the defendants. For example, in the first quarter of 1960 in the RSFSR, roughly 25 percent of convictions for especially dangerous state crimes were of Witnesses, the only religion singled out for mention in the quarterly report by the RSFSR procuracy.\textsuperscript{533}

In 1960, the state introduced new statutes into the criminal code to replace Article 58 as the legal tool used to prosecute believers for religious dissent.\textsuperscript{534} Articles 142 and 143 criminalized violations of the separations of church and state, and church and school. They also technically barred state officials from infringing upon the rights of citizens and from interfering in religious rituals that did not disturb the public order.\textsuperscript{535} More important for Witnesses, Article 227 made it a criminal offense for leaders of religious organizations to incite citizens not to fulfill civic duties or not to participate in the socio-political life of the country under the guise of religious beliefs. Religious rituals that could cause harm to

\textsuperscript{531} Kolarz, \textit{Religion in the Soviet Union}, 343-44.

\textsuperscript{532} GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 555, ll. 1-3.

\textsuperscript{533} GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 556, ll. 1-2, and RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 120, ll. 91-92.

\textsuperscript{534} This law was broadened in 1962 to include even more categories of unacceptable religious belief. Pauline B. Taylor, “Sectarians in Soviet Courts,” \textit{Russian Review} 24, no. 3 (1965): 284.

individuals were similarly banned under this statute. To convict Witnesses under Article 227 was relatively simple, as Witnesses rejected such basic civic duties as military service and voting, and avoided socio-political activities such as membership in youth and Party organizations. When Witnesses discussed these views among themselves and with potential converts, they violated Article 227.

Even more broadly, the second clause of Article 227 allowed the state to prosecute active members of a religious organization if they participated in promoting these illegal activities. This second clause gave the state enough leeway to justify investigations into any Witness, whether or not they held a responsible position in the organization. Indeed, an RSFSR Supreme Court report on the law’s application in 1962 to 1964 complained that some courts had used the law against ordinary members, considering membership alone sufficient for conviction. The report cited the case of a Witness in Irkutsk oblast who had received five years under the statute on the sole evidence of having preached to one woman. The Supreme Court ordered a retrial. While this was not a typical case, it demonstrates the wholesale criminalization of Witness activity that continued through the late Soviet era. The updated criminal code dictated sentences of up to five years imprisonment or exile for persons in violation of this law. The 1964 report also reflects the disproportionate number of Witnesses in criminal cases against believers. Of the 169 convictions reviewed by the Supreme Court, roughly 33 percent were of Witnesses, second only to Pentecostals with 36

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536 Article 227 referred to the RSFSR legal code; the corresponding article in Ukraine was Article 209.


538 RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 120, ll. 87-88, 93-95.

percent. Further, the most convictions for Article 227 by region occurred in Tomsk and Irkutsk oblasts, the locations of the two Witness special settlements.\footnote{GARF, f. 428, op. 3, d. 457, l. 3.}

Beyond Article 227, the state used other methods to suppress the Witnesses. The state exiled a small number of Witnesses under a May 4, 1961, Supreme Soviet decree against “parasites,” i.e. persons not engaged in “socially useful labor.” A July 1962 report on implementation of the decree noted that, of the almost 250,000 people identified as parasites, about 1,200 were leaders of illegal religious sects. Of the 250,000, the state exiled about 20,000 of the worst offenders.\footnote{RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 402, ll. 114-17.} In one case, a Witness in North Ossetia had been given five years of forced labor in exile for parasitism in 1963. The RSFSR Supreme Court, in a review of the case, criticized the application of this decree, finding that a conviction under Article 227 would have been more appropriate.\footnote{RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 120, ll. 105-07.} In addition, Witness men continued to face prosecution for refusal to serve in the military, a crime that carried up to five years in prison.\footnote{Zaichuk, ed., \textit{Zvid zakoniv}, 549.}

**Spying on the Faithful**

As the state created a more nuanced, complex strategy for the prosecution of dissent, it relied heavily on more long-term strategies to liquidate perceived threats. Police and KGB agents infiltrated religious communities, providing critical information to the state while undermining these groups from within. The state had used this “divide and conquer” method in the 1920s and 1930s against the Russian Orthodox Church, subsidizing and promoting a
progressive countermovement in Orthodoxy, known as Renovationism, to weaken the church’s influence. It employed the same approach in the postwar era with Protestant religions, particularly Baptists, using registration as a wedge to divide believers. In both cases, the state exploited genuine differences of opinion over belief and practice to encourage schisms. Infiltration of the Witness organization almost certainly began in the Stalin era, but it expanded considerably in the post-Stalin period.

The Witnesses quickly became aware of such police efforts. The 1956 Yearbook reported that “the Russian government has put many spies in its land, not trusting anyone. They filter into every organization, keeping their eyes and ears open for any of Jehovah’s witnesses, for these they want to silence.” It further stated, “there is great distrust among the brothers, for many strangers have sneaked into the organization and often betray the brothers.” Brooklyn voiced repeated concern in the following years over the danger of schism in the organization. The 1959 Yearbook report on Russia declared:

What the devilish organization [the police] is trying to do is build up a mistrust among the brothers so that they will think that within their own ranks there are hateful people, those who lie, those who are working for other governments, but if all of Jehovah’s witnesses keep their eyes on God’s Word, the Bible, and preach what he has commanded and continue to do the divine will, then the unity that exists among God’s people will continue and a much greater witness will be given throughout all this great territory.

The organizational structure of the Witnesses made the threat of infiltration all the more complex, as just one compromised link in the chain could endanger the entire flow of authority, information, and literature. A 1959 incident demonstrates this problem. That year,

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544 Roslof, Red Priests.
545 1956 Yearbook, 254-55.
suspicions surfaced among elders regarding the district leader, Mina Dodu, after he repeatedly failed to deliver literature on time. Dodu refused to address the problem, and one member began to suspect that Dodu’s courier, who was responsible for transmitting literature and reports between Dodu and the country committee, had been co-opted as well. Left with no other options, the member circumvented Dodu and the courier and sent a concerned letter to the country committee. He was arrested shortly thereafter. The letter writer believed that the timing of his arrest proved that the police had acted to prevent Dodu’s exposure as a police agent.\(^{547}\) In fact, the man’s suspicions were correct. Dodu publicly renounced the faith soon after. He later served as a witness for the prosecution in trials against local Witnesses and helped decode confiscated reports for the police.\(^{548}\)

Problems also arose when members falsely suspected another individual of having betrayed the organization. Witnesses could quickly find themselves expelled from the organization and shunned by fellow believers. Ironically, the alienated Witnesses then became more vulnerable to state agents who sought to coerce them into providing information. Police often lied to arrested members, telling them that certain individuals had betrayed them. This was a useful tool for police who wanted to isolate an active member from the organization. Still, at least a few Witnesses displayed remarkable patience in such situations. One woman found herself the victim of such police tactics and was expelled from the organization as a suspected traitor. Soon after, she was arrested and refused to cooperate with the investigation. She still considered herself to be a Witness, even though local

\(^{547}\) Gheorghe Gorobeț, interview by author, July 7, 2009, Chișinău, Moldova.

members no longer did. Recounting this story in the post-Soviet era, she recalled feeling certain that Jehovah would resolve the situation and vindicate her, and tried not to hate those who had spread false rumors about her. Upon conviction she found herself in the same labor camp as the women who had been tricked into denouncing her as a traitor. Rather than argue, they resolved their differences and trusted one another enough to share illegal literature. The organization eventually restored the woman as a member.\textsuperscript{549}

Witnesses responded to the new wave of investigations and trials with many of the same tactics employed in the Stalin era. Watch Tower Vice President Frederick W. Franz lectured on this theme at the 1955 Triumphant Kingdom Assembly in New York City in 1955.\textsuperscript{550} The following year, \textit{The Watchtower} reprinted the basic outline of this message. In the piece, the organization told members to pursue a “war strategy” of hiding the truth from state persecutors. It advised members to give false information to police to avoid arrest in countries where Witnesses lacked legal standing, stating, “God does not oblige us to show the stupidity of sheep and play into the hands of our fighting enemy.” At the same time, it held to the view that members must tell the truth when under oath in a court of law.\textsuperscript{551}

Franz’s message quickly made its way to the Soviet Union. A 1956 CRCA report from L’viv cited a memo from Knorr advising members not to give information to police and, if necessary, to protect elders by taking full responsibility for any potentially illegal actions. Knorr also recommended that convicted members appeal their court sentences to the

\textsuperscript{549} Questionnaire for Vera Gheorghiță (MJW).


\textsuperscript{551} “Cautious as Serpents Among Wolves,” \textit{The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom}, February 1, 1956, 86, 88.
full extent allowed by the law. Most Witnesses followed the organization’s advice not to cooperate with the police. Nikolai Kalibaba, arrested in early 1959, recalls that, out of a desire to protect other fellow believers, he told investigators he would not identify a single person. An investigator then showed him a picture of his brother, asking him to identify him. Nikolai refused. Next, he was shown a picture of himself and asked, “Is this you?” Nikolai merely responded, “This person looks like me, but whether it is me or not, I can’t say.”

A more detailed document, circulated in Zakarpattia oblast in 1960, counseled members on how to respond to questioning. The Watch Tower organization, well experienced in handling cases of state repression of its members, wanted to make sure that all Witnesses knew that they did have rights, even if the Soviet state did not honor them. It cited several United Nations (UN) documents, including the 1948 Declaration on Human Rights guaranteeing freedom of conscience and a 1952 UN publication listing the Witnesses as a recognized religious organization. It also referenced the Soviet constitution, the works of Lenin, and the November 1954 resolution ending the Hundred Days Campaign. These materials had no practical impact in halting investigations, but they gave Witnesses a means to respond to police when questioned.

On a more practical level, the 1960 memo detailed a list of suggested answers to typical questions from investigators. For example, if asked to explain Armageddon, it advised Witnesses to respond that it is a biblical term referring to the end of evil on earth and the liberation of mankind from oppression, disease, and death. If asked whether they conduct subversive activity, Witnesses should respond that they never participate in political or

552 DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 24, ark. 126-27.

553 2008 Yearbook, 108.
military activities. Other potential questions included why Witnesses do not provide evidence to police, what they think about the release of Sputnik, how they view science and religion, and whether they receive funds from the Rockefeller family.554 These answers may not have changed investigators’ minds, but they taught Witnesses how to defend their faith.

The trial of Mykola Mandziak provides a fascinating glimpse into early Khrushchev-era investigations of Witnesses. Mandziak, a Witness since 1930, had only recently returned home from a previous term in a labor camp when police conducted a search of his home in late 1956. The search revealed a large quantity of religious literature and printing paper hidden throughout the home and concealed in a double-bottomed suitcase. To make matters worse for Mandziak, he was hosting a Bible study with other Witnesses at the time the police arrived to arrest him. The state eventually charged him under Article 58.

During months of interrogation, Mandziak showed remarkable creativity in evading questions by investigators, following the organization’s admonitions to take responsibility and not implicate others. Thus, while he admitted to his own involvement in the organization, he refused to identify anyone else as a member, or even to sign the interrogation records. Asked about the anti-Soviet content of literature confiscated from his home, he said he had not found the free time yet to read it. An unknown man, Mandziak claimed, had dropped off the printing paper, asked him to hold onto it, and then never returned. The believers at his home that night, Mandziak explained, had come to visit his wife, who had recently broken her arm. A fellow prisoner had given him the double-bottomed suitcase as a gift; he had no idea it contained a secret compartment filled with literature. After three months of fruitless questioning, the investigator declared, “Your explanations not only do not match reality, but

554 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 5116, ark. 312-21.
are devoid of any logical thought.” Mandziak admitted it might seem that way, but stood by his statements.

Even when his own son provided evidence against him concerning previous Bible studies held at the home, Mandziak replied that his son must just be confused. These visitors had come over to buy fruit and milk from him and just happened to discuss the Bible. His wife stood by him, stating that she had no idea what he did during the day because they worked different shifts. At his trial in March 1957, Mandziak repeated his statements and claimed he was unaware that his religion was illegal in the Soviet Union. The court sentenced him to ten years in a forced labor camp, along with confiscation of his property and an additional five years of exile from western Ukraine. Such severe consequences for illegal activity did not deter most members from continuing to undertake risky endeavors.

The Dubravnyi Strategy

Ongoing arrests after Stalin meant that many Witnesses returned to forced labor camps, where they preached their beliefs to their fellow prisoners. As one Witness described it: “The more I suffered, the more I preached,” even after receiving additional sentences for proselytism. His story is not unique. Witnesses’ stubborn refusal to cease religious activity challenged camp order and undermined the purported goal of reforming criminals into honest Soviet citizens. In the late 1950s, the Soviet state finally took decisive action to address this problem. Hoping to isolate Witnesses from other prisoners, it began transferring them to a separate zone in the Dubravnyi camp system in Mordovia, an autonomous republic south of

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555 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-35090 (Mandziak’s case file).

556 “Exposing the Red Paradise,” 246.
Nizhnii Novgorod and west of the Volga River. Vasile Ursu, sent to a labor camp in Mordovia in the fall of 1957, recalled that, when he arrived, “many other brothers were also incarcerated there, and more were to come.” By the spring of 1961, the Dubravnyi camp held a total of 10,458 prisoners, the majority serving sentences for especially dangerous state crimes. At the time, it was the only such camp in the RSFSR. Of this total, 1,892 prisoners had been convicted of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda. Five hundred and twenty-seven persons were identified as sectarians or church personnel; most were Witnesses.

However, as the Stalin-era exiles had shown, attempts to isolate Witnesses could have unintended consequences. For imprisoned Witnesses, the Dubravnyi camp proved to be an ideal setting to commune with fellow believers en masse. One man, sent to Mordovia in 1963, described the camp as similar to a “school” for studying and growing in his faith. Previously, many of these men had served time in camps with few other Witness prisoners. Now they had the support of hundreds of others to sustain them through their sentences. Mordovia also made it much easier for Witness elders to minister to their imprisoned flock and convert new members. The organization gave the camp its own circuit and appointed an “overseer” to lead activities. The circuit had twenty-eight study circles, organized into four congregations. For the Witnesses, the camps were simply an extension of their preaching

557 Mordovia is sometimes known as Mordvinia.
558 2004 Yearbook, 105.
559 GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 577, ll. 155-56.
560 GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 577, l. 158. A later report from that year listed 587 sectarians and suggests that nearly all were Jehovahists. GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 765, ll. 32a-35, 46a. The Watch Tower organization estimates that between 1959-66, more than 450 male Witnesses served time in the camp. 2008 Yearbook, 124.
561 Questionnaire for A. Gheorghită (MJW).
work into new locales. A 1960-61 country report from the organization contained a separate set of statistics solely for its work within the camps and prisons.\textsuperscript{562}

Further, the Dubravnyi camp simplified the organization’s difficult and risky task of smuggling in illegal literature to imprisoned members since it now could supply hundreds of people with a single literature delivery. The inmates copied each piece of literature by hand, including the entire Bible. They then distributed the copies to study groups. A few of the men had mastered a technique called “spiderweb writing,” which allowed them to copy entire issues of \textit{The Watchtower} onto tiny paper booklets that could fit in a matchbox.\textsuperscript{563} Family members who visited their loved ones in the camp added to this growing library by bringing in minute hand-copied versions of \textit{The Watchtower} hidden “in the heels of their shoes” or by “braiding thin sheets of paper into their hair.”\textsuperscript{564} Frequent searches cost the Witnesses some of their publications, but they found ways to shield at least a portion of them from detection. In some cases, Witnesses protected their “spiritual food” by hiding the miniature literature wrapped in plastic under their tongues during searches.\textsuperscript{565}

Camp officials quickly realized that the Dubravnyi system had not produced the results they had intended. A 1960 evaluation of the camp concluded that officials had failed to effectively isolate prisoners from each other or the outside world. It found that administrators did not have adequate control over the mail system, allowing prisoners to send

\textsuperscript{562} The report does not include all camps and prisons for reasons discussed later in this chapter regarding a schism in the organization. For example, it did not include Dubravnyi camp in its records. The report lists 1,420 hours spent in preaching work, 33 Bible studies conducted, and 7 baptisms in camps and prisons. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 218-19.

\textsuperscript{563} 2008 Yearbook, 172-74.

\textsuperscript{564} Ibid., 124-25.

\textsuperscript{565} 2002 Yearbook, 204.
correspondence with few limitations. Witnesses and Pentecostal prisoners had both exploited this weakness, sending a huge quantity of mail on a daily basis. The camp also had lost control over incoming mail. In that year alone, staff confiscated over 300 items of religious literature from prisoners.\textsuperscript{566} The 1961 evaluation stated that the roughly 500 religious prisoners received 4,850 packages that year weighing 43 tons.\textsuperscript{567}

The RSFSR procuracy followed up its critical evaluation the next year with a decree condemning the camp’s failure to correct these problems. It noted that not only had the camp allowed prisoners to receive and distribute illegal religious literature, but it had done little to stop inmates from making reproductions of literature or from conducting meetings and religious rituals.\textsuperscript{568} In 1962, the camp finally took more decisive measures, transferring several prisoners to a stricter regime zone and assigning agitation workers to reform prisoners. As a result of these efforts, eighteen prisoners announced they had renounced religion and the camp noted a decline in the number of illegal meetings. The camp hesitated to declare success, however, admitting that the reduction in meetings was largely the result of a shift in tactics by Witnesses. Sensing the increased monitoring, the Witnesses had begun gathering in small groups of only three to five people.

Camp officials stated that it lacked sufficient resources or trained personnel for effective agitation work.\textsuperscript{569} The 1961 camp evaluation noted that its religious prisoners continued to voice anti-Soviet views. They ignored the administration’s attempts at reeducation, refusing to attend lectures, speeches, or participate in other group activities run

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item[566] GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 577, ll. 137-39.
  \item[567] GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 577, l. 164.
  \item[568] GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 577, ll. 144-46.
  \item[569] GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 782, ll. 156-58.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
by agitators. The evaluation also criticized the poor quality of scientific-atheist work despite the clear need for such efforts. The matter was deemed of such importance that it came to the attention of the RSFSR procuracy and the RSFSR MVD. This did little to solve the problem, which resolved itself largely through a decrease in long sentences by the late 1960s. As Witnesses exited the camps, fewer new prisoners replaced them, and the state stopped funneling all Witnesses into Mordovia.

The Witness Organization under Khrushchev

Although a sizeable number of Witnesses remained in forced labor camps well after 1953, many regained their freedom and others joined the faith for the first time. As a result of arrests, exile, and conversions, the Witness organization faced a much more diffuse and growing membership base that required more elders to meet its growing needs. In the Khrushchev era, the organization worked to rebuild and extend its administrative structure over new territories. To this end, the organization added new circuits, groups, and circles, and appointed new elders to lead each of these units. The post-Stalin release of many formerly imprisoned Witnesses helped replenish the organization’s leadership base. They also provided proof to believers that God could protect his people from harm. Areas with longstanding Witness communities saw a surge in numbers in the late 1960s as individuals returned to their home villages.

By the late 1950s, local officials began to notice the return of Witnesses to their communities, and they reacted with alarm. A memo from the CRCA to the Moldavian TsK in

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570 GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 577, ll. 164-68.
571 DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 42, ark. 57; spr. 43, ark. 61.
1956 reported that “Jehovists” and other sectarians who had been released from prison had returned to their communities as “martyrs.”572 Similarly, at a 1957 plenum of the Moldavian Komsomol, one official complained that newly released Witnesses were proclaiming that God had made it possible for them to return home after serving only three years of a twenty-five-year sentence. When the chair of one village soviet spoke to one of the returning men, he asked him if he had seen proof of God. The man replied that God had shown himself by freeing him and others.573 The dismantling of the Gulag made it possible for such men to resume leadership positions in their faith communities with renewed authority.

Even with the moderate liberalizations of the Khrushchev era, the position of country servant faced regular turnover due to police investigations and arrests. Ukrainian Witnesses continued to occupy this important role through the late Soviet era, even as the organization won new converts in the Russian heartland and in other Soviet Republics. However, the organization did appoint country committee members from other regions in later years to reflect the religion’s expansion to new locales. Bohdan Terlets’kyi, who joined the faith during World War II and who had been instrumental in the early postwar leadership, took over as country servant in 1952 after the arrest of Mykola Tsyba. Under investigation by the KGB in 1955, Terlets’kyi chose to renounce the organization rather than face a lengthy prison sentence. For the next several years, he featured regularly in atheist agitation against the Witnesses, publishing articles on the religion and delivering lectures on the inner workings of the Witness leadership.574

572 ANRM, f. 3305, inv. 2, d. 10, f. 186.

573 AOSPRM, f. 278, inv. 3, d. 815, ff. 35-36.

574 Ivanenko, O liudiakh, 244. For atheist work by Terlets’kyi, see, for example, S. Bedei, “Litsemerie mrakobesov,” Sovetskoe zakarp’e, January 14, 1959, 3; B. Terletskii, “Deistvitel’nost’ ubedila,”
The sudden and dramatic departure of Terlets’kyi led to the appointment of Mykola Dubovyns’kyi, a man who already had direct experience with police repression. He served time from 1944 to 1950 for his involvement with the Witnesses. Assuming leadership in 1955, he managed to avoid a second arrest for only a short time. A yearlong investigation in Stanislav oblast, Ukraine, led to his arrest in January 1957 and a twenty-five-year prison sentence.\(^{575}\) Fortunately for the organization, this event coincided closely with the release of Ziatek from the camps in 1956. Ziatek resumed his old responsibilities until he was arrested again on January 1, 1961.\(^{576}\) At that time, the organization made arrangements for yet another man, Ivan Pashkovs’kyi, to take the helm, although Ziatek continued to provide leadership from prison. Only with the appointment of Pashkovs’kyi did the organization enjoy a period of stability. Health problems, rather than police intervention, caused Pashkovs’kyi to relinquish responsibility in 1972.\(^{577}\)

Renewed communication between Brooklyn and the Soviet Witness leadership helped the organization to overcome the challenges of continual arrests and convictions. For several years, the Soviet Witnesses had been unable to collect comprehensive membership data or to keep track of their preaching work and literature distribution. In the Khrushchev era, this work improved, even though it still meant a major risk for elders. Each individual Witness submitted regular reports to his or her circle leader on the number of hours spent on

\(^{575}\) TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 4494, ark. 18.

\(^{576}\) Gol’ko, Sibirskii marshrut, 72-73.

proselytism, how much literature was distributed, how many Bible studies were conducted with interested people, how many return visits were made to potential new converts, and how much money had been donated. Funding for printing materials, travel for leaders, and aid to needy members came entirely from voluntary donations made by members. Circle leaders consolidated and transmitted this information up the chain of command, where the country committee prepared an overall report and smuggled it out abroad. This system kept the international organization better informed on the state of its Soviet branch, although Brooklyn did not publish this data to protect Soviet Witnesses. To further shield members, Soviet elders employed various systems of encoding to disguise the meaning of data on reports if intercepted by the police.

A 1959-1960 country report confiscated in 1962 provides a detailed portrait of Witness activity during the Khrushchev era. It lists over 15,000 pieces of literature distributed, 398,540 hours spent in preaching work, 140,709 return visits, 1,866 Bible studies, 546,024 rubles donated by members, and over 26,000 pieces of literature printed. These data are all the more impressive as they reflect only a fraction of the total efforts in the Soviet Union due to divisions in the leadership to be discussed in the next section. Further, the country report for the following year shows substantial growth, particularly in the area of printing, with over 60,000 items of literature produced.

578 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 207-08.

579 For example, after the arrest of one of the country committee members, the police convinced the man to decipher reports that they had confiscated from him. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 215-16.

580 The incomplete reporting is reflected in the member statistics given in the 1960-61 report. The reports list a total of 9,766 “publishers,” or members active in the preaching work, a figure much lower than state statistics from the same period, which tended to underreport members. A 1964 report from the CRCA in Ukraine, for example, listed over 8,000 members in Ukraine alone. GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 437, l. 1.

581 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 218.
These reports reflect the revival and expansion of underground printing presses that had been largely paralyzed after the arrests and exiles of the late Stalin era. Much of the earlier printing work had involved duplicating pre-1945 literature and publications smuggled into Ukraine by Polish resettlers after the war. In the Khrushchev era, regular channels from abroad were reestablished to allow for the mass reproduction of new magazines, tracts, and books. Hidden in mail packages, carried in by Witnesses disguised as tourists, or smuggled over the western borders, the literature had to be translated into the many languages read by Soviet Witnesses. Dozens of Witnesses served as translators, making it possible to reach out to more communities across the Soviet Union. With the strengthened printing efforts, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the organization printed new issues of *The Watchtower* roughly once a month.582

Hiding large scale printing operations was difficult. Exploiting the rural, isolated locations of many Witness communities, the organization established secret bunkers in the basements and backyards of members and in surrounding uninhabited areas near villages. The bunkers were not small, amateur operations. Some of those in Ukraine had electric generators and ventilation systems to allow members to work underground day and night. In the Moldavian village of Hlina, one Witness set up a printing bunker under the shed in his backyard. When discovered in 1957, it contained organizational documents from the country committee, reports from all fifteen circuits, financial records, three typewriters, printing supplies, and issues of *The Watchtower* in four different languages.583 The organization set up one bunker in the mountains outside of the village of Hanychi in Zakarpattia oblast. When police discovered it in 1963, it contained two typewriters, two mimeograph machines,

582 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 239-40.

583 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 4494, ark. 17-20.
mimeograph paper, notebooks, a radio receiver, binoculars, a kerosene lamp, a bed, linens, clothes, food supplies, and an electric generator, along with a large quantity of literature in Russian, Romanian, and Ukrainian. One young man had run the bunker by himself for three years.\footnote{584}{TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 334, ark. 54-55.}

The Witness leadership made concerted efforts to safeguard printing locations and protect their operators from arrest. The organization kept members unaware of the details of how the literature was produced and by whom, making it impossible for them to betray this information accidentally or intentionally to the police. Literature arrived for each circle through the appointed elder, but even he often did not know the full name of the person who delivered it. Pseudonyms or first names kept identities a secret. The organization also used different people for the printing work and the literature distribution. In fact, the person delivering the literature to the study circle may have been more than one step removed from the actual press.\footnote{585}{Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 53-54.}

The organization also grappled with the difficult task of procuring supplies for its presses. Polish Witnesses, disguised as tourists, offered some help by smuggling in mimeograph paper in the late 1950s.\footnote{586}{Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 199.} In the long run, the organization needed to find other methods to meet the growing demand for literature. Soviet Witnesses, finding it impossible to buy printing ink and paper in bulk from state stores, paid employees of state printing facilities to sell it to them.\footnote{587}{Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 199; and RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, ll. 156-57.} For example, elders bought the supplies for two bunkers in Zakarpattia oblast in large part from members of the oblast Komsomol. Not surprisingly, the
KGB got involved in investigating how Komsomol members had stolen and then sold printing supplies to what the state classified as an anti-Soviet organization.\(^{588}\)

Those who worked in these printing operations assumed an incredible burden. By the early 1960s, the printing presses produced nearly 20,000 items of literature per year.\(^{589}\) The work itself was grueling for those who labored underground for weeks at end to keep the presses running. One man, who worked in a printing operation in Siberia, recalled that he “almost never slept” between the printing work and his full-time job. Outside of his family and a few other Witnesses, no one knew of his involvement. Members from his congregation even questioned his commitment to the faith during this time, since they never saw him in the evenings.\(^{590}\) Housing the literature while it awaited delivery posed similar problems. One man in Transcarpathia created a “theocratic library” in the forest near his home, filling milk cans with literature and burying in the ground.\(^{591}\) Members stored most of the literature in their homes, in secret compartments built to hide illegal publications during regular police raids. When police did discover underground presses, the responsible individuals faced long prison sentences or worse. The 2002 Yearbook states that authorities shot and killed one Witness, Ivan Dziabko, during the raid on his bunker in 1963.\(^{592}\) Even such severe consequences, however, did not deter Witnesses from undertaking these tasks.

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588 RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, ll. 156-57.
589 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 216.
591 2002 Yearbook, 214.
592 Ibid., 217. Dziabko’s press was also the subject of police interrogations of other Witnesses in 1962. One arrested Witness claimed he met with Dziabko in the mountains. At that meeting, Dziabko told the man he did not attend Bible study meetings for fear of arrest. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 189-96.
The Great Witness Schism

More major problems than arrests and raids threatened the Witness leadership by the late 1950s. The 1949 and 1951 removal of Witnesses from the borderlands created a division of the membership into “West,” i.e. those members not subject to exile, and “East,” those now living primarily in Siberian settlements. The massive distance between the two communities strained the unified hierarchical structure, requiring the country committee to service both locations. Four of the committee’s members lived in Ukraine and four in Siberia, yet distance limited their ability to communicate effectively with one another. With the organization still led by Ukrainians, the Siberian elders suffered a sense of isolation and lack of control. This climate fostered mistrust and misunderstanding. The arrests of high-level leaders, including the country servants, hurt the organization’s ability to respond both to this problem and to ongoing police infiltration.

By the late 1950s, leaders in the Siberian exile community began to question the country committee’s ability and authority to lead the organization. Rumors spread that Ziatek, the country servant, had betrayed the organization to the KGB. Continued arrests in both Siberia and the western borderlands added fuel to this suspicion. The conflict took a more serious turn in 1958, when several Siberian members met to discuss the situation and to air their complaints against Ziatek. Seeing no other attractive option, they decided to appeal directly to the Poland branch for permission to form a separate Siberian Witness organization. The men’s smuggled-out letter to the Polish country servant, however, did not produce the desired response. Instead, they received a sharp rebuke denouncing the idea of a

593 Ibid., 194.

594 Questionnaire for A. Gheorghită (MJW).
Siberian Witness organization as “schismatic” and demanding an end to further discussion of the matter. Ignoring this fact and Ziatek’s own attempts to restore unity, the Siberian group stopped reporting to the recognized country committee and halted the flow of information from Siberia to Ukraine. Without outside approval, they formed their own country committee in 1961.

The division gradually spread through the lower levels of the organization, as each side appealed to members for support. Most Witnesses had little idea that a split had occurred, since the same local leaders remained in place and secrecy measures prevented them from having any knowledge of what went on in the upper leadership. The Watch Tower organization estimates that several thousand members came under the control of the new country committee, particularly in Irkutsk and Tomsk. Although the initial motivation for the split had been to form a Siberian country committee, the opposition’s distrust of Ziatek led them to extend their reach beyond Siberia. In short, they hoped to replace the Ziatek committee and become the sole authority for Soviet Witnesses. Ultimately, three major factions within the Witnesses emerged. Those who followed the Brooklyn-appointed Ziatek country committee were dubbed “Ziatekists” (Ziatekovtsy). Those who opposed Ziatek’s leadership and wanted to form a new country committee were known as the “opposition” (oppositsiia). Its members were sometimes called “Potashovists,” (Potashovtsy)


596 2002 Yearbook, 1995, and Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 40-42.

597 2008 Yearbook, 135.
after their most prominent member.598 Lastly, those who rejected any need for a centralized organization were called “neutralists” (neutralisty).

The schism lines reveal deep tensions over the serious consequences of the organization’s lack of registration. Many in the oppositionist and neutralist factions felt frustrated that no progress had been made with the Soviet government to negotiate an agreement that would allow them to practice their faith without fear of persecution. As other religions around them openly held services in churches, some Witnesses wondered why this option was not possible for them as well. For example, a group of Witnesses calling themselves the “Bible Students in the defense of Truth,” circulated fliers in western Ukraine in 1961. The fliers denounced the organization’s leadership for bringing the religion and its members into direct conflict with the Soviet state since World War II. They blamed the leadership’s confrontational methods and uncompromising attitude for causing the mass exile. The text of the fliers noted that, while other religious faiths had registered with the state, the Witnesses had not. As a solution, the fliers suggested that Witnesses rely on the Bible, instead of illegal publications like The Watchtower, for their salvation. They recommended that members back off from active missionary work that could lead to arrests.599

Further complicating matters, the schism coincided with a wave of arrests in Irkutsk oblast and western Ukraine and with the liquidation of several major printing operations. These actions were the climax of a three-year KGB investigation and infiltration of the

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598 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 473, l. 3.

599 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 2, spr. 35, ark. 16-25.
Witnesses, which encouraged the schism as part of its “divide and conquer” strategy.\textsuperscript{600} While the KGB cannot be held solely responsible for the schism, its actions certainly exacerbated divisions and undermined attempts to create unity within the organization.\textsuperscript{601} In 1965, after the schism had already occurred, the KGB chief for L’viv oblast wrote that the KGB was working to “split this sect into two hostile factions” by fueling tensions between the Ziatek and oppositionist groups.\textsuperscript{602} Most damaging, it made a concerted effort to convince arrested members, particularly prominent leaders, to turn against fellow believers. The weakened unity among Witnesses made it easier for the police to obtain information.

This KGB method had its greatest success with Konstantin Potashov, the leader whose name would ultimately be identified as synonymous with the opposition. In 1958, Potashov had just been freed from prison and had settled in the city of Bratsk, Irkutsk oblast, among Ukrainian Witnesses.\textsuperscript{603} A Russian born in 1923 in Gorky oblast, he did not come from the borderland Witness communities like most leaders.\textsuperscript{604} In fact, his early life had been marked by two prison sentences for hooliganism and theft in 1941 and 1948.\textsuperscript{605} While in prison in 1949, he converted to the Witnesses and subsequently received three more sentences for state crimes related to his religious activities.\textsuperscript{606} Once freed and living in

\textsuperscript{600} TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 24, ark. 67-79; and RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, l. 98

\textsuperscript{601} For example, a 1961 KGB report from Kazakhstan notes that it continues to take measures aimed at compromising leaders of illegal congregations. RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 190, ll. 45-46.

\textsuperscript{602} DALO, f. 3, op. 9, spr. 85, ark. 96.

\textsuperscript{603} Potashov’s name is sometimes rendered as “Potashev,” an error that he himself corrected during KGB interrogations. He noted that the name had been misspelled in earlier court documents, leading to confusion. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 252.

\textsuperscript{604} Potashov clarified during interrogation that his birth date was wrongly given in documents as 1924, not 1923, due to an error on his army identification papers in 1942. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 58.

\textsuperscript{605} Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 6, 137.
Irkutsk oblast, Potashov oversaw the development of a major printing operation until several KGB searches suggested to him that another arrest was near at hand. In late 1959, fleeing police detection, Potashov relocated to Zakarpattia oblast, where he assisted with the establishment of several additional printing bunkers. Meanwhile in Irkutsk, a warrant had been issued for his arrest and the investigation into the Irkutsk Witnesses continued.

Potashov’s luck finally ran out in early 1962, after KGB raids in Zakarpattia oblast uncovered the printing operations. A police encounter near a bus station in the city of Mukachevo led to Potashov’s arrest. He was carrying a fake passport and a copy of The Watchtower. Two months of interrogations yielded little to no information. Eventually, however, Potashov began to give evidence, cooperating with the police investigation for several months through early November. Potashov’s departure from the organization was especially damaging given his position as traveling overseer to congregations across the Soviet Union. He was able to provide details on Witnesses in western Ukraine, Siberia, and northern Moldavia. His impact on the organization also survived well after the 1962 investigation. In later years, Potashov became the country’s leading anti-Witness agitator,

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606 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 6.
607 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 179.
608 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 4-5.
609 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 41-85, 132.
610 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 1-3.
611 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 140.
612 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 134
613 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 179-81.
traveling throughout western Ukraine to give talks against the religion and publishing several attacks on the organization, including two memoirs in 1966 and 1976.614

Police roundups of Witnesses continued throughout 1962 in the wake of Potashov’s arrest. The organization briefly relocated some printing operations elsewhere, but they did not escape discovery for long. KGB raids seized other presses before the organization had time to move them.615 In December 1962, Potashov and eight other Witness leaders, namely members of the oppositionist country committee and printing press operators, were brought to trial in Zakarpattia oblast court in Uzhhorod. Potashov and three other defendants gave evidence against the organization, while the remaining Witnesses refused to do so. Instead, they used the trial as a way to preach their faith in the courtroom. The court granted conditional release to those who cooperated; it sentenced the rest to terms of three to seven years plus exile.616

The details of the Potashov affair remains murky due to the unavailability of complete archival records.617 Potashov’s own distorted accounts of his involvement with the organization and the KGB in his later memoirs shed little light on events. This makes it difficult to determine Potashov’s exact position in the organization prior to his arrest. Potashov himself claimed to have led the entire Witness organization, a fact disputed by

614 The memoirs involved a serious reinventing of Potashov’s life history, which minimized his own involvement in the organization’s illegal activities and glossed over his convictions for theft and hooliganism prior to becoming a Witness. K. I. Potashov, Ia i Egova (Uzhhorod: Karpaty, 1966), and Pochemu ia porval s tiegovistami (Uzhhorod: Karpaty, 1976).

615 RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 402, ll. 135-36.


617 The Potashov case file from 1959-1962 in the Zakarpattia SBU archive is missing the later volumes of the trial that cover materials on his co-defendants, the trial itself, evidence such as confiscated literature and reports, and information on sentencing, release, and rehabilitation. The only available files cover the initial 1959 investigation through Potashov’s 1962 arrest, his interrogations, and the initial files on the second of nine total defendants.
official Watch Tower publications. The existing documentation suggests that he was most likely a high-level opposition leader, but not part of the original Siberian committee that formed against Ziatek. Further, rumors among Witnesses that Potashov had been a KGB double agent from the beginning find little support in the records, which show that he served time in prison for his Witness activities beginning in 1949 and extending to 1958.618 His KGB case file contains no mention of any prior involvement with the KGB.619 Ultimately, the real position of Potashov mattered less than the mythology both he and the Soviet state promoted. For the purposes of atheist propaganda, Potashov was, in his own words, “believer number one” in the organization, giving him unique insider authority to denounce the Witnesses’ beliefs and actions.620

The schism was not a uniquely Soviet affair. Similar divisions rocked other Soviet bloc Witness communities over the same basic issues of mistrust and KGB infiltration. In the case of Potashov, the KGB relied on joint efforts with the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs.621 The multiple splits between the various country branches made it difficult for Soviet believers to sort out whom they could trust abroad, a particular problem given their reliance on these contacts for literature and instructions. For example, Polish Witnesses visiting their Soviet brethren in 1961 warned them against any contact with Czechoslovak members due to a schism that had engulfed that community.622 Indeed, already in 1959, over

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618 I encountered this rumor multiple times in discussions with Witnesses during my research.

619 Potashov himself referred to attempts to meet with Ziatek supporters in 1961 to discuss the schism. Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 278-79.

620 Potashov, Ia i Egova, 3.

621 While information on the nature of this cooperation is not available, the KGB acknowledged the efforts in its 1962 report on the investigation. RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, l. 98.

622 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 200.
a thousand Czechoslovak Witnesses had left the official organization, despite retaining their commitment to the faith. Similarly, it was not always clear to outsiders who belonged to the official organization, and who identified with the opposition. A Polish Witness visiting Ternopil’ oblast in 1960, failing to link up as planned with Ziatek to hand over *Watchtower* prints, gave them instead to local oppositionist leaders. The woman herself reported that Poland was in the midst of its own schism, but that she had chosen to support the official channel. Despite this, literature continued to be relayed from Poland to the oppositionist contacts for at least another year.

Changes to Witness doctrine in 1962 exacerbated the schisms across Eastern Europe. That year, the organization announced a new interpretation of Romans 13:1, which exhorts Christians to obey the “governing authorities,” a term that the organization had earlier taken to refer to Jehovah and Jesus Christ. Now, the organization stated that the phrase referred to secular authorities, including the Soviet government. In practical terms, the new understanding did not change how the Witnesses conducted their faith and had little impact on believers in democratic countries. Witnesses still did not obey laws that went against their religious beliefs, such as mandatory military service. Nonetheless, the doctrinal shift suggested a more favorable view of world governments. The verse declares that all authorities “have been established by God” and that everyone “must submit himself” to them. This position, which came in the midst of concerted efforts by the KGB to weaken the organization, was received with suspicion by many Witnesses in the Soviet Union and Soviet


624 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 81-85.

625 One Soviet article, for its part, claimed that the doctrinal change had been made to force people in capitalist dictatorships in Africa, Asia, and Latin America to reject revolutionary change and accept the current oppressive regimes. P. Iurchenko, “Lakmusovyi Papirets’,” *Liudyna i svit*, no. 10 (1968): 29-31.
bloc countries. Some assumed the KGB had planted false literature to convince members to cooperate more willingly with the state, particularly since the state had been known to create fake literature in the past.\footnote{2000 Yearbook, 192; and 2006 Yearbook, 116.} A recent Watch Tower publication on Witnesses in Romania described the situation as follows: “Having suffered much at the hands of brutal rulers, many brothers in Romania found the new understanding hard to accept. In fact, some sincerely thought that it was a shrewd Communist fabrication intended to make them totally subservient to the State.”\footnote{2006 Yearbook, 116.} Many Witnesses in the Soviet Union felt the same way.\footnote{See, for example, Stepan Kozhemba, “Facing Trials in the Strength of God,” Awake!, October 22, 2000, 22.} It took great effort on the part of the organization to convince the vast majority of members of this new view.

By 1962, the schism and KGB investigations placed the Witnesses in the most precarious position since the Stalin-era persecutions. The 1962 Yearbook report on the Soviet Union noted that it had “been a year of hot persecution for many because the communistic government in the Union of Soviet Socialistic Republics has set its mind on crushing those who worship Jehovah God.”\footnote{1962 Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, International Bible Students Association, 1963), 283.} One member described this time as “the most difficult period in the history of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the USSR.”\footnote{2008 Yearbook, 134.} Over 200 people had been arrested, including several members of the country committee, the entire oppositionist country committee, couriers, printing workers, and regional leaders. The police had seized at least
two bunkers in Irkutsk oblast, and another two in Zakarpattia oblast.\textsuperscript{631} Separate KGB operations in Kazakhstan, Armenia, Rivne, Chernivtsi, Kurgan, Cheliabinsk, Perm, Arkhangel, Krasnoiarsk, and Stavropol’ led to trials of elders in these regions.\textsuperscript{632} More trials continued into 1963 and 1964, particularly in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{633}

For the KGB, the success of its multiyear investigation of Soviet Witnesses suggested the possibility that the religion could be entirely eliminated in the near future. In fact, a 1962 memo from KGB chairman Vladimir Semichastnyi to the TsK went so far as to recommend legalizing the organization to further fracture and weaken its leadership.\textsuperscript{634} The legalization of the religion, he wrote, “would create the conditions for the liquidation of the underground in our country, for the break of believers from the harmful influence of foreign Jehovist centers, and would allow us to bring the organization’s actions under official control, reduce its activity, and deprive the sect of the ability to use reactionary literature.”\textsuperscript{635} Only days after sending this report, however, Semichastnyi regretted having made this bold suggestion, perhaps sensing that legalization was not something the TsK would consider. Without waiting for a response, he sent a quick memo to the TsK asking that they ignore his report. The KGB, he wrote, “will continue to study this question.”\textsuperscript{636} It is impossible to know what

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{631} RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, ll. 97-98, 156.
\item \textsuperscript{632} RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 233, ll. 32-33.
\item \textsuperscript{633} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 362, ark. 1; spr. 363, ark. 164; spr. 364, ark. 100-01.
\item \textsuperscript{634} Semichastnyi served as KGB chairman from late 1961 to 1967. When Khrushchev appointed him, Semichastnyi had no previous experience in intelligence and was reluctant to take the position. He eventually participated in Khrushchev’s ouster in 1964. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “Soviet Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” in \textit{The Cold War: Hot Wars of the Cold War}, ed. Lori Lyn Bogle (London: Routledge, 2001), 223.
\item \textsuperscript{635} RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, ll. 99-100.
\item \textsuperscript{636} RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, l. 101.
\end{itemize}
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prompted Semichastnyi to propose legalization, but it is clear that he had little interest in pursuing this agenda without backing from Khrushchev and the Party.

The KGB was not the only institution to suggest the possibility of registering the Witnesses as a means of capitalizing on the schism. A CRA inspector put forth the same idea in his 1966 report on religious conditions in Moldavia. He noted the growing presence within the Witnesses of those in favor of worshipping Jehovah without Brooklyn leadership. Like Semichastnyi, he posited that legalization of neutralist groups within the organization, who rejected Brooklyn’s authority, would heighten “the influence of socialist reality on the religious psychology of the devout Jehovist.”637 Others, like the Irkutsk oblast prosecutor in September 1962, promoted a more moderate strategy. The plan called for continued measures to further divide the organization and cause a mass exodus of its members.638 It was this tactic, not the more daring legalization option, that the state ultimately chose.

In the end, the Soviet state proved unprepared or unwilling to capitalize fully on its gains by legally recognizing and registering the schismatic groups it had helped to create. Instead, it chose to rest on its laurels, hoping that the divisions already created would simply destroy the organization from within over time.639 In a strange twist, the KGB’s own trials of oppositionist leaders had made this outcome unlikely, as they had destroyed the rival country committee. Equally problematic, most of the original Siberian committee members renounced their faith during this period. Frustrated with the mainline organization, they had already rejected the organization’s authority and were more likely to entertain doubts about

637 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 8, ll. 103-04.
638 GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 961, ll. 34-39.
639 DALO, f. 3, op. 9, spr. 85, ark. 96.
the religion itself. Some oppositionists avoided long prison sentences by testifying against the organization. Their status as former believers, however, meant they had no authority among current Witnesses. This left the opposition incapable of presenting a viable alternative to the official organization under Ziatek.

Further, even if the state had sought registration, it may very well have been unsuccessful. The oppositionists and neutralists had no significant differences in beliefs from those groups loyal to Brooklyn.640 Even neutralist groups often did not recognize Soviet laws regarding religious freedom and continued to hold illegal meetings to study the Bible. They also, like other Witnesses, refused to serve in the Army or vote.641 A 1974 CRA report from Kurgan oblast noted that the lines between the groups were rather fluid, with constant communication among each other and sharing of literature.642 Similarly, a 1984 CRA report on neutralists in Chernivtsi oblast stated that local neutralists maintained unofficial contact with Ziatek supporters in order to exchange religious literature.643 None of the three groups sought out registration as a possibility, and none was apparently willing to compromise on its basic beliefs in order to win legalization with the state. In short, the state had created multiple counter-groups to the Brooklyn Witnesses, but none of them fit the standards for acceptable religious belief according to the Khrushchev system.

The KGB’s strategy also underestimated the ability of the Witness organization to adapt and respond to the schism. Ironically, it was the state itself that offered the conditions

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640 A 1966 report from Kurgan oblast noted that there were both Ziatek supporters and oppositionists in the oblast, with little difference between the two groups. As a result, the commissioner suggested that the CRA list them as one group in the official statistics. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 9, ll. 152-53.

641 See, for example, a report on neutralists in Chernivtsi oblast in 1968. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 158, ll. 66-69.

642 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 780, l. 4.

643 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2854, l. 38.
for the Witnesses’ renewal through its concentration of Witness prisoners in the Mordovia camp system. By 1961, the camp held many individuals with highly responsible positions in the organization, including Dubovyn’s’kyi and Ziatek, the two most recent country servants. In particular, by sending Ziatek to Mordovia in 1961, the state gave both sides of the schism a rare opportunity to speak directly to one another. Those who had accused Ziatek of being a double agent saw with their own eyes that Ziatek received no special favors from the authorities and suffered, just like them, for his faith. Gheorghe Gorobeț, incarcerated in Mordovia at this time, recalls the response of an oppositionist to the arrival of Ziatek supporters in the camp: “When he saw that the responsible brothers were still incarcerated, he was surprised, for he had been told that we were all as free as birds and living a life of luxury sponsored by the KGB!”

The effort to reunite the organization received much needed aid from Brooklyn in 1962. A year earlier, the country committee, under the leadership of Pashkovs’kyi, had explained the situation to Polish Witness representatives. The Polish branch sent the information to Brooklyn, forwarding a response from President Nathan Knorr a year later. Knorr wrote:

Communications reaching me from time to time have indicated that you brothers in the U.S.S.R. continue to maintain your strong desire to be faithful servants of Jehovah God. But some of you have had problems in trying to maintain unity with your brothers. I believe this is because of poor communication facilities and the deliberate circulation of false stories by some who are opposed to Jehovah God.

Most importantly, Knorr stated clearly that the worldwide organization in Brooklyn maintained its trust in Ziatek and other appointed elders. Knorr’s call for unity and his

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644 Gorobeț, interview.

645 2004 Yearbook, 111.
support of Ziatek helped convince some Witnesses to return to the fold.  

The organization also appointed trusted individuals to reach out to schismatic groups and restore faith in the country committee. The Witnesses who accepted this task recognized its inherent risks; they could be betrayed at any time by those who no longer belonged to the organization.  

A 1965 L’viv KGB report identified several regional leaders who were spearheading these reunification efforts. The KGB noted that these men held illegal gatherings to convince oppositionists to rejoin the organization, and with some success. The organization estimates that by 1971, such efforts had led to the return of over 4,500 members.  

Still, the schism had long-term effects on the organization that extended into the post-Soviet period. While most members rejoined the main organization by the late 1960s, neutralist and oppositionist groups continued to exist. For example, a 1974 report from the Zakarpattia KGB office estimated that of the 6,500 Witnesses in the area, more than 5,000 were Ziatek supporters, 300 were oppositionists, 270 were neutralists, 200 supported a local leader’s independent group, and the rest were of unknown loyalty. Witnesses continued to work to bring these splinter groups back into the fold into the early 1990s.

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647 Questionnaire for A. Gheorghita (MJW).
648 DALO, f. 3, op. 9, spr. 85, ark. 96-97.
649 2008 *Yearbook*, 143-44.
650 DAZO, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 98, ark. 51.
The Khrushchev System after 1964

The Soviet state lost further momentum in its quest to eliminate religious belief and destroy the Witness organization after 1964, when Politburo members engineered the peaceful ouster of Khrushchev from his position as First Secretary. The ouster brought Brezhnev to power and ended certain aspects of the antireligious campaign. William Fletcher identifies two key changes to religious policy as a result of Khrushchev’s removal from the Party leadership: the end to massive church closures and the more selective use of “force” against believers. One of those groups still singled out for force, he notes, was the Witnesses.651 In general, the new leadership did not fundamentally alter the religious policy toward unregistered minority religions like the Witnesses until the late 1970s, and continued to use the same basic coercive and persuasive methods to liquidate these religious communities. However, the softer stance toward registered religions made the repressive tactics against unregistered groups stand out in comparison.

Nevertheless, just as the Soviet state under Brezhnev backed away from Khrushchev’s famous promise that it would achieve communism in the immediate future, so too did it stop predicting the imminent death of religion. Instead, the state focused on gradual improvements in atheist educational work and on increasing control over both registered and unregistered religious organizations. The shift reflected the failure of Khrushchev’s antireligious campaigns to significantly reduce the number of religious believers in the Soviet Union. The policy change also mirrored the new priorities of the Brezhnev state, marked by an emphasis on foreign policy, domestic stability, and a crackdown on dissidents. Religious activity surfaced as a major issue only to the extent that it intersected with these issues.

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651 Fletcher, Soviet Believers, 5.
Brezhnev’s first decade in power did result in some administrative changes in the regulation of religious affairs. Most importantly, the Council of Ministers merged the CRCA and the CROC into one body, the CRA, in December 1965. The newly formed CRA reflected a growing emphasis on regulation and control of unregistered religious organizations. This included a focus on more low-level administrative measures meant to reduce minor violations of the law. In 1966, the Supreme Soviet enacted administrative penalties for violations of the religious laws. The resolution called on local soviets to issue warnings and fines to individuals for offenses such as unauthorized religious gatherings and baptisms. Witnesses in particular received multiple summons to appear before the local soviets.  

Those found guilty of these charges received fifty-ruble fines, a considerable sum of money, and many members received several fines.  

In line with new focus on administrative measures, the state exhorted local officials to keep closer tabs over illegal religious gatherings. A CRA memo from Krasnoiarsk krai detailed how to conduct raids of Witness home Bible studies. It instructed police or other authorities to arrive at the scene thirty minutes to an hour after the meeting had begun, enter the apartment, and take its host into a separate room. The police were to determine from this person who actually was in charge of the Bible study, explain that such meetings violated the law, and tell all attendants to go home immediately. The memo told authorities to expect believers to ignore these commands, perhaps even by praying or singing. Police should wait patiently for this to end before demanding more forcefully for believers to disperse. The memo advised police not to engage with believers’ questions or their references to religious 

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652 Corresponding resolutions were also passed by the republic-level Soviets. DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 43, ark. 61, and GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 158, l. 36.  

653 See, for example, Questionnaire for Filip Gojan (MJW). The state fined Gojan roughly fifteen times over fourteen years.
matters and Bible citations. Instead, they should simply make a list of all those present and arrest those who refused to identify themselves.\textsuperscript{654}

The CRA and Supreme Soviet repeatedly exhorted local officials to deal more effectively with the Witnesses. In 1968, the Council of Ministers passed a resolution demanding that religious organizations comply with the laws on religion. The resolution praised improvements in decreasing church influence, but criticized shortcomings in work with “fanatic” sects such as True Orthodox Christians and “Jehovists.” The resolution instructed all CRA commissioners to heighten their vigilance in dealing with “reactionary” religious organizations by keeping tabs on religious activities, proselytism, sermons, and so forth. It told officials to register all eligible organizations and eliminate the rest through criminal and administrative sanctions against their leaders.\textsuperscript{655} Partly in response to the all-union resolution earlier that year, the Ukrainian CRA passed its own resolution in August 1968 on strengthening the work of party organizations in regard to the “Jehovists.” The resolution called on regional CRA commissioners to work with local authorities to identify all Jehovah groups, their leaders and activist members, and to send this information to the Party organs. Jehovah leaders were to be informed of their duty to obey the law and warned to stop all illegal activities; those who refused this order were to be issued warnings or fines.\textsuperscript{656}

In 1974, the CRA, faced with continued lack of progress in eliminating Witness communities, issued a resolution calling for greater efforts “to expose and suppress the illegal actions of the Jehovah sect.” The move did little to solve this problem. Instead, it just

\textsuperscript{654} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2784, l. 55.

\textsuperscript{655} DALO f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 40, ark. 55-68a.

\textsuperscript{656} DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 40, ark. 121-22.
increased the number of reports and paperwork from CRA branches and officials without improved results.\textsuperscript{657} Overall, the lack of any enforcement mechanisms to compel officials to demonstrate real gains in reducing religious belief meant that these resolutions failed to suppress Witness communities. Local officials dutifully compiled reports singing the praises of their efforts, which their superiors then cited as evidence that the resolutions had the intended effect. If the optimism of the reports did not match other evidence on the ground, no one seemed willing to invest the necessary time to correct apparent shortcomings. The CRA in May 1980 passed another resolution on work among Witnesses that had a similarly minimal effect.\textsuperscript{658} Religious scholar Sergei Ivanenko has noted that, from 1980 to 1982, most regions simply drew up vague plans for work with Witnesses with no enforcement mechanisms or means to determine their success. Ivanenko rightly suggests that this response to state resolutions reflected local authorities’ disinterest in the matter.\textsuperscript{659}

Brezhnev-era religious policy delegated greater responsibility for religious policy enforcement to the local soviets beyond the task of issuing fines. In 1966, the state prompted the creation of local bodies under the executive committees of district and city soviets to monitor religious life.\textsuperscript{660} These local religious control commissions became a national phenomenon by the late 1960s.\textsuperscript{661} Lacking any independent power to punish believers, their primary duty consisted of providing surveillance on local religious activity and reporting any

\textsuperscript{657} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 815, ll. 66-67, and TsDAVO f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 2, ark. 16-31.

\textsuperscript{658} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2201, ll. 1-29; d. 2060, ll. 19-26.

\textsuperscript{659} Ivanenko, \textit{O liudiakh}, 145-52.

\textsuperscript{660} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2, ll. 103-07.

\textsuperscript{661} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 147, l. 110. The commission’s official title was the “Cooperative Control Commission on Adherence to Laws on Religious Cults” (\textit{Komissiia sodeistviia kontrol’iu po sobliudeniiu zakonodatel’stva o religioznykh kul’takh}).
violations of the law to the authorities. The haphazard nature of the commissions’ membership hindered their effectiveness. The commission chair was often the secretary of the soviet executive committee, while the other members came from a wide assortment of local citizenry. For example, a district commission in Kirovohrad oblast included the local radio station editor, the district newspaper editor, a Komsomol secretary, and a judge.662 Members did not usually have training in religious matters. Further, since they had other full-time jobs and commitments, commission members had little time to devote to educating themselves on these issues, and often little desire to do so. Some republics did host seminars for commission members to provide guidance and instruction.663 Even with training for members, however, the commissions proved a crude instrument for a complex religious policy based on distinguishing between various religious denominations and between leaders and ordinary believers.

Two reports from different districts in the Komi republic show both the positive and negative aspects of the commissions. In the city of Syktyvkar, the republic’s capital, the commission, in existence since 1962, was chaired by the head of the city soviet and included members from the police, Party and Komsomol organizations, cultural workers, and pensioners. CRA reports praised the members’ strong working knowledge both of the laws governing religious organizations and the responsibilities of the commission. Members met once a month to set goals and assign specific tasks. For example, one person took on the task of visiting a Baptist prayer service, another of monitoring a baptism, and another of surveilling the homes of True Orthodox Christians to identify meeting places. The commission members then prepared reports on their work and kept a log of their activities.

662 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 83, ll. 59-63.
663 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 217, l. 156.
and findings. This allowed the city soviet to respond to violations in a timely and efficient fashion and made Syktyvkar’s efforts a model of exemplary work in the late 1960s. A 1969 CRA memo gave suggestions to commissions, and much of what it advocated mirrored the Syktyvkar example.664

In contrast, Kniazhpogostsk district in Komi offers a more typical example of commission work. A late 1960s report characterized the local commission as marked by indifference and a conciliatory attitude toward religious groups. Its members had no familiarity with the local religious situation nor with the relevant laws; they did not even have a full understanding of their own responsibilities as commission members. While the Syktyvkar commission’s surveillance work had identified several violations of the law, the Kniazhpogostsk district commission had provided no useful information to the district soviet. The soviet, in turn, had not issued a single fine against believers for more than two years.665

Yet examples from even the most zealous control commissions like Syktyvkar demonstrate the limits of their effectiveness in preventing Witness activities. A 1972 report from Kirgizia stated that local commissions established watches over the most common meeting spots of unregistered religious groups on three selected days of the week. Atheists, teachers, Komsomol members, and local soviet deputies participated in this “guard duty” outside the homes of believers. They immediately documented attempts at illegal gatherings so that the local soviet could issue fines or other sanctions to the meetings’ hosts and organizers. As a result of these measures, 62 individuals faced administrative hearings in 1971, and 130 in the first nine months of 1972. These figures impressed officials, who did

664 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 217, l. 167.

665 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 156, ll. 50-56.
not take into account the specific nature of Witness study circles, which generally occurred only in small groups and often in the middle of the night. Witnesses met in this fashion several times each week at different locations. Put in this context, Kirgizia officials had clearly identified only a small fraction of the total meetings held during that period.

In short, state efforts could hope to reduce but not prevent illegal religious worship by Witnesses because no locality had the time or personnel needed to stop every meeting.\^666 On the most basic level, Witnesses had greater incentive to try new strategies to circumvent the law and surveillance than the part-time commission members had to stop these actions. The commissions represented one aspect of a losing battle between Witnesses and a state that increasingly only went through the motions of enforcing its antireligious policies.

**Religious Dissent under Brezhnev**

In the post-Khrushchev era, Witnesses no longer faced the same scale of trials and arrests that they had under the two previous Soviet leaders. Under Brezhnev, courts convicted as many as a few hundred Witnesses a year for evasion of military service. More commonly, local soviets issued hundreds of fines every year for illegal baptisms and home Bible studies. Yet trials for illegal religious activities and for proselytism numbered only a few dozen each year during this period. For its part, the Watch Tower organization has noted the decreasing number of criminal cases against, and milder sentences of, Soviet Witnesses in the 1970s.\^667 This shift reflected a more general decline in arrests of believers in the Brezhnev era.

\^666 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 470, ll. 109-112.

\^667 *2004 Yearbook*, 116.
Still, criminal investigations and convictions remained a feature of Witness life, albeit of a smaller magnitude. Reviews conducted by the Ministry of Justice and the legal department of the CRA identified serious shortcomings in how the state applied criminal statutes to religious believers. A 1974 review of cases by the Ministry of Justice, for example, found that some trials lacked concrete evidence or charges. Courts frequently relied almost entirely on a religious group’s lack of registration, which judges interpreted as meaning that the religion was banned in the USSR. The 1974 review apparently did not eliminate such errors, as a 1976 CRA memo repeated the same complaint, citing a case in Odessa oblast in which the prosecutor called the Witnesses “banned by Soviet law.” The CRA clarified that no such ban existed and that some religions simply had not met the criteria for registration. Another CRA memo criticized the 1981 trial of two Witnesses in Donets’k oblast. In this case, the court had not seriously reviewed the confiscated religious literature, including the Bible, before declaring it anti-Soviet. The defendants received a new trial, which resulted in a second conviction.

At the same time, the period saw the rise of a dissident movement within the Soviet Union and a subsequent crackdown on dissent by the state. The Party instituted a process of partial re-Stalinization defined in part by the state’s harsh treatment of those who questioned the existing system and the official ideology. In 1965, the KGB arrested two prominent writers, Andrei Siniavskii and Yulii Daniel’, for publishing their works abroad. The trial and resultant protests from Soviet intellectuals gave rise to a burgeoning dissident movement. Participants circulated *samizdat* (self-published manuscripts) among themselves, met to

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668 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2386, ll. 11-12.

669 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1026, ll. 38-39.

670 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2386, ll. 6-12.
discuss political issues, and, increasingly in later years, challenged the Soviet state on its human rights record both internally and by leaking information to the foreign media.

The history of the Witnesses provides a new perspective on Brezhnev-era political dissent. Scholars have largely focused on intellectual dissent in this period, while not sufficiently including religious communities in discussions. Religious scholar Michael Bourdeaux notes in his 1990 work on glasnost that “while no one would assert that Christian protest was the sole motivator of an emergent human rights movement, it unquestionably played a role which academic research, even to this day, has never fully acknowledged.” Bourdeaux focuses primarily on Christian protest movements in the Soviet Union, which the Witnesses did not engage in and, in fact, rejected. Yet Soviet Witnesses carried out many of the same illegal activities as other underground religious and dissident networks. Much of what dissidents did in the late 1960s and 1970s mirrored what Witnesses had done since their arrival in the Soviet Union after World War II. Underground printing presses, illegal literature circulation, secret meetings, and the smuggling out of information abroad had all been undertaken by Witnesses, and on a much larger scale, decades prior. In fact, illegal religious groups such as the Witnesses represented one of the largest, most organized and active body of dissenters in the postwar Soviet Union.

By privileging the stories of intellectual elites and urban populations, the historical narrative has lost sight of the importance of largely rural and often uneducated religious believers in challenging a hegemonic Soviet ideology and identity. A case in point, scholar Robert Hornsby defines “political dissent” as “acts of protest and criticism that were not

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predicated on national or religious feeling. The distinction between different types of dissent is necessary, but excluding religion ignores the fact that the Soviet state saw actions by unregistered religious groups such as the Witnesses as political, anti-Soviet behavior, and not merely as illegal religious activity.

In this regard, it is not surprising that believers and dissidents often faced the same fate in the Soviet system. Like believers, many dissidents suffered police surveillance and harassment, and occasionally criminal prosecution or exile. The state employed psychiatric hospitals as a means to discredit and isolate both groups. The use of asylums, rather than to prisons, provided the state with cover for its repressive actions. Such measures were taken against at least a few Witnesses, although it does not appear to have been a common occurrence. To note one example, the state committed Pavlo Rurak to a psychiatric hospital after his third arrest for illegal religious activities in the early 1980s. Pavlo recalled the hospital’s filthy conditions and lack of adequate food, water, and shower facilities. Few of the patients had legitimate mental illnesses. Pavlo was the first religious believer the hospital administrator had seen. Perhaps for that reason, the man took pity on Pavlo and spared him any treatment. After a month, he returned Pavlo to the regular camp system.


674 Helsinki Watch, a human rights organization, gathered full documentation for 200 cases of political use of psychiatric hospitals, and estimated the total number of such cases as around 1,000 as of 1985. Ten Years Later: Violations of the Helsinki Accords (New York: U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee, 1985), 237.

675 Rurak, Tri aresta, 126-32.
Frustrated with continued repression, some religious communities petitioned the state in massive numbers for exit visas to leave the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev era. In particular, the Jewish cause garnered international support and put pressure on the Soviet state. The United States Congress added an amendment to the 1974 trade bill tying the right to religious emigration to US-Soviet trade relations. Four years later, a group of Siberian Pentecostals rushed into the US Embassy and refused to leave until granted asylum abroad. They remained at the embassy for almost five years. These events strained Soviet relations with the West, and with the United States in particular. The Witnesses, however, expressed no desire to emigrate. In their minds, they still had communities to nourish and preaching to do among the local non-Witness population. Unlike other religions, they had little hope that relocation to a new country would put an end to their repression. Further, while many Protestant religious organizations worked together during this period to publicize Soviet religious repression, the Witnesses remained peripheral to these efforts due to their rejection of any ecumenical cooperation.

The Watch Tower organization’s stance on secular government limited the immediate impact of the Helsinki Accords and the international human rights movement on its Soviet communities. In 1975, the Soviet Union signed the accords, which promised to respect basic human rights, including the right to freedom of conscience, for all citizens. Theoretically, the Soviet state already guaranteed these rights through its constitution. As political scientist Mike Bowker writes, “Helsinki simply gave the dissidents another opportunity to highlight to the outside world the cavalier attitude of their leaders towards the law.” The Witnesses,

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however, viewed Helsinki less as an opportunity, and more as another example of how governments have mistakenly tried to create a just, peaceful society without God’s intervention. They also saw in the conference a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. A 1975 *Watchtower* article stated:

> But the greatest significance of this conference is that it is one more evidence of the truthfulness of Jehovah God’s prophetic Word, the Bible. Nineteen hundred years ago God inspired the apostle Paul to write that the day would come when the nations would, not only talk of their dire need for “peace and security,” but reach the point where they could claim that they had attained it for all the earth.  

Thus, where dissidents saw an opening to put pressure on the Soviet state to respect human rights, Witnesses saw proof of Jehovah’s plan to wipe out secular government.

As a result, the language of international human rights that emerged from Helsinki did not play the same important role for the Witnesses as it did for other dissenting groups in the Soviet Union. In general, the Witnesses have historically had a complex relationship with international organizations. Official Witness doctrine holds the UN, and its predecessor, the League of Nations, to be the “wild beast” described in Revelation, a demonic figure who controls world governments and who will be destroyed in Armageddon. In more recent years, the Watch Tower organization has cooperated with the UN to protect its rights to freedom of conscience worldwide. Still, the organization’s hostility to international efforts for peace and security have limited media attention or outside support for its struggle for religious freedom. For example, a 1985 Helsinki Watch report detailed cases of religious repression in the Soviet Union, but only mentioned the Witnesses in passing, despite many


679 This refers to Revelation 17. For Witness interpretations of this passage, see, for example, “The Scarlet-colored Beast,” *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom*, December 1, 1962, 731-34.
arrests and trials of Witnesses in the preceding year. Academic and popular works on Christian religious repression also had little to say about the Witnesses. Ironically, this only solidified the Witnesses’ own sense of separation from the secular world and from other Christian denominations.

**Damage Control in the Wake of the Great Schism**

While international human rights rhetoric and the rise of the dissident movement did have a strong immediate impact on the Witnesses, the 1970s did see important changes to the Soviet Witness organization. Under Knorr’s continued tenure as president, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society introduced a series of measures intended to replace one-man leadership with committee control at various levels of the administration. At the highest level, the organization in 1971 instituted rule by a committee known as the Governing Body, reducing the power of the appointed president. In 1976, the Governing Body further subdivided its oversight by creating several sub-committees and investing them with significant responsibilities. The position of president still existed, but the Governing Body controlled most of the decision-making process. The chairmanship rotated on a yearly basis. After Knorr died in 1977, Franz, his vice president, served as president until 1992.


681 See, for example, Ludmila Alexeyeva’s Soviet Dissent, which mentions the Witnesses in lists of groups with effective proselytism strategies, and gives no other information on their activities.

682 A 1992 Watchtower article noted how Helsinki, along with other international efforts, had failed to achieve peace and security since World War II. “Man’s Plans for International Security,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, March 1, 1992, 3-5.

683 Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers, 233-34.

684 2006 Yearbook, 96.
The decline in police repression by the late 1960s made contact between the Soviet Witness leadership and Brooklyn more regular and less dangerous. Communication between the two parties was sufficiently well established to allow for greater Governing Body oversight of the Soviet Witnesses. Expanding on the top-level reforms, the Governing Body in 1972 announced a new “elder arrangement” that would allow a body of elders, rather than a single elder, to oversee congregations. To implement the new policy, Brooklyn directed the Soviet country committee to send lists of recommendations for new appointments of members to leadership positions. The organization, albeit with some apprehension due to fears of police interception, did as requested, successfully instituting the new system without the state’s discovery. More elders meant more responsible members who could oversee activities and ensure uniformity in beliefs and practices across the Soviet Union.

Similar changes on the national level further distributed responsibility to more individuals and took pressure off the leaders. In 1971, Mykhailo Dasevych assumed the position of country servant. He and the other committee members took advantage of the increased freedom of movement that came with the end of special exile in 1965. They traveled across the Soviet Union, visiting individual congregations, meeting with appointed elders, and networking with foreign couriers, who brought in literature and information from abroad while visiting family or acting as tourists. In 1976, the Governing Body introduced

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685 The Governing Body’s origins are not entirely clear. It arose in part from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society’s board of directors. Historian and former Witness M. James Penton argues that the real power transfer occurred only in 1975 through an “organizational coup” of members who wanted to limit Knorr’s powers. Penton suggests that even after 1975, the president still retained a great deal of power over the Governing Body. Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed*, 214-16. The Watch Tower organization itself has stated that the Governing Body did not represent a new concept, emphasizing the change more as a modification of the already existing system. The body is appointed internally by the current members, whose numbers have varied over time, but usually consists of around a dozen individuals.

modifications in the worldwide administrative structure, eliminating the previous system of having a single country servant in charge of each branch and replacing it with rule by committee.688

The new country committee, chosen by the international leadership in Brooklyn, included three members from Ukraine, two from Russia, and one from Kazakhstan. This geographic diversity was in part a natural outgrowth of the organization’s expansion in the Soviet Union. It also reflected a renewed sense of confidence after the schism had undermined unity across far-flung territories. The new committee, in part because its members did not live in the same location, showed a greater ability to prevent detection, elude arrests, and maintain leadership stability, a feat previously not achieved by Soviet Witnesses. The careful oversight of the Dasevych committee avoided a repeat of the devastation brought on by massive arrests in the Stalin and Khrushchev eras. Indeed, if Soviet anti-Witness propaganda continued to denounce the early Witness leaders by name, it had no such information on the current leaders, a fact that was never acknowledged publicly.

The administrative restructuring notwithstanding, the Witnesses continued to use underground printing presses to duplicate literature, incorporating more advanced methods to make this work more efficient.689 For example, more modern presses printed on both sides of the paper simultaneously, doubling the speed of operation.690 Microfilm made smuggling literature into the Soviet Union a simpler task, since it was much smaller in size than printed

687 2002 Yearbook, 224-25.
688 1999 Yearbook, 85.
689 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2759, ll. 68-72.
690 2004 Yearbook, 119.
publications and thus harder for police to detect. By the 1970s, cassette recordings of religious speeches also appeared more frequently, allowing talks by elders to circulate through the Soviet Union. Overall, the Witnesses largely refined their time-tested methods, which had served them well since the Stalin era.

**Conclusion**

Remembering all he suffered in the late Soviet era, one Moldavian Witness summed up the battle between Witnesses and the Soviet state as follows: “Khrushchev died a long time ago and his plan is over, but the Jehovah’s Witnesses have made wonderful progress in this country thanks to Jehovah’s blessing.” That state had intended to rapidly eliminate religious belief through a combination of coercion and persuasion, but for several reasons it proved incapable of accomplishing this task. First, even aggressive Stalin-era methods of police repression had failed to crush the Witness organization. Certainly, the more limited coercive tactics under Khrushchev and Brezhnev could not possibly achieve better results in this regard. Second, the state repeatedly underestimated the tenacity of religious belief, particularly among unregistered religious groups. “Divide and conquer” strategies certainly weakened the Witness organization, but the state did not account for the ability of Witnesses to adapt to and overcome such challenges. Third, the continued use of coercion strengthened the Witnesses’ beliefs, affirming that they had been singled out as true Christians by an ungodly and demonic state. With each passing year, the survival and even growth of

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691 2008 *Yearbook*, 144-45.

692 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 52, ark. 53-56.

693 Questionnaire for A. Gheorghită (MJW).
Witnesses confirmed for members that Jehovah had not deserted his people and that they would outlast the Soviet state.

Further, the remarkable achievements of the Witnesses in creating a well-structured underground organization demonstrate the limits of the Soviet state’s ability to quash dissent and create a unified citizenry. The Witness organization was unparalleled in the scope of its illegal activities, its active membership base, and its hierarchical structure, not only among other religious groups, but in Soviet society as a whole. Yet because it did not have the strong international presence and media attention that the dissident movement and mainline Christian and Jewish religious organizations gained, its history has been overlooked in scholarship. Watch Tower publications have publicized the organization’s history of Soviet repression, but this literature is not widely read by non-Witnesses. Certainly, the Witnesses never represented more than a small fraction of Soviet religious believers, but they were tried, exiled, and harassed in numbers well out of proportion to their size. The Soviet state consistently referred to them as the most hostile and fanatic religious group, and responded accordingly to this perceived threat. Historians Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin have referred to the “Jehovist obsession” among KGB officers as a “supreme example of their lack of any sense of proportion when dealing with even the most insignificant forms of dissent.” I suggest, in contrast, that the Witnesses represented a very real danger to the Soviet

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695 See, for example, TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 214, ark. 105, and TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 12, ark. 219.
Union by undermining state control and showing that if they were willing to face the consequences, Soviet citizens could construct communities outside of the law and the official ideology.\textsuperscript{696}

Recent debates on the overall influence of the dissident movement on Soviet society and on later reform efforts under Gorbachev shed further light on this matter. Some scholars have argued that the role of the dissidents has been overemphasized, while more conformist forces for reform have been overlooked or downplayed. As historian Mark Sandle notes, neither the experiences of the dissidents nor of the shestidesiatniki (1960s-ers) can “be assumed to be representative of Soviet society as a whole.”\textsuperscript{697} In reality, both, like the Witnesses, encompassed only a small percentage of the population. Historians might consider this fact when addressing the impact of religious minorities. Their importance is not necessarily in their numbers, but in how their actions and ideas challenged state and society.

In short, the Witnesses’ history demonstrates that religious believers, particularly those in unregistered organizations, formed a major component of Soviet society that did not conform to official ideology or state laws. They ordered their lives according to religious principles and broke the law when obeying it would violate their faith. Well after the dismantlement of the Gulag and special exile systems, Witnesses and other religious dissenters continued to be tried and convicted, forming a large part of the remaining political prisoner population in the post-Stalin Soviet Union. Their stalwart resistance hindered efforts to create a cohesive society advancing toward communism.

\textsuperscript{696} Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, \textit{The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB} (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 505.

\textsuperscript{697} Mark Sandle provides a succinct overview of these debates in his piece, “A Triumph of Ideological Hairdressing? Intellectual Life in the Brezhnev Era Reconsidered,” in \textit{Brezhnev Reconsidered}, 135-64.
CHAPTER FOUR

WITNESS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

“Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.” 1 Timothy 4:16.

“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.” 2 Corinthians 5:20.

Soviet Witnesses struggled to maintain their basic beliefs and practices despite changing conditions. They had lived under multiple regimes, changed citizenships, resettled in new regions, and seen their communities scattered throughout the Soviet interior. By the 1950s, some Witnesses had served time under two or three different states. As one Witness declared in court, answering charges of treason: “I was born in Ukraine under the Czechoslovakian government and later lived under the rule of Hungary; now the Soviet Union has come into our territory, and I am a Romanian by nationality. Which motherland did I betray?” This sustained persecution reinforced Witnesses’ belief that true Christians could expect no favors from secular authorities hostile to Jehovah and Christ’s millennial kingdom. Holding true to their faith offered a contrast to the instability surrounding them.

Arrests and special exile had transformed the western borderland communities of Witnesses into a disparate network of congregations spread throughout the Soviet interior and peripheries. Yet even in these new territories Witnesses continued to gather in small groups to read the Bible and talk about their faith. They found new converts, raised their

698 2002 Yearbook, 163.
children in the religion, and held baptisms to welcome members into the faith. They kept themselves separate from secular society and local government as much as possible.

The Witnesses’ “neutrality” on political matters did not mean, however, that they lived without regard for the world around them. Even if they had desired to do so, this was not a viable option. Their children attended state-run schools, while the adults worked on collective farms and in Soviet industry. They lived side by side with their largely secular comrades, shopping at the same stores, riding the same buses, and walking the same streets. Their call to spread their faith required them to engage with their neighbors, to speak to them about their beliefs, and to endeavor to win them over to their religion. In turn, the state, along with Party activists, felt compelled to reach out to these communities, attempting their own brand of proselytism for the cause of scientific atheism and communist ideology.

Thus the Witnesses interacted and collided with the Party-state and Soviet society. The Witnesses’ understanding of Soviet power and modern society came from biblical interpretation and prophecy as described in official Watch Tower literature. Their views and actions, in turn, shaped the prevailing Soviet discourse about their religion. Neither side recognized compromise or coexistence as a long term solution, since each saw the total destruction of the other as a necessary precursor to the triumph of its ideology, either through the achievement of communism or the establishment of Christ’s kingdom. This chapter will explore both the daily lived experiences of Witnesses after 1953 and the Witnesses’ evolving views on communism, world peace, persecution, and Soviet power.
The Geography of Witness Life

Massive dislocations of Witnesses since World War II created communities of believers well beyond the western borderlands. Significant numbers of Witnesses now lived in special settlements in Kurgan, Tomsk, and Irkutsk oblasts. Even after exile conditions ended, some chose to stay in their adopted homelands, making them major centers of Witness life through the end of the Soviet Union. Forced labor camps in Siberia and Central Asia also held many Witnesses, who often settled close to their former places of imprisonment upon release. In Kazakhstan, for example, Witnesses settled in Karaganda and Dzhezkazgan after being released from nearby labor camps. Still others moved to new regions of Ukraine and Moldavia, establishing small groups in Kharkiv, Odessa, Dnipropetrovs’k, Crimea, Kirovohrad, Donets’k, and Cherkasy oblasts. These communities, once created, attracted additional Witness settlers who felt assured that they would have access to literature and Bible studies.

The conditions of the 1965 release from special exile further encouraged the dispersion of Witnesses throughout the Soviet Union. While the decree restored freedom of movement to Witnesses, it did not guarantee them the right of return to the western borderlands. Even those who did obtain state approval to return to their native villages found it nearly impossible to convince local authorities to register them. Officials in other regions refused to register Witnesses as well, leaving some with no choice but to lead a fairly

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699 Artem’ev, Svideteli Iegovy, 42. The KGB in Kazakhstan noted a growth in Witnesses in Karaganda oblast as early as 1956 when many recently released Witnesses began preaching among the local population. RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 190, ll. 15-18, 37-46.

700 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 4704, ark. 10-12.

701 Alexandru Guriță, for example, settled in a village in Kazakhstan near the Uzbekistan border in part because there were already other Witnesses there who had established a congregation and had a steady supply of literature. Guriță, interview.
itinerant existence. For instance, one Moldavian family, exiled in 1949 to Kurgan oblast, moved several times before finally establishing a permanent home in Kazakhstan among the growing community in Chimkent oblast.\textsuperscript{702} Another Witness couple lived in nine different locations after leaving the Tomsk special settlement, unable to acquire permanent possessions because they were always on the move.\textsuperscript{703} Similar obstacles awaited Witnesses returning home from labor camps. One man lodged a complaint with the CRA alleging that local authorities refused to allow him to return to his home village in Moldavia upon his release from a camp in Kazakhstan.\textsuperscript{704}

Further, because the Witnesses saw the 1965 decree as an opportunity to preach their faith in new lands and among new peoples, many families and individuals relocated in order to bring the faith to Soviet citizens who had never heard its message. The \textit{1967 Yearbook} report proclaimed that “the name Siberia, in fact, has lost its terror for our brothers and to many it has become a cherished territory assignment.”\textsuperscript{705} Kazakhstan CRA officials noted the arrival of a formerly imprisoned Witness leader in the city of Leninogorsk in 1978 who quickly began gathering a small group of believers to meet in his apartment. When questioned by the authorities as to why he moved to the region, he said that the cost of living was lower and life calmer in Kazakhstan, while nonetheless admitting he had already converted several local residents.\textsuperscript{706} Another man and his wife, denied the right to return

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\textsuperscript{702} Artem’ev, \textit{Svideteli Iegovy}, 69-70.

\textsuperscript{703} Măcuţă, interview.

\textsuperscript{704} The man had been served time, then been exiled to Kazakhstan, after which he attempted to return to Moldavia in 1979. Local authorities claimed they denied his request to register at his family’s residence in the village because the home lacked space for him and his family. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2047, ll. 84-87.

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home, used this chance to serve as full-time “pioneers,” or missionaries, preaching the faith in Central Asia until the late 1980s.\textsuperscript{707}

In short, by the late 1960s, there were hundreds of Witnesses in southern Russia (Krasnodar and Stavropol’ regions and North Ossetia), northern Russia (Komi republic), and in Siberia and the Urals (Tomsk, Irkutsk, Kurgan, and Altai regions). Sizeable communities had also sprung up in Kirgizia and Kazakhstan. A KGB report from 1964 detailed the Witnesses’ growth in Central Asia, including more than 300 Witnesses in Kirgizia. The other Central Asian republics had a much more limited Witness presence, restricted to a few families or individuals.\textsuperscript{708} All of this new growth was in addition to the longstanding and expanding Moldavian and Ukrainian communities.

Witness migration throughout the Soviet Union took place around the same time that the Soviet government began a concerted effort to identify religious associations and believers. In March 1961, by joint decree of the TsK and the Council of Ministers, the CRCA and CROCA began the complex process of quantifying religious belief in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{709} The government charged the two councils with cataloguing all religious associations, both registered and unregistered, by region and republic. Each religious association (defined as having at least twenty members) and religious group (having less than twenty members) was entered as a distinct unit. When possible, commissioners also identified the exact number of members and any known leaders.\textsuperscript{710} Oblast council

\textsuperscript{706} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1680, ll. 59-60.

\textsuperscript{707} The Watch Tower organization uses the term “pioneer” to refer to those who devote extra time to preaching, with different levels for part-time and full-time service. Platon, “Twice Sentenced,” 15.

\textsuperscript{708} RGANI, f. 5, op. 55, d. 72, ll. 5-6. See also Artem’ev, Svideteli Iegovy, 46-48.

\textsuperscript{709} GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 428, l. 1.
commissioners collected this information using their own records and data supplied by police and local soviets. The state made it clear that the councils should keep the public and religious communities entirely unaware of these efforts. It instructed commissioners to restrict the circle of persons informed about this task to a bare minimum. In a 1966 interview with the Soviet press, CRA chairman Vladimir Kuroedov publicly denied that the USSR kept track of the number of believers, citing the state’s respect for freedom of conscience.\textsuperscript{711} The secretive nature of the effort presented a challenge to commissioners, who could not appeal to the pastors and priests of registered churches for accurate estimates of membership.\textsuperscript{712}

In its inaugural year, the two councils identified 10,910 religious associations or groups in the Soviet Union, of which only 4,424 were registered with the state. The data shows that “Jehovists” existed in 47 oblasts and krais, with 607 associations and groups, 15,214 members, and 454 leaders. The breakdown of members by republic included 6,149 in the RSFSR, 6,957 in Ukraine, 1,425 in Moldavia, 286 in Kazakhstan, and 377 in Kirgizia, with small groups scattered throughout the remaining union republics. The statistics also reflected the continued concentration of leadership in the western borderlands, with 288 of the 454 leaders in Ukraine and Moldavia alone.\textsuperscript{713}

In the following years, the database charted the slow, but steady growth in the Witness organization through the mid-1980s. By 1965, it had a reported 16,700 members.\textsuperscript{714} Five years later, that figure had risen to 18,906 members, with 4,919 in the RSFSR; 10,500 in

\textsuperscript{710} GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 123, ll. 5-14.

\textsuperscript{711} “Neskol’ko voprosov o religii i tserkvi,” Zakarpatskaia pravda, September 4, 1966, 3.

\textsuperscript{712} GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 123, ll. 5-14.

\textsuperscript{713} GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 428, ll. 39-43.

\textsuperscript{714} RGANI, f. 5, op. 62, d. 38, ll. 269-70.
Ukraine; 2,212 in Moldavia; 643 in Kazakhstan; and 360 in Kirgizia.\textsuperscript{715} This included increases both in and outside of the western borderlands. For example, Krasnoiar krai had 248 members in 1965, and 370 in 1975. Stavropol’ krai, which listed almost no Witnesses in 1965, had 1,200 members ten years later. In Ukraine, with the highest density of Witnesses, the religion grew in Zakarpattia oblast from 3,045 to 3,914 members, and in Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast from 1,679 to 1,812.\textsuperscript{716} By 1977, the CRA reported over 22,000 Witnesses, with an estimated 3,349 in Moldavia and 12,449 in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{717} In 1985, the last year that comprehensive statistics are available from the archives, the CRA reported a total of roughly 27,000 Witnesses, with 1,381 members in Kazakhstan, 690 in Kirgizia, 4,100 in Moldavia, 13,271 in Ukraine, and 6,695 in the RSFSR. It also identified small groups in Lithuania, Estonia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Georgia. In Ukraine alone, there were 3,381 Witnesses in Zakarpattia oblast, 2,152 in L’viv oblast, 1,506 in Chernivtsi oblast, and 1,910 in Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast.\textsuperscript{718}

The data on religious membership laid bare the problem posed by relatively minor groups such as the Witnesses. While Witnesses made up a small fraction of total Soviet believers, they were one of the largest unregistered religious organizations. In western Ukraine, they dwarfed all other unregistered groups and were second only to Pentecostals for Ukraine as a whole.\textsuperscript{719} For example, Zakarpattia oblast in 1974 had 146 unregistered

\textsuperscript{715} RGANI, f. 5, op. 63, d. 89, l. 272.

\textsuperscript{716} For 1965 statistics, see GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 442-43. For 1975 statistics, see GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 881-90.

\textsuperscript{717} For 1977 statistics, see GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1290-97.

\textsuperscript{718} 1985 is the last year that files are currently available for the All-Union CRA at GARF. For 1985 statistics, see GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3129-34.

\textsuperscript{719} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 318, ark. 125.
religions associations with 5,334 total members. Of these, 90 associations and 3,892 persons were Witnesses. The next biggest group was the Pentecostals with 32 associations and 707 members. The situation was similar in L’viv oblast. By 1980, the region had more than 2,000 Witnesses, with only 600 unregistered Pentecostals and 250 unregistered Baptists in comparison. In general, the inclusion of unregistered groups in the data highlighted the high percentage of religious activity occurring outside of state norms and control. It also demonstrated the diversity of religious belief across the Soviet Union and identified hot spots of religious activity. The percentage of Moldavians belonging to religious sects was roughly five times the Soviet Union’s average. More broadly, religious life, and unregistered religious groups in particular, existed disproportionately on the periphery of Soviet power in regions far from the metropoles of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The post-Stalin push to show concrete results from antireligious agitation and propaganda led some CRCA officials to underreport religious membership even prior to the 1961 all-union database. A 1957 CRCA memo criticized the L’viv CRCA for listing only a handful of “Jehovists” in its report. The CRCA commissioner noted that these figures “raise serious doubts as to the accuracy of such assertions,” calling the numbers “unlikely.” This problem persisted throughout the late Soviet era. In 1980, the Moldavian CRA commissioner admitted to having trouble tabulating exact counts of Witnesses, with figures ranging from

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720 DAZO, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 72, ark. 117. This remained an issue throughout the late Soviet era. In 1983, the oblast reported that of the region’s 95 unregistered associations with 4,934 members, 64 of the associations and 3,621 of the members were Witnesses. DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 10.

721 A 1976 L’viv oblast report stated that with 16 groups and more than 1,000 members, the Witnesses were the most numerous unregistered religious organization in the oblast. DALO, f. 3, op. 34, spr. 94, ark. 16.

722 DALO, f. 3, op. 47, spr. 44, ark. 105.

723 ANRM, f. 3305, inv. 2, d. 14, f. 40.

724 DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 26, ark. 46.
four to six thousand members. He found that some districts had provided inaccurate data, hoping not to “spoil their statistics.” With an increased drive to eliminate unregistered groups by the late 1970s and early 1980s, oblast CRA personnel often combed their rolls for groups of Witnesses they could argue no longer functioned and did not need to appear in the official data collection. As a result, CRA commissioners regularly requested that an unregistered group of Witnesses be removed from the official charts, claiming it was no longer active.

Even beyond willful tampering with the statistics, surveys of unregistered religious associations such as the Witnesses suffered from poor and inaccurate reporting. The 1961 instructions to commissioners acknowledged the inherent difficulty of identifying communities and members who make a concerted effort to remain hidden from state authorities. Indeed, while commissioners had relatively easy access to basic information on registered churches, including baptism records, they had no such window into Witness life. The mobility of Witnesses made this task even more demanding. Responding to the poor quality of reporting in 1975, the Kazakhstan CRA complained that some regions did not accurately describe the level of religiosity in their areas, primarily in regard to unregistered groups. It criticized several regions in particular for poor reporting on “Jehovists.” This memo points to another basic problem: the lack of distinction between Witnesses and the Orthodox sect of Il’inists. Only a few regional and republic-level CRCA branch offices

725 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2047, ll. 50-52.

726 For example, one 1981 request from Volyn oblast cited the fact that most of the formerly sixteen members were elderly, of whom nine had died in the past five years, and five had moved to other districts. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 215, l. 1.

727 GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 123, ll. 5-14.

728 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 927, ll. 12-18.
distinguished between the two religions in their reports. Even then, both types of “Jehovist” data were often grouped into one category at the all-union level. The 1973 CRA report did include separate lists for both groups, suggesting that Il’inists did not make up a significant portion of “Jehovist” believers. It identified only 500 Il’inists, compared with an estimated 20,000 to 22,000 Witnesses.  

CRCA and CRA data sometimes contradicted reports from the security organs. A 1963 letter to all oblast CRCA commissioners in Ukraine noted with frustration that the data supplied by these branch offices bore little resemblance to information given by the KGB. It cited substantial discrepancies in accounting for the “Jehovists,” which cast doubt on the accuracy of CRCA information on this organization. The memo asked commissioners to work more closely with their regional KGB offices to clarify statistical data and provide more accurate reports.  

On a similar note, while the CRA counted 2,796 members in 1974 for Zakarpattia oblast, the KGB estimated roughly 6,500 members, a huge discrepancy in numbers.  

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society kept its own tallies of its members in the Soviet Union using smuggled-out reports from the country committee. The 1962 Yearbook, for example, highlighted a “marked decrease” in active members for the prior year, but suggested that the reason for the lower figure might be that not all reports made it to Brooklyn. To shield Soviet bloc members from state persecution, the organization did not

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729 GARF, f. 6991, op. 4, d. 428, ll. 39-43; RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1077a, l. 4; and RGANI, f. 5, op. 67, d. 115, l. 113.

730 DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 33, ark. 127.

731 DAZO, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 98, ark. 48, 51. This was not a one-time discrepancy between the CRA and the KGB. By 1977, the Zakarpattia oblast KGB had increased its estimate to 9,000 Witnesses, still about double that of official CRA statistics of 4,339 members. DAZO, f. 1, op. 9, spr. 59, ark. 60, 68.
publish individual country statistics in its yearbooks. Instead, it printed the sum total of all members in countries where Witnesses had no legal status as a single statistic. As a result, it is impossible to tally data specific to the Soviet Union for this period. However, post-Soviet publications have estimated the Soviet membership of the Witnesses at roughly 45,000 members by 1991. This figure is much higher than the 25,000 members identified by the state five years earlier.

A final reason for official underreporting of Witnesses stems from the difference in how the organization and the religious councils defined “members.” For the CROCA and CRA, membership denoted an adult who had presumably undergone baptism, and thus their definition did not include children and youth. In fact, Witnesses do not have an age requirement for baptism into the faith, allowing minors with sufficient maturity to make this commitment. Since children and youth were a substantial portion of Witness communities, this distinction was of major importance in tallying members. For example, the Zakarpattia oblast CRA estimated in 1975 that there were 720 children under the age of 3; 3,998 children ages 3 to 7; and 2,256 school-age children in Witness families. The youth factor may have been the biggest reason for the gap in actual membership and official statistics. The official tallies also did not include unbaptized members who nonetheless adhered to the religion’s beliefs and practices.

732 *1962 Yearbook*, 32.

733 It is impossible to determine any membership figures from these group statistics, since the number of countries included in the figure changed nearly every year, and the organization did not always identify which countries were included in the count.

734 *2002 Yearbook*, 234.

735 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 39, ark. 32.
The Khrushchev era also gave rise to a second form of cataloguing religious belief, shedding light on the demographics of religious communities such as the Witnesses. William C. Fletcher has noted that heightened scholarly attention to religion beginning in the Khrushchev era led to the steady growth of studies on the “the sociology of religion,” which encouraged field research on religious believers. This trend resulted in numerous opinion polls among Witnesses to gauge not only their beliefs, but also their attitudes toward the Soviet state. Equally important, the data provided a snapshot of the social makeup of Witness communities. The bulk of this research was conducted in Moldavia and Ukraine with the oldest Witness communities in the Soviet Union. The relatively high concentration of Witnesses in rural areas in these regions made them especially attractive to researchers. The overall strength of Christian sectarianism in the western republics also allowed scholars to survey several religious communities in a single area and to compare the various groups.

Although the studies focused heavily on quantifying beliefs and practices, the data are perhaps most useful in providing basic demographic information on the Witnesses. Unlike subjective matters of faith and worship, questions regarding educational level, age, gender, and class were less vulnerable to survey bias. That said, this type of data also served an ideological purpose by supporting the official depiction of believers as generally poorly educated, elderly, and female.

On the most basic level, many surveys attempted to prove quantitatively the Soviet trope that religious belief and ignorance went hand in hand. A 1965 monograph cited data that more than 80 percent of sectarians were barely literate or illiterate, while a 1969 work

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quoted a Moldavian study that found low levels of literacy among 78 percent of Witnesses. A subsequent study of Moldavian Witnesses by the Moldavian Academy of Sciences concluded that a majority of the organization’s leaders had only a basic education (four years), while just 4 percent had a secondary or technical education.

Given the low education levels of Witnesses surveyed, it is not surprising that research revealed a concentration of Witnesses in unskilled farm and industrial labor. The aging population of Witnesses in Ukraine meant that many members were pensioners who no longer worked. A 1971 study of 1,510 Witnesses in Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast found that among male members, roughly 75 percent worked at unskilled jobs in industry or on collective farms, while the rest were pensioners or unemployed. For women, roughly 40 percent worked in these fields, with the rest classified as housewives, pensioners, or unemployed. Sixty-six percent of members were 40 to 60 years old. The study highlighted these data as evidence of the aging membership of Witnesses in this community.

The CRA also collected demographic information on religious believers. A detailed report from the Irkutsk oblast CRA in 1969 described the Witnesses upon their arrival to the region in 1951. Largely illiterate or semi-literate, few had any specialized skills, with most working in unskilled, low-paying jobs given to special settlers. The report noted that the Witnesses’ generally low levels of education limited their job opportunities. It also observed some change over time, with increasing numbers of Witnesses completing an eight-year


738 V. V. Konik, “Istiny” svidetelei Iegovy (Moscow: Politizdat, 1978), 95.

739 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 378, l. 67, and TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 5, spr. 236, ark. 87-89.
secondary education in the two decades after their initial settlement in the region.\textsuperscript{740} Still, even CRA studies done in the 1980s documented low education and employment skill levels. A 1982 CRA report from L’vov oblast found that less than 1 percent of Witnesses had a higher education, and only 15 percent had completed secondary school. Another 30 percent had an incomplete secondary education, while 45 percent had only a basic education. Ten percent had no formal education at all. In regard to social class, the report listed 30.5 percent as laborers, 9.5 percent as collective farm workers, 47 percent as pensioners or unemployed, and 2 percent as serving time. The rest were youth and students (10 percent) or white-collar workers (1 percent).\textsuperscript{741}

Both CRA and academic sociological studies identified a Witness membership that was disproportionately female and rural. In the Ivano-Frankivs’k study, approximately 34 percent of members were men.\textsuperscript{742} In a 1982 CRA report on L’viv oblast, only 39 percent of members were men. In general, nearly every study found an imbalance in the gender breakdown of members. CRA reports from Ternopil’ and Chernivtsi oblasts in 1979 stated that only 18 percent and 4 percent of surveyed Witnesses lived in urban areas, respectively.\textsuperscript{743} Studies revealed that most Witnesses lived in towns and villages, where it was easier for them to find employment and support their family with less government interference.

Data from areas with more recent Witness migration sometimes showed a more youthful membership. For example, according to a 1976 CRA study done in Krasnoiar krai,\textsuperscript{740} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 227, ll. 36-37.

\textsuperscript{741} DALO, f. 3, op. 59, spr. 239, ark. 3. The data are fairly similar to other demographic information for L’viv oblast provided in a 1973 CRA report. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 5, spr. 356, ark. 74-75.

\textsuperscript{742} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 378, l. 67.

\textsuperscript{743} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 103, ark. 119, 145.
11 percent of the 84 members in the city of Abakan were under 20; 29 percent were between 21 and 31 years of age; 25 percent were between 41 and 50; 14 percent between 51 and 60, and 21 percent older than 60.\footnote{GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 959, l. 51. A similar survey of the Nazarovo district group in the oblast showed comparable demographic breakdowns. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 959, l. 63.} Similarly, the Odessa community in 1981 had 572 members, of which 20 percent were under 20; 12 percent were 30 to 40; 21 percent were 41 to 50; 21 percent were 51 to 60; and 26 percent were over 60. However, as with statistics for the older communities, only 38 percent were men and 58 percent had four years of education or less. Still, this data did not include the 119 school-age children or 57 preschool-age children.\footnote{GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2201, ll. 5-6.}

Lastly, CRA statistics reveal the heavy burden of criminal convictions of Witness leaders for actions related to their religious activity. Of thirty-one Witness leaders surveyed in Odessa oblast in 1979, for example, twenty had criminal records. In comparison, the Pentecostals had only two of thirty-nine leaders with prior convictions, and the Baptists only two of nineteen leaders.\footnote{GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1660, l. 130.} Similarly, four out of six group leaders in Donets’k oblast, three out of four leaders in Zaporizhzhia oblast, and twenty-one out of forty-four leaders in Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast in 1982 had criminal records.\footnote{TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 218, ark. 20, 41, 46.}

Overall, sociological statistics provided a mostly accurate portrait of the demographic composition of Witness communities. Indeed, members tended to have a low level of education and to work in unskilled industrial or farm labor, or to be of pension age. A majority of members were female.
Coming Together as a Community

More so than for other religions in the Soviet Union, the Witnesses’ beliefs and practices required that they gather as a community to maintain their faith. Perhaps no religion took the Biblical injunction “faith without works is dead” as seriously as the Witnesses. This passage formed the framework for everything the Witnesses did, from finding new converts to coming together for Bible study. While other believers may have found spiritual comfort or satisfaction through the Bible and prayer alone, for Witnesses, faith required them to share their beliefs with others within and outside of their own community. This led to frequent clashes with Soviet authorities, but it also impelled Witnesses to create viable, cohesive communities that functioned outside of secular society.

Regular meetings formed a central part of how Soviet Witnesses created a sense of kinship. In democratic countries during this period, Witnesses gathered as a congregation three times a week for five basic functions: theocratic ministry school, service meeting, public meeting, study of The Watchtower, and book study. The public meeting and Watchtower study were held in tandem, typically on Sunday. The theocratic ministry school and service meeting occurred together on a weekday evening. The book study took place on a third evening. The Soviet organization preserved much of this standard format. The theocratic ministry school, instituted by President Knorr in 1943 in all congregations worldwide, taught members how to preach effectively. Ukrainian Witnesses created their

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748 James 2:17-20.

749 For a history of Witness meetings, see Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers, 94, 247-48. For an overview of the format of Witness meetings, see You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York and the International Bible Students Association, 1989), 200-01. Starting in 2009, the organization reduced the weekly meetings from three to two. As part of this change, the book study was combined with the theocratic ministry school and service meeting evening, and was reclassified as a “Bible study.”
first theocratic ministry schools by the late 1940s, a fact uncovered during a 1951 criminal
investigation of several members who led these classes in L’viv oblast.\textsuperscript{750} This practice
followed the Witnesses into exile.\textsuperscript{751} Witnesses also implemented the service meeting, which
used interactive elements, such as short talks or skits, to help members learn to speak about
their faith to others. A 1969 CRA report noted that Witness children in Stavropol’ krai gave
short talks at gatherings and participated in plays on Bible themes, likely in conjunction with
service meetings.\textsuperscript{752}

Similarly, Soviet Witnesses, like their fellow believers worldwide, used the weekly
meetings to study Bible-based literature, most importantly \textit{The Watchtower}. To facilitate this
practice, book-length publications and \textit{The Watchtower} contain questions at the bottom of the
text to guide members. At meetings, the questions are then read aloud, giving members the
chance to provide answers and elders the opportunity to reinforce the main points of the
reading. Soviet Witnesses had to grapple with a much more limited supply of literature,
which likely led to slower, more intensive study of what publications were available in the
community. This made meetings all the more valuable, as sometimes an entire circle of
members may have had only a single issue of \textit{The Watchtower}.\textsuperscript{753}

Some elements of Witness meetings took a different form due to the unique
conditions of life under Soviet rule. In democratic societies, the public meeting consists of a
short prepared speech given by an elder. This presented a particular challenge since inviting
the public to meetings was simply not an option for Soviet Witnesses. It appears that such

\textsuperscript{750} See L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-31504, ark. 189-90, 276-77.

\textsuperscript{751} Davidjuk, “My Chief Concern,” 23.

\textsuperscript{752} RGANI, f. 1, op. 62, d. 38, l. 275.

\textsuperscript{753} \textit{2002 Yearbook}, 210.
talks did take place, but without non-member involvement. To help circulate prepared speeches among several communities, some elders recorded their talks onto cassette tapes that could be played at meetings.  

Worldwide Witness gatherings traditionally include a musical component, limited to religious songs from the organization’s standard songbook, usually sung by the entire congregation to open and close meetings. Live orchestras provided instrumental music at Witness assemblies until the late 1970s, when the organization largely replaced them with tape recordings. Soviet Witnesses had a strong interest in music and many communities developed a more organized repertoire, creating choirs and orchestras to perform at weddings, funerals, and other large gatherings. Fedor Zhitnikov, who later became the first head of the Kazakh Witness organization after independence, played drums in his local orchestra. His community also had a choir, and both groups played at major events. Even the Mordovian camp had its own Witness choir. One man recalls that the camp officers and their wives at times requested songs from them.

In order to avoid police detection, Witnesses developed multiple strategies to gather without provoking undue attention. While most congregations worldwide contain one to two hundred members, Soviet Witnesses broke up their congregations into small circles. This

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755 The organization felt members invested too much time in music rehearsals and that it distracted from the religious purpose of the events. It also expressed concern that some orchestras had altered the original music. “Making Melody to Jehovah with Instrumental Music,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, June 1, 1977, 343-44.

756 See, for example, GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 960, ll. 22-23.

757 Artem’ev, Svideteli Iegovy, 65.

758 Rurak, Tri aresta, 98, and 2008 Yearbook, 179.
allowed them to meet in small groups of less than a dozen members, often all family
members or neighbors, making it more difficult for police, who could have trouble sorting out meetings from familial gatherings.759 To further protect members, Witnesses generally arrived before dawn or late at night at the designated homes. At a 1975 trial in Stavropol’ krai, former Witnesses testified that meetings generally occurred after dark on short notice, and that attendees showed up in intervals in small groups of two to three people. They also stated that the organization advised members that, if authorities or unknown people appeared at the meeting location, they were to immediately hide, flee, and, if necessary, destroy all literature. No one attended meetings until having received clearance from local elders.760

In addition to the weekly meetings, conventions and assemblies offer Witnesses worldwide a chance to come together on a larger scale. Since Rutherford’s tenure, these mass events have given the organization a platform to announce the publication of new literature and to address changes in doctrine or the administrative structure. Equally important, the gatherings provide a specific time and space for the baptism of new members into the faith.761 In democratic countries during the Soviet era, circuit assemblies (roughly 20 congregations) met once or twice a year, along with an annual district convention (roughly 200 congregations). Once every several years, the organization hosted an international convention, bringing together hundreds of thousands of members from across the world. It

759 Rurak, Tri aresta, 24. A 1982 CRA report from Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast stated that most meetings took place among relatives and neighbors. These meetings, it noted, could not be fined or documented since they were technically familial. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 207, ark. 200.

760 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 960, ll. 24-26.

761 Penton, Apocalypse Delayed, 191.
generally held such gatherings at sports stadiums or other large venues.\footnote{762} For example, at the Divine Will International Assembly in 1958, more than 250,000 people gathered in and around Yankee Stadium and the nearby Polo Grounds.\footnote{763}

Because Soviet Witnesses did not have the luxury of renting out auditoriums and stadiums for their members, district conventions, international conventions, and mass baptisms were out of the question. Instead, they found ways to skirt the law and official notice, hosting smaller-scale assemblies for members. The rural locations of most communities proved beneficial in this regard. As they had in the Stalin era, members continued to hold meetings in unpopulated, wooded areas outside of their villages. One 1970 meeting in the forest between two villages in Zakarpattia oblast, for example, drew over 300 participants. The organization hosted at least a dozen other mass gatherings that year in various locations, according to official reports.\footnote{764} In Central Asian communities, Witnesses met in mountainous areas or in the steppe.\footnote{765} One woman remembered walking several kilometers into the empty Kazakh steppe early in the morning so that she and other believers could meet as a community in secret.\footnote{766}

This tactic worked best in isolated areas with low population density, but officials still managed to identify and break up many of these gatherings. Witnesses thus relied heavily on

\footnote{762} For an overview of these gatherings, see \textit{You Can Live Forever}, 199-200. For a history of these gatherings, see \textit{Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers}, 254-82.


\footnote{764} RGANI, f. 5, op. 63, d. 89, l. 275. For another forest meeting incident, see DALO, f. 3, op. 59, spr. 196, ark. 1-7.

\footnote{765} Guriţă, interview.

\footnote{766} Artem’ev, \textit{Svideteli Iegovy}, 44-45.
weddings and funerals as a more widespread and reliable method to disguise assemblies. These occasions provided cover for Witnesses to convene en masse in plain view of the authorities. Some events involved as many as 500 people.\textsuperscript{767} One Witness referred to them as “one-day conventions.”\textsuperscript{768} A 1960 funeral in Ukraine had over 250 attendees who read poems, sang songs, and gave speeches on religious themes. This particular funeral provoked the ire of authorities for several reasons: the deceased had not been a known believer, a teenager gave one of the speeches, and Party members’ wives were among the participants.\textsuperscript{769}

Given the large crowds at such celebrations and the overtly religious content of the ceremonies, authorities quickly grew wise to the secondary function of these events. One woman recalls how, when her father died, the police and local officials came to the home seeking information on the funeral and warned the family against singing songs and reciting prayers at the event. On the morning of the service, the police arrived just as prayer had begun and followed the mourners from the home to the cemetery, where the police then attempted to detain the man leading the prayer. The women in attendance created a distraction that allowed him to slip away undetected.\textsuperscript{770} Local Moldavian press coverage of a 1973 Witness wedding remarked that no one drank wine or gave toasts and that the service consisted primarily of endless speeches on religious themes.\textsuperscript{771}

\textsuperscript{767}TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 81, ark. 33-34.
\textsuperscript{768}Măcuţă, interview.
\textsuperscript{769}TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 283, ark. 174-76.
\textsuperscript{770}2002 Yearbook, 208-09.
A 1978 report from the Ukrainian CRA advised local officials to be on the alert for upcoming weddings in order to prevent such events from turning into religious rallies. The memo also suggested that Party organizations send a representative to the gathering to watch for possible violations of the law.\(^{772}\) A report from Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast the same year demonstrates how this advice worked in practice. The CRA oblast commissioner had received information regarding an upcoming wedding between two young Witnesses. To strategize a response to the event, local police, the district Party executive committee and the prosecutor held a special meeting to work out appropriate measures, setting up voluntary patrols and traffic stops along all roads leading to the village on the wedding day. To further keep tabs on the celebration, they instructed the chair of the Party committee at the factory where the bride worked and one of the groom’s co-workers to attend the event guised as well-wishers. Undoubtedly, the uninvited presence of two Party members did not escape the notice of the Witnesses.

The report from the two wedding crashers provides a detailed portrait of a typical Witness wedding. According to Soviet custom and law, the special day began with a trip by the bride and groom to the local civil registry office to formally register their marriage. The monitors made note of the fact that the couple failed to drink the customary champagne. The couple then traveled home to greet the roughly ninety people in attendance. A choir began the festivities with a few religious songs, followed by an elder member who opened the ceremony with a prayer. He then explained the biblical significance of a Christian wedding to those gathered. A second speaker addressed the proper behavior of a husband and his need to remain firm in his beliefs, true to his wife, moral, and faithful to Jehovah. The newlyweds spoke next, pledging to stay committed to their faith and thanking Jehovah for strengthening

\(^{772}\) TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 75, ark. 81-82.
their lives. The parents followed, echoing previous sentiments, before the choir resumed, followed by four more speeches. After a final prayer, food was served. For several hours, the wedding had given this congregation a means to gather and listen to religious speeches without interruption, all under the gaze of Party members, who stood by, unable to do anything at that time other than document the event.  

Certainly, the state could, and sometimes did, prosecute believers for the illegal use of weddings and funerals as religious events. Most frequently, local soviets issued warnings and fines to organizers and speakers if officials managed to determine the identities of these individuals. This happened in all locales with sizeable Witness communities. In a few instances, Witnesses faced criminal charges on this basis, although typically such incidents served as only one element in a larger criminal case for illegal religious activity. The content of speeches mattered greatly in determining the state’s reaction. In one 1986 trial, for example, two men from Donets’k oblast received lengthy sentences after holding multiple assemblies of Witnesses in various locations and allegedly giving talks about Armageddon and against military service.

Unlike many other Soviet citizens, Witnesses did not celebrate birthdays nor religious and state holidays, seeing them as pagan traditions incompatible with true Christian worship. Indeed, at the trial of one Witness, a neighbor testified that the woman had spotted her buying a Christmas tree and told her that this practice was against God’s wishes.  

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773 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 81, ark. 29-31.

774 See, for example, GAR, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1446, l. 3; DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 29, ark. 191, and L. Tsurkan, “Otvetsvennost’ za narushenie zakonodat’stva o religioznykh kul’takh,” Leninets (Edineț district), September 13, 1983, 2-3.

775 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 358, ark. 251-58.

776 L’viv SBU archive, spr. P-29147, ark. 179.
belief extended to state holidays and demonstrations, which Witnesses avoided in order not to get involved in any political activity. The Witnesses’ only celebration, the Memorial of Christ’s Death, takes place during the Easter season. The event, open to the public in democratic countries, consists of religious talks, along with a reenactment of the Last Supper. Only members of the 144,00 “anointed” class, the earliest converts to the faith whom the Witnesses believe will ascend to heaven, partake of the wine and bread. Since by the postwar era, most of these individuals were elderly, and many had died, local Memorial celebrations worldwide often did not, and do not include a single person from this select and dwindling group.

Soviet Witnesses made a concerted effort to celebrate this event, albeit on a much smaller scale and in secret. One former Witness described a Memorial service he had attended where participants gathered after sunset in the locked apartment of one of the members. They sang songs, praised God and Christ, and displayed the bread and wine, but did not eat or drink them as they had no individuals present from among the 144,000. At a 1981 Memorial service in Kirovohrad oblast held late in the evening, Witnesses barred the apartment door, preventing police who arrived on the scene from immediately entering the home. Even imprisoned Witnesses struggled to observe this special day. While one Witness imprisoned in the Mordovia camp recalled never missing a single Memorial during the several years he spent there, others were not so fortunate. One woman, who served time

777 See, for example, V. L. Novoselov, *Kak prekrasen etot mir, posmotri* (Donetsk: Donbas, 1980), 70.

778 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1649, l. 37.

779 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2135, l. 18.
in a camp in Kemerovo oblast, managed to celebrate Memorial only twice during her ten-year sentence, including one service that was disrupted by camp officials.\textsuperscript{780}

Owing to lack of information on Witness beliefs and practices, Soviet officials did not immediately recognize Memorial as a religious holiday nor take consistent measures to combat its celebration. As a result, Memorial services played only a minor role in most Soviet antireligious propaganda. A 1964 newspaper article in Zakarpattia oblast by former oppositionist leader Potashov explained the ritual, but the event merited little other coverage in the press.\textsuperscript{781} Similarly, a 1974 CRA report circulated among commissioners referred to it as the Witnesses’ version of Easter, giving a short description of the practice for its personnel.\textsuperscript{782} Only in 1978 did the CRA begin taking serious note of Memorial celebrations. Two years later, they began collecting systematic data on its observance.\textsuperscript{783} That year, CRA provided local Party, soviet, and police officials advance notice of the event so that they could hold meetings with known Witness elders in their areas to warn them against violations of the law. As a result, the CRA and local authorities documented dozens of Memorial services, resulting in fines and warnings for some elders and organizers.\textsuperscript{784}

Symbolizing a covenant between God and the individual, baptisms represented an additional way for Witnesses to come together as a community and practice their faith. Soviet Witnesses continued to perform baptisms in secret as they had in Stalin era. Some

\textsuperscript{780} 2008 Yearbook, 186-87.


\textsuperscript{782} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 622, l. 26.

\textsuperscript{783} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1434, l. 43.

\textsuperscript{784} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 127, ark. 7-24.
took place during the day, hidden among crowds of swimmers in nearby lakes and rivers.  

More commonly, small groups gathered at night for this ritual. Baptism signified an individual’s sincere commitment to the organization. For Soviet Witnesses, this had particular resonance as it meant that the individual could be trusted not to betray others to the police. Prior to baptism, potential converts often had no access to any religious literature other than the Bible. They studied it and learned about the faith through individual meetings with another member or an elder. This limited neophytes’ sphere of contacts within the organization and prevented them from giving out information to the police, making infiltration more difficult. One Witness, Gheorghe Gorobet, recalled that people sometimes waited two or three years to be baptized so that the local members could be certain they were not KGB infiltrators. He noted that the practice of using only the Bible to teach the faith to interested people allowed elders to test a person’s loyalty to the faith before introducing the individual into the broader community.

Indeed, Witnesses had good reason to be wary of baptizing new members, as elders who performed these rituals could suffer fines or criminal prosecution. For example, three South Ossetian elders received lengthy sentences in 1961, in part for conducting a nighttime baptism of members in a local canal. Despite the precautionary measures, many trials of elders included testimony from former believers about baptisms. A case in point, the 1973 trial of Witness elders in Crimea included statements from former members about how the defendants had helped to prepare them for their baptisms, which were performed in a local

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785 An CRCA report from 1961 recounts one such event. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 308, ark. 109.
786 Gorobet, interview.
787 GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 750, l. 24.
Former members sometimes shared this sensitive information in the press and atheist publications, a common challenge to maintaining secrecy within the organization. One man, Vladimir, retold his baptism horror story in a 1963 volume of testimonials from former believers. He described how, having passed a two-year “trial period” with the Witnesses, he was finally invited to be baptized after midnight one night in a local river in Tomsk oblast. After the baptism, Vladimir came home with a serious fever and the chills and spent days hallucinating that Jehovah and local leaders were stalking him outside his window. He quickly grew disillusioned with the local leaders who ignored his sickness, and decided to leave the organization. His wife took him to a psychiatric hospital and then divorced him after he renounced his faith. His story, though undoubtedly embellished, highlights the fact that, after baptism, some individuals renounced their faith and denounced the organization. While the Witnesses took care to prevent such incidents, it was impossible to eliminate them entirely.

**Staying “No Part of This World”**

Although some tactics changed, the Witnesses’ position against involvement in government or state affairs remained largely consistent throughout the late Soviet era. In the Witnesses’ view, the constancy of their faith provided a stark contrast to the actions of other Christian organizations and the Soviet state itself. As a 1969 *Watchtower* article stated:

Jehovah’s witnesses today cannot compromise. In some countries they must preach the Kingdom good news underground. In others they meet secretly in order to be

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788 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 356, ll. 9, 12.

strengthened for the work ahead. Though they are law-abiding Christians when faced squarely with an issue involving integrity to Jehovah, they cannot bow to the whim or dictates of nationalistic rulers.790

In the Soviet context, the politicization of daily life required Witnesses to adopt more rigid practices in order not to compromise their “Christian neutrality.” They did join trade unions to gain employment, but they did not participate in any union activities.791 More broadly, they generally avoided movies and plays and did not read fiction, magazines, or newspapers, which they correctly assumed contained political content. While atheist propaganda on the Witnesses routinely depicted these actions as the result of prohibitions from the organization, in fact, they reflected the adaptability of Witnesses to the conditions of Soviet rule. Similarly, atheist propaganda portrayed Witnesses who participated in these activities as violating their beliefs. This ignored how members made personal choices as to how to best remain true to their faith. For instance, one Witness told the press, “I believe in Jehovah God. I am a member of a trade union. I listen to the radio and watch television.” While the state may have seen this statement as a contradiction in terms, Witnesses worldwide would not have seen any inherent problem with this behavior.792

The Witnesses’ neutral stance toward politics led nearly all members to abstain from state-sponsored petition campaigns against nuclear war. In 1955, local Party organs acknowledged the resistance of local Witnesses in collecting signatures for an antinuclear petition. Across Moldavia, officials identified hundreds of Witnesses who refused to sign due


791 The organization advises members that while they may join a union if it is a precondition for employment, but they should not assume any official position within the union, nor participate in political activities such as strikes and labor disputes. “Questions from Readers,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, February 15, 1961, 128. For the Soviet context, see TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 5, spr. 356, ark. 8; op. 7, spr. 274, ark. 23.

to their religious convictions. In Irkutsk oblast, the region with the highest number of Witnesses in exile, 1,035 members refused to add their names to the petition. Officials in Tomsk oblast reported similar problems with their local Witness communities. The district Party committees sent their most experienced agitators to handle the situation, but they failed to convince 514 Witnesses to sign. Given that the petition drives aimed at 100 percent participation, the Witnesses’ stance represented a distinct obstacle to local officials intent on fulfilling this goal. Although the Witnesses saw their actions as politically neutral, the state read them as a political statement against world peace and Soviet foreign policy.

More important, Witnesses adopted new strategies to avoid involvement in electoral campaigns. With the approval of the organization, many members began to participate in elections, at least on a performative level. Potashov, for example, advised members that, if they chose to vote, they should cross off all the candidates and write in, “I vote for Jehovah God.” A 1964 Watchtower article instructed Witnesses that they may write “For God’s Kingdom” on the ballot or mark it void, but should not vote for specific candidates. Others told election monitors that they could not vote, as they had “already cast their votes for Jehovah God.” A 1969 CRA report cited over 3,000 individuals who refused to participate

793 AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 14, d. 192, ff. 86, 145, 149; d. 193, ff. 99, 139.
794 RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 707, l. 161.
795 RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 707, ll. 129-32. Similar issues were also reported among Witnesses in Moldavia. RGANI, f. 5, op. 16, d. 711, ll. 102-14.
796 Zakarpattia SBU archive, spr. 27, t. 1, ark. 60. A former Witness recalled being told to write, “I vote for Jesus Christ” on his voting ballot at a 1975 trial. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 960, l. 27.
798 This was a common phrase throughout the Soviet period used by Witnesses to explain their refusal to participate in elections. It was cited in 1969 by officials in Kirovohrad oblast. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 222, l. 70.
in elections as they “had already voted for Jehovah God.” Since many Witnesses worked as seasonal laborers, they sometimes skirted elections by gaining permission to vote in another location, but then not voting at all. Some members left home on the day of elections so that electoral commissions could not stop by and pressure them to vote.

The voting issue remained a thorn in the side of Soviet authorities, who kept close track of individuals who did not cast ballots. By performing the act of going to the polls, some Witnesses avoided unnecessary social pressure from activists eager to increase participation in elections. It also gave officials proof that atheist campaigns were having a positive effect. Reports on atheist work frequently cited the fact that more and more Witnesses voted in elections. Whom they were voting for was rarely mentioned. In general, the percentage of Witnesses voting in elections varied greatly by district and region, reflecting the decisions of local elders and members whether to cast invalid ballots or to avoid the polls entirely.

Military service forced another major confrontation between Witnesses and the state. Throughout the postwar Soviet era, neither the state nor the Witness organization had any inclination to budge on this issue. Statistics from Ukraine show the growing number of religious-based refusals in the late 1970s, from 271 cases in 1976 to 540 in 1979. While these figures do not differentiate between religions, a strong majority were certainly Witnesses, the rest coming from unregistered Protestant denominations. This is evidenced by the fact that

799 RGANI, f. 5, op. 62, d. 38, l. 276.
800 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1144, l. 138.
801 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1596, l. 6.
802 See, for example, GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 378, l. 67; d. 473, l. 5; d. 1144, ll. 136-38.
the highest number of violations came from the region with the highest concentration of Witnesses, Zakarpattia oblast.\textsuperscript{803}

Throughout the postwar era, most Witnesses followed the guidelines given in the Ten Points memo, which instructed members to register for the draft, but not to serve. A Khrushchev-era CRA report from L’viv states that the Witness organization advised believers not to join the military, but told them to register in order to avoid police detection.\textsuperscript{804} Typically, the young men reported for the initial medical exam, hoping for a possible medical exemption in order to avoid a court trial. A few men cited medical conditions, whether real or invented, to skirt service, a method that was not always successful.\textsuperscript{805} Others left home and moved to other regions after receiving their draft notice in order to dodge the local authorities.\textsuperscript{806} Those who failed to avoid a criminal trial used it as a means to publicly declare their faith. In some trials, family members, usually parents, spoke on behalf of their son’s religious convictions.\textsuperscript{807} Most received a three-year labor camp sentence, but at least a few served more time as a result of prior convictions. Upon release, some men found themselves again under investigation, as they were still of eligible draft age. No law prevented multiple convictions.\textsuperscript{808} One man, for example, was convicted in 1978 to three years, and then called up to serve again immediately upon release in 1981, where he

\textsuperscript{803} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 109, ark. 6.

\textsuperscript{804} DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 24, ark. 126.

\textsuperscript{805} See, for example, TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 358, ark. 157-59.

\textsuperscript{806} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 222, ark. 31.

\textsuperscript{807} See, for example, TsDAVO f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 222, ark. 11.

\textsuperscript{808} A 1964 review of convictions of religious believers by the RSFSR procuracy clarified that courts can issue multiple sentences for refusal to serve. GARF, f. 428, op. 3, d. 457, l. 27.
received another three years. In general, young men faced a test of their faith as they reached adulthood, and most, but not all, chose to serve time rather than go against their religious beliefs.

**Soviet Witnesses and the Ban on Blood Transfusions**

In the Soviet Union, much of the conflict between Witnesses and the state stemmed from the Witnesses’ doctrine of political neutrality. In comparison, the Witnesses’ refusal to accept blood transfusions, a highly contentious issue in many countries, had little effect on the Witnesses’ relationship with the state. Since 1945, Witnesses have viewed transfusions as a violation of biblical commandments not to “eat blood.” Watch Tower publications frequently highlight the procedure’s medical risks, suggesting that avoiding transfusions is not simply a religiously wise decision, but also a medically safer option. A 1961 *Watchtower* article on the issue, for example, included the subheading, “Transfusions cause death and disease.” The organization instructs members to reject a transfusion even in cases where it could lead to death. Witnesses typically carry cards in their wallets that read “no blood” to inform medical personnel of their wishes in an emergency situation. Since 1990, the organization has organized hospital liaison committees to explain the Witnesses’

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809 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 222, ark. 7-8.


religious beliefs on blood transfusions to hospital staff and medical professionals and to advocate bloodless alternatives for patients.\textsuperscript{814}

The Witnesses’ stance on blood transfusion rarely arose as an issue either in the Soviet media or in internal documents from Party and governmental institutions. A 1969 report from the Irkutsk CRA briefly mentioned a \textit{Watchtower} article discussing the organization’s position on blood transfusions, but made no comment on its application to Witnesses in Irkutsk.\textsuperscript{815} Similarly, a 1966 Soviet publication on the Witnesses devoted a section to the topic, but its only examples involved foreign Witnesses.\textsuperscript{816} One 1979 newspaper article told the story of a Witness woman who died as a result of refusing a transfusion. Yet it was the only time the paper mentioned the subject in over a hundred postwar articles it published on the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{817}

The lack of attention to this issue may have been due to the fact that in other countries, conflicts tend to arise as officials grapple with how to respect the religious wishes of patients and the responsibilities of doctors. In the Soviet Union, doctors had no such responsibility to temper their medical decisions to meet the religious demands of patients. If a Witness patient needed a blood transfusion, sources suggest that state hospitals saw no problem with administering one by force. One woman, Galina, almost died from complications after giving birth to her second son in 1980. The doctor told her she would die without a blood transfusion and asked, “Where is your God now? Will he come down from heaven to save you?” The hospital staff tried to force Galina’s husband to give blood for his

\textsuperscript{815} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 227, l. 37.
\textsuperscript{817} S. Ionku and A. Pristoiko, “Gor’kaia pravda o sektantakh,” \textit{Novaia zhizn'}, March 13, 1979, 2.
wife, but he refused. Meanwhile, Galina took what many thought might be her last moments alive to preach from her hospital bed. Luckily, Galina managed to gain access to hard-to-find medicine to treat a blood infection and survived the incident.818 Another Witness recalled an incident in which a fellow believer had a c-section without general anesthesia because she feared that the state would give her a blood transfusion if she were not conscious to resist.819

Often the Soviet media made no distinction between blood transfusion refusals and a broader mistrust of medicine.820 The reticence of Witnesses to seek medical attention at state clinics and hospitals was real, but linked not to a rejection of science, but to fears that Soviet doctors would force them to accept transfusions in violation of their beliefs. One 1977 newspaper article, for example, gave a detailed case of how a hospital performed a transfusion on a woman despite the family’s objections. The journalist did not mention the Witnesses’ objections to transfusions as a specific religious practice, making it seem as though the family simply did not want doctors to intervene at all.821 One 1979 CRA report did clarify the issue, noting specific abstention from blood transfusions and citing one case of death as a result of this refusal.822 Yet this information seems not to have widely circulated among lecturers and agitators. The transfusion issue rarely appeared in antireligious pamphlets and books on the Witnesses. Overall, the refusal to accept blood transfusions had a relatively minor impact on how the Soviet state viewed Witnesses, a notable fact in itself given how much controversy the issue has caused in other countries.

818 Măcuţă, interview.
819 Gojan, interview.
820 See, for example, AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 18, d. 163, f. 8.
822 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1649, l. 36.
Preaching the Good News to Soviet Citizens

Despite the risks of bringing new people into the fold, Soviet Witnesses understood evangelism as a duty and a privilege of all true Christians. Indeed, The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society calculates its membership as the number of active “publishers,” a term it uses to describe those who engage in preaching their beliefs to others. Each member is expected to go out into the community every month to “publish” and submit a report on these efforts to the local congregation. Soviet Witnesses were no different in this regard, although they faced the real danger that someone would not merely refuse to listen or slam the door in their face, but would denounce them to the police.

In countries where Witnesses legally practice their faith, most of the publishing work occurs through door-to-door preaching, a method inspired by the example of early Christian communities. The Bible recounts, “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” As a result, many Soviet Witnesses adhered to this practice. Iacob Gojan found inspiration for his door-to-door efforts from the story of Jesus and the woman at the well, in which Jesus asks a Samaritan women to draw him water and uses the moment to preach to her. Adopting this approach for the modern day, Iacob went to homes asking for a glass of water. Once allowed inside, he retold the “woman at the well” story as a means to start discussions of faith. Similarly, Nikolai Kalibaba went to peoples’ homes to ask if they were interested in selling any livestock, gradually turning the conversation to religious matters.

823 Acts 5:42.
824 John 4:7-26, and Gojan, interview.
In areas where Party and state officials neglected atheist work, Witnesses eagerly took advantage of the increased opportunity to practice their faith and find converts. One Moldavian Witness openly proselytized to others in the community and even picked up hitchhikers in the district as a way to preach to individuals. Local officials did nothing beyond issuing warnings to the man. His employer did even less, listing him as a shock worker on the honor board. In 1973, the Moldavian agitprop department cited this case as an instance of extreme negligence of scientific atheist education by Party officials. It noted that the KGB had finally gotten involved in the matter, but failed to state what measures the KGB had taken to resolve the situation. 826

Most Witnesses, however, avoided door-to-door preaching and other conspicuous activities in favor of safer methods. Indeed, the organization’s annual reports on Soviet Witnesses highlighted this fact, stating that believers had found new ways to spread their faith. Funerals and weddings, for example, offered an opportunity for elders to give talks about their beliefs to guests who were not members of the faith. 827 In general, Witnesses used any opportunity to preach, a practice the 1969 Yearbook called “incidental witnessing.” 828 Some spoke to passengers while riding trains and buses. 829 One man, a bus driver himself, preached on his routes before he was reported to authorities and issued a fine. 830 The 1970 Yearbook gave a list of other tactics employed by Soviet members, including using vacation

825 2008 Yearbook, 106.

826 AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 34, d. 212, ff. 36-38.

827 1967 Yearbook, 314.


829 DAZO, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 98, ark. 27.

830 A. B. Doev, Podlinnoe litso ’svidetelei legovy’ (Frunze: Kyrgyzstan, 1972), 37-38.
time to travel and speak to people in new territories.831 One hospital discharged a Witness man early proselytized to other patients. Prior to this, he had developed a habit of going to the local house of culture on evenings and weekends to share his beliefs. Several of the hospital patients testified against him at his subsequent trial for illegal religious activity in 1971.832

While Witnesses found their career paths limited by low levels of education and employment discrimination, they also sought out jobs that would allow them the freedom to proselytize with less police scrutiny. Mykhailo Dasevych, the head of the Soviet country committee from 1972, worked as a self-employed carpenter in order to have the freedom to travel and meet with congregations.833 Local authorities in Chernivtsi oblast in 1968 determined that the majority of the local Witness leaders worked as drivers, allowing them the opportunity to meet with members without arousing suspicion and to deliver literature and instructions.834

Seasonal labor brigades posed a serious problem for officials, not solely because they provided Witnesses with the ability to travel and network with other Witness communities. Equally problematic, the brigades were sometimes staffed and led largely by Witnesses. The few non-Witness members were then subjected to constant proselytism and sometimes joined the organization as a result.835 Reports from Zakarpattia oblast in 1968 stated that officials had to strengthen passport control over Witnesses to prevent them from using seasonal labor

832 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 5, spr. 237, ark. 101-03.
834 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 158, l. 67a.
835 DAZO, f. 1, op. 9, spr. 59, ark. 71.
as a means to leave the area. The KGB also took note of this issue, citing an incident involving proselytism by members of a seasonal brigade in Krasnodar krai. Despite the efforts of authorities, seasonal labor continued to offer Witnesses opportunities to preach to others. One Moldavian Witness who organized a construction brigade to Omsk oblast in 1974, read Bible passages to his fellow workers and provided commentary on Armageddon. When the brigade returned to the village, one of the workers denounced the man. The Witness, he claimed, had not let anyone listen to the radio, and tried to convince them not to go to movies or concerts. The Komsomol intervened in one situation, in which a young man had joined the Witnesses after learning about the faith on a construction brigade. Similar incidents appeared in the Soviet press through the late 1980s. A schoolteacher in Zakarpattia oblast in 1985 reported that she and her fellow teachers warned parents about the dangers of Witness proselytism on construction brigades and tried to convince graduates to take jobs in local factories or at the kolkhoz instead.

Because so many Witnesses served time in prisons and labor camps, many of the proselytism efforts took place among prisoners. The 1957 Yearbook report on the Soviet Union claimed that “of all that are known to be in the truth today in Russia it is concluded that forty percent have received the truth in prison and in camps.”

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836 DAZO, f. 1, op. 6, spr. 201, ark. 2; spr. 370, ark. 15.
837 RGANI, f. 5, op. 62, d. 38, l. 274.
840 See, for example, I. Mokrianin, “Oglianemsia bez gneva,” Zakarpatskaia pravda, December 19, 1987, 2.
842 1957 Yearbook, 254.
depicted a Witness elder watching a train convoy of prisoners pass through his town. An onlooker tells the elder that the train is full of traitors. The elder, inspired by this information, decides to commit a crime in order to get sent to prison, where he can preach among the traitors—the perfect soil for Witness teachings, the book noted.\textsuperscript{843} This fantastical story highlights the state’s concern about the fact that Witnesses did have success in converting prisoners, in part because they offered redemption for those condemned by society. A 1963 procuracy report stated that, in labor camps in L’viv oblast, many “Jehovists” proselytized to other prisoners. The Witnesses had taught prisoners not to read newspapers or books or to watch Soviet films shown in the camps, but the camp administration had done little to address this problem.\textsuperscript{844}

Soviet publications exploited the fact that some Witnesses had served time for treason and other serious crimes related to activities during World War II. In 1960, atheist activists in Irkutsk oblast held a meeting to denounce two Witnesses who had allegedly collaborated with the Nazis. During the event, another Witness defended one of the accused men: “He tortured and killed people, it is true. But he was not a Jehovist then. Now he does not kill. God has forgiven him. Now he is a servant of Jehovah God.” Though refracted through the lens of an atheist agitator, the incident is likely a fairly accurate reflection of what happened. Witnesses’ evangelism extended to everyone, including those with criminal records, due to their belief that only God could judge the sincerity of a person’s repentance. One Witness, at an atheist talk in 1967, admitted to the crowd that he had personally committed many bad deeds before joining the faith, but that, having become a Witness, he had chosen to sin no


\textsuperscript{844} GARF, f. 8131, op. 32, d. 7036, l. 53.
more. For the Soviet state, however, the Witnesses harbored traitors and war criminals, a fact that played a major role in their depictions of Witness leaders.

Witnesses also preached to camp officials and atheist agitators. One imprisoned Witness spoke about his faith to a woman who ran the food kiosk in the camp. Only when sent to install windows in the camp commander’s home did he realize that the kiosk operator was the commander’s wife. Yet he continued to proselytize to her, trusting her enough to give her literature to read in secret. In another instance, when agitators raided a late night Bible study in 1984, the elder in charge began to preach to the men, telling them that Witnesses have nothing to hide. Similarly, one man openly proselytized to the witnesses (poniatye), who monitored a police search of his home. Two Witnesses, ordered to appear at a court trial to give testimony against a fellow member, used the train trip there to spread their beliefs to fellow passengers. In one case, a KGB agent assigned to infiltrate the Witnesses embraced the faith and became a member. He recalled that when the Witnesses learned of his KGB background, they showed him kindness and attention, impressing him with their fearlessness.


847 2008 Yearbook, 194-95.

848 The newspaper article on the incident described the preaching attempt as a failure. V. Drogal’chuk, “Shag navstrechu,” Zakarpatskaia pravda, November 20, 1984, 2.

849 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 322, ark. 275.

850 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 244, ark. 44.

The refusal of Witnesses to cease their preaching efforts represented a constant thorn in the side of local Party and state officials. One Moldavian Komsomol secretary from a district with a large number of Witnesses declared at a Komsomol plenum in 1957 that at his kolkhoz, “We have people belonging to the Jehovist sect. Those of you who do not know this sect, God help you never to know.”\textsuperscript{852} The Witnesses’ ability to attract new youth converts outside of existing Witness families particularly troubled Soviet authorities.\textsuperscript{853} In one village in Moldavia in 1954, Witnesses convinced a young man to join the faith. Formerly a Komsomol member, he publicly turned in his Komsomol membership card, announcing that “Jehovah God forbid him to remain in this ‘satanic’ organization.”\textsuperscript{854} The Komsomol reported on another incident in which one of its members, a student at a pedagogical institute, joined the Witnesses after they visited his home while he recovered from a serious illness. Although the same report noted that most young “sectarians” join these religions due to parental influence, incidents such as the one with the student indicated that some youth members came from among the allegedly secular Soviet population.\textsuperscript{855}

Overall, the insular nature of Witness communities created a spirit of closeness and mutual aid, which won them some converts. Witnesses often sought out potential new members from among those alienated from Soviet society or those experiencing personal hardships or tragedy. They pointed to the Bible’s message of redemption and the promise of eternal life in an earthly paradise as a way to bring comfort to these individuals. One woman,

\textsuperscript{852} AOSPRM, f. 278, inv. 3, d. 815, f. 43.

\textsuperscript{853} One Komsomol report argued that Witnesses were specially recruiting young members, citing as evidence the fact that Witnesses call their proselytizers “pioneers.” The Komsomol official felt certain the Witnesses were exploiting the popularity of the Soviet “Young Pioneers” to win over converts. RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1112s, ll. 186-87.

\textsuperscript{854} AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 13, d. 254, f. 34.

\textsuperscript{855} RGASPI, f. 1, op. 34, d. 38, l. 141.
whose husband had died at the front in World War II, found consolation in the Witnesses, who told her that her husband would return to her after Armageddon.\footnote{Kravchenko and Sergienko, ‘Slugy Egovy’, 34.} One young man, born with impaired vision, discovered a welcoming community and an outlet for his musical talents in the Witnesses’ local orchestra. His new beliefs taught him that God would make his disability disappear in the millennial kingdom.\footnote{V. I. Golubovich, ed., Pochemu my porvali s religiei (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1958), 185.} Where the Witnesses saw themselves as offering hope and support to those in need, the Soviet state viewed their efforts as exploiting individuals in times of crisis and vulnerability.

Witnesses reached out to those estranged from society. One man joined after the loss of his job left him and his wife struggling to make ends meet.\footnote{A. S. Gerasimets, ed., Nam ne po puti s iegovistami (Irkutsk: Irkutskoe o-vo ‘Znanie,’ 1960), 23.} Another man converted after his collective farm unfairly allotted him a smaller plot of land than he felt he deserved.\footnote{I. Melesh, “Prozrenie,” Zakarpatskaia pravda, May 23, 1969, 2.} One woman struggled to care for her two small children alone after she lost her husband in a work accident. Her work collective ignored her, offering no help, while the Witnesses showered her with attention.\footnote{B. R. Belopol’skii, V omute religioznogo sektantstva (Ul’ianovsk: Ul’ianovskoe kn. izd., 1962), 28-29.} Instances of injustice in the Soviet system bolstered the Witnesses’ message that secular governments could never create a perfect society and a fair system of rule.

Some who joined the Witnesses found themselves attracted to its strong moral values. Atheist propaganda attempted to deflect this by publicizing the moral indiscretions of believers. Yet even some agitators recognized the common public perception that Christians had higher morals than the rest of Soviet society. Witnesses do not allow their members to
smoke or engage in premarital sex, and they advise moderation in alcohol consumption. In
the Soviet Union, almost all members abstained from alcohol, a practice shared with many
Protestant communities. At a 1963 Komsomol plenum in Moldavia, one attendee described
his own difficulties in working with Baptists at the factories, as they did not smoke, did not
drink, and worked hard. He complained that the Komsomol lacked compelling examples
from within their own ranks to counteract this upstanding image of young Baptists.861

Similarly, a 1957 CRCA memo to the Party agitprop department noted that “sects” that
promote moral family life and do not drink alcohol, smoke, or curse, draw in new members
attracted to this cleaner lifestyle.862 A 1969 CRA memo contained a nearly identical
statement, suggesting that atheist work had succeeded little in addressing this issue. It quoted
one Witness who said he used to be a hopeless drunk before he joined the Witnesses. Now he
lives a sober life.863

The higher moral standards could provide an inviting contrast to difficult home lives.
Women who were married to abusive or alcoholic husbands found a special appeal in the
Witnesses’ sober lifestyle. When one family joined the Witnesses, the father, a heavy drinker
with a prior conviction for hooliganism and a habit of getting into fights, abandoned these
pursuits in favor of his new religion.864 Another woman, who had already joined the
Witnesses, encouraged her husband to join after alcoholism cost him his job and driver’s
license.865

861 AOSPRM, f. 278, inv. 5, d. 148, ff. 70-71.
862 RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 90, l. 88.
863 RGANI, f. 5, op. 62, d. 38, l. 275.
865 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2842, ll. 19-20.
Witnesses, like other evangelizing communities, also frequently sought out potential converts among believers of different faiths, primarily other Christians. These individuals already had a demonstrated interest in the Bible that made them more open to discussions about God. One 1956 CRCA report from L’viv oblast mentions that some of the local Baptists had joined the Witnesses, but that eight of these individuals had already returned to the Baptists. The report provides no information as to the reasons for the conversions.\(^{866}\) Soviet publications recounted numerous incidents where citizens had joined and left several different Christian religious organizations.\(^{867}\) One man, for example, had been baptized into the Orthodox Church and then joined the Baptists with his wife. When his wife died at a young age despite his prayers, he joined the Pentecostals, but left after bandits attacked and killed his son in western Ukraine. Finally, he joined the Witnesses, only to renounce that faith as well, and religion in general.\(^{868}\)

Given that many Protestant communities had public houses of worship in the Soviet Union, Witnesses had a relatively easy time locating these believers and preaching directly to them. A 1971 CRA report stated that Witnesses in Vinnytsia oblast had begun attending Adventist and Baptist services in order to speak with these congregations.\(^{869}\) Other CRA memos cite similar instances from other regions. One such report noted that Witnesses visited the homes of local Baptists to proselytize to them, but with no apparent success.\(^{870}\)

\(^{866}\) DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 24, ark. 213.


\(^{869}\) RGANI, f. 5, op. 63, d. 89, ll. 277-78.

\(^{870}\) GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 553, l. 44.
Witnesses in Volyn’ oblast attended Seventh Day Adventist meetings in 1974 and spoke with one Adventist leader at his home. The two groups discussed biblical interpretations of Armageddon, with neither side apparently winning the other over to their views.\footnote{GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 631, l. 121.} Police confiscated cassette tapes from one man that contained recordings geared at converting Baptists to the faith.\footnote{RGANI, f. 5, op. 67, d. 115, l. 188.}

For the Soviet authorities, Witnesses represented a greater danger to the social order than registered religious organizations whose members practiced their faith within the parameters of Soviet law. Officials did not look kindly on conversions from legal into illegal religious communities. One 1958 report from L’viv oblast cited an incident involving the local assistant pastor of a registered Baptist congregation. After the man’s daughter had joined the Witnesses, the pastor allowed her and her husband to live in his home. A regional newspaper reported on this matter, condemning the man for letting this happen, while the CRCA met with the head pastor to discuss the man’s possible dismissal.\footnote{The CRCA, in an internal memo, noted that the man had been told that he was responsible for his children’s actions. The head pastor sought the CRCA’s counsel on whether it should remove the man from his position. The CRCA informed the head pastor that the congregation should decide the matter. DALO, F. 1332, op. 2, spr. 2, ark. 198-202.} Such incidents reflect the clear hierarchy of religious organizations in the late Soviet era, in which Witnesses were viewed as the least desirable.\footnote{DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 26, ark. 198-99.} A member of a registered Baptist congregation appealed to the CRCA after a Witness spoke with her nephew. In response, the CRCA commissioner met with both parties, warning the Witness that if she continued to proselytize to the young man, the government would take appropriate measures. An atheist agitator was
also assigned to work with the nephew. One Moldavian Komsomol official complained in 1957 that some Komsomol activists had decided that “the Orthodox Church is good, the Jehovahists are bad.”

Witnesses’ preaching efforts among other religious communities highlight the tense relations between Witnesses and believers of other faiths. Registered congregations had little more tolerance for Witness proselytism among their members than did the state authorities. In some instances, clergy took it upon themselves to report illegal actions of the Witnesses. The Ukrainian CRCA even noted in a 1964 report that, in Rivne oblast, courts had allowed Russian Orthodox priests to serve as expert witnesses in the trials of illegal sectarians. It cited the trial of one Witness, which included testimony from a local priest who claimed that the Witness organization cooperated with foreign security agencies. The CRA stated clearly that such use of priests was unacceptable, recommending a local agitator or former believer give this information in court instead. This incident was likely an anomaly since it won immediate condemnation when brought to the attention of CRA officials. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the preferential treatment accorded to registered religious leaders in comparison to Witness elders. The Witnesses’ harsh critiques of other religions similarly ruled out any ecumenical spirit across faiths. In 1983, after Witnesses attempted to convert Baptists in Odessa oblast, accusing their leaders of “collaborating in the crimes and deeds of Caesar” and “deviation from the gospel truths,” the local minister complained to the CRA.

875 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 309, ark. 83.
876 AOSPRM, f. 278, inv. 3, d. 815, f. 38.
877 See, for example, AOSPRM, f. 278, inv. 3, d. 915, f. 16, and DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 24, ark. 77-78.
878 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 351, ark. 22-23.
commissioner.\textsuperscript{879}

Overall, Soviet Witnesses proved steadfast in their efforts to spread their faith to others, adapting the organization’s worldwide preaching methods to meet the challenges of a largely secular Soviet society. They offered potential converts a close-knit community based on principles of strict biblical morality and mutual support. For those dissatisfied with the current order or their personal lives, Witnesses provided a critique of Soviet power and a promise of a better life under Christ’s kingdom. The small, but steady growth in members suggests that some Soviet citizens found comfort in this message.

\section*{Witness Family Life}

Although conversion played a major role in Witness beliefs and practices, much, if not most of the Soviet-era membership growth came through existing family networks. By raising their children in the faith, Witnesses ensured a new generation of believers. The Soviet state, fully aware of this dynamic, devoted a great deal of attention to children and youth in an effort to cut off the Witnesses’ primary source of expansion. For them, youth represented the next generation of Soviet leaders. In the western borderlands, this was the first generation born and raised under Soviet power. As such, the existence of religious youth represented a far more disturbing phenomenon to Soviet officials than the older generation of prewar Witnesses.

Not surprisingly, Witnesses faced a major battle with the state over the hearts and minds of their children, a confrontation waged mostly through the school system. Having no choice but to send their children to state-run institutions, parents could only hope that they had trained their children well enough to resist pressures from secular classmates, teachers,

\textsuperscript{879} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 274, ark. 171-72.
and principals. For the Witnesses, the Soviet situation did not present an entirely unique dilemma. The Watch Tower organization teaches members to view the outside world as corrupt and to guard against “bad associations,” which can lead believers away from their faith. In keeping with this view, Witnesses restrict their friends (and marital partners) to within their faith communities, and expect their children to do the same. Schools make this especially challenging for children with a still developing sense of identity and values.

The Watch Tower organization advises members worldwide to take caution and prepare their children before sending them out into society. A 1954 Watchtower article provides a good summation of the official stance on the outside world and schools in particular:

This old world is sunk! It has sunk itself. It sows filth, it reaps filth. It mocks God, but not with impunity. (Gal. 6: 7-8) Yet it is amid these sullied seas of delinquent humanity that we must navigate a course of morality and integrity, and one of the most anxious concerns of faithful parents is that their children will not sink in these seas when they venture from the home port.

The article further advises parents not to delay instilling religious values in their children, noting, “The fresher clay is the easier it is to mold. The longer it sets the harder it gets.” The organization urged parents to begin at infancy, making the child prepared to defend the faith once he or she enters school.880

In order to raise steadfast believers, Witness communities treat their children as unbaptized members of the faith, involving them in gatherings and other activities. As in other countries, Soviet Witness children attended the weekly meetings and Bible studies, contributing along with their parents.881 Some Witness groups ran youth meetings, giving

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children a chance to make friends within their own community. A 1971 CRA report noted that Stavropol’ krai ran a youth orchestra and a youth theater troupe, which performed short skits on religious themes at weddings. In some families, even young children helped with the literature production, hand-copying issues of *The Watchtower*. In the trial of a Witness elder in 1961, the school notebooks of the defendant’s son, filled with hand-copied religious texts, were entered as evidence. One young girl acted as a courier for her grandfather, a local elder, because she attracted less suspicion.

Some parents preferred to limit the risk posed by Soviet schools by restricting their children’s exposure to them. In the Stalin era, most Witness parents enrolled their children only in the four-year village schools. Rural areas in the western borderlands and exile locations often lacked schools beyond this basic level, making it necessary for students to travel to town and live in dormitories to continue their studies. Local officials in one village tried in vain to convince one father to let his son live in a dormitory rather than have to walk several kilometers each day to school in the nearby town. One young Witness recalled how, after eight years of primary school in his village, he had to travel to the district center to continue his education. That lasted only two weeks. Shocked by the drinking, smoking, and vulgarity of his fellow students, he quickly concluded that, if he remained there, he would

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883 RGANI, f. 5, op. 63, d. 89, l. 276.


885 AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 21, d. 234, f. 73.

886 2002 *Yearbook*, 177.

887 “Chernaia ten’ iegovy,” *Sovetskoe Zaural’e*, October 18, 1964, 3.
soon compromise his faith. Indeed, two other Witness youth who remained at the school left the religion. By the Khrushchev era, the expansion of educational institutions in these more peripheral regions allowed most Witness children to attend school longer in their own communities. Most completed at least seven to eight years of schooling, with some finishing their secondary education.

Even while at school, Witness children tried to keep apart from their secular peers. Like their parents, Witness children operated in the Soviet world, but they worked hard not to be “of the world.” This meant adhering to the principle of “Christian neutrality” in all political matters. In Soviet schools, this proved extremely difficult given the politicization of everyday life and the education system. Students sang patriotic songs glorifying the state in their choirs. They participated in training exercises meant to prepare them for military service. They joined the Party’s youth organizations, the Octobrists, Young Pioneers, and Komsomol. They read stories and watched films about the heroic deeds of the Red Army. Witness children did none of these activities. They tried to get along with their classmates, but they did not befriend them.

Beyond abstaining from what they saw as political matters, Witness children attempted to steer clear of most extracurricular activities, which could bring them into greater contact with “bad associations.” Witnesses teach that these activities can distract children from their proper focus on spiritual growth and preaching work. As such, their children generally do not play competitive sports, join school clubs, or participate in amateur art or

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888 Măcuță, interview.
theater circles. The Soviet Union was no exception. A Zakarpattia school principal noted that one Witness child sat with her eyes closed the whole time the class watched movies.

Some Witness children felt compelled to speak about their faith in the classroom, perhaps viewing it as a chance to fulfill the biblical injunction to preach the word of God. One seventh-grader wrote an essay about how he had missed something in life before he read the Bible. Another student told his class:

All sciences claiming that God did not create the earth and the universe are wrong. They are not able to disprove what is written in the Bible. There is God and there is Satan. They rule the world. Satan seduces people and leads them from God. In order not to be influenced by Satan, I read only the Bible. I do not read any other books, I do not go to the movies, I do not watch television, and I sing only Christian songs.

A seventh-grader declared that even if her father told her to abandon the Bible and her faith, she would not do so. Her convictions were her own, not something borrowed from her parents. Expressing these convictions required young Witnesses to take ownership of their religion.

Making a stand in schools put Witnesses in direct confrontation with teachers and principals. Children generally knew enough not to involve their parents, since doing so could result in a criminal investigation for illegal religious activity. Parents in turn taught children to fight their own battles. The organization itself had already dealt with similar situations

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890 DAZO, f. 1, op. 1, spr. 3484, ark. 23.


893 Măcuță, interview.
elsewhere, including in the United States where Witness children refused to say the pledge of allegiance. A 1940 *Watchtower* article described the organization’s view of such matters:

> When a child reaches the age of understanding and intelligence, and intelligently takes his stand on the side of Jehovah and his kingdom, that child must prove his integrity toward Jehovah if he gains life everlasting. Therefore the child must be subjected to reproach and persecution and the parents also must likewise be subjected to reproach and persecution, because Satan will see to it that they get it, and the Lord permits it in order to afford an opportunity for such consecrated persons to prove their integrity toward him and thus prove Satan a liar.”

Children, like their parents, needed to learn to defend their faith and appreciate the opportunity to serve as witnesses for the biblical truth in the face of persecution. One thirteen-year-old boy, detained by the police for proselytizing in his village, came home and told his parents how he “had been persecuted for Jehovah’s name.” Both parents and child considered the incident a “proud” moment, as the boy had remained firm in his faith under pressure.

The refusal to join youth organizations provoked the greatest tests of children’s’ commitment to this principle. The Soviet press invariably blamed the parents when children would not join, portraying the children as victims of adults’ fanatical beliefs. In one case, a principal called a third-grade child, Ionel, into his office to ask him if he would like to join the Young Pioneers. Ionel responded no. The man then pulled out a Pioneer scarf and tried to tie it around Ionel’s neck, saying, “Hold on, let’s see if it at least looks good on you.” The boy backed into a corner, crying and putting up his hands to protect himself until the principal relented and put the scarf away. The Soviet press, which covered the incident in detail, portrayed the affair as an example of parental fanaticism, but the description makes it

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895 2008 *Yearbook*, 118-19.
hard to ignore the clear use of coercion applied to the young child.\textsuperscript{896} In a similar situation, after a fifth-grader took off the Pioneer scarf and refused to wear it, the principal grabbed a child, putting the scarf back on him. The child took it off again despite the principal’s threats.\textsuperscript{897}

In this regard, schools frequently reinforced, rather than undermined, Witness children’s convictions. A 1979 CRA report acknowledged this fact, noting that Witnesses often quit school rather than face further conflict with teachers over membership in youth organizations.\textsuperscript{898} Some Witness children expressed to their teachers their belief that the Pioneers and true Christianity were incompatible. One girl told the school that she could not join the Pioneers because “the Pioneers do not recognize God.”\textsuperscript{899} Another girl expressed her desire to live in the next world and her belief that joining the Pioneers would lead to her destruction at Armageddon.\textsuperscript{900} The two young sons of one Witness couple told the school principal that their father had read them the Bible, teaching them that only faith in Jehovah could bring happiness in life.\textsuperscript{901}

Even if Witness children had wanted to make friends and fit in, schools often made this difficult if not impossible. Many children experienced harsh teasing as a result of their

\textsuperscript{896} The director took the matter up with the child’s father and, when the father refused to yield on the issue, brought the matter to court. The judge had the child removed from the home. This story appeared as a series of articles in a Moldavian district newspaper. I. Podolianu, “Da zdravstvet razum!,” \textit{Leninets} (Lipcani district), March 23, March 25, March 27, and March 30, 1960, 4, and I. Dmitriev, “Ikh deti ne budut iegovistami,” \textit{Leninets} (Lipcani district), April 29, 1960, 4.

\textsuperscript{897} Ivanenko, \textit{O liudiakh}, 133-34.

\textsuperscript{898} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1564, l. 138.

\textsuperscript{899} RGANI, f. 5, op. 62, d. 38, l. 277.

\textsuperscript{900} GARF, f. 6991, op. 3, d. 687, reprinted in Odintsov, \textit{Sovet ministrov}, 71.

beliefs. Teachers singled them out for ridicule and scorn. Iacob Gojan received lower marks in school because of his faith, and his teacher forced him to stand in front of the class so that other students could mock him and his faith.  

One young man who did ultimately leave the faith recalled how, in school, students treated him meanly, but this made him happy because his parents had taught him that to be friends with the world is to be enemies with God. Only when the class leader began to be nice to him did he reconsider his beliefs.  

Having been raised to view persecution as a sign of true faith, Witness children thus had a chance to experience this early on in life and many found it deeply meaningful and spiritually significant. On the whole, Witness children learned hard lessons about how the state treated members of their faith. They saw their homes searched, their parents harassed, even arrested, and their Bible studies broken up by police. Such experiences taught Witness children that secular authority would persecute true Christians. These convictions could withstand even serious trials. One Ukrainian woman lost custody of her seven-year-old twins and was only able to visit them on yearly vacations. Seven years later, both children chose to return to their mother, becoming Witnesses as well. In a similar vein, the state sent Fedor Zhitnikov to a children’s home after his father’s arrest in 1959. The experience only strengthened Fedor’s faith, motivating him to undergo baptism. A traveling elder performed the ritual in secret while Victor was still living at that home.  

Undoubtedly, some children felt caught between conflicting desires to fit in with their peers, remain true to their beliefs, and please their parents. An example from one school in

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902 Gojan, interview.  
903 TsDAHO, f. 7, op. 20, spr. 120, ark. 18.  
904 2002 Yearbook, 218.  
905 Artem’ev, Svideteli Iegovy, 60-63.
L’viv oblast in 1961 illustrates how even very young children became trapped in those battles. At the school, a third-grader from a Witness family voiced a desire to join the Octobrist and wear the signature red star badge. When her parents refused to allow it, the district Knowledge Society got involved, holding a public meeting to discuss the matter. After the young girl repeated her request at this gathering, the parents relented and let her join.906 One young man fell in love with a girl outside of the religion, marrying her and leaving the faith.907

As the above examples illustrate, not all Witness children and youth choose to follow the path laid out by their parents and elders. For many, school was an exciting time of exposure to new people, new ideas, and new possibilities. In one family, all three daughters left home after renouncing the faith of their parents. The youngest appealed to the village soviet to be placed in a dormitory where she could complete her schooling away from home.908 Instances of Witness youth who ran away from home or moved in with other relatives appeared regularly in the Soviet press, often written by the young people themselves.909 One young Witness, for example, wanted nothing to do with his father or his religion as a child, living with his grandmother until he joined the Red Army.910 A CRA report from Chernivtsi oblast in 1981 gave an example from the village of Cherlenivka. The principal there estimated that of the 224 Witness children who had graduated from his school

906 DALO, f. R-1658, op. 1, spr. 115, ark. 44.
910 This man joined the faith much later as an adult, but only after the death of his father. Palamariuc, interview; and 2002 Yearbook, 91-92.
during his tenure, 125 became baptized members and the rest became non-believers.\textsuperscript{911}

Peer pressure is a powerful force and it had a definite influence on Witness children both in the Soviet Union and worldwide. For example, former Witnesses have published numerous accounts of growing up in and leaving the faith in the United States.\textsuperscript{912} For Soviet Witnesses, children faced additional pressure from school and local authorities to renounce the faith of their parents. In a 1982 trial, the prosecution called the ten-year-old daughter of one Witness to the stand to testify about how her mother had forced her to abstain from school activities, even tearing off the Octobrist badge from her dress in front of the entire school. The court deprived the mother of custody rights, sending the child to live with her non-Witness father.\textsuperscript{913} This case was not unique.\textsuperscript{914} Soviet press and courts repeatedly involved children in attacks on Witnesses, claiming to protect these young “victims” from the fanaticism of their parents.

**Former Believers**

Tensions in Witness families over religious matters bring to light the broader, mostly unexplored issue of former believers in scholarship on religion in the postwar Soviet Union. Previous research on Soviet Witnesses has not given this issue its due, focusing instead on

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\item \textsuperscript{911} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 169, ark. 73.
\item \textsuperscript{913} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2619, ll. 30-32.
\item \textsuperscript{914} B. I. Iatsenko, *Odkrovennia slug zhovtogo dyiavola* (Uzhhorod: Zakarpatskoe obl. kn. izd, 1963), 5.
\end{itemize}
those Witnesses who remained within the faith. This ignores the fact that every religion produces not only converts, but also “apostates,” who often have a highly critical view of the faith they abandoned and are frequently the most vocal opponents of the religion.\textsuperscript{915} This is especially true of the Witnesses, who have a high turnover in membership worldwide.\textsuperscript{916} In this sense, the Soviet experience is not entirely unique. Former Soviet Witnesses cited feeling isolated from their peers at school and work, left out of holiday celebrations, and pressured to devote more energy to proselytism than to career or educational aspirations as reasons for why they reconsidered their faith. Similarly, former Witnesses often voiced their doubts in the organization’s interpretation of the Bible. Of course, former Soviet Witnesses also had complaints unique to the Soviet system—such as disgust with the Watch Tower organization’s alleged political motivations, anti-Soviet activities, and criminal leadership.

Some Soviet Witnesses certainly left the organization because doing so offered a reprieve from intense public scrutiny and from discriminatory practices in workplaces and higher education. Vasilii Kalin, the first head of the Russian Witness organization after 1991, has stated that Witnesses could not find good work or get a higher education in the post-Stalin era. When he applied twice to attend university, officials told him to bring in a Komsomol membership card, knowing that this would not be possible for him.\textsuperscript{917} Yet by renouncing their faith Witnesses could get an advanced degree or a job promotion and no


\textsuperscript{916} The high turnover is due in large part to the fact that the organization expels, or “disfellowships,” members who fail to live up to its moral standards or who express doubts in its beliefs and practices. Inactive members who fail to attend meetings or who do not proselytize may also face disfellowshipping. Those who repent of their actions can be reinstated.

\textsuperscript{917} Odintsov, \textit{Sovet ministrov}, 197.
longer face the scorn of their coworkers and neighbors. Renunciations could also protect Witnesses from ongoing criminal investigations and trials for their religious activities. One former Witness claimed that some opportunistic Witnesses gave fake renunciations of their faith to avoid punishment for their crimes. Ironically, this man had himself left the Witnesses while on trial for illegal religious activity.\footnote{A. Bylich, “Ispoved’,” Iskra, July 5, 1962, 4.} Indeed, it was a fairly common occurrence for courts to dismiss all charges or give a suspended sentence to Witnesses who publicly admitted guilt and promised to forsake all further involvement with the religion.\footnote{See, for example, the trial of Ivan Zaporozhan for anti-Soviet activity in 1963. After he provided testimony against the Watch Tower organization, declaring its leaders to be power-hungry swindlers, the court freed him on a promise to start a new life and to help others leave the organization. B. Boiko, “I upala s glaz pelena . . . ,” Iskra (Rîscani district), August 22, 1963, 2.}

Many, perhaps most, who left the Witnesses were young people, some of whom had never formally joined the faith, but had been raised in Witness families. The pressures at school, combined with the realization that, as long as they stayed with the faith, their career and educational paths would be very limited, drove many young people to opt out of their parents’ belief system. Some young men did not want to serve several years in labor camps for refusing to join the military along with their peers.\footnote{For cases of Witness youth serving in the army, see TsDAHO, f. 7, op. 30, spr. 3320, ark. 74; AOSPRM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 229, f. 125; Iu. Adam, “Ia poryvaui s iegovistami,” Pobeditel’, August 25, 1961, 4; and G. Postolakii, “Vysokaia chest’, pochetnyi dolg,” Novaia zhizn’, December 25, 1980, 2.} In short, Witness youth reached a crossroads as they entered adulthood. They, among their fellow believers, had the most to gain materially by leaving the faith. For some, Soviet society was, for all its faults, a much more appealing option that offered greater opportunities than a life lived within an oppressed, insular religious community.

The experience of leaving the faith could be both exhilarating and terrifying. Former
believers found that the society that had previously denounced them now welcomed them with open arms. One young woman, Ivanna, moved into a dormitory, made new friends, and joined the Komsomol. She even took lessons to become a parachutist. Nikolai, a young man raised in the faith, skipped Witness meetings with another friend from the religion, secretly watching Soviet movies until caught by the friend’s father. He finally left home so that he could join the Komsomol and serve in the Red Army. Recounting his decision to reject the Witness faith in the Soviet media, he entitled his story, “From sectarian darkness into the light and joy of life.”

At the same time, losing one’s faith often meant losing one’s family as well. In all countries, Witnesses generally do not communicate with individuals who are expelled from, or who voluntarily leave, the organization. This includes relatives and family members, with exceptions made as dictated by necessity. The practice was more pronounced in the Soviet Union, given that, in many instances, these individuals now actively cooperated with the state against the religion. One young woman had to leave home upon renouncing the Witnesses. Her mother told her she would rather see her dead than an unbeliever. Another young Witness, whose father disowned him after he left the faith, addressed his father in a newspaper article: “Am I not your son? Where is your fatherly love, your love of the people, which you speak about so often in your preaching?” Two years later, then in the army, he

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921 Gerasimets, ed., Nam ne po puti, 37-38.

922 For example, married couples are advised to maintain their marital vows even in cases when one individual renounces his or her faith.


924 D. Zaporozhan, “Pochemu ia porval s sektoi,” Leninets (Edineț district), September 28, 1963, 2, 4.
continued to try to convince his Witness wife to leave the faith, without success. For many youth, their entrance into secular society meant starting a new life outside of the religion.

Witness Views of the Soviet State

Sustained persecution of believers strengthened the Witnesses’ long-held conviction that true Christians would suffer for their faith in the final days before Armageddon. A 1958 Watch Tower publication describing the mistreatment of Soviet members affirmed:

The God of salvation has been permitting all this persecution of his witnesses in order to test those who profess to seek him and to love him. By the fiery trials from the persecutors and oppressors Jehovah smelts those claiming to be his people in order to expose and skim away those who are mere scummy dross and to manifest, purify, and retain those who are pure, precious, metal.

Even encounters with police could be sources of inspiration. After Gheorghe Gorobeț joined the Witnesses in the mid-1950s, the local police called him in for questioning, showing him a printed copy of The Watchtower. He had never seen it before in its original form and did not recognize it at first. While the police had hoped to show him the political content of the magazine, all he noticed were the “words of everlasting life” printed on its pages.

For Witnesses, changes to Soviet religious policy represented no more than a temporary shift that did not alter the government’s anti-Christian foundation. A 1956 Watchtower article written after the Secret Speech declared, “Today the predatory, bloodstained, intolerant totalitarian leopard of communism claims to have changed his spots.” The continued imprisonment of Witnesses, however, signaled to the organization that

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926 Your Will be Done on Earth! (Brooklyn: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1958), 288-89.

927 Gorobeț, interview.
this move was nothing more than “sheer hypocrisy.” In the organization’s view, it might win concessions from such a state, but it could not secure real justice for believers. Similarly, Witnesses took the lack of registration and ongoing persecution as a confirmation of their faith. Unlike other Christian organizations that had registered with the atheist Soviet state, the Witnesses felt they alone had refused to compromise their faith for political expediency. A 1958 *Awake!* article declared, “Popular organized religion has suffered the defeat in that it has agreed to mouth the Communist peace-propaganda line for the crumbs of freedom to practice a strictly ritualistic religion.” For the Witnesses, registration had made other religions, namely the Russian Orthodox Church, into a “tool of the Godless Communist Soviet regime.” Other articles blamed the Orthodox Church for ignoring the spiritual needs of the Russian people and thus fostering the growth of communism. A 1973 *Awake!* article stated:

> One needs to understand that the churches, especially the Orthodox Church, were key elements in the oppression of the people by the czars. For their own selfish advantage, the clergy for centuries had catered to the rulers, ignored the needs of the people and kept them in ignorance. The majority of the people were held in virtual slavery to the rulers and wealthy classes. The clergy worked to keep it that way.

While Watch Tower publications proclaimed their own survival and even growth in the face of Soviet repression, they also believed that the rest of the Soviet Union’s religious tradition would not last much longer. A 1973 article ended with the statement: “the conclusion is

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929 “Ungodly Russia’s Triple Defeat,” *Awake!*, October 22, 1958, 3.

930 “Should the Christian Church be a Tool of the State?,” *Awake!*, July 8, 1964, 8.

931 A 1965 article declared that “the preparation of Russia for communism began back in the tenth century when Vladimir I embraced the Eastern Catholic faith.” It also declared that the Church under in the tsarist era “served the interests of the ruling class in Russia and oppressed the common people.” “Christendom’s Responsibility for Communism,” *Awake!,* July 8, 1965, 9.

inescapable. Slowly but surely the religions of Christendom and heathendom are being
strangled to death in the Soviet Union.”933 Rather than contextualize their persecution within
a larger antireligious policy, the Witnesses understood their persecution as unique and
spiritually meaningful, marking them as the only true Christians.

The content of Watch Tower publications put them not only at odds with other
religions, but, more problematically, with the Soviet state and the official ideology. Witness
literature, perhaps as much as Witness actions, fueled suspicions that the organization had
political, rather than religious aims. Both Awake! and The Watchtower constantly reported
and commented on a wide range of human interest stories and world news presented from a
biblical perspective. They published detailed coverage of both major and minor events in the
Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc. For example, in 1957, Awake! printed news briefs on
Khrushchev’s “We will bury you” speech, a UN resolution against Soviet intervention in
Hungary, Soviet troops in Poland, Khrushchev’s comments on Stalin, Soviet-American
missile disputes, nuclear test bans, May Day peace parades, the international youth festival in
Moscow, Soviet spies, Sputnik, and Marshal Georgii Zhukov’s fall from power, among other
topics.934 For the state, these types of articles and blurbs had no place in religious literature
and could only be explained by the organization’s underlying political ideology. Coverage of
Soviet affairs in Watch Tower publications provided easy fodder against the organization in
the Soviet press.

933 “What about the Other Religions?,” Awake!, April 8, 1973, 15.
Awake!, June 22, 1957, 31; “Watching the World: Moscow Welcomes Youth,” Awake!, September 8, 1957, 29;
I—Something to Cackle About,” Awake!, November 22, 1957, 29; and “Watching the World: Zhukov
Removed,” Awake!, December 8, 1957, 29.
The Witnesses understood their publications as reflecting the organization’s strictly neutral position regarding politics. A 1961 *Awake!* article told readers that “true Christians today therefore can no more take sides in the cold war between East and West than Jesus and his disciples took sides in the political strife between the Romans and the Jews.” While the Soviet media focused only on Witness condemnations of communism, the Witnesses equally dismissed capitalism and all other economic and political systems as incapable of bringing about lasting world peace, security, and prosperity. A 1981 *Awake!* article that described the failings of capitalism, communism, and socialism in turn, said of capitalism:

> Capitalism undoubtedly provided an improvement over the feudal system, if only for the greater freedom it brought to the working classes. But it also brought many injustices. The gap between the rich and the poor tended to widen. At its worst, it brought about exploitation and class warfare. At its best, it produced an affluent consumer society in some lands, with material fullness. But it has also produced spiritual emptiness, and has failed to bring true and lasting happiness.

For the Witnesses, no man-made government, regardless of its ideology, could provide a permanent solution to the world’s problems. Humans needed to wait on God and not take matters into their own hands. Unfortunately for Soviet Witnesses, the Soviet media easily cherry picked those passages that related directly to communism in order to portray the organization as distinctly anti-Soviet, while ignoring those that related to capitalism.

That said, although Witnesses did not see their publications as political, Witness coverage of Soviet affairs cannot be described as neutral. First, likely as a result of being written in the United States, Watch Tower literature adopted much of the style and rhetoric of American publications on the Cold War. It used the moniker “totalitarian” to describe the

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Soviet government and “iron curtain” to refer to the East-West division of Europe.\textsuperscript{937} A 1965 *Awake!* article commented that “the people under Communist rule in East Germany are unhappy captives. They want to be united with the rest of Germany.”\textsuperscript{938} Witness coverage of the 1956 Hungarian revolution provides perhaps the best illustration of this point. The organization described the events in Hungary as follows:

Following the deglorification of Stalin the Russian bear had smiled. . . . Then an oppressed people rose in unison to throw off the oppressive yoke of a hated rule. Russia’s “peaceful coexistence” exploded. The bear’s smile became a snarl, the gloved hand showed an iron fist and the streets of Hungary were bathed in blood.\textsuperscript{939}

Soviet publications took particular issue with this reporting, even claiming that Witnesses were somehow involved in supporting anti-Soviet forces.\textsuperscript{940} Certainly, they did not read an article such as this as politically neutral.

More important though, the coverage was not neutral in that Witnesses did not, and do not, understand current events to be unrelated to biblical teachings. In fact, for them, current events underscore the veracity of the organization’s prophetic teachings regarding Armageddon and the establishment of the millennial kingdom. Where the Soviet Union saw a political message, the Witnesses found clear evidence that biblical prophecies were being fulfilled. Indeed, the extensive reporting on political affairs, begun under Rutherford’s tenure, served a clear religious purpose: to demonstrate to members the failure of secular states and societies to achieve peace, justice, and prosperity for humankind. This

\textsuperscript{937} “Making All Making One Under Their Creator,” *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom*, April 1, 1956.

\textsuperscript{938} “Why the Berlin Wall?,” *Awake!*, December 8, 1965, 6.

\textsuperscript{939} “Hungarians Revolt,” *Awake!*, April 22, 1957, 16.

understanding of world history clashed directly with Soviet policy. The Watch Tower organization seemed to understand this fact perfectly when it wrote in 1960:

> Why are Soviet leaders bothered by Jehovah’s witnesses? Because they uphold Jehovah as the One to worship, not the State; because they seek peace and pursue it, even now beating their swords into plowshares; because they increase in number despite Communist attacks against them; because they preach the kingdom of God as man’s only hope; because they foretell the doom of worldly nations, including world communism, at God’s war of Armageddon.941

Both the Witnesses and the Soviet Union recognized that this view was not compatible with Soviet ideology, nor was it a peripheral issue within Witness beliefs. In fact, it stood at the core of Witness doctrine, which promised that Jehovah would sweep away the corrupt current system and establish righteous rule for his followers.

Since the 1920s, Watch Tower publications have denounced communism both in theory and practice, a view expressed in their literature throughout the Soviet era. A 1955 *Awake!* article described communism as a “false religion” that “receives its power and authority from none other than the Dragon, Satan the devil.” Coverage of the repression of Witnesses in the Soviet bloc offered evidence for this viewpoint. A 1957 article entitled “Exposing the Red Paradise,” focusing on recent events in Hungary, declared, “Here is firsthand evidence that communism is not a modern materialistic messiah.” Such language reflects the Witnesses’ ongoing view that communism is itself a religion.


943 “Exposing the Red Paradise,” 32.

The Witness organization combined its general critique of communism and the Soviet state with more specific positions on issues unique to the postwar context. With the arms race and the looming threat of nuclear war, the Witnesses rejected fears that a nuclear holocaust could destroy the earth. For them, this directly contradicted God’s promise that his followers would live forever in a paradise on earth. This theme recurred in dozens of articles in the postwar era. A 1982 *Awake!* article stated, “One reason Jehovah’s Witnesses publish this journal is to assure its readers that the world is not going to end in a nuclear holocaust.” If Watch Tower publications rejected widespread anxiety about the planet’s destruction, it was not on the basis of optimism about progress toward peace. In fact, Witnesses regarded both the Khrushchev-era concept of “peaceful coexistence” and Brezhnev-era détente negotiations with the United States as biblically unsound. A 1963 article on a test-ban treaty between the US and the Soviet Union declared, “Peace will come soon, in our very generation, but in God’s way, not by any test-ban treaty.” Similarly, a 1954 *Awake!* proclaimed that “the Bible shows that coexistence is not the hope of the world, for only one kingdom is destined to control the world, and that is God’s kingdom.” In fact, both the Witnesses and the Soviet state agreed that ultimately either God or communism would have to win out.

Perhaps most important in explaining the Witnesses’ view of the Soviet Union, the organization taught its members that the postwar rise of two new superpowers fulfilled biblical prophecy. In 1958, the organization released a new book entitled *Your Will be Done*

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945 See, for example, “Could War Start by Accident?,” *Awake!,* July 8, 1961, 5-8.
947 “A 'Generation of Peace' or a Short-Lived World Peace?,” *Awake!,* October 8, 1972, 13.
on Earth!, which included a new interpretation of the Book of Daniel. In chapter eleven, the Bible describes Daniel’s powerful vision of an epic struggle between two mighty kings, the “King of the South” and the “King of the North.” According to Your Will be Done on Earth!, these kings represented real-life figures. In each historical time period, the kings took on new incarnations, always fighting among themselves for world domination. For example, the King of the North appeared in history from “the Seleucid dynasty of the hellenic kings” to “the Nazi imperial ruler.” The 1958 book declared that the King of the North had resurfaced and taken on a new embodiment: the Soviet Union. The “Anglo-American dual world power” of the United States and Great Britain, meanwhile, assumed the adversarial role of the King of the South.950

Daniel’s description of the King of the North, the organization felt, fit in perfectly with the actions of the Soviet state. Daniel predicted that the king would “exalt and magnify himself above every god” and would blaspheme against the true God (Daniel 11:36). The organization noted how the Soviet Union had persecuted true Christianity and had promoted communism as a false idol. Daniel foretold that the king would “honor a god of fortresses” and would have a great military strength (Daniel 11:38). Witnesses saw the arms race as proof of this attribute. Daniel stated that the king would invade other lands and act aggressively toward other countries (Daniel 11:24). Watch Tower publications cited the Soviet Union’s control over Eastern Europe and its involvement in third world politics as evidence of this intent.951 A 1981 publication quotes Daniel prophesying how the King of the North would gain gold, silver, and other precious metals, commenting that the Soviet Union “is one of the very few industrialized nations that does not need to import oil. The Soviet

950 Your Will be Done on Earth!, 291, 93.

951 See, for example, “Prophetic Spotlight on Current Events,” Awake!, April 22, 1966, 9-10.
Union also controls vast deposits of the very strategic minerals that the ‘king of the south’ needs desperately. No wonder world politics in recent years have been characterized by a ‘pushing match’ between the superpowers!“952

The organization believed that the Daniel prophecy not only helped believers to understand current and past Soviet actions, but to predict future outcomes. A 1960 Awake! proclaimed, “God’s prophetic Word, according to the Book of Daniel, shows that the present-day prophetic ‘king of the north’ is the ruling actor of world communism and that this Communist ‘king’ will eventually launch a full-scale attack against Jehovah’s witnesses.”953 The Daniel prophecy also foretells defeat for both kings, evidence that God would destroy worldwide communism along with all other earthly governments. This view gave further weight to the position that there could be no lasting agreement between the US and the Soviet Union. A CRA official who spoke with one Witness elder in 1984 noted that the man openly expressed his opinion that the world was in a state of tension, with the forces of North and South opposed to one another, as the Bible predicted.954

Overall, the Witnesses’ beliefs placed them in direct confrontation with Soviet ideology, as they soundly rejected the notion of human progress and prophesied the destruction of the Soviet system. They understood and expected that the state would persecute them for these views, which in turn reinforced their conviction that true Christians must suffer at the hands of ungodly authorities. A 1966 Watchtower article compared the standoff to the events of Exodus, in which the Israelites’ righteous actions only hardened the Pharaoh’s heart against God and led to his defeat. Referring to people learning God’s truth in

954 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 70-72.
communist lands, the article declared, “This fact that people are learning this greatly plagues the Communist leaders but they are unable to stop the plague and they continue to harden themselves, making their destruction sure.” Both Witnesses and the Soviet state agreed on one thing: both of them could not survive; one would have to defeat the other.955

1975: Countdown to Armageddon

Beginning in 1966, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society began to publish information on a new milestone in human history.956 1975, it proclaimed, would mark 6,000 years of human existence since Creation. Would this date also usher in the millennial kingdom? Witness doctrine and biblical interpretation suggested this might be the case.957 The Watchtower and Awake! tended toward more nuanced views of 1975, cautioning readers not to view the year as the definite date for Armageddon, although assembly speeches and the monthly newsletter, Our Kingdom Service, used more exclamatory language, exhorting Witnesses to engage in publishing work while there was still time before Armageddon.958 In remarks republished in The Watchtower, Vice President Franz, for example, told a crowd at the district assembly in Baltimore:

What about the year 1975? What is it going to mean, dear friends? Does it mean that Armageddon is going to be finished, with Satan bound, by 1975? It could! It could! All things are possible with God. Does it mean that Babylon the Great is going to go down

955 “World Communism as God Views It,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, September 1, 1966, 519.

956 The 1975 interpretation was first discussed in the book, Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God, the release of which was announced at the 1966 assemblies. “Rejoicing over ‘God’s Sons of Liberty’ Spiritual Feast,” The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah’s Kingdom, October 15, 1966, 631.


958 Singelenberg, “‘It Separated the Wheat,” 24-25.
by 1975? It could. . . . All things are possible with God. But we are not saying. And don’t any of you be specific in saying anything that is going to happen between now and 1975. But the big point of it all is this, dear friends: Time is short. Time is running out, no question about that.959

Given Soviet Witnesses’ more limited access to literature, it is impossible to know how much of this information filtered into the Soviet Union. However, Soviet Witnesses did pick up on the potential significance of 1975, increasing their own proselytism efforts among the local population.

The surge in Soviet Witness activity was noticeable enough to come to the attention of local officials by the early 1970s. For example, a 1974 report from the Zakarpattia oblast Party committee observed that local members had been preaching the coming of Armageddon in 1975 on trains and buses. The year before, one of the leaders had given a speech at a funeral stating that 5998 years had passed since the creation of the world and that this meant only two years remained until Armageddon. After this speech, the village soviet and regional CRA issued the man an official warning.960 A 1974 KGB report from Zakarpattia oblast recommended that atheist agitators use the 1975 prediction to compromise the religion and its leaders. It suggested that it covertly support such propaganda until the end of 1975. When Armageddon did not occur as widely predicted, the state could then exploit this fact in its antireligious propaganda. The KGB advised planning talks on TV, radio, and in the press to highlight the false prophecy after 1975.961 Indeed, the KGB put this plan into action in the area, promoting the 1975 prediction and then hosting lectures along with local soviet and Party organs afterward.

959 “Rejoicing over ‘God’s Sons of Liberty,’” 631.
960 DAZO, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 98, ark. 26-27.
961 DAZO, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 98, ark. 56.
Soviet publications similarly used the prediction as evidence of the leadership’s hypocrisy, hoping it would create a rift between members and elders. It cited examples of how Witnesses had sincerely waited for Armageddon to happen, even selling off their possessions and giving the money to the organization, while elders used these donations to build additions on their homes.\textsuperscript{962} Crimean officials published several articles in the two years after 1975, hoping to compromise the belief in Armageddon among Witnesses.\textsuperscript{963} Yet other sources suggest that at least some members approached the 1975 date with caution. For instance, a 1976 article entitled “Report from Armageddon” cites this fact as evidence of greater skepticism among believers.\textsuperscript{964} When agitators brought up the 1975 prediction at an atheist evening the following year, one Witness stood up and declared, “Only Jehovah knows the hour” of Armageddon.\textsuperscript{965} Similarly, the L’viv CRA, alerted to the 1975 date in advance, reported that it had not identified any instances of Witnesses actively preparing for Armageddon by selling off goods or spreading rumors.\textsuperscript{966} These incidents illustrate the fact that some Soviet Witnesses, like others worldwide, saw the 1975 date as a possibility or likelihood, but not as an absolute certainty.

Still, the 1975 prediction had a serious impact on the worldwide Witness membership, slowing down the growth in baptisms and the average time spent in monthly proselytism in the immediate years that followed.\textsuperscript{967} In 1979, the Governing Body apologized for the

\textsuperscript{962} See, for example, V. F. Dobrzhans’kyi, Bruklins’ka shkola litsemirstva (Uzhhorod: Karpaty, 1986), 38.
\textsuperscript{963} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 52, ark. 57-58.
\textsuperscript{964} V. Kharazov, “Reportakh s armageddona,” Nauka i religiia, no. 8 (1976): 46-51.
\textsuperscript{965} D. Korets’kyi, “‘Svidky Egovy’ rozdumuiut’ . . . ,” Liudyna i svit, no. 6 (1976): 52-53.
\textsuperscript{966} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 5, spr. 2, ark. 29.
organization’s role in over-stressing the potential significance of the date among members.\textsuperscript{968} However, the 1975 prediction had led to a major increase in worldwide membership, from roughly 1,200,000 members in 1968 to roughly 2,400,000 members, or double, by 1976.\textsuperscript{969} Likewise in the Soviet Union, the 1975 prediction helped, more than it hurt, Witnesses. Soviet membership spiked dramatically in the lead-up to 1975. In 1973, roughly 400 people joined the religion in Zakarpattia oblast alone, followed by 800 people in 1974, and 1,474 people in 1975. Even though the press and internal reports noted that some members did leave after 1975, having grown disillusioned by the false prediction, most did not.\textsuperscript{970}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Soviet Witnesses proved remarkably skillful at adapting to changing circumstances. They found ways to modify their practices while following, as closely as possible, the actions of their brethren worldwide. They also maintained their core beliefs, which they used to make sense of the outside world and the Soviet state in particular. The close ties between the Brooklyn headquarters and the Soviet communities, combined with more regular access to literature, made it possible for these communities to achieve a high degree of conformity to the central model, while still allowing members the freedom and flexibility to make choices on the ground level about how best to remain faithful to their values in the unique Soviet context. Because the organization itself had a long history of state opposition to its activities


\textsuperscript{969} Penton has charted this surge based on yearly statistics provided by the organization in its yearbooks. Penton, \textit{Apocalypse Delayed}, 96.

\textsuperscript{970} DAZO, f. 1 op. 9, spr. 59, ark. 60-62.
in other countries, it was able to address many of these issues in its publications, for instance on matters of voting and trade union membership. When in doubt, the Witnesses tended to follow the motto of “better safe than sorry,” avoiding films, social organizations, and other aspects of Soviet culture and society that might compromise their beliefs. This position put them at further odds with the surrounding world, bringing both adults and children into conflict with local authorities and atheist agitators. Ironically, this only reinforced the Witnesses’ longstanding views on state persecution of true Christians.

The organization’s “neutral” stance on political matters cannot be understood without a critical reading of how this concept worked in practice and an appreciation of the fact that “neutrality” itself is a deeply political position. The Witnesses’ rejection of secular government, combined with their specific denunciations of communist ideology and Soviet governance, offered a clear critique of the state’s official promises that it could achieve peace and prosperity for all of its citizens. While these statements constituted biblical prophecy for the Witnesses, Soviet officials, not surprisingly, saw them as a political rejection of its policies and achievements. This fact reinforces the reality that Soviet persecution of Witnesses was not entirely irrational, but rather based, at least in part, on the real threat posed by the Witnesses to the existing social and political order.
CHAPTER FIVE
PREACHING ATHEISM IN THE LATE SOVIET ERA

“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” Matthew 10:16

While Witnesses labored to construct viable religious communities, the Soviet state implemented an agitation and propaganda campaign against believers. During the Hundred Days Campaign in 1954, the Party asserted that previous atheist propaganda had failed because it was far too limited, abstract, and divorced from real life. The post-Stalin state made it its duty to correct these perceived mistakes and to know about every facet of religious life within its borders. In order to reliminate religious belief, it also recognized the need for local efforts by trained agitators armed with detailed knowledge of individual religious communities. Post-Stalin official discourse on religion divided believers into two camps: ordinary or rank-and-file (riadovye) believers, and dangerous fanatics and leaders. The state emphasized that most believers fell into the former category and had to be encouraged to rejoin society using only persuasive, non-coercive methods. Authorities saw the latter category, however, as a distinct threat to Soviet society that had to be eliminated, by force if necessary. A 1964 article in the newspaper Pravda Ukrainy (Ukraine Truth) vividly illustrates this view:

It is said that rabid dogs must be destroyed, but those whom the dog bites must be treated. We must wage a decisive battle against those who consciously harm our great work of building communism, but also “treat,” patiently, intelligently, humanely, all
of those for whom life obstacles led them off the true path and threw them into
Jehovism’s embrace.”

If rank-and-file members were to be “treated” of their religious disease, leaders were to be
“destroyed.” As a result, Soviet publications frequently referred to ordinary members as
victims and atheist work as necessary to “free” them from the chains of religious dogmatism.
One 1965 work declared that the struggle against religion “is against religious ideology, not
against the people whom it has infected.” It called for the “liberation” of believers so that
they could become “conscious builders of communism.”

The Soviet state’s revitalization of antireligious agitprop represented an unwelcome
intrusion into the private lives of Witnesses perhaps equal to the Stalin-era exiles and arrests.
Witnesses faced intensive pressure to conform to societal norms in all aspects of their daily
lives. Their coworkers used meetings at work to discuss and condemn Witnesses’ private
lives and religious activities. Their local papers ran steady news coverage scrutinizing the
most mundane of believers’ activities. Local Party agitators hosted lectures, film screenings,
and talks to denounce religious practices and beliefs. Witnesses’ fellow villagers and
townspeople came to their homes to convince them to abandon their beliefs and embrace
communist ideology. And their former fellow believers, who had since renounced the faith,
attempted to convert them to patriotic, loyal Soviet citizens and atheists.

The Watch Tower organization noticed the sea change in antireligious propaganda. Its
1960 report on the USSR noted:

Previous to this the Communists in Russia have tried to deal with the Witnesses in a
quiet manner. Obviously they felt that such a course was the best one for them to
follow in their efforts to keep the message of Jehovah’s kingdom suppressed. Now


972 P. L. Kaushanskii, Ideologiia i deiatel’nost’ khristianskikh sekt (Kemerovo: Kemerovskoe kn. izd., 1965),
64.
they have resorted to dealing with this problem in public. They seem to have realized that they have lost the battle to keep the message from being spread throughout all of Russia.  

The battle between Soviet ideology and Witness beliefs had entered the public arena, with both sides eager to win converts so that their vision of utopia—be it communism or the millennial kingdom—could be fulfilled. This chapter will examine how the Soviet state hoped to turn believers into active builders of communism. It will also describe how the Soviet state constructed a standard, official discourse about the Witnesses.

Witnesses had their own strategy to deal with the state’s public attacks on religious belief. A 1956 Watchtower article bore the title, “Cautious as Serpents Among Wolves,” a reference to Matthew 10:16, in which Jesus advises his disciples, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” The Soviet media quickly picked up on the new organizational motto and intentionally mistranslated it to read “poisonous as snakes.” A 1960 issue of the antireligious magazine, Voyovnychyi ateist, printed a full-page editorial cartoon against the Witnesses with the caption informing readers that the Witnesses’ motto is: “Be quiet like doves, and poisonous as snakes.” True to their slogan, Witnesses exercised both caution and resourcefulness in responding to atheist agitprop. Their actions show that some believers actively contested attempts by atheist agitators to distort and defame religious beliefs and practices.

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974 “Cautious as Serpents,” 76-90.

Framing Official Discourse

The state’s proclamation that most believers were loyal Soviet citizens required atheist agitators to take a more tactful and patient approach to their work. A 1958 booklet on Witnesses and state religious policy informed readers, “The Communist Party, to achieve the real liberation of all workers from religious prejudices, is waging an ideological battle against religious ideology and organizing the broadest possible scientific-educational and anti-religious propaganda, without offending the religious sentiments of believers and religious servants.”976 This message, at least in theory, applied to all religious communities, regardless of registration status.

The press tried to reflect this new attitude toward religious believers, but much of its coverage remained offensive to believers. It still contained factual errors, exaggerations, and false accusations, and it did little to further the acceptance of Witnesses as loyal citizens in the minds of Soviet citizens. A 1967 CRA report on atheist press in the Komi republic illustrates this problem. The CRA criticized local papers in the region for not printing enough materials on “Jehovists,” but also rebuked the author of an article calling for criminal charges against all Jehovah parents as too harsh. The press found itself caught between a rock and a hard place, needing to take a firm stance against religion, without antagonizing believers. Not surprisingly, many newspapers found it easier to publish more abstract materials against religious belief without adapting it to reflect local conditions. In Komi, local papers printed articles on Baptists in districts where there were no actual Baptists.977 Similarly in Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast, newspapers ran articles on Islam despite the lack of any Muslim

976 A. Aleksandrov, Propovedniki t’my i mrokobesia: Reaktsionnaia sushchnost’ religioznykh sekts innokent’ evtsev, iegovistov i murskhkovtsev (Chișinău: Gosizdat Moldavii, 1958), 4.

977 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 80, ll. 201-03.
community in the area. Yet these actions, too, garnered criticism from CRA officials for incorrect attitudes toward atheist work.

The post-Stalin Soviet state felt that lack of information on the Witnesses in the press had hindered atheist work and left citizens vulnerable to proselytism. Indeed, while the religious councils, police, and security organs had extensive information about local leaders, organizational structure, rituals, and beliefs, they did not generally share this data with the public. The public in the Stalin era had known virtually nothing about the Witnesses outside of what it had learned directly from Witnesses themselves or from local gossip. The Witnesses and other small religious communities had almost never appeared in any atheist materials. Seeking to correct this perceived problem, the Soviet media dramatically increased its attention to unregistered minority religious communities after 1953. In fact, a disproportionate amount of atheist publications after 1953 focused on efforts among these groups. For example, a survey of all Soviet atheist literature from 1955 to 1966 showed that 17 percent was dedicated to Witnesses, 12 percent to Baptists, 9 percent to Pentecostals, 7 percent to Seventh Day Adventists, and about 50 percent to “sectarianism” in general.

In response to the state’s call to make atheist work specific to local conditions, agitators and newspapers in regions with Witnesses began publicizing the existence of these communities in atheist lectures and articles. In areas with high concentrations of Witnesses, press coverage of the religion could be quite intense, often dwarfing that of all other religions. Zakarpatskaia pravda (Transcarpathian Truth), an oblast-level newspaper, printed almost 200 articles solely on the Witnesses during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. Other western Ukrainian oblast newspapers, such as Lvovskaia pravda (L’viv Truth, in L’viv

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978 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 167, ark. 47.

979 A. I. Klibanov, Religioznoe sektantstvo i sovremennost’ (Moscow: Nauka, 1969), 34.
oblast) and Prykarpats’ka pravda (Carpathian Truth, in Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast), covered the Witnesses extensively. District papers in northern Moldavia devoted a remarkable amount of space to the religion, with articles on Witnesses in many northern districts appearing far more often than those on any other religious community.980 As Moldavian district papers typically consisted of only four pages and ran only two to four times a week, Witness articles took up a substantial portion of a single edition, at times filling an entire page with articles and photos.981 In Edineț district, home to several hundred Witnesses, local papers printed more than 150 articles during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras.

Republic-level papers, particularly Pravda Ukrainy, Radians’ka Ukraina (Soviet Ukraine), Sovetskaia Moldavia (Soviet Moldavia), Sovetskaia Kirgiziia (Soviet Kirgizia), and Kazakhstanskaia pravda (Kazakhstan Truth), supplemented more extensive local and regional coverage with additional articles on the Witnesses. District and regional papers reprinted some of these articles. Further, the two national anti-religious magazines, Voyovnychyi ateist and Nauka i religii, published more than fifty articles each on the Witnesses from the 1950s through the mid-1980s. In sum, Soviet citizens who lived in one of the regions or republics with a significant Witness presence would have found it almost impossible to avoid reading about the Witnesses on a weekly, if not monthly basis.

Moreover, state publishing houses printed numerous book-length studies of the Witnesses beginning in the 1960s. These books served primarily as practical guides for agitators. The Knowledge Society’s union-level and regional publishing houses, along with

980 I examined coverage in several Moldavian district papers, including Bor’ba (Struggle), Put’ k kommunizmu (Path to Communism), Leninets (Leninist, Edineț district); Novaia zhizn’ (New Life), Rodina (Homeland, Briceni district); Leninets, Put’ k kommunizmu (Lipcani district); Rodina (Fâlești district); Iskra (Spark, Bălți district); Iskra, Pobeditel’ (Victor, Râșcani district); and Iskra (Glodeni district).

981 For example, the March 10, 1957, issue of Leninets (Lipcani district), devoted three of its four pages to the Witnesses, including photographs of items confiscated from members.
other regional presses, distributed books, tracts, and booklets on the Witnesses, their beliefs and practices, and how to conduct atheist work among them.\textsuperscript{982} Other publishers produced lengthier, academic works by Soviet scholars, who delved into the Witnesses’ history in the United States and the Soviet Union, sometimes incorporating sociological research and theological analysis.\textsuperscript{983}

State film industries released several fictionalized and documentary films for use in atheist agitation, such as \textit{Reportazh z t'my} (Report from the Darkness) on the Witnesses’ underground printing bunkers in Irkutsk oblast.\textsuperscript{984} Another film, \textit{Armageddon}, revolved around a love story between two youths. The young female protagonist joins the Witnesses while her love interest has gone off to serve in the army. With the help of the local collective, the young man returns home and wins back his woman from the sect.\textsuperscript{985} These films relied heavily on information from the religious councils in scripting the narrative. A 1959 letter


\textsuperscript{983} I use the term “academic” to refer to works published by Soviet scholars at research institutions and universities. See, for example, Gazhos, \textit{Osoobennosti ideologii iegovizma}; Gazhos, \textit{Evoliutsiia religioznogo sektantstva}; V. V. Konik, \textit{Kritika eskhatologii svidetelei iegovy} (Moscow: O-vo “Znanie” USSR, 1976); Konik, \textit{‘Istiny’ svidetelei legovy; and Moskalenko, Sovremennyi iegovizm}.


from a Leningrad movie studio to the CRCA shows how this process worked. The studio wanted to make a propaganda film about the Witnesses and had a list of questions it needed answered. It asked whether Witnesses conduct water baptism, use icons, have formal choirs, allow children to participate at their meetings, and what their prayer houses look like and how they dress. The CRCA sent the studio a detailed response.

Official propaganda on the Witnesses had much in common with Soviet discourse on other Western Christian religious communities, which portrayed these believers as victims of unscrupulous leaders who took advantage of individuals’ ignorance, naïveté, or personal hardships to convert them. Having joined a religion, they struggled with the inherent contradictions in religious beliefs, particularly in regard to science and biblical literalism, and grew suspicious of their leaders’ hidden motives, either for personal enrichment or political power. The Soviet media presented believers as being trapped by fear or indecision, lacking the tools to renounce religion, yet envious of their secular neighbors, who enjoyed happy, fulfilling lives. Intent to emphasize the positive, this discourse focused on those believers who had made the leap out of faith to rejoin Soviet society. It permeated atheist lectures and talks, newspaper and journal articles, atheist booklets and pamphlets, and academic works on Christian believers. It also pervaded both the external and internal languages of the state. Indeed, religious council reports often showed little difference in content from published antireligious tracts. Similarly, at a closed Moldavian TsK meeting in 1960, Party members discussed the organization’s need to distinguish between “honest Soviet people” who had

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986 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 2, spr. 20, ark. 39-40.

987 I use the term “western Christian” rather than Protestant because the Witnesses do not consider themselves to be Protestant.
joined sects due to “political immaturity” and those “dishonest people” who exploited ignorant individuals for their own aims.\textsuperscript{988}

While Soviet discourse on Witnesses incorporated fundamentals from the broader official image of believers as ignorant, naive, and vulnerable victims of manipulative, greedy, and power-hungry leaders and fanatics, it also included unique elements. Since the Witnesses did not have any legal standing in the Soviet Union, unlike many Baptist, Adventist, and other Western Christian organizations, Soviet discourse emphasized the illegality of the religion and its subversive underground political activities. This fact made it difficult to depict the majority of Witnesses as loyal Soviet citizens, hindering Soviet efforts to fit the Witnesses into the broader narrative about religious believers. Similarly, the continued arrest of many Witnesses, and their refusal to conform to social norms and state laws, meant that state and Party officials could not easily avoid offensive or politically-charged language that portrayed Witnesses as dangerous criminals.\textsuperscript{989} Soviet discourse thus settled into an uneasy balance of painting most Witnesses as ordinary citizens duped into joining a religious faith, while also characterizing the Watch Tower organization as the most fanatical and anti-Soviet of all Soviet religious organizations.

Perhaps more than any other factor, the organization’s American roots made the Witnesses an object of deep suspicion during the Cold War. Soviet sources often referred to the Witnesses’ American leadership simply as “Brooklyn,” an allusion to the location of the

\textsuperscript{988} ANRM, f. 3305, inv. 2, d. 13, f. 37.

\textsuperscript{989} For example, a L’viv CRCA report from July 1955 continued to cite Stalin-era trials of the Witnesses as evidence of the organization’s ties to bourgeois nationalists and espionage. DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 23, ark. 196. By May 1956, reports from L’viv on the Witnesses had dropped this information from their summaries of Witness beliefs and activities, while still alleging that the Witnesses conducted “active anti-Soviet activity” in order to establish a theocracy. DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 24, ark. 124-29.
organization’s central offices. The author of one antireligious work noted that for Witnesses, “Their ‘god’ is not in heaven, but on earth, in Brooklyn.” Another referred to Watch Towe literature as “literature from Brooklyn, that same Brooklyn that is near New York, that same New York that is in the USA.” According to Soviet accounts, the Witnesses’ American connections demonstrated their political support for capitalism and bourgeois democracy. In this view, the reactionary capitalist West used the Witnesses as a tool to undermine Soviet attempts to build world peace and achieve communism.

Soviet accounts disputed the organization’s claims that it constituted a religion, arguing that for the Witnesses, religion served solely as a “mask” to hide their true political goals. One editorial cartoon depicted a worker asking a Witness, “What is it that you, Jehovah’s Witnesses, do?” The Witness replies, “[We conduct] anti-Soviet agitation. And if there’s time left over, we pray.” A former Witness, in a 1961 series of articles for *Molodezh’ Moldavii* (Moldovan Youth), concluded, “The Jehovah’s Witness organization

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991 Garkavenko, *Chto takoe religioznoe sektantstvo*, 63.


995 Rekemchuk, *Dvoinoe dno*, 43.
has no faith in God and is subservient to dirty politics against the people.”

A 1958 book, *Dvoinoe Dno* (Double Bottom), used the metaphor of a double-bottomed suitcase, which Witnesses employed to transport illegal literature, to describe how the organization hid its political message beneath religious beliefs.

Almost all Soviet publications described the organization’s doctrine on Armageddon as misanthropic, violent, and politically motivated. They depicted this belief as tantamount to support for war and the annihilation of the majority of the population. The press portrayed the organization as teaching its members to rejoice at the prospects of a violent extermination of humankind. Some articles suggested that Witnesses themselves would take part in the mass slaughter. One former Witness described his misgivings with Armageddon, which he interpreted as meaning that his salvation depended on the destruction of everyone else. Belief in an inevitable battle that would destroy all worldly governments contradicted the state’s promise of an eventual triumph of communism over capitalism. Press reports suggested that talk of the annihilation of secular authority referred solely to the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe. This transformed a belief in the destruction of Satan’s followers into a call for the murder of all communists and citizens of socialist states. Indeed, one academic work notes that, according to the Witnesses, Satan “has an

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997 Rekemchuk, *Dvoinoe dno*, 12.


999 Kashnikov, *Dvoinoe dno*, 105.


exact address—the USSR and the countries of socialist cooperation.”

Within the context of the Cold War, talk of a “holy war” often assumed a specifically nuclear tone by the 1960s. Soviet sources depicted the Witnesses praising the invention of the atomic bomb as God’s weapon against Satan in Armageddon. A 1961 work claimed that the Witnesses advocated a third world war between the Soviet Union and the West to be fought with nuclear and hydrogen weapons. The author noted that the doctrine of Armageddon buttressed the “atomic psychosis” promoted by the Pentagon, West Germany, and NATO. One former Witness declared that Armageddon was a code word for the destruction of socialism by thermonuclear rockets and bombs.

In general, the Witnesses faced accusations that their apocalyptic religious language masked a political agenda of promoting the political and military interests of the capitalist West. Their refusal to complete obligatory military service made them vulnerable to accusations of disloyalty. In the eyes of the Soviet press, such acts amounted to sedition. One newspaper article told the story of a Witness, a trained medic, who attempted to avoid service altogether, but eventually enlisted under fear of criminal prosecution. He then skillfully avoided getting sent to the front during World War II by faking a heart condition. After demobilization, he freely took advantage of his status as a veteran to get perks at his job. One former Witness, who fought in the Red Army during World War II prior to joining the

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1003 Korotkaia et al., Iegovizm, 47.
1004 Numerous publications refer to Armageddon as a “holy war.” See for example V. Il’in, “Iadovitye, kak zmei,” Komsomol’skaia pravda, July 15, 1959, 4.
1006 Moskalenko, Sekta iegovistov, 44.
1007 Man’kovskii, Kak iegovisty, 11.
faith, recalled his outrage when he discovered that some of his fellow believers had not
served their country and even bragged about it. Announcing in the local paper his break with
the Witnesses, he declared that he would take up arms to defend the homeland again if
necessary.\textsuperscript{1009}

Numerous Soviet publications accused the organization of promoting
“cosmopolitanism,” best defined as a refusal to recognize national borders or loyalties, under
the guise of religious doctrine. Witnesses allegedly instructed members to reject national
identity and patriotism, and to view themselves instead as world citizens, or alternately, as
citizens of Christ’s future kingdom on earth.\textsuperscript{1010} One man, when brought before a court in the
Komi republic, described his nationality as “former Ukrainian, current Jehovah’s
Witness.”\textsuperscript{1011} At the same time, many authors suggested that the organization misrepresented
its so-called cosmopolitanism, which had little to do with religious beliefs and everything to
do with political expedience. They asserted that the Watch Tower leadership encouraged
members in socialist countries to disobey the state, while advocating submission to state
authority in capitalist countries.\textsuperscript{1012}

Espionage charges appeared sporadically in the press and served as evidence that
while the Witnesses publicly preached cosmopolitanism, they secretly pledged loyalty to the
United States. A 1964 work claimed that American intelligence recommended that their spies

\textsuperscript{1009} L. Boiko, “Pochemu ia porval s sektoi,” \textit{Sotsialisticheskii Donbass}, August 2, 1958, 2.
\textsuperscript{1011} Rekemchuk, \textit{Dvoine dno}, 47.
\textsuperscript{1012} Bartoshevich and Borisoglebskii, \textit{Imenem boga Iegovy}, 90-91.
make contact with Witnesses as “loyal and trustworthy allies.” The fact that the Witnesses kept detailed records of their membership and their missionary activities played an important role in these accusations. Press reports accused the Witnesses of sending sensitive information on the Soviet Union to American intelligence. Several publications alleged that Witnesses were gathering data on the prices of basic goods in the Soviet Union. Publications cited the seizure of goods, printing equipment, and currency from high-level elders as further evidence of illegal foreign connections. Again, Witness beliefs were seen as a religious smoke screen that clouded the real, political aims of the organization.

Heightened Western scrutiny of Soviet religious persecution starting in the 1970s led to a greater emphasis on Soviet guarantees of freedom of conscience in atheist propaganda. Feeling an increased need to justify state actions against religious organizations, some Soviet works claimed that the capitalist West employed religion as “psychological warfare” to turn citizens against the Soviet state. A 1984 book acknowledged foreign allegations that the Soviet Union persecuted religious believers. Yet it asserted that the state needed to take harsh measures against religious communities that

1013 Arzamazov, Podlinnoe litso iegovizma, 51.


1015 See, for example, Shysh, Armageddon?, 12-13, and S. Boiko, “Sektanty-shpiony,” Izvestiia, June 13, 1962, 6. The charges stemmed from forms that Brooklyn had sent to its branch offices regarding the cost of living so that it could set appropriate prices for subscriptions to The Watchtower. The organization itself denied it had ever sent the form to Moscow. “Watching the World: Accused of Spying,” Awake!, August 8, 1962, 29. Most likely, the form was mistakenly included among other smuggled literature and reports and confiscated by the Soviet police, who then used it for propaganda purposes.


1017 See, for example, Veselov and Vladimirov, Za shirmoi sviatosti, 4-6.

1018 A. V. Belov and A. D. Shilkin, Diversiia bez dinamita (Moscow: Politizdat, 1972), 12.
contained a “few bad apples” (v sem’e ne bez uroda), namely the Witnesses, Reform Adventists, and unregistered Pentecostals and Baptists.\textsuperscript{1019}

Soviet publications covered criminal trials of Witnesses, not as examples of state persecution, but as fair and necessary court decisions based on the defendant’s illegal actions. Accusations of criminal activities provided a strong justification for the organization’s continued illegality. They also allowed the press to argue that Witnesses did not suffer persecution for their beliefs, but rather for their underground political activities, anti-Soviet behavior, and violation of Soviet laws. As a 1962 article stated, “Every citizen of the Soviet Union is free to practice any religion and no one will condemn him for this. But, if under the guise of religious activity someone violates Soviet laws, infringing on that which is sacred to us, our people will deal with him according to the law.”\textsuperscript{1020}

In keeping with its denial of religious persecution, the Soviet state never acknowledged the mass exiles of Witnesses. Books that did include background on the organization’s Soviet history simply skipped from the 1940s into the late 1950s, or referred to Witnesses as relocating or resettling in Siberia of their own volition. In a 1957 newspaper article by a former Witness in Moldavia, for example, the author indicated without explanation that he and his family “ended up in Kurgan oblast.”\textsuperscript{1021} One 1960 work, which perhaps came the closest to discussing the exile, retold an incident in which a Witness child recited a poem entitled “How demons took us to Siberia.” The author, however, notes simply that the poem was anti-Soviet.\textsuperscript{1022}

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\textsuperscript{1019} A. L. Vladimirov and A. P. Solomka, \textit{Prodannaia sovest’} (Donets’k: Donbas, 1984), 4, 9.
\textsuperscript{1021} S. Dragan, “Vot kak nas obmanyvali,” \textit{Bor’ba}, May 11, 1957, 2.
\textsuperscript{1022} Gerasimets, ed., \textit{Nam ne po puti}, 49.
\end{flushleft}
Official discourse on Witnesses never fully adhered to the guidelines outlined in the Khrushchev antireligious campaigns because the state entrusted its conveyance to atheist agitators and the press, and then did little to ensure that these groups properly transmitted its message. As a result, the press and atheist publications repeated wild rumors and stories that depicted all Witnesses, leaders and ordinary believers alike, as amoral, dangerous, anti-Soviet villains. One 1962 newspaper article alleged that Witness elders require female members to lose their virginity in group orgies and even claimed that this explained the pregnancy of several local women, whom the author named.\textsuperscript{1023} According to a 1979 book on sects in North Ossetia, the Witnesses avoid wearing metal because they believe that God intends to send an electrical current to earth to burn non-believers.\textsuperscript{1024} Bizarre accusations may have kept the public leery of getting involved with the Witnesses, but they could not have convinced current believers. During a question and answer session with the CRA in 1983, local Witnesses in Crimea asked the speaker why the state demanded a certain level of expertise from those who write books on economics, but apparently anyone who wants to can write a book on atheism.\textsuperscript{1025}

Many scholars and agitators recognized the shortcomings of atheist literature on the Witnesses, modifying or rejecting specific tenets of this broad general discourse and criticizing baseless accusations like the ones cited above. For example, some works gave serious attention to Witness theology as a religion, and not just a political mask.\textsuperscript{1026} Nauka i


\textsuperscript{1024} A. K. Khachirov and B. Kh. Bidzhelov, Pautina (Ordzhonikidze: Ir, 1979), 111.

\textsuperscript{1025} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2623, l. 12.
religiia printed an article in 1972 critiquing several aspects of the official discourse, including the notion that the Witnesses were purely a political organization and that Armageddon was a code word for a third world war. In a 1978 scholarly work on the Witnesses, the author rejected the “assertion that appears in our literature that this religious movement is ‘not so much a religious as a political organization.’ For the majority of believers, it is first and foremost a religion.” Yet even works that acknowledged the religious aspects of the organization connected it to reactionary political ideas.

Propaganda repeatedly highlighted the negative effect that religion had on believers, citing multiple examples of women victimized by predatory religious sects, including the Witnesses. A sociological study of the Witnesses published in 1981 described the inhumane treatment of women in the organization, claiming that the Watch Tower organization taught woman that their role was as a “loyal slave” to man. This fit in with the state’s assertion that most believers were elderly women, whom religious organizations, especially Western Christian denominations, treated as inferior to men. The Soviet media depicted male Witnesses as chauvinists who justified beating their wives into submission by citing their biblical right to rule their households. The local Moldavian press accused one man of forcing his wife to attend Bible studies, telling her he would kill her if she refused. The man’s local elders had allegedly instructed him to bring her “dead or alive.” She left him

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1026 See, for example, Shadrin, Evoliutsia svidetelei Iegovy.
1028 Konik, “Istiny” svidetelei Iegovy, 78.
1029 Korotkaia et al., Iegovizm, 109.
1031 “Chernaia ten’ legovy,” 3.
instead. Knowledge Society publications advised agitators to discuss the inequality of women in religious sects, and to show women how only Soviet power offered them an equal role in society.

Beyond ignorance and female oppression, atheist propaganda made heavy use of fear as a reason why Soviet citizens chose to remain in the Witnesses even when they had doubts about the religion’s beliefs or realized its anti-Soviet or criminal undertones. For example, one article related the story of a woman who wanted to leave the Witnesses. Local leaders frightened her into remaining in the organization by appearing at her windows at night and conjuring up a fake “spirit” who made prophecies about the dire consequences of renouncing the faith. The woman became so scared that she fell ill and had to be hospitalized. A 1959 article claimed that a local leader had decapitated a stray cat in front of members with an axe, telling them that this would happen to them too if they disobeyed him.

Numerous publications recounted the deleterious effects of Witness beliefs on members’ physical and mental health. A 1961 book retold the story of a Siberian Witness who went insane after working in an underground printing bunker for two years. He ended up in a mental hospital in Irkutsk, incapable of speaking until six months into his treatment, when he uttered the words: “All-powerful Jehovah God, help!” Some books contained

1032 V. Stakhii, “Vot, ono istinnoe litso ‘svyetelei Iegovy’,” Leninets (Lipcani district), October 14, 1959, 2.


1036 V. A. Moskalenko and Iu. N. Artamoshin, Pravda o khristianskkh sektakh (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1963), 84-85. This accusation also appeared in CRA reports. See RGANI, f. 5, op. 63, d. 89, l. 278.
stories of Witnesses drowning or becoming deathly ill as a result of baptisms. One doctor testified at a public trial of a Witness that believers suffered a disproportionate amount of ailments, including epilepsy, due to the harmful effects of constant fear-mongering by leaders about the coming Armageddon. Many works cited incidents in which Witnesses died after their leaders told them not to seek medical treatment and instead to pray for healing. One woman allegedly died from cancer after she waited too long to seek treatment. Her local leader told her that God gave her the disease as punishment for going to the doctor.

Since Witnesses allegedly spent all their time in fearful anticipation of the imminent arrival of Armageddon, Soviet sources depicted them as indifferent to labor and hard work. This interest returned to believers only after they had rejected their faith and embraced Soviet society. One man, who left the Witnesses while serving time for anti-Soviet activity, voiced regrets that he had wasted so much of his life without anything to show for it: “Why did I rob myself of the best years of my life? Why am I not an agronomist, a doctor, or an engineer?” Another former Witness noted how he had found all work pointless with Armageddon just around the corner. Since leaving the organization, however, he became a shock worker and his portrait hung on the honor board at his workplace. The fact that some Witnesses had originally avoided joining collective farms was also mentioned as

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1038 See, for example, V. Fel’k, “Armageddona ne budet!,” Sovetskaia Kirgiziia, September 12, 1970, 28. This article told the story of a Witness who drowned during a baptism.

1039 AOSPRM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 227, f. 70.


1041 F. German, “Ia uvidel svet!,” Leninets (Edineț district), March 25, 1962, 4.

1042 Fel’k, “Armageddona ne budet!,” 3.
evidence of a weak work ethic among believers. One man, renouncing his faith at a public hearing, asked the court for forgiveness and the opportunity to prove his change of heart by working at the collective farm.

**Ordinary Believers vs. Fanatics and Leaders**

By framing Witnesses as victims of their own organization, official discourse reinforced the state’s distinction between so-called ordinary believers and leaders/fanatics. Almost all accounts about ordinary believers focused on those individuals who had already chosen to renounce their faith. This made it easier for the Soviet press to portray them in a sympathetic, if patronizing, light, as gullible individuals, often uneducated and rural, who joined the Witnesses as a result of trickery and manipulation. In this view, believers had little to no knowledge of the illegal, political activities of their leaders and trusted that they had joined a religion that could solve all their problems. The Soviet media used images of spider webs to portray how religious organizations trapped unwitting citizens and poisoned their minds. One newspaper reporter commented, “Just as the spider sets out its net and drinks the blood of those insects caught in it, so too does the sectarian weave a web of lies and deceit around trusting children’s souls.”

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1045 Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii have noted the use of spider web imagery in socialist propaganda against the bourgeoisie in 1917. Right-wing anti-Jewish tracts prior to 1914 also employed spider web metaphors. Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 169-70.

Society seminar on how to give atheist lectures, one speaker commented that “sectarian propagandists try to recruit weak-willed people and those who have experienced or are experiencing misfortune or dissatisfaction with their personal life.” A lecturer on scientific atheism stated that religious sects had grown more active due to the hardships of World War II and the immediate postwar period, exploiting instances of personal tragedy or inattention from the collective to win over vulnerable citizens.

The Soviet media described how believers gradually underwent a process of enlightenment as they slowly realized the organization’s illegal political activities and the falsity of its doctrines. The amazing technological achievements of the Soviet Union also swayed believers to embrace communism. In one instance, a newspaper printed a statement from Witnesses who described how the launch of Sputnik and Khrushchev’s trip to America helped convince them to embrace atheism. Sputnik convinced another Witness that there was no God in the heavens, only Soviet rockets. The press used these stories to demonstrate the superiority of communist ideology over religious belief.

The fact that many Witnesses had joined the organization in the western borderlands prior to or shortly after the arrival of Soviet power allowed the state to characterize some of its own citizenry as backward and foolish, while shifting the blame for this situation to the capitalist Polish and Romanian interwar governments. This created the impression that time would naturally solve this problem, since individuals raised under Soviet power would be less susceptible to such tactics. A 1963 work told the story of a Moldavian Witness, born to a

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1047 AOSPRM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 155, f. 91.
1048 RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1150, ll. 3-4.
1049 Gerasimets, ed., Nam ne po puti, 10-11.
poor peasant family under Romanian rule in 1919. With no formal education, he was lured into the Witnesses by a traveling proselytizer in 1946, who told him that, at Armageddon, everyone would die except the Witnesses. In this earthly paradise, the blind would see, the lame would walk, and all the women would be beautiful. Years later, he began to realize the massive corruption among his local leaders and found troubling contradictions in the biblical teachings. He eventually left the organization in the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{1051} The example of Mariia Kuziv from Stanislav oblast provides another illustration of the typical former believer as represented in Soviet publications. Under Polish rule, she received only three years of education in a village school. When her husband, father, and two brothers died at the front during World War II, she was left to raise their three young children on her own. A Witness who wanted to use Mariia’s house as a potential hideout offered her money, telling her it came from “Jehovah himself.” After a few more meetings and payments, he convinced Mariia to let him dig a hole under her stove to hide literature, making her an unwitting accomplice to the organization’s illegal deeds. The author cited this story to make his point that primarily “weak, unstable, ignorant people” join the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1052}

If ordinary believers represented the most backward, vulnerable elements in Soviet society, official discourse portrayed religious leaders and so-called fanatics as a motley assortment of evildoers: former kulaks, rapists, murderers, child abusers, drunkards, deadbeats, Nazi collaborators, thieves, and speculators. A 1965 newspaper article provided a broad definition of a religious fanatic: “It is someone who has so absorbed religious illusions, so tortured his mind with God’s cloying false promises, that his mind has become

\textsuperscript{1051} Semashko and Sukhachev, \textit{Armageddon ne sostoitalsia}, 3-12.

\textsuperscript{1052} Moskalenko, \textit{Sekta iewovistov}, 57.
Soviet publications depicted leaders as having little investment in the actual religious faith—if they believed it at all—and exploiting religion as a means to their advance their political agenda or to get rich. As one 1974 Knowledge Society publication put it, most Witness leaders “do not believe in God or Satan, nor in biblical texts.” Accounts of leaders invariably portrayed them greedily collecting donations from members to spend on lavish goods for themselves. A 1975 book painted a detailed portrait of one man who lived in a two-storied estate with servants. The author described how, over glasses of cognac, the leader doled out money to his underlings, who then deposited the funds into their secret Swiss bank accounts. A 1960 Moldavian newspaper article listed the supposedly luxury items owned by a local Witness leader, including two electrical heaters, kitchen appliances, a gas stove, and a phone, with information on the exact cost of each item.

As the above article demonstrates, the press frequently cited preaching about Armageddon as evidence of the insincerity of leaders’ beliefs. Many press accounts characterized leaders as hypocrites who privately focused on acquiring wealth, but publicly advised believers against the accumulation of goods in preparation for the millennial kingdom. The 1977 work, Armageddona ne Budet (There Will Be No Armageddon), related an anecdote about one leader who bought a new Zhiguli automobile, noting, “Where is he

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1055 Kashnikov, Dvoinoe dno, 1-18.
1056 The author sarcastically wondered if the Witness needed the phone to call Jehovah and strategize about Armageddon. G. S. Chernopiskii, “Gde ty, Iegova?,” Leninets (Lipcani district), March 13, 1960, 4.
going to get gasoline after Armageddon?" Similarly, publications exploited the organization’s ongoing schism as evidence that leaders only cared about their hold on power. One article referred to Pavlo Ziatek as an “old rooster,” and the battle between him and the oppositionists as a “cock fight” over who would rule the roost.\footnote{Armagedonna ne budet (Irkutsk: Vostochno-Sibirskoe kn. izd., 1977), 36.} Accounts of the schism within the organization by former leaders involved in the events described it as a struggle for control and access to funds.\footnote{O. Ivanovich, “Vnimanie! Na kovre, ’sviatie’ petukhi,” Put’ k kommunizmu (Edineț district), July 1, 1960, 4.}

The Soviet media did not merely suggest that leaders were crooked, but that they represented a serious threat to their members and society at large. Repeated accounts of Witnesses raping, assaulting, and murdering Soviet citizens enforced the idea that these were extremely dangerous individuals who could not be allowed to remain free in Soviet society. The story of one Witness, who allegedly impregnated and then attempted to kill a thirteen-year-old girl, appeared in several publications. The media also frequently mentioned the story of a man who burned his wife and aunt alive when they left the Witnesses.\footnote{K. Polychuk, “Slova i dela rukovodiashchikh iegovistskikh ‘brat’ev’,” Krasnoe znamia, February 28, 1960, 3.} One piece suggested the man had gotten inspiration for his violent act from the Bible, in particular God’s command to Abraham that he sacrifice his only son.\footnote{R. Pavlushko, “Imenem egovy,” Voyovnychyi ateist, no. 6 (1963): 19.}

\footnote{Arzamazov, Podlinnoe litso iegovizma, 78-81; M. Kuz’o, “Zhizn’ proshla mimo,” L’oyoskaia pravda, April 28, 1960, 3; and Moskalenko and Artamoshin, Pravda o khristianskich sektakh, 102-03.} In a 1979 article, a reporter told the story of one woman who had joined the Witnesses. When her husband, in part due to the stress of his wife’s newfound religious faith, became an alcoholic and cheated on her, she...
attempted to set the house on fire, hoping to kill him and his lover. The village soviet chairman intervened before this could happen.\textsuperscript{1062}

Violent narratives like these served to undermine the Witnesses’ self-proclaimed superior morality by suggesting that, in reality, members did not uphold such high standards. A 1958 work on sectarianism drew a sharp distinction on this basis between communist and sectarian morality. The author, noting that sects teach people to love their enemies, asked how a Soviet citizen could love fascists who had killed so many innocent people, or love the American imperialists who had executed peaceful Korean citizens. Real love for humanity, he concluded, means hating the enemies of humanity and of the working class.\textsuperscript{1063} Similarly, Soviet discourse depicted the idea of repentance as insincere and self-serving. One 1963 work recounted how a Witness impregnated a young milkmaid at the local collective farm, resulting in him being expelled from the religion. Six months later, after praying day and night for forgiveness, he began attending meetings again with the elders’ approval.\textsuperscript{1064} Overall, the Witnesses’ belief in redemption translated in Soviet texts into a cynical justification for all manner of illegal actions, not just war crimes.

World War II imagery played a critical role in Soviet depictions of Witness elders and so-called “fanatics.” Publications generally remained silent on the Witnesses’ persecution in Nazi Germany or suggested that the Nazis had favored the Witnesses during occupation.\textsuperscript{1065} The press described the Watch Tower organization as providing a postwar cover for former


\textsuperscript{1063} Smirnov, \textit{Chto takoe sektantstvo?}, 14-15.

\textsuperscript{1064} Semashko and Sukhachev, \textit{Armageddon ne sostoiatsia}, 11.

\textsuperscript{1065} One work claimed that the German occupying army in Ukraine instructed its troops not to “touch the Jehovists.” Malyniak, \textit{Pravdu skazhu}, 6. Another alleged that Nazis supported the Witnesses because of their refusal to fight in the Red Army. Boichuk, \textit{Khto taki egovisty?}, 24.
Nazis, who converted to the Witnesses either during the war in Nazi concentration or POW camps, or after the war in Soviet prison camps, where they were sent for alleged collaboration.\textsuperscript{1066} Several publications detailed the wartime deeds of one Witness who allegedly worked as a translator for the Germans under occupation. A 1962 work said that, while serving time for treason, this woman “did not change her views regarding Soviet power and the Soviet people, but simply changed the form of her struggle” by converting to the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1067} The “Nazi-turned-Witness” became one of the most common tropes in literature about the Watch Tower organization. These accusations suggested a fundamental similarity between Nazi and Witness ideology.\textsuperscript{1068} At least one academic work alleged that the Nazis sought out Witnesses as potential collaborators and spies in the occupied territories.\textsuperscript{1069} Other accounts conflated both Witness beliefs and Nazism with Ukrainian nationalism.\textsuperscript{1070} In this version, former Nazis and Ukrainian nationalists joined the Witnesses because they found the organization’s anti-Soviet and anticommmunist political rhetoric familiar and appealing. It also offered them a new underground structure through which to continue their subversive political activity.\textsuperscript{1071}

Not all Witnesses had lived in the occupied territories during the war, however, and

\textsuperscript{1066} For instance, a 1960 article gave the example of a Witness who converted after the war: “Take the ‘devout’ Oleksii Kurdas from Zaporizhzhia. There was a time when he served a different God—Hitler.” \textit{Il’in, “Eshche odna,”} 204. This man’s story appeared in multiple publications. See also Bartoshevich and Borisoglebskii, \textit{Imenem boga Iegovy}, 108, and Konik, \textit{“Istiny” svidetelei Iegovy}, 97-98.


\textsuperscript{1068} At the same time, Jehovah’s Witnesses were often accused of conflating communism and fascism. See, for example, Levnin, \textit{Brat’ia Brulkinskikh apostolov}, 41, and Konik, \textit{“Istiny” svidetelei Iegovy}, 71.

\textsuperscript{1069} Bartoshevich and Borisoglebskii, \textit{Imenem boga Iegovy}, 19-20; and Fedorenko, \textit{Sekty}, 201.

\textsuperscript{1070} For an example of accusations regarding Ukrainian nationalism, see A. Baratsevichius and V. Butkus, “Kto takie ‘slugi legovy’? Sviatoschi bez maski,” \textit{Sovetskaia Litva}, March 1, 1973.

\textsuperscript{1071} Boichuk, \textit{Khto taki egovisty?}, 13.
the Soviet media could not tar all believers with the charge of Nazism or Ukrainian nationalism. Still, most press reports applied the broad themes of fanaticism and violence to depictions of the Witnesses. Most commonly, they portrayed the family life of “fanatical” Witnesses as dysfunctional and abusive, with parents instilling religious values in their children through brute force.1072 A 1963 article recounted an incident in which such harsh treatment by parents led to the death of their young son.1073 Soviet accounts alleged that Witness parents isolated their children from society, denying them the happy childhood that other Soviet children enjoyed.1074 In one such incident, a father told his son, “Do not even think of wearing that satanic collar! I’ll kill you!” The son left home and turned into a hooligan. He later fatally wounded his father during a brawl.1075 Stories like this served as “proof” both of the psychological damage caused by a religious upbringing and of the desire of children to participate in Soviet life. They also demonstrated the dangers that fanatical members represented not only to society and state, but also to their own families.

The press used such accusations to justify the state’s decisions to revoke the child custody rights of some so-called Witness fanatics. A 1960 study of the organization included the story of Vladimir Derkach, the father of a Witness, who appealed to the courts to grant him custody rights of his grandchildren. He testified that his son and daughter-in-law, since joining the Witnesses, had mistreated their children and barred him from visiting, as a result of which he had to sneak food to them through an open window. After the parents discovered

1072 Korotkaia et al., Jegovizm, 108.


1074 Levnin, Brat’ia Braklinskikh apostolov, 63.

this activity, they kept the shutters closed and the lights off. A 1959 article recounted how one woman entrusted her young daughter to the care of her older sister. When she returned home a year later, the daughter and her Witness husband had brainwashed the girl, who no longer recognized her mother. The distraught woman appealed to the courts for redress. Similar stories of neglect and abuse featured prominently in articles on depriving Witness parents of custody rights.

Although many accounts characterized women as victims of a sexist religious sect, some narratives reinforced traditional gender roles in attacking fanatical female Witnesses. The Soviet press depicted these women as devoting all their time to the religion while disregarding their duties as wives and mothers. Newspapers printed complaints from husbands about their Witness wives, whom they said did not cook, clean, or do laundry. Reporters from the village of Briceni, Moldavia, traveled to investigate one such complaint letter in 1964. The woman, accused of not speaking to her husband, cooking for him, or keeping their home heated, told the reporters that she did not need a husband who did not believe in God. In one case detailed in Zakarpatskaia pravda, a young man falsely accused his wife of being a Witness so that he could divorce her, claiming she did not do any housework and that she beat him. The court threw out the claim, declaring it fraudulent because his wife, in fact, was not a Witness or religious at all, and the man wanted a divorce so that he could marry his cousin. The fact that the man thought this defense would win

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1076 Bartoshevich and Borisoglebskii, Imenem boga Iegovy, 138-39.
1077 Avdeev, “Okhota za dushami.”
him a divorce suggests that such allegations had a wide reach.

The Soviet state pitted ordinary believers against leaders and fanatics to show that most believers were loyal Soviet citizens who could be taught to embrace communism, while leaders and fanatics constituted a real threat to the social order. In reality, however, anti-Witness publications did not always draw a clear distinction and instead painted a picture of the Witnesses as so politically corrupt and nefarious that it was difficult, if not impossible, for any sensible reader to believe that ordinary members could have been unaware of these illegal actions. One 1960 work portrayed nearly all Witnesses as drunks, murderers, and rapists, even while repeating the standard rhetoric about ordinary believers and leaders/fanatics. 1081 A 1962 Komsomol report criticized atheist propaganda for being primitive in nature and lumping all believers together as “western collaborators” and “parasites.” It stressed that the lack of well-defined distinctions between leaders and ordinary members had detracted from atheist efforts. 1082

In addition, while atheist discourse on other Western Christian sects contained many of the same tropes about ordinary believers and leaders/fanatics, it categorized Witnesses as the most extreme and dangerous, with little sincere religious belief except among rank-and-file members. This mirrored the fact that Witnesses, unlike Baptists, Adventists and other more mainstream organizations, had no access to registration. One 1975 work even recounted how Baptists rebuked Witnesses for their hostility to Soviet power. 1083 A former believer recalled her involvement with three religions: the Russian Orthodox Church, the Baptists,

1081 Gerasimets and Reshetnikov, Pravda ob organizatsii iegovistov.

1082 RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1111, l. 8.

1083 Kashnikov, Dvoinoe dno, 183-84.
and the Witnesses. “Jehovism,” she noted, was the most reactionary.\(^{1084}\) Thus, official discourse reinforced the state’s assessment of the relative threat posed by various religious organizations, justifying the heightened use of repressive measures against Witnesses in comparison to other faiths.

**Cadres, Cadres, Cadres**

Atheist work required not only information, but also individuals to disseminate this standard discourse to the broader population. The demand for more attention to local conditions and a personalized approach to agitation created a major need for trained personnel, one that the Party-state never managed to fill. Simply put, there were always too few cadres and most had insufficient knowledge to be effective.\(^{1085}\) The concentration of Witnesses in small towns and villages, which disproportionately suffered from a lack of qualified cadres, compounded this problem.\(^{1086}\) A 1959 report by the head of the Knowledge Society’s scientific atheism department in Zakarpattia oblast to the Ukrainian agitprop department identified the number one weakness among cadres as a lack of information. Many cadres, it stated, mistakenly thought it was enough to acquire superficial familiarity with religion, natural science, and dialectical materialism, often giving lectures on topics they knew nothing about. In fact, the report asserted, an atheist must have “encyclopedic

\(^{1084}\) Gerasimets, ed., *Nam ne po puti*, 29-33.

\(^{1085}\) Newspaper editorials as late as the Gorbachev era continued to cite the lack of qualified cadres as a major problem in conducting effective atheist work. “Ateistam-nastupat’!,” *Zakarpatskaia pravda*, November 19, 1987, 1.

\(^{1086}\) AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 18, d. 190, f. 47. Similarly, a 1962 article in a Moldavian district newspaper noted the difficulty of convincing lecturers from Chișinău or the Glodeni district center to travel to the Kalinin collective farm to work with local Witnesses there. “Protiv temnoty i mrakobesii,” *Iskra* (Glodeni district), February 3, 1962, 1.
knowledge.”\textsuperscript{1087} Few agitators lived up to this high standard.

In some areas, the state did assign its most experienced activists for work with the Witnesses, viewing it as a challenging assignment appropriate only for the most skilled cadres.\textsuperscript{1088} Indeed, atheist agitators sometimes spent a disproportionate amount of their time addressing this religion in part because official discourse portrayed Witnesses as the most dangerous and anti-Soviet religion. A 1965 work on Christian sects, while acknowledging the Witnesses’ small size relative to other religious organizations, called on agitators to pay “special attention” to them because their reactionary politics hindered progress toward communism and world peace.\textsuperscript{1089} Similarly, a 1974 report on atheist work in Moldavia observed that “all attention from the Party, soviets, and social organizations is directed precisely at work with Jehovahists.”\textsuperscript{1090} Activists in other locales, however, often took an opposite approach—ignoring the Witness issue precisely because it was so challenging. A 1962 article criticized one collective farm for stopping all individual work with believers because its members “do not have time.”\textsuperscript{1091}

Teachers and principals from primary and high schools made up the greatest number of atheist lecturers and agitators. A 1961 article on atheist work in Irkutsk oblast argued that atheist efforts would have greater success if university-level instructors could be persuaded to get involved.\textsuperscript{1092} However, despite continual efforts to secure their participation, individuals

\textsuperscript{1087} DAZO, f. 1, op. 1, spr. 3485, ark. 139-45.
\textsuperscript{1088} DAZO, f. 1, op. 5, spr. 714, ark. 75, 81; op. 6, spr. 711, ark. 4-5, 7, 18.
\textsuperscript{1089} Kaushanskii, Ideologiia i deiatel’nost’, 64.
\textsuperscript{1090} AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 35, d. 184, f. 75.
\textsuperscript{1091} I. Pukhal’skii, “Za konkretnuiu, tseleustremlenuiu ateisticheskuiu propagandu,” Leninets (Edineț district), February 11, 1962, 4.
working with Witnesses and giving lectures on the Witness faith were rarely professional scholars. Further, few universities or institutes existed in the rural areas where most Witnesses lived, limiting available cadres to local Party and Komsomol members and school staff. Statistical data from districts in L’viv oblast for 1971 provide a representative breakdown of these cadres. In Sokal’ district, of the 102 atheist lecturers, 67 percent were Party members and another 15 percent belonged to the Komsomol. Of the 423 atheist agitators in the district, 31 percent were Party members and 47 percent belonged to the Komsomol. The majority of the cadres (58 percent) were educators, another 17 percent in government jobs, and the rest in an assortment of fields.\textsuperscript{1093}

Language barriers remained a constant problem for cadres, since most atheist literature was printed in Russian and some Witnesses from the western borderlands could not read it. While publishing houses printed literature on the Witnesses in the Ukrainian language, language remained a major issue in Moldavian communities. Local agitators complained in 1959 that they lacked any materials in Romanian when, at the same time, Witnesses had plentiful literature in this language.\textsuperscript{1094} Since atheist lecturers relied heavily on prepared remarks, the lack of resources in non-Russian languages was another major hurdle to atheist work. In 1964, thirteen years after the exile of Moldavian Witnesses to Tomsk oblast, the Asino city Party secretary reported that plans to hold a Romanian-language atheist event suffered from a basic dilemma. The region apparently did not have a single capable lecturer in that language and had to ask the Moldavian Party organization to send

\textsuperscript{1092} Sviridov and Talanov, “Na zemle sibirskoi,” 75.

\textsuperscript{1093} DALO, f. 3, op. 19, spr. 135, ark. 130-38.

\textsuperscript{1094} AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 19, d. 170, f. 31.
The specific traits of Christian religions created another stumbling block even for trained cadres. Atheist propaganda instructed agitators to gain a more detailed knowledge of the Bible because of the central role this text played in Western Christian religious organizations. Yet one report from the Knowledge Society in Zakarpattia oblast complained that, while many Soviet atheists did not have access to a single serious book on Christian theology, the Witnesses illegally distributed Bible commentary throughout the Soviet Union. Despite this fact, official propaganda frequently touted stories in which agitators stumped Witnesses on biblical questions. Some publications claimed that even unskilled workers could beat the Witnesses at Bible trivia. A 1986 work, for example, recounted how coworkers challenged a Witness to explain whom Cain married, since the only other humans at that time were his parents, Adam and Eve. The Witness decided to leave the religion as a result of this encounter. In reality, most believers, Witnesses included, could have told the workers that Adam and Eve also had female children for Cain to marry. The same man was stumped by how God could resurrect the dead, since by then their bodies would have decomposed. Such primitive “gotcha questions” reveal the reliance by agitators on limited training and primitive antireligious tracts.

The propaganda notwithstanding, atheist agitators had a difficult time distinguishing between the various strains of Christianity. For example, Witnesses do not believe in the immortality of the soul. They preach that the Biblical term “soul” refers to a living human

1095 AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 24, d. 174, f. 73.
1096 Ivanov and Kol’tsov, O nauchno-ateisticheskoi propagande, 5-6.
1097 DAZO, f. 1, op. 1, spr. 3485, ark. 139-45.
1098 Dobrzhans’kyi, Bruklins’ka shkola, 71-74.
being, not to a separate entity that can survive death. In Christ’s millennial kingdom, righteous individuals who have died will be given new bodies and will be allowed to live forever. In the interim between death and this resurrection, however, they do not exist in a spirit form as a soul. One agitator, unaware of this doctrine, brought scientific data to a meeting with a local Witness proving that life cannot exist after death. The man eagerly responded, “You see, even science confirms our teachings.”  

In another embarrassing example, a well-meaning activist devoted an entire year to convincing a local believer to renounce the Baptist faith. The woman proved very receptive to his critique of the Baptists and eventually announced, “You’ve convinced me. I don’t believe in Baptism.” The man’s enthusiasm over his success soon soured, however, when he learned that she was, in fact, not a Baptist, but a Witness.  

A 1967 brochure on atheist work noted that many agitators use the same Bible criticism for all Christian religions, ignoring the major differences in beliefs. Overall, unprepared and ill-qualified cadres bore significant responsibility for the huge gap between the state’s proclaimed agitation standards and reality.

The state did attempt to improve the quality of its cadres, and most locales offered at least some training for atheist agitators in the form of seminars or classes. This included Knowledge Society and Komsomol-facilitated courses, as well as classes within secondary and higher educational institutions in scientific atheism. Despite the additional training

1099 Osintseva, Chemu uchat iegovisty, 10-11.
1100 Kuts, Armageddon, 126.
1101 Osintseva, Chemu uchat iegovisty, 4.
1103 RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 97, ll. 18-26; d. 959, ll. 11-12.
and re-training of cadres, reports on atheist work throughout the late Soviet era continually cited poor quality personnel as a major problem. A 1965 conference on sects hosted by the CRCA brought together personnel from the CRCA, editors of antireligious journals, members of the Knowledge Society, and various antireligious agitators and scholars to discuss how to strengthen scientific atheist propaganda. Prominent religious scholar A. I. Klibanov expressed alarm at abusive practices on the part of some agitators, who, he observed, had turned atheist work into its own sort of “sect.” He cited instances where agitators forced vodka down the throat of an Adventist believer and other incidents where the state had compelled believers to undergo psychiatric treatment. He concluded that agitators needed not only to educate believers, but also to improve the quality of their own work.\footnote{DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 37, ark. 85-87.}

A 1979 CRA report likewise complained that many teachers and Komsomol members could not distinguish between various sects and, as a result, sometimes hurt or offended youth with their atheist efforts, only making the situation worse.\footnote{GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1564, l. 137.}

Given the dearth of qualified personnel to facilitate agitation, the state tapped into the sizeable community of former religious believers to supplement its ranks. These individuals were in theory ideally suited for this work, having personally experienced life within a religious community. Particularly for smaller and more obscure religions such as the Witnesses, former believers offered a vital source of information on beliefs and practices.\footnote{Arzamazov, Podlinnoe litso, 138.}

Equally important, the state hoped that believers would be more likely to listen to such individuals than they would to Party activists. As a result, former believers became a ubiquitous part of antireligious work in the late Soviet era, serving as public speakers, expert
witnesses at trials, and authors of antireligious articles, books, lectures, and pamphlets. Thus, in dealing with atheist agitation, Witnesses often faced their own former fellow believers.

The fact that many former Witnesses still had family members in the religion gave their involvement in antireligious work a personal motivation that other cadres lacked. Statements by former believers almost always included a call to friends and family members to follow their example and join Soviet society. One former Witness, retelling his story in *Sovetskaia Moldaviia*, declared, “I call on everyone who has not yet broken free of the spider web of religious superstition: Look around yourself, open your heart and eyes to those people building a new life.” He then addressed his mother and sister, asking them to believe him, lose their fear, and abandon their faith. Renunciation of religion provided a way for these families to reconcile, now as fellow atheists. Yet not all former Witnesses wanted to participate in atheist agitation, as it could further damage their relationship with religious family members. One 1976 article noted that some people lacked the willpower to make their renunciation of religion public because they worried about what their former fellow believers would think of them. The press also alleged that religious leaders frightened members from publicly turning against the organization even after they no longer belonged to it.

The former believers brought not only passion to their appeals, but also a tone and style that resembled the religious imagery and language of their previous faith. One former Witness, for example, stated that her future now lay with people who, like her, shared a belief in “the greatest faith—communism.” Another referred to life after the Witnesses as a

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“spiritual resurrection.”¹¹¹¹ One former believer told readers that, after hearing about Iurii Gagarin’s flight into space, he realized, “Now that’s where heaven is! People are building it on earth without Armageddon and other nonsense.”¹¹¹² Many individuals described their embrace of communism and atheism as akin to having to being “born again.”¹¹¹³ One former Witness declared, “I once was blind, but now I see.”¹¹¹⁴

Ironically, many of those former believers most willing to contribute to atheist work had been leaders and “fanatics,” who, according to the state, were supposed to be a band of devious criminals and traitors. Yet, with so few qualified cadres, agitators could hardly afford to be picky, especially since these individuals possessed unique information on the organization’s structure and activities. For the former believers themselves, the striking contrast in treatment between ordinary members and leaders/fanatics made it imperative that they demonstrate that they belonged to the former category. Even though the hierarchical nature of the Witness organization made it relatively easy to identify leaders, these former Witnesses emphasized both their own victimization and their attempts to internally reform the organization as a means of reframing their life stories.

In particular, high-ranking former members aligned themselves with the neutralist or oppositionist splinter organizations founded as a result of the schism, claiming to have pushed for severing ties with the Brooklyn headquarters. Former oppositionist Konstantyn

¹¹¹⁰ M. Cheban, “Ia vernulas’ k zhizni,” Iskra (Rîscani district), May 7, 1963, 2.
¹¹¹³ See, for example, G. M. Tur’ev, Triasina:Rassaz o cheloveke, porvavshem s religiei (Syktyvkar: Komi kn. izd., 1983), 35.
Polychuk took this approach in his 1958 open letter to Sovetskaia Moldaviia. He described numerous attempts on his part to convince the organization’s leadership to stop their underground activities and seek legal registration. The failure of these efforts caused him to realize the subversive political aims of the Witnesses and to quit the organization.\footnote{Polychuk, “Smelee rvite,” 4.}

Gheorghe Dobuliac, a former local Witness leader in Moldavia, recounted an incident in which oppositionists threw stones at him one night after he returned home from a meeting with fellow neutralists.\footnote{G. Dobuliak, “V poiskakh istiny,” Sovetskaia Moldaviia, February 20, 1969, 4.}

Fanatics, meanwhile, proved more elusive to define, making it easier to reinvent themselves as ordinary members. In many instances, the only difference between a fanatic and an ordinary member was that the former still belonged to the Witnesses while the latter no longer did. Indeed, at a trial in Moldavia in 1959, the defendant had already confessed to illegal religious activity and abandoned the organization. Despite being charged with activities that the press associated with fanatics, media coverage portrayed her as a victim of a manipulative organization that converted her in the immediate aftermath of her husband’s tragic death. The court, noting the sincerity of her change of heart, handed down a suspended sentence and released her back into the community.\footnote{Panachevnyi and Chemortan, “Protsess v Tabanakh,” 2, 4.}

Former Witnesses invariably depicted their own conversion through the lens of victimization, even when they held positions of considerable rank within the Witness organization. For example, Polychuk, the oppositionist leader, not only claimed to have been a voice of moderation in the leadership, but also described his conversion to the Witnesses as a result of wartime instability in western Ukraine. He explained how the Witnesses’ message
appealed to him in a time of desperation and uncertainty.\textsuperscript{1118} Regardless of which approach they chose, former Witness leaders and “fanatics” framed their involvement with the organization within the standard narrative about religious believers. In particular, they confirmed the state’s official position that most believers represented loyal Soviet citizens who had simply gone astray.

**Reaching Out to Believers**

Former believers and atheist activists took on the work of individualized and mass forms of agitation. Both methods aimed to inoculate Soviet citizens against the false promises of religious belief and to convert those who had already joined a religious faith into engaged, atheist builders of communism. Mass events such as lectures, film showings, meetings, and other evening events, allowed agitators to reach the largest possible number of citizens. Thus, as the antireligious campaign returned to the fore in the late 1950s, the number of antireligious lectures and other events grew rapidly. For instance, a 1961 article in \textit{Nauka i religiia} surveyed atheist work in Irkutsk oblast, focusing on lectures as the biggest component of these efforts. It cited the fact that over 10,000 atheist or natural science lectures had been given in the region in the past year.\textsuperscript{1119} L’viv oblast reported 4,517 atheist lectures in 1956, 13,094 in 1958, and 26,250 in 1960, a huge increase over just four years.\textsuperscript{1120} Moldavian Party cadres held roughly 5,000 such lectures in 1956, and 9,000 a year later. They also hosted 25 seminars to train atheist lecturers in 1958.\textsuperscript{1121} Atheist lectures by the

\textsuperscript{1118} Polychuk, “Smelee rvite,” 3-4.

\textsuperscript{1119} Sviridov and Talanov, “Na zemle sibirskoi,” 72.

\textsuperscript{1120} DALO, f. 1332, op. 2, spr. 30, ark. 37.

\textsuperscript{1121} AOSPRM, f. 51, inv. 18, d. 190, f. 46.
Moldavian Knowledge Society grew many times over during this period as well; it gave 10,089 lectures in 1965.\footnote{AOSPRM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 358, f. 253.}

Lectures served a purpose beyond propaganda, allowing agitators and local authorities to identify believers and potential leaders. Acknowledging this point at a 1959 Knowledge Society conference, one speaker noted that he had stopped keeping lists of those who spoke at or attended these events because it put believers on guard.\footnote{GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 281, l. 69.} One Witness confirmed this view, recalling that those Witnesses who asked questions were assigned closer police surveillance.\footnote{Gojan, interview.} In fact, some believers chose not to participate in these events for this reason. As a result, mass forms of atheist agitation frequently suffered from “preaching to the choir” syndrome. Yet some believers came to these events precisely to engage in debates with the lecturers, exploiting the ignorance of speakers by asking tricky questions or making provocative statements.\footnote{Sviridov and Talanov, “Na zemle sibirskoi,” 72.} An all-union Party conference on work among believers in the western borderlands acknowledged that interactive formats sometimes ran into these problems when cadres lacked proper training.\footnote{RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 3, l. 17. Similarly, a Moldavian Komsomol conference in 1957 warned agitators that fanatical believers and leaders who attended these events could compromise their effectiveness. RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 844, l. 236.} To give an example, a Witness at one lecture asked the speaker why Witnesses could not study at institutions of higher education. The man placed the blame on Witness parents, whom he alleged barred their children from enrolling at such institutions.\footnote{O. Georgi\v{s}eh, “Pravda o zhizn\'i odna,” Novaia zhizn’, August 12, 1976, 2, 4.} He could not admit the obvious truth that the Soviet state violated its own constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience by denying believers

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{AOSPRM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 358, f. 253.}
\item \footnote{GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 281, l. 69.}
\item \footnote{Gojan, interview.}
\item \footnote{Sviridov and Talanov, “Na zemle sibirskoi,” 72.}
\item \footnote{RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 3, l. 17. Similarly, a Moldavian Komsomol conference in 1957 warned agitators that fanatical believers and leaders who attended these events could compromise their effectiveness. RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 844, l. 236.}
\item \footnote{O. Georgi\v{s}eh, “Pravda o zhizn\'i odna,” Novaia zhizn’, August 12, 1976, 2, 4.}
\end{itemize}
access to higher education. At a different talk on Christian sects in 1969, a Baptist challenged the speaker’s comments on the reactionary nature of religious organizations. He said, “But did sectarians create the atomic bomb? Did they drop it on Hiroshima?” The speaker awkwardly responded by declaring that Truman, who dropped the bomb, was a Baptist.\textsuperscript{1128} This answer was unlikely to satisfy most believers.

The Watch Tower organization promoted these efforts by providing Soviet members with lists of suggested questions to stump atheist lecturers.\textsuperscript{1129} It cited the example of Christ, who, when answering questions posed by priests and Pharisees, would often avoid falling into a trap by not giving a direct answer.\textsuperscript{1130} Sample questions in one list included: “What is a law of nature?” “Can there be a law without a lawgiver?” “Who taught birds to build nests?” “What came first—wisdom or matter?” These sorts of questions played on the poor preparation of many lecturers, who did not typically have a strong scientific or religious background. The Watch Tower organization also circulated prepared answers to common questions from agitators and authorities.\textsuperscript{1131} They also cited quotes from Lenin and Khrushchev defending the rights of citizens to freedom of conscience.\textsuperscript{1132}

As a result, some atheist agitators felt uncomfortable hosting such events. At a 1959 RSFSR Knowledge Society conference, the chairman of the organization’s atheism department criticized those who suggested that agitators back off from interactive formats for atheist evenings. He expressed his belief that question and answer sessions where both

\textsuperscript{1128} \textit{Novaia zhizn’}, March 1, 1969, 2.

\textsuperscript{1129} The exact origin of these lists is not known, but they were most likely prepared abroad in Brooklyn or one of the European branch offices and smuggled into the Soviet Union.

\textsuperscript{1130} TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 5116, ark. 307-26.

\textsuperscript{1131} RGASPI, f. 1., op. 32, d. 1111, ll. 29-30.

\textsuperscript{1132} RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1112s, l. 184.
believers and presenters speak can be productive as long as organizers control the event. He advised them not to let believers speak more than the atheists, as had happened on some occasions. When done well, he remarked from his own experience, such evenings could draw large crowds of as many as 700 to 1,500 people.\textsuperscript{1133}

Community and work collective meetings represented a more intense form of mass work than lectures and other atheist events, and typically focused on the actions of specific local individuals. The primary goal was not to provide information on the religious organization’s beliefs and practices, but rather to ostracize allegedly fanatical members or leaders, applying social pressure to force them to renounce their faith. To this end, agitators encouraged audience members to participate in condemning the individual. Particularly in the Khrushchev era, these events often went well beyond mere pressure and could include direct threats of criminal prosecution or other coercive measures. In August 1961, the Rakhiv district Komsomol in Zakarpattia oblast, citing the success of its public meetings in converting believers to atheism, observed that participants demanded that all remaining Witnesses be brought to court on criminal charges.\textsuperscript{1134}

The call for strong measures against believers stemmed in part from the Khrushchev-\textsuperscript{era campaign against “parasites.” Under the decree on parasites, communities could exile such individuals or compel them to perform labor for the state. Some believers, primarily clergymen and ministers, were subject to exile under this law. For example, at meetings held in several Transcarpathian villages in December 1959, village residents clamored for the exile of local Witnesses, whom they labeled parasites and accused of stealing from the collective farm. Under pressure from the community and authorities to abandon their faith or

\textsuperscript{1133} GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 281, ll. 65-68.

\textsuperscript{1134} DAZO, f. 93, op. 2, spr. 236, ark. 202.
face exile, nineteen Witnesses wrote a letter to the district newspaper announcing they had quit the religion. The local leader, unwilling to renounce his faith, moved to Crimea to escape possible criminal charges.\textsuperscript{1135}

Well after the Khrushchev era, communities used these meetings to apply social pressure on believers. At a 1983 meeting of workers at a timber industry plant in Tomsk oblast, members castigated two Witness coworkers for their religious activities. One worker stated, “Fedor, we not only work, but live as neighbors. And now it turns out that, every day after greeting me, you pray for my destruction.” He went on to compare Hitler and Reagan’s militarism to Fedor’s belief in Armageddon. In closing, he asked Fedor where in the Bible it says he cannot defend his homeland, questioning Fedor what he would do if he punched him right now. Fedor responded: “Just try.” The attendees denounced the two men’s allegedly antisocial actions, issuing a warning that, if their religious activities did not cease, the matter would be brought before a court of law.\textsuperscript{1136} These events, meant to condemn local Witnesses, could undermine the antireligious campaign’s stated goal of convincing believers to renounce religion without resorting to threats. Often vitriolic in tone, press coverage of the meetings failed to distinguish between leaders and other members, calling for harsh measures against all believers. A 1960 report from the Zakarpattia oblast Party committee, for example, criticized local newspapers for printing articles denouncing ordinary Witnesses as speculators and parasites when, the report pointed out, many ordinary members are in fact honest Soviet citizens.\textsuperscript{1137}

\textsuperscript{1135} DAZO, f. 1, op. 1, spr. 3484, ark. 107-08.
\textsuperscript{1136} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2604, ll. 36-37.
\textsuperscript{1137} DAZO, f. 1, op. 5, spr. 147, ark. 35-36.
In forced labor camps, authorities also used meetings to convince Witness prisoners to embrace atheism. In the Ozernyi camp in 1960, officials discovered that Witnesses had conducted meetings to preach and convert new members. To deal with the situation, camp supervisors held a meeting of all prisoners to voice their criticism of the “Jehovists” among them. The collective recommended that the men publicly renounce their faith and that officials transfer the most active members to a stricter security camp where they would have less ability to proselytize to others, a move approved by the administration. In the same camp, officials assigned several atheist prisoner-activists to work with a known Witness prisoner. The men persuaded the Witness to attend films and participate in other group activities. When his family came to visit him, he told them to stop mentioning Jehovah in their letters as he had lost his faith in God.\textsuperscript{1138} Such conversions to atheism, done under the duress of camp life, reflect the combination of persuasion and coercion employed in atheist agitation.

By the late 1950s, numerous publications and reports began to urge agitators to take the message directly to believers, declaring “individual work” the most effective method of atheist agitation.\textsuperscript{1139} At a 1960 Party conference on scientific atheism, the speakers endorsed this tactic above all others.\textsuperscript{1140} As envisioned, “individual work” meant that atheist agitators would establish contact with a local believer in their community, perhaps by visiting the individual’s home or workplace. The goal was to create a sense of trust, showing the believer that the agitator had a genuine interest in his life. Many publications advised agitators not to immediately bring up religion in conversation, as this could put the believer on guard.

\textsuperscript{1138} GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 577, l. 20.


\textsuperscript{1140} RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 3, l. 18.
literature recommended that only once the two individuals were well-acquainted should the agitator slowly bring the conversation around to religious matters and tactfully make the case for atheism. Ideally, the believer would see the agitator as his friend and be convinced to renounce his faith. As described by atheist literature, a successful conversion to atheism through individual work took considerable time. Agitators were advised to exercise patience and dedication.\textsuperscript{1141}

A 1964 report from the village of Zniatsevo in Zakarpattia oblast provides an example of what high quality individual work looked like in practice. The village had forty-nine Witnesses in 1963. At first, the district party committee studied the Witnesses’ beliefs. Next they organized lectures on scientific progress at the village club and showed an anti-Witness propaganda film. Then they assigned agitators to each Witness family. The report indicated that the Witnesses were initially suspicious, but the agitators persisted and eventually managed to speak directly to their assigned families, offering critiques of the Bible. As a result of these efforts, at least a few Witnesses renounced their faith. Some of the younger former believers joined the Komsomol.\textsuperscript{1142} In a similar case in 1976, a local agitator in Crimea visited one Witness family on multiple occasions, brought them periodicals to read, showed interest in their lives, and even took their son to the movies. Only after the agitator became a welcome guest in their home did he successfully turn the conversations to questions of faith.\textsuperscript{1143} Because so many atheist agitators worked as schoolteachers and principals, much of the individual work occurred in the school system with Witness children

\textsuperscript{1141} Indeed, at the 1966 conference on individual work, speakers described this method as a slow process requiring patience and commitment over months, if not years. RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 53, l. 100.

\textsuperscript{1142} DAZO, f. 1, op. 5, spr. 714, ark. 31-35.

and youth.\footnote{A. N. Nevskii, “Osobennosti ateisticheskogo vospitaniia sredi sektantov,” \textit{Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma}, no. 29 (1982): 41; D. Koretskaia, “Obmanutye ozhidaniia,” \textit{Nauka i religiia}, no. 10 (1976): 53; Bartoshevich and Borisoglebskii, \textit{Imenem boga Iegovy}, 133-34; and Levin, \textit{Brat’ia Bruklinskikh apostolov}, 74-75. Further, in Ukraine, schoolteachers organized atheist evening events, discussed atheist books in class, set up atheist clubs, held open debates, and printed wall newspapers and bulletins on atheism. A. Mitin, “Sovremennoe religioznoe sektantstvo i molodezh’,” in \textit{Molodezh’ religii ateizm}, ed. E. Mal’kova (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1984), 114-15.} Publications gave examples of how the care and concern of a dedicated teacher turned a child away from religion and toward active involvement in school activities.\footnote{Grudinin, \textit{Iegovizm i deti}, 46-47. A 1966 article, for example, described how local teachers convinced a young Witness to get involved in school activities, join the Pioneers, and go to the movies. V. Pernei, “Prozrenie,” \textit{Novaia zhizn’}, January 29, 1966, 3.} Whether for adults or children, individual work relied on an interpersonal emotional appeal to believers on a face-to-face basis. A former believer who spoke at a 1966 conference hosted by the Moscow Institute of Scientific Atheism compared individual work to his own previous proselytism. He remarked that, when he was still a “fanatic,” he believed God would reward him for every person he saved. When he went to one woman’s home to preach, she warned him that her husband would kill him if he came again. Because he was so committed to saving this woman, even this threat did not deter him. He visited the home once more, spoke directly to the husband, and the two developed respect for one another. The man concluded that agitators had to put the same amount of time and effort into their work as believers devoted to proselytism.\footnote{RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 53, ll. 97-98.} A memo from the CRCA to the secretary of the Moldavian TsK in 1956 likewise advised the Party to borrow from sectarian methods by using an individual approach to believers to persuade them to renounce their beliefs.\footnote{ANRM, f. 3305, inv. 2, d. 10, f. 185.} A 1967 work advocated a strategy nearly identical to the one employed by Witnesses worldwide, recommending that agitators leave an article or book with the believer to read,
using the literature as a means to return to the home for further discussion.\textsuperscript{1148}

The difference between Witnesses and atheists, however, was that while Witnesses were prepared and willing to spend hundreds of hours to win over a single convert, atheist cadres had no such dedication. They had their own careers and families, making atheist agitation a part-time responsibility of secondary importance in their lives. Soviet publications repeatedly reminded agitators to be patient and to understand that individual work was a “complex process” that could not happen as a result of a single meeting or lecture.\textsuperscript{1149} A 1987 newspaper editorial in Zakarpattia oblast criticized agitators who had unrealistic expectations about how quickly they could win over believers to atheism.\textsuperscript{1150} A 1966 book on the Witnesses gave the example of a local believer, Semen, to illustrate this problem. It noted that atheist agitators had held four individual conversations with Semen over the preceding eight years. Yet in that same period, Semen had spent at least eighty hours a month attending Witness activities.\textsuperscript{1151} A 1989 article likewise estimated that it took sixty visits for “sectarians” to convert someone into their faith, but that atheists aimed to convince them to renounce these beliefs in only five to six visits.\textsuperscript{1152} With this imbalance of time, atheist individual work could not hope to eliminate religious belief.

Even when the state succeeded in winning believers over to atheism, it often failed to capitalize on its gains. Indeed, believers sometimes returned to their faith once the state lost interest in them. In some of these cases, believers may have never sincerely wanted to

\textsuperscript{1148} Osintseva, \textit{Chem uchat iegovisty}, 42.

\textsuperscript{1149} “Za voinstvennost’ ateisticheskoi propagandy,” \textit{Zakarpatskaia pravda}, October 18, 1967, 1.


\textsuperscript{1151} Kuts, \textit{Armageddon}, 123.

abandon their religion, doing so only under pressure. For example, the state granted a Witness elder convicted of anti-Soviet activity early release in 1974 after he claimed to have left the organization. Upon returning home, however, he remained involved with the religion.\textsuperscript{1153} Some former Witnesses came back to the organization in part because, while the state viewed its task as done, Witness members did not lose hope that their former fellow believers could be convinced to return to the faith.\textsuperscript{1154} Several former Witnesses complained that current members and elders repeatedly attempted to woo them back into the organization.\textsuperscript{1155} A 1974 sociological study of the Ukrainian Witnesses instructed agitators to continue meeting with believers even after they rejected religion, noting that some individuals later rejoined the organization or joined a different faith community.\textsuperscript{1156}

**Private Life on Public Display**

While official discourse told inspirational stories of how atheist activists had befriended believers and convinced them to renounce their faith, it also reflected the consequences for those who rejected these overtures. Their lives were put on display for ridicule, scorn, and condemnation. Post-Stalin antireligious work relied heavily on public shaming, citing individuals by name and exposing their private lives to public scrutiny. One lecture, for example, singled out a young Witness woman as a hypocrite for preaching “do

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\textsuperscript{1153} DAZO, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 72, ark. 142.

\textsuperscript{1154} Chebotar’, “Ateisticheskaia rabota v novykh usloviakh,” 2; GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2132, l. 92, and TsDAVO, f. 4618, op. 1, spr. 967, ark. 219.


\textsuperscript{1156} A. Z. Shysh et al., *Egovizm i egovisti* (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1974), 142.
not kill,” even after she had an abortion. A district Party organization set up voluntary patrols (druzhiniki) to catch believers stealing from the collective farms, taking their pictures at the site of the crimes and using these in propaganda work among believers. Published accounts by former believers almost always listed Witnesses whom the author called upon to renounce the faith. While done in the name of encouraging people to break the chains of religion, such publications isolated and ostracized believers from their neighbors.

Newspapers in particular practiced this form of social pressure, defaming individual Witnesses for a variety of immoral or unethical actions. One district newspaper in Moldavia singled out a man for owning more than the legally permissible number of sheep, which he sold on the black market at a high price. The same paper printed an article against Witnesses who apparently failed to give up their seats on a local bus to a woman with an infant. The article used this incident to show how Witnesses treated nonbelievers. The paper also criticized one Witness woman for cursing at her workplace. Another paper published pictures of Witness women drinking liquor and named several Witnesses who had stolen fruit during a recent harvest at the collective farm.

Agitators often applied equal pressure to the families of believers as they did to the believers themselves. Agitators expected family members to take the lead in atheist work

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1157 AOSPRM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 229, f. 127. Similarly, a former believer identified one Witness leader who had advised female members not to go to a gynecologist, but had nonetheless sought an abortion for herself. V. I. Golubovich, ed., Z polonu marnovirstva i temriavi (Kiev: Derzhpolitvydav URSR, 1960), 126.
1158 AOSPRM, f. 3174, inv. 1, d. 269, f. 29.
with their religious relatives and condemned them when they did not. In one incident, not
publicized in the press, a Party member and city soviet deputy shot and killed two of his
wife’s relatives because they converted her to the Witnesses. The murder came after
authorities subjected the man to relentless criticism for his poor control over his family.
Getting drunk after one such Party meeting, he decided to commit the crime. Outside the
court building, where he was tried and sentenced to ten years, people threw snowballs at his
wife, shouting, “He should have killed you too.”\footnote{1163} The incident reflects the awkward
position of individuals who came from Witness families but did not belong to the religion.
Local officials often held them responsible for family members’ actions.\footnote{1164} In 1976, the
Moldavian village of Grimancăuți held meetings of the local trade union, Party, and
Komsomol to condemn several villagers who had not tried to convince their relatives to leave
the Witnesses.\footnote{1165}

Internal memos from the religious councils and the Ministry of Justice reveal that
officials and agitators used a variety of methods that fell outside the approved guidelines to
pressure believers to abandon religion. One Witness filed a complaint in 1980, alleging that
the city soviet refused to give him an apartment unless he publicly renounced his faith in the
press.\footnote{1166} A 1960 report that praised how 500 Witnesses had left the faith identified several
instances of improper conduct. Some unnamed individuals hurled insults at Witnesses. One

\footnote{1163} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 959, l. 57; and Ivanenko, \emph{O liudiakh}, 144-45.

\footnote{1164} Similarly, a 1954 report from one Moldavian village noted that the brother of the local Witness leader was a
Komsomol member who just returned from military service. If he would just work with his sister, the report
stated, she would surely leave the faith and the religion itself would collapse in the village. AOSPRM, f. 51,
inv. 13, d. 254, f. 34.

\footnote{1165} The matter was initially spotlighted by the district newspaper and then discussed at these meetings. V.
okazalas’ zybkoi,” \emph{Novaia zhizn’}, June 8, 1976, 2.

\footnote{1166} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2630, l. 11.
man fired shots at the home of a Witness family, while others tried to force local Witnesses to drink vodka. One believer lost his driver’s license, and officials refused to reinstate the license until he embraced atheism. At a 1960 conference on scientific atheism, several speakers criticized officials who turned to coercive methods, such as illegal dismissals from work, instead of using persuasive methods. Some officials treated believers as second-class citizens, conflating religious organizations and leaders with rank-and-file members. Similarly, the Komsomol cited instances in which believers lost their jobs despite having good work ethics or were excluded from higher education, only further isolating these individuals from society and making it harder to reach them.

For those few qualified cadres, the poor quality and crude tactics of their fellow agitators were a source of continual frustration. Speakers at a 1963 plenum of the Moldavian Komsomol pointed to cases in which flawed atheist work had hindered attempts to reach out to believers. In one factory in Tiraspol, for example, rather than befriend a young Baptist worker, agitators created “an atmosphere of hatred and persecution” around her, resulting in the girl trusting no one. The plenum also discussed the widespread showing of the anti-Witness film Armageddon at atheist evening events, which included scenes of believers committing murder, an occurrence the plenum felt was “very rare” and not helpful. Party agitators admitted that such forms of atheist work only hindered progress toward creating trust among believers and molding them into atheist Soviet citizens. In general, the discriminatory treatment of ordinary Witnesses and leaders alike detracted from atheist

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1167 RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 77, l. 19.
1168 RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 3, l. 20.
1169 RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1111, l. 9.
1170 AOSPRM, f. 278, inv. 5, d. 148, ff. 23-24, 27.
efforts and made most Witnesses even more hostile to the thought of embracing Soviet society and ideology.

**Trials as Propaganda**

At the same time that some activists criticized atheist agitation for its inappropriate coercive elements, many also wanted to soften the state’s hard-line measures against the Witnesses by infusing them with a persuasive, propagandistic motive, thereby muting their underlying punitive function. They recognized that repressive measures could make it more difficult for agitators to win the trust of believers and could undermine the state’s message that it wanted to help, not punish, ordinary believers. With this in mind, post-Stalin trials gave Witness defendants the chance to admit guilt, repent, and avoid a criminal conviction. So that the trials served a broader educational function, they were generally open to the public and reported on widely in the press. For example, all RSFSR cases involving anti-Soviet agitation under the guise of religious propaganda for the first quarter of 1960 were held in open court and included a community accuser (*obshchestvennyi obvinitel’*), often a former member of the religion.\(^{1171}\) These trials frequently attracted large crowds and newspaper reporters. At one trial in 1964, 250 people attended, with the district and regional papers and local radio providing detailed information, along with testimonials from former believers.\(^{1172}\)

Comrade and social courts epitomized the educational aspect of trials. Instituted in 1919 to enforce work discipline, these courts were revived under Khrushchev, becoming a major feature of antireligious work and part of a larger populist impulse in the Khrushchev

\(^{1171}\) GARF, f. 461, op. 11, d. 556, l. 12

\(^{1172}\) TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 4, spr. 362, ark. 2-4.
era.\textsuperscript{1173} By 1964, approximately 197,000 such courts existed in the USSR.\textsuperscript{1174} The courts, staffed by citizens, were organized primarily around workplaces and housing units, and exerted pressure over individuals in their community in cases where direct state intervention and criminal proceedings had been deemed unnecessary. Radio stations broadcast some of these hearings and atheist film producers used court footage in documentary films against the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1175} The 1962 Yearbook noted that:

Fiendish means have been employed to break the integrity of Jehovah’s servants. Publishers [Witnesses] are brought before so-called fellow-workers courts, made up of factory of farm workers, managers and party functionaries. They are threatened with the loss of their jobs, allotments, homes, pensions, and so forth, if they do not publicly denounce the organization and withdraw.\textsuperscript{1176}

A 1960 comrade court hearing against two Witness fathers provides a glimpse of how these trials ran. The court accused both men of raising their children in a religious spirit and of refusing to allow the children to participate in official youth organizations or other extracurricular activities. Several speakers made accusatory remarks against the men. For example, a doctor provided testimony on how one of the men had come to his office to secure medical treatment for his terminally ill wife. The doctor asked him why he had appealed to a medical professional, and not God, for help. The man responded: “Who else would I call?” The audience shouted: “Jehovah!” The doctor continued to berate the man,


\textsuperscript{1174} Gorlizki, “Delegalization in Russia,” 403.

\textsuperscript{1175} Sviridov and Talanov, “Na zemle sibirskoi,” 72-73.

asking him if he had ever actually seen or spoken to Jehovah. The doctor then demanded to know where the man obtained his Watch Tower literature. The audience shouted in response: “Nathan Knorr! Rutherford! Brooklyn! Bourgeoisie! America!” When the presiding judge allowed one of the men to speak, he was shouted down by calls from audience members, including former Witnesses, to let the man’s child join the Pioneers, sing in the school choir, and get involved in gymnastics. The court recommended the revocation of custody rights, sending its decision to the local People’s Court.1177

Criminal trials often employed a similar framework and style, even though the proceedings were more serious and could result in long sentences. A 1959 trial in Mykolaïv oblast took place over three days in the city of Pervomais’k’s Palace of Culture. Prior to the event, local residents attended public talks by former Witnesses, a KGB official, and others, all decrying the actions of local believers. Area newspapers and the regional radio covered these events and the well-attended trial in detail, while a crew filmed the proceedings for use in anti-Witness propaganda. The oblast Party secretary reported that, as one of the defendants spoke, the crowd shouted, “Death to American spies and traitors of the homeland,” and called out, “Exile them!” The prosecution paraded a host of former and current Witnesses onto the stand. After the current Witnesses refused to testify against the organization, the crowd called out, “Shame!” “Try him!” and, “He is no better than the defendants!” The defendants received terms of five to ten years of forced labor for anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, while the court indicted those individuals who had not testified against their fellow believers for refusal to cooperate with the court. The crowd called out for harsher sentences and had to be reminded by the prosecutor that the terms were consistent with

government sentencing guidelines.\textsuperscript{1178}

Atheist agitprop used materials gathered at public trials to convince ordinary believers that their leaders were crooks and fanatics. After the 1962 trial against the country committee, agitators put together a traveling exhibition of trial photographs and documents.\textsuperscript{1179} Similarly, newspapers reprinted photographs of confiscated literature and printing equipment found during the arrest of country servant Dubovyns’kyi.\textsuperscript{1180} Evidence from the Stalin-era trials of Witness leaders resurfaced in some publications.\textsuperscript{1181} Agitators even organized group tours of uncovered printing bunkers so that community members and believers could see the illegal activities of the Witness leadership.\textsuperscript{1182}

Witnesses saw trials as opportunities to explain and preach their faith, just as they had in the Stalin era. A 1962 Komsomol report cautioned that open court trials had sometimes proven counterproductive in this regard, giving sectarians a venue for religious propaganda.\textsuperscript{1183} At a 1983 trial of a Witness husband and wife in Kirgizia, neither defendant admitted to any leadership position in the Witnesses, but told the court that they had raised their children in the faith and that the family read Watch Tower publications together.\textsuperscript{1184} At another trial, the defendant told the court, “There are two roads—the wide one, leading to

\textsuperscript{1178} TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 24, spr. 24, ark. 67-79.
\textsuperscript{1179} DAZO, f. 93, op. 2, spr. 398, ark. 22-23.
\textsuperscript{1180} Dragan, “Vot kak nas obmanyvali,” 2.
\textsuperscript{1181} Buimistruk, Moia ispoved’, 19.
\textsuperscript{1183} RGASPI, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1111, l. 39.
\textsuperscript{1184} The court sentenced both individuals to three years in a labor camp and confiscated their two motorcycles. Upon request of the husband’s employer, however, the court gave the husband a suspended sentence and released him. The employer promised to conduct educational work with him. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2756, ll. 84-89.
death, and the narrow one, leading to eternal life. And I am glad that I am taking the narrow path.” Accused of refusing to allow her daughter to join the Octobrists, she declared, “I am a true Christian and I believe in Jehovah God and worship only God, and not a star. Therefore, I want my daughter also to be a true Christian and not to wear a star.” She ended by telling those gathered in the courtroom that God would soon eliminate all suffering and evil on earth and establish a paradise for the Witnesses.\footnote{1185}

While most Witnesses defended their beliefs in court, trial propaganda focused instead on those Witnesses who abandoned their beliefs during the hearing or investigation. In such instances, the court usually abstained from delivering a prison sentence, releasing the reformed believer back into society as a testament to the great humanity of the Soviet justice system. The believer, in turn, was expected to make good on his pledge by publicly renouncing his former faith, typically in the local or regional newspapers. Ion, a Moldavian Witness tried in 1963, used his courtroom testimony to admit guilt and ask for mercy. He clarified that no one had forced him into making this statement. The court granted his request and freed him.\footnote{1186} At a 1960 comrade court hearing in Stavropol’ krai, a former Witness begged his fellow collective farmers not to deprive him of custody rights and vowed to raise his children in a Soviet manner. The court decided to grant him a second chance to show the collective that he could lead an honest life.\footnote{1187}

**Perpetual Crisis**

To demonstrate concrete results in their struggle against religious belief, atheist

\footnote{1185} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 254, ark. 45.

\footnote{1186} Boiko, “I upala s glaz pelena,” 2.

activists and CRA officials cited the numbers of believers converted into atheists. Nearly
every community could point to someone who had been convinced to abandon religious
beliefs. In this sense, former believers served a useful purpose beyond their involvement in
atheist work. Their sheer existence proved that religion was indeed losing support among the
population. As a result, both Soviet publications and internal reports continually cited
examples of former believers, providing lists of Witnesses who had abandoned their faith.1188
Similarly, most reports on the state of antireligious work referred to “former believers” and
quantified how many believers had left religious organizations in a given time period. A
1962 Ternopil’ oblast report, for example, noted that as a result of Party measures over the
previous two years, 282 Jehovah’s Witnesses had announced their withdrawal from the organization.1189
A 1959 Volyn’ oblast report claimed that the Witnesses were no longer active in the area.1190
Despite these positive assessments, both Ternopil’ and Volyn’ continued to have sizeable
Witness populations through the 1980s.1191 Similarly, reports from the northern Moldavian
district of Edineț declared that, thanks to atheist work, the local Witness community was on
the brink of collapse in 1956.1192 Yet a 1973 CRA report on the district listed 514
Witnesses.1193

Even though atheist propaganda maintained that religion would not die out on its
own, antireligious propaganda promoted the view that it would decline in influence as Soviet

1188 See, for example, Kuts, Armageddon, 117-18.
1189 RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 215, l. 17.
1190 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 2418, ark. 39.
1191 For example in the 1985 CRA statistics, Ternopil’ reported 770 Witnesses and Volyn’ listed 698. GARF, f.
6991, op. 6, d. 3130, l. 102.
1192 AOSPRM, f. 278, inv. 3, d. 779, f. 1.
1193 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 548, l. 11.
society progressed toward communism. Atheist propaganda proclaimed that religion had entered a general “crisis” as it struggled to adapt to modern conditions. This view acknowledged the fact that religions had modified their beliefs and practices to remain relevant in Soviet society. A 1971 booklet, for example, was entitled “Jehovism Adapts.” Soviet publications argued that religious organizations were desperate to fill in their depleted ranks. Overall, atheist propaganda declared that religions would eventually collapse under the weight of modern reality. As a 1968 work put it in discussing ordinary believers: “They cannot be deceived forever. The time will come when people will see the light.” A 1962 article in a Moldavian district newspaper, noting how it had received letters from more than twenty former Witnesses, was appropriately entitled “On the verge of collapse.”

What these publications often failed to take into account, of course, were the individuals who continued to join the Witnesses, a number that could more than equal those leaving the organization. A 1974 report from Zakarpattia oblast stated that, although in one district 120 people had left the Witnesses, another 152 had joined during the same time period. On the national level, the agitprop department of the TsK acknowledged that, although more than 500 Witnesses had left the religion in 1959, many others had converted

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1198 DAZO, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 98, ark. 26.
to the faith. More than forty people had become members from one Irkutsk district alone. Children of Witness parents also tended to join the organization upon reaching adulthood.\textsuperscript{1199} The Zakarpattia oblast Party committee in January 1969 reported that many districts experienced a decline in members of unregistered sects and a halt to further growth, but admitted that there had been no net decrease in the number of Witnesses and some growth in specific districts. The committee explained this discrepancy as the result not of actual growth, but of better accounting and more accurate information on Witness communities.\textsuperscript{1200}

Even if the data did not substantiate this point, Soviet media, scholars, atheist agitators, and the CRA all comforted themselves with the belief that religion had reached a state of crisis from which it could not recover.\textsuperscript{1201} A 1978 work stated that “the religious crisis cannot be evaluated solely by the number of believers.”\textsuperscript{1202} A 1966 CRA report proclaimed that more and more Witnesses wanted to move out of the underground and reject ties to the Brooklyn headquarters.\textsuperscript{1203} In 1979, the CRA described the religion situation in Moldavia as “extremely complex.” It cited the alleged “crisis” to help explain the increase in youth membership in Christian groups, including the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1204} At a 1980 All-Union CRA conference at the Moscow Academy of Science, speakers explained the apparent stability of religious life and even some recent growth in the number of believers by claiming that religious organizations were doing everything in their power to overcome the “crisis” within

\textsuperscript{1199} RGANI, f. 5, op. 34, d. 77, l. 18.

\textsuperscript{1200} DAZO, f. 1, op. 6, spr. 93, ark. 14-15.

\textsuperscript{1201} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 147, ll. 111-14.

\textsuperscript{1202} Konik, “Istiny” svidetelei legovy, 8.

\textsuperscript{1203} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 8, l. 103.

\textsuperscript{1204} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1564, l. 135.
their ranks.\footnote{GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1825, l. 12.}

Sociological studies offered a means to give scientific weight to this argument. One 1980 booklet put out by the Ukraine Knowledge Society declared that “empirical data from concrete sociological research” had proven that believers are in the midst of a “process of emancipation” from religious belief.\footnote{Gryniv, \textit{Bruklin na rozdorizhzh}, 6.} Much of the sociological research on religion focused on finding proof for the existence of the alleged “crisis” in religious communities. Sociological survey data on qualitative religious belief should be used with caution. Many studies do not indicate how they identified Witnesses, nor how they managed to get them to answer probing and potentially incriminating questions regarding their faith. It is possible that researchers relied on police records or CRA databases to locate believers and that Witnesses felt forced to cooperate in such surveys. Given the continued arrest and harassment of Witnesses into the 1980s, members would have had ample reason to provide false information and little incentive to speak freely about their beliefs and practices. Not surprisingly, survey results show relatively high percentages of participants who responded to all questions with either “I don’t know” or “I cannot say.”\footnote{Christel Lane has argued that while Soviet sociological studies of religion are generally reliable, polls of illegal sects such as the Witnesses must be viewed with caution, since believers were likely to give false responses or refuse to answer at all. Lane, \textit{Christian Religion}, 15-16. See also Fletcher, \textit{Soviet Believers}, 185-90.} Indeed, at a 1975 trial of Witnesses in Stavropol’, a former member testified that his local leaders had instructed believers to answer “I don’t know” to all questions by authorities.\footnote{GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 960, l. 25.} The wording of questions could also heavily bias the results. A survey in Moldavia asked Witnesses: “Are you aware of the political orientation of Brooklyn literature?” The majority respondents in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\footnote{1205}] GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1825, l. 12.
\item[\footnote{1206}] Gryniv, \textit{Bruklin na rozdorizhzh}, 6.
\item[\footnote{1207}] Christel Lane has argued that while Soviet sociological studies of religion are generally reliable, polls of illegal sects such as the Witnesses must be viewed with caution, since believers were likely to give false responses or refuse to answer at all. Lane, \textit{Christian Religion}, 15-16. See also Fletcher, \textit{Soviet Believers}, 185-90.
\item[\footnote{1208}] GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 960, l. 25.
\end{itemize}
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each village answered, “I don’t know.” The study concluded from this response that the majority of ordinary believers were unaware of the political machinations of the organization’s leaders.\textsuperscript{1209}

Accurate or not, Soviet publications used sociological data as evidence of an internal crisis among the Witnesses. The study of Ukrainian Witnesses in 1976 offered a great deal of data to back up this claim, observing that more than 47 percent of Witnesses did not intend to raise their children in a “religious spirit.” Fifty-seven percent allowed their children to read fiction and roughly 27 percent let their children join the Pioneers. Only a third stated that they had total confidence in the truth of the organization’s doctrines. Just over 8 percent of respondents believed that Armageddon would occur in their lifetime.\textsuperscript{1210} According to another study conducted in Ukraine, 28 percent of Witnesses had married outside of their faith, “evidence” that members did not always follow the religion’s guidelines.\textsuperscript{1211} Other research found that 15 percent of Witnesses believed families should instill love of one’s homeland and people (\textit{narod}) in their children. The author used this data to argue that the vast majority of Witnesses were either neutral or positively inclined toward socialist progress.\textsuperscript{1212}

Sociological data also attempted to prove that not all Witnesses shared the assumed anti-Soviet political ideology of their leaders. For example, a Ukrainian study asked Witnesses to define Armageddon. The most popular definition was “God’s judgment” or the “Last Judgment,” followed by “God’s secret” or “I don’t know.” Only 5 percent of

\textsuperscript{1209} Gazhos, \textit{Osobennosti ideologii iegovizma}, 47.

\textsuperscript{1210} Iarotskii, \textit{Evoliutsiia sovremennogo iegovizma}, 112-20.

\textsuperscript{1211} Gryniv, \textit{Bruklin na rozdorizhki}, 32.

\textsuperscript{1212} Pugach, \textit{Egovizm}, 45, 67-69.
respondents described it as a “holy war” and another 5 percent as the destruction of the world. This stood in contrast to the authors’ depiction of Armageddon as war propaganda. Ordinary believers, they argued, did not share the organization’s allegedly misanthropic views. 1213 Ukrainian surveys found that 53 percent of members actively opposed the organization’s attitude toward the Soviet state and society, while 29 percent passively rejected some or all of the organization’s political views. 1214 A similar study concluded that only 39 percent of Witnesses were “fanatics,” although the researchers did not state exactly how they came to such a conclusion. 1215

The crisis began to ring hollow as decades passed with little or no success in liquidating Witness communities. Even as the state trumpeted its achievements in converting believers into atheists, its own statistics from the CRA showed no evidence of a reduction in religious belief. Religious propaganda declared that religious communities could not adapt to the changing conditions of Soviet life forever, but just how long it would take for this alleged crisis to have a real impact on reducing religious belief was never articulated. In fact, Witnesses had faced far more adverse circumstances and overcome them. They were prepared to weather this crisis of modern times until Armageddon.

Conclusion

After Stalin’s death, the state generated a standard discourse on religious belief in general, and Witnesses in particular, that sharply distinguished between ordinary believers

1213 Shysh et al., Egovizm i egovisti, 74, 119.

1214 This survey data is based on two studies of the Witnesses in Ukraine. The first study was done by I. D. Pugach in 1973, and is entitled Analiz religioznogo soznania ‘svidetelei legovy’ i nekotorye osobennosti ikh ateisticheskoi vospitanii. The second study, Egovizm i egovisti, was a collective work published in 1974. Korotkaia et al., Iegovizm, 115.

1215 Safronova, Reaktionnost’ Mistisheskikh Sovremennogo Khristianskogo Sektantstva, 100.
and leaders/fanatics. The distinction between ordinary believers and leaders allowed the state to view most believers as loyal Soviet citizens who had been misled by manipulative fanatics. Equally critical, it shielded the state from having to confront the more dangerous possibility that some of its citizens actually found the Witnesses’ message more appealing than socialism or communism. Instead, official rhetoric explained the tenacity of religious beliefs as mere “survivals” from the capitalist past that would completely disappear only with the achievement of communism.1216

Yet, while the post-Stalin press asserted that more and more Soviet citizens abandoned their faith each year, official rhetoric on the alleged “sectarian crisis” remained profoundly static throughout the late Soviet era. This situation presented the state with a rather serious dilemma. On the one hand, exposing what the authorities saw as the severe drawbacks of membership in religious organizations to public scrutiny created a more informed public that in theory would be less susceptible to religious solicitations. On the other hand, continued media attention betrayed the staunch resilience of religious communities in Soviet society. The Soviet media and atheist agitators thus awkwardly oscillated between highlighting the threat of sects and proclaiming their gradual and inevitable dissolution. This discourse revealed the state’s failure to eliminate religion, while providing marginal religious organizations with free publicity for their beliefs and practices refracted through the lens of official propaganda.

At the same time that the state extended legal registration to many religious organizations, it faced increasing scrutiny from foreign observers, including the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, regarding its persecution of religious believers. Official

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1216 See, for example, A. Zalesskii, G. P. Davidiuk, and E. S. Prokoshina, eds., Prichiny sushchestvovaniia i puti preodoleniiia religioznykh perezhitkov (Minsk: Nauka i tekhnika, 1965).
rhetoric maintained that the state prosecuted believers not for their religious convictions, but for their illegal, subversive political actions.\textsuperscript{1217} It proclaimed that the state was doing all it could to reach out to ordinary believers and to integrate them into Soviet society. Testimonials from former Witnesses affirmed these claims, while exposés of criminal activity by leaders and fanatics validated the alleged threat posed by certain members.

Cadres from Party and public organizations used lectures, atheist events, individual work, comrade courts, and work meetings to pressure Witnesses to embrace atheism and abandon religion. They hoped to beat the Witnesses at their own game by converting believers into godless builders of communism. Yet the Witnesses actively contested these attempts, protecting their members from atheist rhetoric by challenging agitators and winning new converts, even bringing former believers back into the fold. Ultimately, the state could not compete with the dedication and skills of trained Witness proselytizers who believed they were saving citizens from destruction in Armageddon. Atheist cadres, meanwhile, lacked this same level of motivation and Bible knowledge. While the state pointed to former believers as evidence of its success, religious belief showed little indication of fading away. As a result, promises of a secular communist paradise began to appear about as likely as Witness predictions of a coming Armageddon.

\textsuperscript{1217} See Shamaro, “Torgovtsy strakhom,” 29, and Korotkaia et al., \textit{Iegovizm}, 47.
CHAPTER SIX

THE PATH TO LEGALIZATION FROM LATE BREZHNEV THROUGH GORBACHEV

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’” Psalm 126: 1-2.

The Soviet state and the Jehovah’s Witnesses found themselves in a stalemate by the late 1970s. Despite continued efforts to control or eliminate unregistered religious communities, the state had failed to convert most Witnesses to atheist communism and to liquidate the Witnesses’ leadership and underground organization. Yet the Witnesses remained a fringe religious group with a small membership in comparison to other faiths in the Soviet Union. Both the Witnesses and the Soviet state won individual converts to their point of view, but neither communism nor Armageddon seemed close on the horizon. Under Brezhnev, the state shifted focus toward controlling, rather than eliminating, religious life. It hoped that a “softer” approach of extending limited benefits to religious organizations previously barred from registration would bring them under closer state scrutiny. It would also help prevent illegal activities and undermine independent religious authorities.

With this goal in mind, the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) in the late 1970s began to cautiously broach the possibility of legalizing the Witnesses if they agreed to conform to state laws on religious organizations. While both the CRA and Witnesses seemed open to discussing the matter in the abstract, neither party proved willing to compromise its vision of what registration should entail. The CRA intended to register the Witnesses on the basis of the existing registration laws, while Witnesses wanted a “no strings attached”
legalization that would allow them to practice their faith as they did in Western democratic
countries. The death of Brezhnev in November 1982 did not cause a shift in this standoff by
either the state or the Witnesses. Under the short-lived successive leaderships of Iurii
Vladimirovich Andropov (November 1982 to February 1984) and Konstantin Ustinovich
Chernenko (February 1984 to March 1985), dialogue over registration persisted with little
tangible results.

Ultimately, it took new, more youthful leadership under Mikhail Sergeevich
Gorbachev (1985-1991) to transform church-state relations. Under Gorbachev’s twin policies
of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost’ (openness), the state signaled a willingness to
rethink official policy toward registration with greater input from Soviet citizens. Yet even as
the state moved toward democratic reforms and more liberal definitions of freedom of
conscience, the Witnesses remained one of the last illegal religious organizations in the
Soviet Union. Not until the final months of the Soviet state were the Witnesses officially
registered.

Revisiting Registration

Adjustments to religious policy in the twilight years of the Brezhnev era made it
possible to revisit the question of registration. In 1977, the state replaced the 1936 “Stalin
Constitution” with the so-called “Brezhnev Constitution,” which reaffirmed freedom of
conscience for all Soviet citizens, while introducing two relatively minor changes in church-
state relations. First, it modified Article 52 to “guarantee” freedom of conscience, where the
earlier constitution had merely “recognized” this right. This semantic distinction reflected the
state’s desire to voice a commitment to basic human rights in response to growing
international condemnation. Article 29 declared that the USSR, in its relations with other states, “respects human rights and fundamental freedoms” and upholds the rules of international law. Second, the constitution further altered the original language of Article 52 by substituting the right to conduct “antireligious propaganda” to the right to conduct “atheist propaganda.”¹²¹⁸ This less antagonistic approach framed atheism as a positive worldview based on science and materialism rather than a reaction against religious belief. The Brezhnev Constitution, however, did not ensure basic rights for citizens any more than had the previous Stalin constitution. Even if the state had enforced the freedoms outlined in the document, the constitution did not address serious obstacles to freedom of conscience for organizations such as the Witnesses. In particular, it did not allow for religious abstention from civic duties such as voting and military service.

In general, the Brezhnev Constitution was as much a public relations campaign as it was an official statement of Soviet governance. In the lead up to its passage, the state solicited input from citizens to demonstrate the democratic nature of Soviet rule as enshrined in the document. Citizens had a chance to suggest changes and to comment on the draft constitution between June and October 1977, when the state adopted the final version as law.¹²¹⁹ In keeping with this policy, the CRA gathered feedback from religious believers and clergy on their reactions to the new constitution. CRA officials noted that, while most religions had a positive attitude and favorable response to the draft version, some “extremist elements” and “religious fanatics,” including the Witnesses, responded with skepticism and denounced continued state support for atheist propaganda. One 1977 CRA report quoted


Witnesses in Odessa oblast who criticized the constitution’s provision requiring military service and rejected the Brezhnev doctrine of a worldwide “struggle for peace.”\textsuperscript{1220} A Witness cited in the report said in regard to the latter point, “We [Soviet Witnesses] do not take up arms. In the US, 500,000 Jehovists do not take up arms either. That’s how you really prevent war.”\textsuperscript{1221} Witnesses in Krasnoiarsk krai criticized the new constitution for not granting believers the right to proselytize.\textsuperscript{1222} Witness criticisms of the constitution, not surprisingly, found little favor among Soviet officials, who disregarded these opinions as the voices of a few extremists and fanatics.

More important for religious organizations, the Soviet state in the summer of 1975 announced revisions to the 1929 Law on Religious Associations. As with the Brezhnev Constitution, the state intended the modifications to address growing international criticism of its human rights record in regard to religious believers. The Ukrainian agitprop department director, for example, in a memo to the Ukrainian Politburo in October 1976, expressed the hope that the law would counteract foreign propaganda on alleged religious repression in the USSR.\textsuperscript{1223} A 1975 memo from the Ukrainian CRA commissioner called on state institutions to show greater adherence to the principles of freedom of conscience due to foreign propaganda on religious repression. The commissioner advised the CRA officials to put more

\textsuperscript{1220} The “struggle for peace” slogan, developed in the early 1970s, reflected Brezhnev’s focus on stability and control and his pursuit of improved relations with the United States during this period. See John van Oudenaren, \textit{Détente in Europe: The Soviet Union and the West since 1953} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 138.

\textsuperscript{1221} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1144, ll. 151-54.

\textsuperscript{1222} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1166, l. 92.

\textsuperscript{1223} TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 10, spr. 2492, ark. 114.
effort into explaining these principles to Soviet citizens in order to avoid conflicts with believers.\(^{1224}\)

In fact, the statute contained little that was new. Rather, it made public what had already been practiced, but never acknowledged, since the secret 1961 instructions.\(^{1225}\) By exposing internal religious policy to public scrutiny, the state intended to acquaint Soviet citizens, and believers in particular, with Soviet laws on freedom of conscience.\(^{1226}\) Greater knowledge of the law, it believed, would result in better compliance with state regulations by believers. The 1975 regulation had one notable difference from the 1961 instructions, however, of relevance for Witnesses and other unregistered religious organizations: Article 23, which barred specific organizations from registration, did not appear in the new published regulation. This change apparently caused some confusion within the CRA as to whether this aspect of the 1961 instructions remained in force, or had been superseded by the new law. To clarify the matter, CRA commissioner Kuroedov wrote to the TsK in 1978 that he understood Article 23 to no longer apply to registration. Unfortunately, available documentation does not include the TsK’s response to this query.\(^{1227}\) Yet the subsequent actions of the CRA to promote registration strongly suggest that Kuroedov’s view represented the majority opinion of CRA officials, at least in some areas, primarily Ukraine, with the most concentrated Witness communities.

The renewed interest in registration reflected the long-standing focus on control over religious life in the Brezhnev era. At a Ukrainian Politburo session in October 1976,

\(^{1224}\) GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 737, ll. 202-03.


\(^{1226}\) TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 10, spr. 2492, ark. 114.

members acknowledged that, by not offering registration to certain groups, the state had created dissatisfaction among believers, fueling religious fanaticism and conflict between believers and local authorities. In a 1979 report on religious sectarianism, the Ukrainian CRA commissioner underlined the following text: “The second major problem remains the actions of groups of unregistered believers.” The report maintained that these groups harbored extremists, traitors, fascist collaborators, and criminals. The best strategy, it asserted, was to bring such groups out of the underground and into the legal system. The Witnesses, as one of the largest unregistered religious communities, were of major importance in this regard. In Zakarpattia oblast, for example, with the highest concentration of Witnesses in the Soviet Union, 1978 CRA statistics identified 46 unregistered Witness groups with 4,287 members. The next largest unregistered religion in the oblast, Pentecostals, had only 14 groups and 599 members. In order to extend control over unofficial religious life, the state realized it needed to take measures to bring the Witnesses under its authority.

In May 1980, the registration issue received further attention from the all-union CRA as a result of a national conference and a related CRA resolution on work with Jehovists. The conference stressed the need for all CRA commissioners and local officials to do more to bring religious life under the control and oversight of the state. It focused on registration and compliance with the law and discussed the need for propaganda to counteract Western charges of Soviet religious repression. That same year, the CRA passed a resolution calling for improving work with “Jehovists,” including the goal of registration. In response,

1228 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 10, spr. 2492, ark. 122.
1229 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 100, ark. 104-05.
1230 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 58, ark. 4.
1231 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 32, spr. 1593, ark. 26, and GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1871, ll. 9-11.
the Ukrainian CRA held oblast-level seminars for the MVD, police, and justice officials to discuss its implementation and notified oblast-level Party committees about the resolution and the measures to be taken.1232

The 1980 resolution sent a mixed message to CRA commissioners, requiring them to broach the issue of local registration with Witness communities, while simultaneously working to eliminate organized Witness activities. Question and answer sessions between the officials and agitators and local Witnesses in Volyn’ oblast demonstrate this two-pronged strategy toward Witnesses. While ostensibly held to explain the law and registration to Witnesses, the talks also included denunciations of the allegedly anti-Soviet ideology of Witness leaders and the anti-communist nature of the Witness religion. Authorities used the meetings to help identify Witnesses for targeted atheist agitation.

In addition, the CRA hoped that registration would weaken the religion’s underground organization. In this sense, the 1980 resolution evidenced the state’s intent to implement what KGB director Semichastnyi had advised over a decade earlier: to divide and conquer the Witnesses through registration. This idea won support from CRA officials and advisors in the early and mid-1980s. Shortly after the conference, the Krasnoiarsk CRA commissioner stressed the need to pursue legalization as part of other measures to reduce the influence of extremist leaders in the Witness organization.1233 A few years later, with little progress made on registration, P. L. Iarotskii, a religious scholar and advisor to the CRA on the Witnesses, instructed the CRA that, if the state extended registration to the Witnesses,

1232 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 207, ark. 195.
1233 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1825, ll. 12-27.
they would fight among themselves to meet the terms necessary for registration, leading to division and schism within the religion, a positive outcome for the state.\textsuperscript{1234}

The state struggled to find the right balance between registration and repression during this period. Some officials still hoped that the state could eliminate the Witnesses without extending them any legal standing. For example, the Kurgan oblast Party committee in 1981 called for registration of unregistered religious organizations within eighteen months. Yet in the copy of the action plan sent to the CRA, an official had penciled in the margins next to the stated registration goal, “or prevent their illegal actions.” The official also underlined the text stating that, in cases where groups refuse to register, it would move to prevent any unauthorized religious activities.\textsuperscript{1235} An August 1982 memo from the Zakarpattia oblast Party committee called for registering Jehovists and Reform Adventists, but also for taking measures against those who refuse to register.\textsuperscript{1236}

Probably as a result of the higher concentration of religious believers in Ukraine, officials there devoted the most time and effort into resolving the registration issue. From the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, several Ukrainian oblasts worked to extend registration to underground Western Christian groups. In most locales, these measures took the form of talks between CRA and Party officials and believers to explain the existing law and need for compliance. For example, the Ukrainian CRA sent out inspectors in 1978 to explain the new statute on religious organizations to believers and to assess their willingness to comply.\textsuperscript{1237}

Outside of Ukraine, where Witnesses and believers in general were less concentrated, CRA

\textsuperscript{1234} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2521, l. 7.

\textsuperscript{1235} GARF f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2096, l. 6.

\textsuperscript{1236} DAZO, f. 1, op. 21, spr. 122, ark. 49-51.

\textsuperscript{1237} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 84, ark. 88-103.
commissioners and local soviets showed less initiative. In one exception to this rule, some districts in Irkutsk oblast sought to register the Witnesses. In December 1979, the Usol’e-Sibirskoe city soviet passed a plan for work with “Jehovists” that included broaching the question of registration for Witnesses in Chunskii district. Though unsuccessful, this example demonstrates that interest in registering the Witnesses by local officials extended beyond Ukraine.¹²³⁸

A 1979 memo to city and district Party executive committees from the Donets’k CRA commissioner advised officials how to conduct these meetings with believers. It suggested that speakers explain the nature and practical guarantees of freedom of conscience in the USSR, including the right to practice or not practice a religion, the right to conduct atheist propaganda, the separation of church and state and church and schools, and the equality of all citizens before the law. The memo instructed officials to make clear that these rights were limited to the extent necessary to ensure social order and security and the health and well-being of its citizens. It also recommended that officials encourage believers to take part in Soviet life by going to the movies, watching television, and reading modern Soviet literature, newspapers, and magazines. The memo cautioned that some “extremists” might cite the Helsinki Accords and other international legal documents concerning freedom of religion. It advised officials to clarify that these documents do not provide unlimited freedom, but rather confirm both the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and as such, conform to Soviet laws.¹²³⁹ Agitators, local soviets, and their control commissions similarly stepped up efforts during this time to explain the current laws and registration policies to religious communities,

¹²³⁸ GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1609, ll. 19-21.
¹²³⁹ GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1649, ll. 18-23.
especially unregistered groups. To aid in these efforts, the CRA circulated information to lecturers on the laws governing religious organizations.

Forums between believers and authorities and agitators revealed the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to registration. In Ivano-Frankivs’k oblast from 1980 to 1981, the CRA held thirty-nine conversations with Witnesses to explain the laws governing religious organizations, along with individual conversations with sixty-six known Witness elders.

Yet, after three years of such talks, the Odessa CRA commissioner concluded in 1981 that these communities were unready for registration. Many Witnesses pointed out that registration would make it impossible for them to practice their faith as they saw fit. They wanted the state to guarantee their right to preach door to door and to provide meeting spaces for Witnesses to gather. A CRA inspector to Chernivtsi oblast in 1981 described Witnesses’ attitude toward registration as “negative,” noting one Witness’s comment to him that “the Bible and the USSR’s laws are incompatible.” At a 1984 meeting in Zakarpattia oblast, believers questioned how they could register when Soviet laws deny the existence of God and wondered if registration would interfere with access to literature, or, more troublingly, if it would deprive them of salvation.

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1240 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 6-7.
1241 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 197, ark. 2-13. For example, in Zakarpattia oblast in 1983, 965 lectures and conversations on this topic were held with religious believers. In addition, 112 newspaper articles and radio broadcasts addressed the matter. The state held 45 seminars for members of local soviets to explain the laws and provide instruction on how to work with religious believers. DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 11-13.
1242 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2132, l. 91.
1243 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 167, ark. 77-80.
1244 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2521, ll. 1-5.
1245 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 274, ark. 36-37.
Many Witnesses felt registration would, in fact, make it more difficult for them to practice their faith. Since the state had failed to cut off literature supply or prevent illegal activities, the Witnesses saw little benefit in compromising. They had already learned how to adapt to life under Soviet rule without having to abandon their beliefs or practices. One elder in Zakarpattia oblast worried that registration would entail a loss of access to Brooklyn literature. He observed this would be far worse than the current situation, in which Soviet Witnesses received literature once a month from Ukrainians in Canada and from Europe. He did not elaborate on the logistics of these literature deliveries, but presumably some of it was mailed to the Soviet Union and eluded customs officials. A 1982 report from Donets’k oblast acknowledged that, because the state had been unable to prevent Witnesses from holding illegal meetings, it had failed to demonstrate to the Witnesses the need for registration. An informational report prepared for a 1983 CRA conference in Kiev emphasized: “Without Brooklyn literature, without its constant incitement of fanaticism and the fomenting of a campaign of fear around a given situation . . . Jehovism as an ideological phenomenon and organizational system cannot exist.” Yet although the state understood the critical role of Watch Tower literature in the religion, it could not effectively cut off its supply into the Soviet Union and force the Witnesses to accept its terms of registration.

State efforts to control access to the international organization and literature became even more difficult in this period due to developments in Poland. Watch Tower President Frederick W. Franz and Governing Body member Theodore Jaracz received official sanction

1246 DAZO f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 34-35.


from the Polish government in the fall of 1977 to visit the country and meet with Polish
believers. The following year, Jaracz returned to Poland with another Governing Body
member, Milton Henschel, for a meeting with the Polish version of the CRA, the Office of
Religious Affairs. While this visit did not result in registration for the organization, Polish
Witnesses subsequently enjoyed a freer atmosphere with less state interference even after the
imposition of martial law in 1981 in response to social and labor unrest. The Polish
government also consented to the Witnesses’ establishing greater contact with its
international organization and its fellow believers worldwide. In 1983, Witnesses from
Western European countries received visas to take part in religious conventions in Poland.
The next year, the organization imported 60,000 copies of the publication, *My Book of Bible
Stories*, followed by other religious literature in mass quantities. The freer environment
in Poland undoubtedly made it easier for Soviet Witnesses to network with the Polish
Witness organization and to smuggle in instructions and literature from this neighboring
country.

As the Polish example suggests, both Witnesses and the international Governing
Body understood registration in Soviet bloc countries as an act of negotiation not between
local believers and local officials, but as an agreement between the Governing Body and the
state. Many CRA officials acknowledged this obstacle in their reports on talks with Soviet
Witnesses. At a 1984 meeting in Dnipropetrovs’k oblast, an elder told officials, “We have a
theocratic organization and, therefore, the question of registration is not decided by us, but by

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1249 In 1980, the state permitted 2,000 Polish Witnesses to attend a district convention in Vienna and more than
5,000 to attend the following year’s convention in Austria. Also in 1981, Polish officials let Witnesses hold
their own convention with 5,571 participants in Gdansk, along with two additional conventions at a sports hall
Brooklyn.1250 At a meeting in Chernivtsi oblast, one Witness told a CRA official that he would need to travel to Brooklyn to resolve the matter of registration.1251 The talks between the CRA and Witnesses yielded no results because CRA officials did not speak to those with the power to make decisions for the organizations.

Further exacerbating this problem was the fact that the state hoped to drive a wedge between ordinary believers and elders within the Witness community. This strategy led CRA officials to hold talks not only with local elders, but with the entire Witness population. Yet reports acknowledged that believers deferred to their elders in making key decisions and showed little inclination to operate independently of the organization’s leadership. When the CRA sent inspectors to Zakarpattia oblast in 1984, for example, all of the local elders and many other Witnesses were out of the region working as seasonal laborers. The Witnesses left in the area were primarily children, homemakers, and the elderly. One man, a pensioner, advised the inspector to wait for the elders to return from the seasonal labor brigades, since he could not make decisions himself on registration.1252 The trip proved fruitless.

Similarly, CRA officials hoped that they could exploit lingering divisions from the schism among the Witnesses and appeal to splinter groups outside of Brooklyn’s authority. Although officials assumed these communities would be more eager to register and have fewer concerns about literature access and communicating with the Governing Body than mainline Witnesses, this proved not to be the case. The Chernivtsi commissioner claimed in 1983 that the CRA and local officials had a better relationship with neutralists than with other Witnesses. However, he lamented that even the neutralists had not completely rejected

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1250 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 278, ark. 15.

1251 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 167, ark. 111.

1252 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 71.
Brooklyn’s authority, noting that some members continued to read old *Watchtower* issues or to receive new issues from other Witnesses. More problematically, neutralists refused to compromise on the issue of military service and were lukewarm about registration in general. In the end, the commissioner concluded that the CRA could not depend on legalization of the neutralists in the near future.¹²⁵³

A few oblasts had greater initial success in advancing registration among these schismatic groups due to interest from individual Witnesses, but also failed to achieve real results because they could not convince the entire community of the benefits of registration. The Ternopil’ CRA worked with one breakaway Witness community that seemed open to registration.¹²⁵⁴ The oblast CRA commissioner reported in 1981 that the village elder in Malyi Khodachkiv, Volodymyr Turok, had presented a written declaration seeking registration of his group of nine Witnesses. On closer examination, however, the CRA discovered that only Volodymyr had signed the letter and therefore instructed him to acquire the signatures and consent of all members. A follow-up meeting with Volodymyr a month later found that not only had he made no progress in convincing other members to sign, but that his wife was the major holdout. Volodymyr told the commissioner, “The main thing is that I need to convince my wife, Marta. For some reason, she is wary about this idea and definitely influences others. I will try to convince her.”¹²⁵⁵ Two years later, Volodymyr had made no progress in convincing Marta and the other members to sign the registration documents. By that time, even he had changed his mind and begun to avoid contact with the

¹²⁵³ GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2636, l. 51-53.

¹²⁵⁴ TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 241, ark. 103.

¹²⁵⁵ TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 167, ark. 89-90.
The Zakarpattia CRA focused on registering the so-called Tyvodarists, named after a local Witness leader whose members had split from the main organization in the 1960s, rejected Watch Tower literature, and renounced ties to Brooklyn. Although the KGB had suggested as early as the late 1970s that the state consider registering this group, this had never come to fruition. In the 1980s, local Witness leader M. I. Turda, a pensioner, led the group in the village of Bila Tserkva. In 1981, the CRA reported that Turda did not feel the time had come for registration. Reports in 1983 and 1984 described the group as not very active, meeting only once a week in small groups to study the Bible, with an estimated seventy-three members, fifty-three of whom were women, mostly elderly pensioners. When the CRA held a meeting with the Tyvodarists and other Witnesses in the spring of 1984 to discuss registration, it was met with a positive attitude from Tyvodar supporters, and a more muted response from mainline Witnesses. Yet the CRA failed to convince either group to register. In general, the CRA erred in assuming that splinter groups within the Witnesses would agree to register. Multiple attempts to win cooperation from these communities yielded no better results than with groups loyal to the Governing Body.

Because dialogue with Witnesses produced no tangible results, the state struggled to maintain any momentum toward registering the Witnesses. In fact, the Ukrainian agitprop

1256 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 241, ark. 103.
1257 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 274, ark. 36.
1258 DAZO, f. 1, op. 9, spr. 59, ark. 62.
1259 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2201, l. 16.
1260 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 241, ark. 63, and DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 34.
1261 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 274, ark. 36-37.
department was not entirely oblivious to the major obstacles facing registration. Its instructions to CRA commissioners in 1984 identified legitimate barriers to capitalizing on the purported division between rank-and-file members and leaders and acknowledged that Witnesses intended to wait on Brooklyn for permission to register.\textsuperscript{1262} The state, however, failed to see the fundamental contradiction between its official discourse and the real-life situation as reported by its own personnel and CRA officials. The state also refused to admit that its methods of agitation work had failed to make progress toward a uniformly atheist society.

As a result, action plans for work with Witnesses showed little difference from previous decades. The agitprop department, for example, continued to endorse the use of public meetings to condemn believers for illegal religious activity. It advocated the same basic measures it had employed since the Khrushchev era: specialized groups of atheist agitators to be created solely for work with Jehovahists, improved statistics on Witnesses, further individual work with members, preventative measures against proselytism by members on seasonal work brigades, and more propaganda on the religion’s allegedly anti-Soviet and reactionary teachings. It instructed officials in Ukraine to initiate group conversations with members to explain the existing laws on religious associations and cautioned officials not to let these measures be perceived as an “anti-Jehovist campaign.”\textsuperscript{1263} The plan enacted by Zakarpattia oblast called for studying the local situation, allocating the best ideological workers to areas with high concentrations of Witnesses, holding oblast seminars for lecturers and agitators, using the mass media and law enforcement to expose the

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\textsuperscript{1262} DAZO, f. 1, op. 21, spr. 122, ark. 10-14; f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 34-35.

\textsuperscript{1263} DAZO, f. 1, op. 21, spr. 122, ark. 10-14.
antisocial activities of extremists and fanatics, and highlighting examples of effective atheist education among Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1264}

Ultimately, efforts to register Witnesses in the late 1970s and early 1980s failed because the state, despite its new rhetoric about legalization, would not modify registration to make it acceptable to Witnesses. While the state saw registration as a process that would begin on the local level with individual groups of Witnesses, the Witnesses viewed it as an act that could occur only on a national level with approval of the international organization.\textsuperscript{1265} The chief CRA inspector in Ukraine, in a 1985 report, also noted that the new policy had not been uniformly implemented. Some oblasts had abandoned their efforts when they did not produce results, while other oblasts did not understand the new policy and thus never made any real attempt to implement it.\textsuperscript{1266} In short, registration required a coordinated effort and centralized talks between the Soviet state and the Governing Body, conditions the state was not prepared to meet.

**No End in Sight to State Repression**

As the Soviet state pursued a dual strategy of regulation and repression, Witnesses faced continued arrests and convictions through the early Gorbachev era for illegal religious activity. Criminal cases focused on alleged leaders and fanatics, whom the state increasingly referred to as “extremists.” According to a 1984 Krasnoiarsk CRA memorandum, “Characteristic of religious extremism are attempts to use religion for political purposes, to consciously refuse to recognize the law on religious cults, and to falsify the position of

\textsuperscript{1264} DAZO, f. 1, op. 21, spr. 122, ark. 6-7.

\textsuperscript{1265} DAZO, f. 1, op. 25, spr. 147, ark. 19; f. 1, op. 30, spr. 96, ark. 8-10.

\textsuperscript{1266} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 311, ark. 33.
religion, church, and believers in the USSR.” This definition reflected the heightened sensitivity of the Soviet state in the 1980s to foreign accusations of state religious persecution. The document urged the state to struggle against religion and fight for the rights and interests of believers.\footnote{GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2784, ll. 44-45.} The state’s proclaimed support for freedom of conscience notwithstanding, Witnesses accounted for a disproportionate number of the criminal convictions for illegal religious activity. For example, in Ukraine in 1978-79, the state recorded 78 criminal violations of laws by Witnesses. The significantly larger organization of unregistered Baptists had 124. In comparison, the Russian Orthodox Church had 15, and Pentecostals had only 11 violations.\footnote{TsDAVO, op. 7, spr. 109, ark. 10.}

To shield itself from foreign accusations that it criminalized religious activity, the Soviet state sometimes opted to revoke custody rights of unregistered religious believers, including Witnesses, on the basis of child neglect or abuse, rather than prosecute them for religious activity.\footnote{DAZO, f. 1, op. 5, spr. 814, ark. 19. Some custody cases also occurred during the late Khrushchev era. See, for example, 2008 Yearbook, 114-16.} In one notable instance, the Dobuliac family in the village of Grimăncăuți, Moldavia, lost custody of its four youngest children after a court convicted the eldest son of shirking military service in 1976. A year later, the state placed the children in state-run homes, where it hoped to reeducate them in a Soviet spirit. Instead, the children continually ran away to their parents. Thirteen-year old Petru showed little interest in school, ten-year old Liudmila did not join the Young Pioneers, and even seven-year old Galina refused to join the Octobrists. After several years of state involvement with no progress, officials finally got tired of hauling the children back to orphanages and returned custody to
the parents. In other cases, however, the state opted both for criminal prosecution and revocation of custody rights. One woman, Mariia, lost custody of her young daughter in late 1982 after being tried for illegal religious proselytism. Prosecution witnesses at the trial testified that Mariia had ripped off the Octobrist pin from her daughter’s dress in front of students and teachers at the local school. While these cases were not common, Witness parents lived with the knowledge that their religious beliefs could cost them custody of their children.

The appointment of former KGB chief Iu. V. Andropov as General Secretary in late 1982 resulted in a brief rise in religious repression and arrests of human rights activists, but it did little to eliminate underground religious activity or intellectual dissent. The Witness organization itself remarked on a “wave of persecution” from 1982 to 1984, and archival evidence confirms this impression. During this period, regional courts convicted dozens of Witnesses of illegal religious activity, often based on flimsy evidence, and handed down relatively long prison sentences. For example, in 1984 a Moldavian Witness received three years in a labor camp for printing and storing a large quantity of religious literature in his home. The same year, a female Witness also received three years in a camp on the basis of evidence that she regularly attended religious meetings in private homes and proselytized

1270 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 1343, ll. 13-15.

1271 GARF, 6991 f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2838, ll. 49-50.


1273 For information on criminal trials of Witnesses during this time, see TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 182, ark. 87-92; spr. 207, ark. 13; spr. 254, ark. 2-3, 37-38; spr. 322, ark. 13-19, 46-55, 63-69; GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2783, ll. 9-15; d. 2776, ll. 21-29. For discussion of legalization, see TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 167, ark. 89-90, 111-12; spr. 207, ark. 13-15, 118. For Witness perspective, see 2002 Yearbook, 228.

1274 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2759, ll. 68-72.
to local citizens about her beliefs.\textsuperscript{1275}

A 1983 trial in the city of Osh, Kirgizia, illustrates the typical format of trials during this period. The two defendants, a married Russian couple, had moved to the region in the late 1960s with their two school-age children. Both had prior convictions related to their involvement with the Witnesses. The husband served time for resisting the military draft in 1973, and the wife spent six years in a camp for a 1959 conviction on anti-Soviet activity. The court presented evidence that the couple converted several individuals in the city of Dzhalal-Abad and held meetings in their home to read The Watchtower and Awake!. The prosecution noted that, because of the couple’s actions, some of these converts had refused to vote or to serve in the military. The couple’s children had not joined the Komsomol or participated in other school activities. A search of the home uncovered hundreds of Watch Tower publications, along with cassette recordings of Witness sermons and choir music. In court, the couple claimed that they were simply ordinary Witnesses and did not lead any group or give any literature to others. The wife admitted to raising her children as religious believers, but said she let them make their own decisions. The son testified that his parents helped him study the Bible. Other Witnesses took the stand to confirm that the family belonged to the Witnesses, but they refused to denounce the couple. Perhaps sensing the weak evidence linking the couple to specific illegal actions, the prosecution emphasized that the Witnesses were not registered under the law and that the confiscated literature contained slander against the government and social order. The court sentenced both defendants to three years in a labor camp, with partial confiscation of property, but suspended the husband’s sentence with a promise from his employer that the work collective would reeducate him.\textsuperscript{1276}

\textsuperscript{1275} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2841, ll. 7-14.
The Kirgizia trial demonstrates the state’s willingness to prosecute believers for simply owning religious literature and studying it in small groups. In the absence of clear evidence of illegal activity, the court used “expert” analysis of literature to demonstrate the inherently slanderous and reactionary nature of Watch Tower publications. For Witnesses, the latest wave of criminal trials only confirmed the insincerity of state overtures regarding legalization and showed the state’s fundamental unwillingness to alter its policy toward the religion. The new round of court sentences did not deter most Witnesses from practicing their faith.

A 1984 resolution from the Ukrainian CRA on counteracting illegal activities by Witnesses highlighted the state’s lack of progress in eliminating underground religious organizations. A 1984 report from Zakarpattia oblast remarked that even though Witnesses held meetings two to three times a week, local authorities rarely bothered to fine them. Indeed, the oblast CRA commissioner stated that in Rakhiv district, home to more than a thousand Witnesses, officials had fined only nine members the previous year. A report from the Ukrainian agitprop department recommended that the CRA work more seriously with Witness communities to explain the need to conform to the laws governing religious organizations. The department circulated instructions to the CRA and other officials on the 1984 resolution, noting that the state would continue to issue fines and warnings and would initiate criminal investigations against Witnesses for violating the law. The 1984 resolution repeated worn-out, decades old tropes about the Witnesses that showed little

1276 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2756, ll. 84-89.
1277 TsDAVO, f. 4748, op. 7, spr. 275, ark. 41-42; spr. 278, ark. 24-26.
1278 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 8-9.
1279 DAZO, f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 18.
understanding of the organization’s capacity to adapt and respond to its members’ needs in the face of state repression.\footnote{For example, the resolution made reference to the allegedly growing crisis among believers, declaring that ordinary members had become increasingly alienated from their leaders and wanted to obey the law, even as the state’s own registration efforts proved otherwise. DAZO, f. 1, op. 21, spr. 122, ark. 10-14; f. 1490, op. 3, spr. 95, ark. 34-35.} In the end, Andropov’s shortlived attempt to clamp down on underground religious activity had little impact on most Witnesses and no influence on their willingness to compromise over the issue of registration.

**A New Era in Church-State Relations?**

After the brief tenures of Andropov and Chernenko, the Communist Party choose a leader who offered a chance to infuse new ideas and relative youth into the increasingly elderly Politburo. Mikhail Gorbachev assumed the post of General Secretary in March 1985. The appointment of Gorbachev as General Secretary did not immediately usher in a transformation of Soviet governance. Political scientist George Breslauer accurately describes Gorbachev’s domestic policies during the first eighteen months as “noteworthy more for their traditionalism than for their reformism.”\footnote{George W. Breslauer, *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 53.} During this early period, Gorbachev gave little indication that he intended to overhaul religious policy.\footnote{Sabrina Petra Ramet, “Religious Policy in the Era of Gorbachev,” in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 33.} Political Scientist Nathaniel Davis notes only modest improvements in church-state relations during Gorbachev’s first year and half in power, when the state eased restrictions on contact with Western religious organizations, allowing foreign aid in the form of Bibles, religious
 Despite the slow pace of progress, Gorbachev’s rhetoric of glasnost’ and perestroika represented a clear discursive break with the past and laid the framework for more radical reforms later in his tenure.\textsuperscript{1284}

The first signal of a shift in the state’s attitude toward acceptable dissent came in the fall of 1986 when the state released imprisoned human rights activist Anatolii Shcharanskii and dissident poet Irina Ratushinskaia. In December, the state allowed Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov to return to Moscow after years spent in internal exile.\textsuperscript{1285} More broadly in early 1987, Gorbachev instituted a sweeping plan for gradual democratization of the Party-state over the next few years.\textsuperscript{1286} Yet progress in registration of religious communities remained extremely slow through 1987. For example, in 1985, the RSFSR granted registration to twenty-three new religious associations. In 1987, the figure rose slightly, to forty-four new associations, still only a tiny fraction of the total unregistered religious communities.\textsuperscript{1287}

The Soviet state began implementing sweeping reforms in church-state relations by 1988, beginning a period of increased registration, official acknowledgement of the repression of religious believers and the need for new laws, public discussion of religious matters, and a gradual rejection of the basic tenets of previous antireligious propaganda. The


\textsuperscript{1284} Breslauer, \textit{Gorbachev and Yeltsin}, 53.

\textsuperscript{1285} Bourdeaux, \textit{Gorbachev}, 27-29.

\textsuperscript{1286} Breslauer, \textit{Gorbachev and Yeltsin}, 59.

\textsuperscript{1287} GARF, f. A-661, op. 1, d. 17, l. 98.
reversal of religious policy was nowhere more evident than in the state’s attitude toward the dominant religious faith in the Soviet Union. In April 1988, Gorbachev met in the Kremlin with Patriarch Pimen I (1971-1990) and other church leaders to hear their demands for changes in state policy and to apologize for the mistreatment of believers and church hierarchs under previous Party leadership. Of equal importance, 1988 marked the thousand-year anniversary of the Christianization of Rus’ by Prince Vladimir of Kiev. The state granted the Russian Orthodox Church broad leeway to host several days of festivities to mark the historic occasion, while Gorbachev and other officials showed their support by attending some of the events.

Gorbachev demonstrated his commitment to the new state position by visiting churches of various denominations and speaking with religious leaders during his trips abroad. Most notably, in December 1989 he met with Pope John Paul II to establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The new all-union CRA commissioner, Iu. N. Khristoradnov, in a 1989 interview with Nauka i religiia, stressed that the new course in religious policy was based on Leninist principles. He promised Soviet citizens that “there will be no return to the past” regarding Soviet religious policy. Gorbachev’s actions regarding religious policy in this respect mirror his larger “New Thinking” platform of a socialist democracy with respect for “universal human values” and in collaboration with the

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1288 Political scientist Sabrina Petra Ramet states that through 1988, “the Russian Orthodox Church was, by a considerable margin, the primary beneficiary of policy liberalization.” Ramet, “Religious Policy,” 34.

1289 Davis, A Long Walk to Church, 66-67.

1290 Ibid., 68.

1291 Bourdeaux, Gorbachev, 39.

capitalist world. In line with this view, Gorbachev traveled not only to the Vatican but across Europe and to the United States, creating a strikingly different, more cooperative and open image of Soviet leadership.\footnote{For a discussion of Gorbachev’s philosophy, see Anthony D’Agostino, *Gorbachev’s Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 126–47.}

The Soviet media adopted a starkly different tone in keeping with the changing religious climate, as glasnost’ allowed for greater public discussion of previously taboo subjects. By 1987, Soviet citizens could read frank accounts of the Stalin-era purges and the Gulag in their newspapers and magazines.\footnote{Kathleen E. Smith, *Remembering Stalin’s Victims: Popular Memory and the End of the USSR* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 46.} In the religious sphere, increased press freedoms led to an almost uniformly positive view of Orthodoxy in Soviet newspapers and in previously atheist journals, sometimes bordering on an endorsement of Orthodoxy. In some instances, journals provided calendars of church holidays and other information for readers about how to practice the Orthodox faith. By 1991, the last year of its publication in the USSR, *Nauka i religiia* featured a series on Buddhism in Russia, “conversations on the Bible,” and theological debates in Christianity. The former science section contained a wide range of articles on matters as disparate as astrology, ghosts, UFOs, the hole in the ozone layer, and the origins of human life.\footnote{“Napechatano v 1991 godu,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 12 (1991): 63.} In February 1991, *Nauka i religiia* launched a series of articles called “The ‘Small’ Churches in the USSR” to introduce readers to the various Christian, largely Protestant, denominations active in the Soviet Union.\footnote{V. Kharazov, “‘Malye’ tserkvi v SSSR,” *Nauka i religiia*, no. 2 (1991): 16.} Before the USSR’s collapse, the journal printed articles in this series on Seventh Day Adventism and the
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).\textsuperscript{1297} \textit{Liudyna i svit} adopted a similar tone from 1988 through the Soviet Union’s collapse, printing photographs of church services, interviews with religious leaders, discussions of the Bible, and articles on psychic power and other eclectic topics. Not surprisingly given its size comparative to other faiths in the Soviet Union, Russian Orthodoxy dominated the coverage.

The liberalization shift in religious policy occurred primarily through unofficial signals given by the Party leadership and Gorbachev, and not through changes to legislation. Arrests of believers for religious activity came to a halt. Religious literature flowed into the country without state interference. International religious leaders received visas to visit the Soviet Union and speak to their faith communities. Religious communities applied for and received registration with little resistance from local officials. In 1988, 231 new religious groups gained registration, followed by 686 in 1989 and 834 in the first half of 1990.\textsuperscript{1298} While the Soviet state recognized the clear need for new legislation to make these reforms permanent and standard throughout the country, it took considerable time for the Supreme Soviet to develop a law to meet the demands of the public, church leaders, and the Party-state.\textsuperscript{1299} In 1987, the TsK ordered the CRA to draft a new law on freedom of conscience.\textsuperscript{1300} Three years later, the Supreme Soviet finally passed the law.

In the interim, a vibrant discussion of the draft law took place in public, most prominently in the journal \textit{Nauka i religiia}, which published regular reports on the law’s

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1298} GARF, f. A-661, op. 1, d. 17, l. 98.
\item \textsuperscript{1299} Michael Bourdeaux dates the initial discussions of new legislation to early 1986. Bourdeaux, \textit{Gorbachev}, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{1300} Anderson, \textit{Religion, State, and Politics}, 159.
\end{itemize}
progress. In an interview conducted with A. E. Sebentsov, the chair of the legislative committee of the USSR Supreme Soviet, the official told the journal that the draft law had been made public to allow for greater input from citizens. He said that all mainstream faith communities, including Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, and Buddhists, had a chance to review the law and to recommend changes. The Supreme Soviet had reached out to the new Patriarch, Aleksii II (1990-2008), to ensure his support for the legislation. However, the state did not include Witnesses and other unregistered religious organizations in the discussion. In addition, as Sebentsov pointed out, elections to the Supreme Soviet allowed a significant number of religious personnel to win seats as people’s deputies, including 192 Russian Orthodox believers, 55 Muslims, 12 Baptists and Adventists, 5 Buddhists, 4 Greek Catholics, 2 Methodists, and 1 Armenian Apostolic Church member. This ensured these communities a voice in the political process.\textsuperscript{1301} At the same time, this avenue to political empowerment was not available for Witnesses, who do not vote or run for office due to their religious beliefs.

The new Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, passed by the Supreme Soviet on October 1, 1990, guaranteed broad religious freedoms.\textsuperscript{1302} Article 3 guaranteed the right of all citizens to practice a faith either as an individual or within an organization. It gave parents the right to raise their children in a religious manner and to enroll their children in religious education courses (Article 6). The state could no longer deprive parents of custody or harass them for instilling religious values in their children. Of major importance for members of evangelical faiths, the article granted believers the freedom


to preach to others. The law also created a streamlined process for registering religious organizations with equal protection under the law. Any group of ten or more adults could seek registration of a religious organization through its local city or district soviet. The law mandated that soviets make a decision on registration within a month (Article 10). Any organization rejected for registration had the right to appeal the decision in court (Article 15). Once registered, religious organizations could purchase or rent buildings for services and rituals without state interference (Article 21). They could import and export religious literature (Article 22) and conduct charitable and philanthropic activities (Article 23).

The new legislation radically altered the postwar relationship between church and state, and the Soviet state and international law. It denied the Soviet state the right to finance atheist agitation and propaganda (Article 5). Equally critical, it removed all regulatory power from the CRA. Under the new law, the CRA functioned solely as a center for “information, consultation, and expert review,” making it little more than an advisory body to the state on religious matters. Lastly, the final article of the law gave precedence to international treaties signed by the USSR (Article 31). In response to the all-union law, several Soviet republics enacted similar legislation. The RSFSR passed its version of the law on October 25, 1990. The Ukrainian Supreme Soviet enacted its own law on April 23, 1991.1303 As a result, even after the Soviet Union’s collapse only a year later, republic-level laws modeled after the USSR legislation continued to govern church-state relations into the 1990s in Soviet successor states.

The new laws did not address all legal matters of importance to believers. For Witnesses, military service remained an unresolved issue. Article 4 of the all-union law

stated, “No one can evade the performance of duties established by law for reasons of his religious convictions. Substituting the performance of one duty for another for reasons of convictions is permitted only in instances stipulated by USSR legislation.” The law’s RSFSR counterpart similarly stated that religion itself was not a basis for refusal to fulfill civic duties unless provided for by other legislation (Article 7). However, USSR or RSFSR legislation on alternative service or religious exemption did not exist, which made it impossible for Witnesses to choose this option. A 1991 article in Nauka i religiia estimated that hundreds of believers refused to complete military service each year.1304 Thus, even as the Gorbachev era transformed religious life in the country, allowing for more free, open practice of faith, Witnesses continued to receive prison sentences through 1991 for refusing to serve in the military.1305

Making Soviet Witnesses Legal

By the time Gorbachev took over the Party leadership, the state had spent nearly a decade in fruitless attempts to negotiate registration with the Witnesses. As the Watch Tower organization noted, “The perestroika announced in 1985 did not immediately bring about the results anticipated. In some regions, the Witnesses were still convicted and sent to prisons as before.”1306 Moreover, the state continued to use fines and warnings to penalize minor violations of the law. In 1986, the Ukrainian TsK praised the Party-state for improved control over religious groups and for curtailing illegal activities, but criticized local officials for

1306 2008 Yearbook, 197.
overuse of fines and warnings instead of explanatory work among believers.\textsuperscript{1307} The CRA noted that some officials wrongly thought that approving any request for registration was akin to retreat from the struggle against religion. This, it observed, had caused dissatisfaction among believers and a growth in fanaticism and extremism.\textsuperscript{1308} Yet the TsK and CRA statements apparently did little to immediately change the situation. In Zakarpattia oblast the next year, for example, city and district soviets issued 21 fines, 9 warnings, and facilitated 165 public meetings or other group forums to condemn the illegal actions of local Witnesses. Courts sentenced five individuals to labor camps for refusal to serve in the military.\textsuperscript{1309}

At least a few Witnesses faced criminal trials for illegal religious activity during the early Gorbachev era. Soviet courts found Witnesses guilty of slandering the Soviet state by spreading false information about the government and its social system. In some cases, these charges were in addition to convictions under Article 209, the statute most commonly used to prosecute believers who illegally preached their beliefs to others.\textsuperscript{1310} In January 1987, the Snizhne city court in Donets’k oblast convicted five individuals under Article 209, finding the men, all local city leaders of the Witnesses, had organized meetings and incited members not to fulfill their civic duties. The men received four- to five-year sentences along with three years exile and confiscation of property.\textsuperscript{1311} In the spring and fall of that same year, a broader amnesty of over a hundred “prisoners of conscience,” including several prominent religious

\textsuperscript{1307} TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 11, spr. 1505, ark. 10-14.
\textsuperscript{1308} TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 11, spr. 1505, ark. 19-20.
\textsuperscript{1309} DAZO, f. 1, op. 28, spr. 115, ark. 21-22.
\textsuperscript{1310} GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 2841, ll. 7-14; d. 2783, ll. 9-15; d. 2759, ll. 68-72.
\textsuperscript{1311} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 437, ark. 112-20.
dissidents such as Father Gleb Iakunin, resulted in the early release of some Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1312} Other Witnesses, mostly those convicted of refusal to serve in the military, remained in prison through early 1991.

Gorbachev-era coverage of Witnesses in the Soviet mass media differed little in content and tone from that of previous decades until 1989. \textit{Liudyna i svit}, for example, printed two articles on the Witnesses in 1986, both of which were identical in style to earlier pieces in the journal during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. The first article described an interview with an elderly Witness who expressed regrets at having wasted his life in the faith; the second article praised the success of individual work with Witnesses in Chernivtsi oblast.\textsuperscript{1313} An article in the journal from the summer of 1988 gave no indication that official attitudes toward the Witnesses had changed. The author told a far-fetched tale of a young Witness who fought with the Allied Forces in World War II only to return home to his Ukrainian village after the war and have his father shun him for serving in the military. The man eventually left the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1314}

Newspaper coverage through 1988 similarly maintained a strikingly unchanged tone toward Witnesses, although the number of articles on Witnesses decreased to only a handful of pieces. A February 1988 article in \textit{Zakarpatskaia pravda}, for example, told the story of a young Witness who had served time for refusing to complete military service. Repeating worn-out tropes about ordinary believers, the author recounted how the man had lost his father at age three and had a difficult childhood, facts used to explain why the man joined the

\textsuperscript{1312} Davis, \textit{A Long Walk to Church}, 64.


\textsuperscript{1314} Mandziuk, “U labiryntakh Egovy,” 46-57.
Witnesses. The author related how the man, having since left the faith, wanted to make up for his mistakes by serving in the army.\textsuperscript{1315} The same year this article appeared, \textit{Zakarpatskaia pravda} praised former oppositionist leader Konstantin Potashov’s decades-long atheist work among Witnesses in the oblast.\textsuperscript{1316}

While newspapers and atheist journals printed articles on improved church-state relations, the tone did not imply that expanded religious freedoms necessarily encompassed the Witnesses. In a 1988 interview in \textit{Liudyna i svit}, the Ukrainian CRA commissioner informed Soviet readers that groups who still had not registered did not want to do so. He remarked that groups such as the Baptist-Schismatics, Pentecostals, and Witnesses seemed to prefer to wait for the new law on freedom of conscience, rather than register in conformity with the existing law. The commissioner expressed his belief that this viewpoint demonstrated these believers’ low level of political consciousness.\textsuperscript{1317} As late as December 1989, the commissioner publicly criticized these religious groups for continuing to violate the law and refusing to register. He blamed religious leaders for the lack of cooperation with the state.\textsuperscript{1318}

Naturally, it took time to implement the state’s new course in religious affairs and to dismantle the previous system of atheist agitprop. A November 1987 article in a Moldavian district newspaper stated that perestroika did not mean an end to atheist work with the Witnesses. The reporter, speaking about the situation in the village of Criva, told readers that whether or not they believed in God “is a matter of your conscience. But your conscience


ought to be clean not only before God, but before your homeland, before your neighbors, and before those you love. Is this not so?"1319 By 1989, however, the tone of publications on atheist agitation took a much less politicized view of religious life and beliefs, including those of Witnesses. For example, a pamphlet printed that year by the Ukrainian Knowledge Society for use by atheist agitators did not claim that the Witnesses were a political organization, had a political agenda, or committed criminal acts by violating the law. Instead, the publication focused on teaching agitators the basic facts about the Witnesses’ religious worldview. The pamphlet advised agitators to develop a new program for work with Witnesses devoid of even a hint of coercion.1320

While the Soviet state grappled with how to respond to Witnesses in light of its evolving religious policy, Soviet bloc countries changed course in their treatment of the Witnesses. Growing religious freedom in the near abroad reflected the lack of control by the Soviet Union over its satellite states and put pressure on the Soviet state to resolve its own registration issues with the Watch Tower organization. In all Soviet bloc countries, de facto persecution ended first, followed later by official registration. In Hungary, steps toward legalization began in the fall of 1984 when members of the Hungarian country committee met with state officials. As a result, Hungarian Witnesses began to hold meetings with less government interference. In 1987, Henschel and Jaracz, along with German Governing Body member Willi Pohl, met with Religious Affairs officials. They achieved registration of the Hungarian Witness organization in June 1989.1321 In Czechoslovakia, state persecution


largely ceased in the late 1980s. East German Witnesses had to wait until the Berlin Wall fell to win legal recognition, granted by the German Democratic Republic on March 14, 1990. Romania legalized the Witnesses a month after the GDR.

The developments in Poland had the greatest impact on Soviet Witnesses. Most notably, the Polish Witness organization appealed for and received a permit to host an international convention in the summer of 1989. The permit allowed four conventions in the cities of Chorzów, Warsaw, Wrocław, and Poznań. Finally, in May 1989, after years of negotiation between the state and the Governing Body, the organization received official registration. Soviet Witnesses, sensing a new attitude toward religion on the part of the state, hoped to take part in Polish conventions across the border. In December 1987, a Ukrainian CRA inspector reported from Volyn’ oblast that several local Witnesses had attended conventions held in Poland under the pretense of visiting relatives. The Witnesses told the inspector that both KGB and CRA officials had been aware of the real purpose of the trip and had not attempted to prevent them from traveling. Similarly, some Ukrainian members took part in a 1988 district convention in Poland under the guise of visiting friends and relatives. Customs officials allowed these individuals to bring back Bibles and other religious literature. The lack of state interference in these travel plans signaled to

1322 For background on the legalization process in the Czechoslovakia, see 2000 Yearbook, 206-12.
1323 1999 Yearbook, 112.
1324 Jehovah’s Witnesses: Proclaimers, 505.
1325 For background on the legalization process in Poland, see 1994 Yearbook, 240-47.
1326 DAZO, f. 1, op. 28, spr. 115, ark. 11.
1327 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 401, ark. 8.
1328 2002 Yearbook, 231.
Witnesses the potential for further progress in church-state relations.

The climate of greater freedom for Witnesses in the near abroad indicated to the Governing Body that a regional shift in religious policy was taking place and that the time had come to reopen serious negotiations with the Soviet state. Soviet Witnesses conveyed to the European branch offices and the international organization the positive shift in state policy. The German branch office relayed to the Governing Body in 1988 that Soviet Witnesses “feel that the attitude toward them has drastically changed.” That year, Witnesses celebrated the yearly Memorial services without interference. Watch Tower publications in 1989 acknowledged the progress toward greater religious freedom.\textsuperscript{1329} To test the extent to which the Soviet state had shifted its position on the Witnesses, the German branch office compiled a list of home addresses for Soviet Witnesses and shipped small packets of literature to them.\textsuperscript{1330} By early 1990, the branch had mailed roughly 1,600 shipments into the Soviet Union without interference.\textsuperscript{1331}

While Witnesses waited for the state to resolve the registration issue, they continued to find new members. This growth accelerated under Gorbachev, in part due to the more relaxed climate under glasnost’, which made it easier for Witnesses to proselytize. While comprehensive CRA statistics were temporarily unavailable from the Russian state archive for the Gorbachev period at the time of my research, other sources identify several areas of growth. For example, the 1985 statistics listed just under 7,000 Witnesses in the RSFSR, while a 1989 CRA memo estimated that 10,000 Witnesses now lived in the territory,


\textsuperscript{1330} 2002 \textit{Yearbook}, 232.

\textsuperscript{1331} 2008 \textit{Yearbook}, 197.
primarily in the Northern Caucasus, Krasnodar and Krasnoiarsk regions, and Irkutsk oblast. Similarly, Ukraine identified 13,271 members in 1985, but a 1989 CRA chart included 14,860 Witnesses. A document prepared later that year showed a remarkable jump in the statistics, with 19,518 Witnesses, an increase mostly accounted for by an additional 3,000 reported members in Zakarpattia oblast. Indeed, by January 1991, Zakarpattia oblast reported 9,540 Witnesses, by far the largest Witness community in the Soviet Union. For its part, the Watch Tower organization estimated that in 1991, there were 25,448 active members in Ukraine and another 20,000 in the rest of the USSR. Of this 20,000, the organization estimated that 15,987 lived in the RSFSR.

The state’s rapid registration of religious communities between 1988 and 1990 made this growth all the more apparent by isolating the Witnesses from other religious communities who now enjoyed legal standing. As of January 1, 1989, Witnesses represented the largest category of unregistered religious groups in Ukraine, followed by Pentecostals and Baptists. At a meeting between officials, agitators, and religious believers in February 1988 in the village of Velyki Luchky in Zakarpattia oblast, a Russian Orthodox believer criticized Witnesses for keeping their children out of the army when other believers’ children fulfilled their military service obligations. At a similar meeting in the village of Rakoshyno, an Adventist told Witnesses to follow the Adventist example and begin registration. The

1332 GARF, A-661, op. 1, d. 9, l. 99.
1333 GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3130, l. 95, and TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 441, ark. 95-96.
1334 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 536, ark. 9.
1335 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 607, ark. 49.
1336 2002 Yearbook, 234; and 2008 Yearbook, 203.
1337 TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 32, spr. 2556, ark. 12-13.
Witnesses were open to such meetings, but wanted to wait on permission from Brooklyn to register.1338

The Gorbachev-era state realized that, if it wanted to achieve the legalization of the Witness organization, it would need to do so on the conditions set by the Witnesses through the Governing Body. By 1988, the state recognized that it had to make the first move and establish direct contact with the Brooklyn headquarters. The first attempted high-level meeting, which took place on the initiative of the Ukrainian CRA commissioner, proved somewhat of a disaster. When Ukrainian CRA commissioner, N. A. Kolesnik, traveled to Brooklyn in November 1988 to meet with the Governing Body, he did so with little warning to the organization, whose leaders were, it turned out, not in the country at the time.1339 Watch Tower representatives apologized to Kolesnik for the confusion and provided a tour of the organization’s printing presses and facilities. They promised to convey his desire for dialogue to the leadership. Despite the setback, Kolesnik took the opportunity to speak to lower-level representatives of the organization about the democratization process in the Soviet Union and improvements in freedom of conscience. He claimed that many Witnesses, including those in Ukraine, had expressed a desire to normalize relations between their organization and the state, and to register in accordance with the law. Witnesses, he acknowledged, would register only with approval from the Governing Body. Thus, he asked that the Governing Body review its position on registration, stressing that resolution would be in the interests of the several thousand Soviet “Jehovists.” Upon his return to Ukraine,

1338 DAZO, f. 1, op. 30, spr. 96, ark. 8-11.

1339 Calling Kolesnik’s trip a waste of time, one Kievan Witness told a CRA official in June 1989 that the Governing Body had been at a London convention. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 535, ark. 9.
Kolesnik recommended that the CRA send an official request for registration to the Governing Body.\textsuperscript{1340}

The Brooklyn leadership seemed to appreciate the olive branch extended by Kolesnik. The following year, the Governing Body advised the Soviet country committee to “start negotiations with authorities to register our public ministry.”\textsuperscript{1341} In turn, the CRA gained encouragement from the example of improved church-state relations across the Soviet bloc. A 1989 CRA report noted the recent registration of Witnesses in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, and hypothesized correctly that this shift reflected new instructions from the Governing Body.\textsuperscript{1342} These external developments put pressure on the CRA to resolve its own Witness question, since they demonstrated that an appeal to the Governing Body could produce positive results. The CRA and Governing Body made a second attempt at negotiations at the end of the year. With permission from the Soviet state, Governing Body members Milton Henschel and Theodore Jaracz traveled to Ukraine to meet with the Soviet country committee.\textsuperscript{1343} At the same time, in the fall of 1989, Ukrainian elders traveled to Moscow to discuss legalization with the CRA.\textsuperscript{1344}

Even with the progress in 1989 toward legalization, it is important to recognize the gradual and sometimes inconsistent character of the new course in religious policy. Without the new religious law in place, events proceeded in a haphazard manner and the long-term objectives of the top Party leadership were not always clear to officials or Witnesses. A

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\textsuperscript{1340} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 400, ark. 51-52.
\textsuperscript{1341} 2002 Yearbook, 232.
\textsuperscript{1342} GARF, f. A-661, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 92-94, 99.
\textsuperscript{1343} 2002 Yearbook, 232.
\textsuperscript{1344} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 535, ark. 9.
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October 1989 resolution passed by the Russian CRA on improving work with unregistered Protestant associations reflects this confusion. The report acknowledged that approximately half of all Western Christian religious groups remained unregistered, including 220 Baptist groups, 200 Pentecostal groups, 86 Witness groups, and 20 Adventist-Reformist groups, among others. It blamed the situation on the state’s misguided decision to categorically deny these groups registration under previous regimes. As a result, it argued, these communities went deeper underground and developed a hostile attitude toward state institutions. The resolution instructed all regional CRA commissioners to speak with religious leaders, active members, and ordinary believers and to answer their questions regarding registration, explaining the current laws and the constitutional guarantees on freedom of conscience.\textsuperscript{1345} On the other hand, the resolution mixed old tropes with the new ideas of perestroika. For example, it cited the internal “crisis” within religious communities as a partial explanation for the unwillingness of leaders to register their communities. The report also drew a clear distinction between these supposedly recalcitrant leaders and ordinary believers who, it alleged, favored registration.\textsuperscript{1346} In short, even as the state sought registration, some officials continued to view the Watch Tower organization and its leaders as extremists, and believers as naive, but loyal citizens.

A further illustration of the confusion among officials, Witnesses, and the Party leadership over the course of church-state relations came when local Ukrainian elders requested the right to attend the four international conventions held in Poland in the summer of 1989. L’viv Witnesses appealed directly to the CRA to help arrange group transportation

\textsuperscript{1345} GARF, f. A-661, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 192-99.

\textsuperscript{1346} GARF, f. A-661, op. 1, d. 9, l. 201.
for about 1,000 members. Although the CRA rejected this request, directing them to travel as tourists, it wavered on how to respond to the convention. The CRA felt that it could be useful for Soviet Witnesses to take part and advance the call for Soviet registration. Thus, after telling the Witnesses it could not help them with transportation, the L’viv CRA nonetheless sent a memo to the Ukrainian CRA to ask whether it could offer a bus for local Witness elders to participate in talks on registration. The Ukrainian CRA chairman, reading this report, underlined the last remark and put a question mark in the margin. The documents do not indicate how the transportation question was resolved, but they do show how officials struggled to apply the new course in religious policy to concrete local and regional decisions.

The state ultimately allowed Witnesses to attend the Polish conventions, marking the first time the two Witness communities had been able to communicate openly after decades of clandestine contacts. According to Watch Tower statistics, several thousand Soviet members traveled from Moldavia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, the Caucasus, and other Soviet regions, joining a total of 165,518 Witnesses in attendance for several days of religious talks and fellowship. Ukrainian Witness Sofiia Vovchuk, who attended the 1989 Polish conventions, recalled afterward that “we never imagined that there would be freedom. When we read in The Watchtower about the conventions taking place in other countries, we prayed to Jehovah that just once in our lives, we might have the opportunity to attend a convention such as they have in other countries. Sure enough, Jehovah blessed us.”

Soviet delegates had a chance to speak about their experiences as part of the convention program, spreading

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1347 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 445, ark. 15.


1349 2002 Yearbook, 229.
information about their repression and Soviet history to members worldwide.1350

The conventions show how, despite lingering mutual mistrust, both officials and Witness elders proved willing to work together for legalization. The following winter, in February 1990, an official Watch Tower delegation, which included Henschel, Jaracz, eleven Soviet Witnesses, and Willi Pohl and Nikita Karlstroem from the German branch office traveled for direct talks with CRA officials in Moscow. Although the organization wished to register, representatives made clear their intent to maintain a “theocratic” structure, and stipulated that the state had to grant registration first to the central organization, and then to its lower rungs. The meeting also discussed the finer points of Witness beliefs, which CRA officials struggled to understand. Pohl, for example, clarified that the belief in the destruction of earthly governments stems from the organization’s interpretation of biblical prophecy, and did not indicate an endorsement of violence by Witnesses. At the close of the session, the CRA officials promised to expedite the registration process.1351

In the wake of these talks, Ukrainian Witnesses told local CRA officials in early 1990 that they considered the matter of registration “resolved.” They voiced their intent to wait for the passage of the new religious law and achieve registration under its more liberal guidelines. Echoing the hopeful remarks of the Ukrainian Witnesses, the Russian CRA commissioner reported in April 1990 that he had made clear progress in registering the Witnesses. He remarked that “the Jehovists are in talks with Brooklyn and have received its permission to register.”1352 Russian CRA commissioner L. F. Kolesnikov, in Nauka i religiia in 1990, expressed certainty that although some groups had not yet “established official


1351 2008 Yearbook, 198-203.

1352 GARF, f. A-661, op. 1, d. 17, l. 15.
relations with the state,” citing Reform Adventists, True Orthodox Christians, and Witnesses, the situation would gradually resolve itself. Sensing a clear change in conditions, Witnesses spoke freely to officials about how they received literature in packages from Poland and other countries. For example, on the day they met with CRA representatives, Witnesses mentioned that they had received copies of *The Watchtower* published just two weeks earlier. More surprisingly, local Witnesses invited the CRA inspector to attend one of their weekly meetings. He accepted the invitation. The inspector reported that the meeting opened and closed with prayer and song. Much of the service, he observed, was similar to that of the Adventists. He stressed the positive reaction he received by the twenty-four Witnesses gathered at the private home.

The Soviet state affirmed its new attitude toward the Watch Tower organization by making it even easier for believers to attend Polish conventions in 1990, allowing 17,454 members, or nearly half of all Witnesses, to travel to Warsaw that summer. The state’s position reflected the more open borders within the Soviet bloc countries and the growing ability of Soviet and Eastern bloc citizens to travel without state interference. For Soviet Witnesses, the convention offered a chance not only to meet with international believers, but also to reunite with fellow Soviet members from across the vast USSR. More than 100 prisoners who had served time in the Mordovia camp reunited at the event. One attendee, who had spent fifteen years in Siberian exile, commented, “We are now expecting better

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1354 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 548, ark. 47-48.
times to come along.” Another man declared, “Better times are already here. I can now take our message freely from house to house, whereas in the past this was not possible.”

In February 1991, a follow-up delegation of Witnesses, including Pohl, met with the Ukrainian CRA commissioner in Kiev to review final negotiations for registration. Pohl voiced concerns about the need for foreign Witnesses to receive multi-entry visas to help advise the Soviet Witness organization on the importation of literature, the establishment of legal printing presses within the USSR, and the construction of meeting spaces or “Kingdom Halls” where members could gather. This meeting led shortly thereafter to the first legal Witness organization established in the USSR through the Ukrainian CRA. The legal charter, signed on February 28, 1991, by the inaugural country committee, mirrored the basic administrative structure of Witness country branches worldwide. The charter recognized the creation of a governing committee (kerivnyi komitet) and a central office (or “Bethel,” as it is known by Witnesses) staffed by full-time volunteers to oversee the national organization. The governing committee comprised a small body of elders (from three to nine members) chosen by the Governing Body. The first committee included seven elders and, though registered in Ukraine, included one representative from Kazakhstan, two from Irkutsk oblast, and four from western Ukraine. Mykhailo Dasevych, then head of the Soviet country committee, joined the new committee as its “coordinator.” Now allowed to gather openly as they did elsewhere in the world, the Witnesses regrouped their members into congregations that met as a single community, instead of in small circles and groups. The charter proclaimed the Witnesses’ core beliefs and commitment to door-to-door proselytism, free

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1358 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 622, ark. 15-18.
Bible studies with interested individuals, and distribution of literature. Registration accorded the Ukrainian Witnesses the previously unimaginable right to rent or purchase accommodations for its Kingdom Halls, Congress Halls, and other building needs. The document did not address military service or other civic responsibilities of Witnesses. This would have to be resolved through separate legislation by the state, as happened in Ukraine the next year. Russian Witnesses followed suit with their own registration and charter through the Russian CRA a month later on March 27, 1991.

While the Witnesses lacked an all-union registration of their organization, in effect, both charters together created a single, unified Witness organization whose administrative authority stretched across the entire Soviet Union. Moldavia provides an illustrative example of how other Witness communities achieved de facto legal status prior to the Soviet Union’s collapse. In December 1989, Moldavian elders had already received permission to travel to L’viv to meet with the country committee for religious training. In early 1990, local officials in the district of Fetești allowed Witnesses to use a member’s house as a Kingdom Hall for 185 local believers. When construction work to convert the house into a hall revealed deep structural problems, the Witnesses appealed for and received permission to construct a new Kingdom Hall on the site instead. By 1991, they held circuit assemblies without police or state interference.

Registration made possible centralized communications and coordinated efforts between the Governing Body, its European branch offices, and the newly legalized Soviet country committee. In early spring of 1991, the first legal mass shipments of literature from Germany arrived in L’viv, where Witnesses then transported them to congregations in

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1359 TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 637, ark. 40-46.

1360 2004 Yearbook, 120-25.
Ukraine, Russia, and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. For the first time, Soviet Witnesses received illustrated color copies of The Watchtower and Awake! in regular shipments, no longer needing to hoard literature or to share a single issue among friends and family. Two Witness couples from Germany arrived in L’viv later in the year to help establish the first branch office facilities. Witnesses held their first-ever district conventions in public spaces with government approval that summer and fall, attending one of seven conventions held in Estonia, Ukraine, Siberia, and Kazakhstan. Some likely attended more than one event or brought non-Witness friends and relatives, since the total attendance at the events (more than 70,000 individuals) exceeded the organization’s active membership that year. Polish members helped provide logistical support for the Ukrainian conventions.

The Witnesses’ new legal status finally began to overturn some of the negative, politicized discourse about their religion in the Soviet media. A few publications even directly acknowledged the previously secret exile of the Witnesses from the western borderlands. An October 1991 issue of Liudyna i svit printed perhaps the first press attempt at an objective history of the Witness organization, its beliefs and practices, and its view of the Soviet state. The piece admitted that the Soviet press and other publications had misrepresented the Witnesses and their activities as subversive. The April 1991 issue of the Moldavian district newspaper, Krai rodnoi, contained a lengthy article on the Witnesses

1361 2002 Yearbook, 234.
1362 Ibid., 248.
1363 Ibid., 235-36.
1364 Prior to 1991, a Moldavian district newspaper did print a two-part series on the 1949 special exile of Moldavians. The article includes the story of one family who was exiled to Kurgan oblast as kulaks, but who later converted to the Witnesses. The religious affiliation of the family is acknowledged only in passing in the two articles. A. Pristoiko, “Spetspereselentsy,” Novaia zhizn’, February 3, February 13, 1990, 2.
that began: “Pairs of people are going in the darkness to the prayer house, discussing something in a whisper. They return from the prayer house with a lightness and ease in their souls, hope, and faith in tomorrow.” The article retold the life story of one Witness couple who had spent years in a forced labor camp in the 1950s, separated from their young child. Even after the state released the couple from the camps, they faced steady discrimination and were denied equal access to work and housing. Students bullied their son at school and teachers gave him poor grades because of the family’s faith. Despite these obstacles, the family remained firmly committed to the Witness faith, a fact that in earlier coverage would have won them scorn, but here resulted in praise for their determination. The article ended, “Whether Jehovists, Orthodox, Subbotniki, or Baptists, we are all, first and foremost, people.”

**Conclusion**

The Soviet state in the late 1970s and early 1980s fundamentally misread the Witnesses in thinking that it could convince them to abandon their provocative beliefs and practices in exchange for registration. Official rhetoric championed the mistaken notion that Soviet reality had pushed religions into a state of “crisis” that left them weak and desperate to remain relevant in the modern world. In fact, no such crisis existed and many religions maintained firm communities of believers and found new converts. Further, the Witnesses’ attempts to legalize their activities under the previous Stalin and Khrushchev regimes clearly showed that the organization expected the state to compromise its policies to meet the needs of the Witnesses, and that the Witnesses had no intention of adapting their faith to suit secular authorities. As decades passed without progress on registration, the Witnesses

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developed a viable underground network of believers that functioned remarkably well without state sanction. Having learned how to survive under these conditions, the organization had less incentive to modify its practices and accept restrictions on its activities.

Thus, both the Witnesses and the state expected the other side to give ground, but neither proved willing to do so. It took new Party leadership under Gorbachev in the late 1980s for real advances in registration to take place. In the end, the Witnesses’ version of legalization won out, as the Gorbachev-era state agreed to register the Witnesses on the terms of the Governing Body. In a summer 1991 article in *The Watchtower*, the organization referred to its Soviet registration as “a joyful climax to one hundred years of witnessing.” After decades of repression and harassment, Soviet Witnesses could now openly profess their faith without fear of state reprisals. A new era of church-state relations had begun.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

FREEDOM AND OPPOSITION IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

“A great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.”
1 Corinthians 16:9

No sooner had the Watch Tower organization and the Soviet state finally come to an agreement on registration than the Soviet system entered a period of crisis and collapse that culminated in the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991. The man who had engineered the advent of religious freedom, Gorbachev, was out of power, and fifteen newly independent republics emerged, each with the power to determine the boundaries of freedom of conscience within its borders. The Witness question, therefore, was solved in the USSR only to become an issue for the successor states. The final two chapters explore Witness life and the Witnesses’ interactions with state and society in Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova.

While this chapter focuses on Russia, many of the problems faced by Russian Witnesses affected Witness communities across the states of the former Soviet Union. First, although official attitudes changed toward the Witnesses, public perceptions did not shift as rapidly. Decades of agitation work and sustained anti-Witness propaganda in Soviet publications left their mark. Negative press on the Witnesses ceased in the late 1980s, but it was not replaced with an equal amount of positive or neutral coverage. Only occasional

\[1368\text{ The collapse of the Soviet Union left many believers in independent states that had not yet officially registered the Witnesses as separate entities from the Ukrainian and RSFSR communities. This delayed the process of legalization for the Witnesses in those states that continued to require registration of religious organizations. For example, Witnesses received initial registration in Tajikistan in 1994 (and federal registration in 1997, which was revoked in 2007), Kazakhstan in 1997, Azerbaijan in 1997, Belarus in 1998, Armenia in 2004, and Georgia in 2008. Wolfram Slupina, “Problems Associated with Religious Freedom in the Commonwealth of Independent States – As Shown By the Example of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” in On Religious Liberty, 182, 191, 214.} \]
articles challenged Soviet conceptions of the Witnesses, leaving readers to assume that Soviet discourse on the religion had been largely accurate. By the mid-1990s, much of the reporting once again adopted a hostile tone. Witnesses remained ostracized from their fellow citizens, much as they had been for decades.

Second, registration created massive work for the international organization, which had to adapt to its gradual legalization across the former Soviet bloc countries. Each of the newly independent states needed offices, full-time volunteer staff, translation services, rental space and land for its Kingdom Halls, and administrative oversight. Rapid growth in membership in the region made these tasks all the more challenging by creating a continual demand for literature, meeting spaces, and responsible elders. In turn, Soviet elders and believers had to learn how to conform to the worldwide standards of the organization and submit to closer administrative control from the international leadership. All of this took time, effort, and financial resources from the organization.

Lastly, the resurgence of national and religious identities during this period created new tensions between the Witnesses, state, and society. As a religion that eschews the concepts of patriotism, nationalism, and ecumenicalism, the Witnesses won few admirers among the major political parties and churches in the post-1991 era. Moreover, the Witnesses’ growth sparked tension within society and, in particular, among more mainstream religious organizations that resented the Witnesses’ provocative beliefs and confrontational proselytism. By the late 1990s, the Witnesses faced an increasingly hostile climate, fueled in large part by the Russian Orthodox Church and its followers. In particular, the Church helped launch an “anticult movement” that framed opposition to the Witnesses within a pan-European discourse about the alleged dangers of “cults” to a democratic society. The anticult
movement, in turn, fueled public mistrust of minority religions and pushed the Russian state to adopt stricter controls over them. As a result, Witnesses once again found themselves on the margins of acceptable belief and dissent. The newly elected governments of the western successor states struggled to set boundaries on freedom of conscience that fit within basic democratic standards and satisfied the demands of powerful political constituents, including the resurgent Russian Orthodox Church.

The Religious Revival

In the final years of the Soviet Union, Russian citizens already demonstrated a renewed interest in religion and spirituality buoyed by the state’s more tolerant attitude toward faith in the late 1980s. Television healers, now allowed to broadcast on Soviet airwaves, captivated millions of viewers. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the booming market for religious ideas, as well as the relative lack of restrictions on missionary activities, attracted large numbers of foreign religious organizations to Russia in search of converts. American preachers introduced Christian broadcasting programs on the Russian television and radio airwaves and held mass rallies in major Russian cities. New religious movements (hereafter, NRMs) such as the Unification Church and the Church of Scientology also established a toehold in the religious marketplace. Within the first three years of

1369 The most prominent healer, Anatolii Kashpirovskii, fell from grace after he participated in a live television broadcast of a surgery, in which the woman refused an anesthetic, believing Kashpirovskii could remove pain from her body. This failed to occur and the woman’s clear agony during the procedure lost Kashpirovskii his devoted audience. For a biography of Kashpirovskii, see Galina Vinogradova, Saint or Satan? The Life and Times of Russia’s New Rasputin Anatoly Kashpirovsky (Glastonbury, UK: Gothic Image Publications, 1996).

1370 “Cults: Russian Pagans,” The Observer, May 14, 1995, Life Page, 20. In keeping with the standard set by sociologists and political scientists in describing this phenomenon, I have chosen to use the neutral term “new religious movements” to convey the diverse mix of religious organizations operating on Russian territory during this period. Nonetheless, the term does have its flaws, as many of the organizations are not so new and are based on Christian, Hindu, and Muslim doctrines.
independence, an estimated 1,000 foreign missionaries and 50 foreign religious organizations flocked to Russia. Homegrown religious movements added to this boom. While most Russians remained either nonreligious, nondenominational, or nominally Russian Orthodox, a growing percentage identified themselves with NRM and Western Christian organizations. Statistics on this growth vary widely, from the figure of three to five million Russian members of NRM promoted by Russian critics of these groups, to an estimate of 250,000 to 400,000 given in Western scholarship. Whatever the reality behind the figures, by the late 1990s, this initial surge had largely leveled out.

Regardless, most Russians considered themselves Orthodox. Few, however, had any interest in participating in church life or in adhering to a strict set of practices and beliefs. According to surveys carried out from 1991 through 1999 by a joint research project of the Academy of Finland and the Russian Academy of Sciences, although a majority of the population identified as Russian Orthodox, only 7 percent attended services at least once a month. Orthodox self-identification seemed to indicate a cultural rather than religious affiliation. While 75 percent of all Russians in 1999 considered themselves Orthodox, so did 42 percent of self-identified atheists and 50 percent of self-identified “nonbelievers.” Further,


1372 The higher figure originated with the Ministries of Health and Internal Affairs in the 1990s. The discrepancy in the statistics is the result of four basic difficulties in establishing total NRM membership. First, many organizations do not keep track of membership, refuse to provide these figures to the public, or artificially inflate their rolls. Second, there is little agreement among scholars and NRMs themselves as to what membership entails; some organizations have clear initiation rituals, such as baptisms. Other organizations consider anyone who attends a meeting a member. Third, NRMs tend to have high membership turnover. Lastly, many organizations exist only briefly, sometimes reemerging under a different name. Stephen J. Hunt, Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 31. For the three to five million figure, see, for example, A. I. Khvylia-Olinter and S. A. Luk’ianov, Opasnye totalitaranye formy religioznykh sekt (Moscow: Sviato-Vladimirskoe Bratstvo, 1996), 5, 40. For Western estimates, see Marat Shterin and James T. Richardson, “Local Laws Restricting Religion in Russia: Precursors of Russia’s New National Law,” in Religious Liberty, 154, and Marat Shterin, “New Religious Movements in Russia in the 1990s,” in Religious Transition, 185.
among those who expressd belief in some Orthodox dogma, adherence to specific tenets varied greatly. In 1991, a mere 34 percent of Russians believed in God, a figure that increased to 59 percent by 1999. Only 17 percent of those polled in 1991 expressed belief in life after death, and 24 percent in 1999. The corresponding percentages for men and people under thirty were even lower. 1373

Thus, the first post-Soviet decade saw a “return” to Russian Orthodoxy for most Russians, as well as greater experimentation with other religious traditions and beliefs, and a lack of cohesion among the Orthodox faithful. This presented the Church with an opportunity to reestablish itself as the center of Russian religious life, but also created clear challenges. First, in contrast to many of the Western religious organizations setting up shop in newly democratic Russia, the Church was not well prepared to handle the free market competition in religious ideas that characterized the 1990s. It had little experience conducting the sort of modern missionary work practiced by Western Christian organizations. In fact, the missionary tactics of Westerners seemed brazen, alien and offensive to Russian Orthodox clergy and to many ordinary Russians. Some clergy characterized Western missionary work as “buying members.” 1374 This accusation hints at the disparity of financial resources between the Church and large missionary organizations. Western missionaries offered not only free educational and religious materials, but also social services, sometimes as basic as a hot meal, to Russians at a time when neither the state nor the Church could provide for the social welfare of Russian citizens. Such activities blurred the line between religious

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proselytism and charity work, and led the Church to view all foreign philanthropy with suspicion.

**Rapid Membership Growth**

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society was one of the well-financed, well-trained missionary operations setting up shop in Russia in the 1990s. With its extensive experience in worldwide proselytism, the organization stood in a good position to expand its preaching work to new locales in Russia. Thus the 1990s saw rapid growth in the number of Witnesses in Eastern Europe in general, and in Russia in particular. The organization conducted baptisms of 7,820 individuals at the 1991 Soviet conventions alone. However, it did not immediately adapt its annual reports on membership to reflect the breakup of the Soviet Union into independent states. The 1992 annual report grouped together all fifteen states of the former USSR, territories which contained a total of 58,823 “publishers” (active members in the organization). The next year’s report listed the Baltic states separately and reported the remaining twelve countries’ membership at 75,726. The 1994 report gave Ukraine its own entry, followed by a separate listing for Moldova in 1995, and finally for Russia in 1996. At this point, it becomes possible to chart the Witnesses’ growth in Russia separately from that of the other former Soviet republics.

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These statistics reveal a sharp increase in Russian membership in the organization. The 1996 annual report listed 61,483 publishers in Russia, a number that nearly doubled by 2000, when Russia had a total of 114,284 publishers. By 2005, this figure had risen to 136,726, and by 2010, 157,365 Russians belonged to the organization. To put this growth into a global perspective, in 1996, the Witnesses had nearly five million members worldwide, and 7,224,930 members by 2010. As these data make clear, Witnesses in Russia grew at a faster rate than the worldwide organization. This gap had closed by 2010, when Russia reported a 2 percent growth, compared to a 2.5 percent worldwide growth.

In the early to mid-1990s, Witnesses capitalized on the rising interest in their religion and learned to adapt their proselytism methods to attract the greatest number of converts. For example, Witnesses typically arrange Bible studies in private homes for individuals or single families, but in Ivanovo oblast, local Witnesses faced such a demand for these studies that one man held studies with as many as fifty people in a rented hall in order to preach to more people simultaneously. Eventually, a large number of the participants wanted to become “unbaptized publishers,” the term used by the organization to refer to those who engage in preaching work, but have not yet undergone baptism. The unbaptized publisher usually accompanies a more experienced, baptized member to learn how to preach door-to-door. In Ivanovo, the local Witness allowed as many as ten unbaptized publishers at a time to join him as he preached in the community.

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1379 2001 Yearbook, 36-38.

1380 2006 Yearbook, 36; 2011 Yearbook, 44.

1381 For 1996 statistics, see 1996 Yearbook, 40. For 2009 statistics, see 2011 Yearbook, 46.

1382 2011 Yearbook, 44-46.

1383 2008 Yearbook, 231-32.
posed by the organization’s rapid expansion. The injunction to preach led to a major influx in new members and potential members, but it also created a pressing need for experienced believers to instruct recent converts in the tenets and practices of the faith. The organization met this commitment in part by encouraging its more spiritually mature members to serve as “pioneers,” the name for individuals who devote extra time to preaching. In particular, “special pioneers” preach full-time, sometimes in distant locations that lack congregations. To train personnel for this work, the organization set up the Pioneer Service School in Russia in the 1990s, which offered instruction for pioneers in local Russian congregations.¹³⁸⁴

In the two decades since the demise of Soviet power, the makeup of the Witnesses in Russia changed dramatically. A 2000 study of roughly 1,000 Witnesses in Moscow by the Sociology Department of Moscow State University offers some insights into this phenomenon. It found that Witnesses had a higher level of education (67.5 percent) than the rest of the city population (54.7 percent).¹³⁸⁵ Roughly 80 percent of Moscow Witnesses were women, compared with 56 percent of the general Moscow population. The average age of a Witness woman was 45 years, and 34 for men. As with the broader Russian population, Witness families had a low birth rate, with an average of one child per family. Most Witnesses had joined the organization between 1995 and 2000; only 4 percent had been baptized before 1990. Somewhat surprisingly, almost 60 percent of married respondents had partners who did not belong to the Witnesses.¹³⁸⁶

¹³⁸⁴ Ibid., 240.
¹³⁸⁵ Unfortunately, the study does not include information on employment or income for the Moscow Witnesses.
These results should be viewed with caution, since they come from Moscow, an area in which virtually no Witnesses lived prior to 1991 and since Moscow’s population is more urban and educated than that of Russia as a whole. Still, the study offers a portrait of one of many newly-formed Witness communities in Russia since the advent of religious freedom. Overall, women made up the majority of new converts, as they had in the Soviet era. Most members had no experience with Soviet repression of religious belief, having joined the faith after the collapse. Major urban centers like Moscow and Petersburg now boasted thousands of Witnesses, where previously only a handful had existed. In general, new congregations throughout the Russian Federation increased the religion’s ethnic and geographic diversity.

No longer subject to official discrimination at institutions of higher education and jobs, more Witnesses found gainful employment, earned a college degree, and lived in urban centers with greater career opportunities.

Creating a Russian Witness Organization

With such massive membership growth, the Governing Body faced a monumental task in establishing its administrative system over Russian territory. On the national level, it granted the Soviet country committee initial responsibility for all work within the fifteen former union republics. By the early 1990s, however, the Governing Body began to subdivide the former Soviet territories, creating a separate Ukrainian branch and shifting oversight for Moldova to Romania, and supervision of the Baltic states to Finland. Armenia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan received separate branch offices somewhat later, while a newly created Kazakhstan office took over responsibility for the remaining Central Asian republics.
The Russian country committee and branch office maintained responsibility for Belarus through 2010.\footnote{\textit{2002 Yearbook}, 235. The Georgian branch took over responsibility for the organization in Azerbaijan. Information provided by the Jehovah’s Witnesses Office of Public Information.}

On the eve of the Soviet Union’s collapse, the Governing Body launched a “spiritual rehabilitation program” in Soviet bloc countries to help previously underground congregations conform to the organization’s administrative structure. Translation of Watch Tower literature played a critical role in this project. In the Soviet era, members smuggled in various language editions of 	extit{The Watchtower} from abroad and then translated them into the languages spoken by Soviet members. For most of this period, the international organization also printed its own Russian edition of the magazine, which appeared on a monthly basis and was periodically smuggled into the Soviet Union. In 1985, the Russian version first appeared twice a month, in line with the English version, and in June 1990, the two versions were published simultaneously. By the 1990s, Witnesses could read 	extit{The Watchtower} semimonthly in color in nine East European languages. With standardized translations of the magazine now in use, Witnesses studied the same articles at the same time as other believers worldwide. As the Russian branch administered many ethnically non-Russian territories, the organization also financed translation work of 	extit{The Watchtower} and other publications into more than forty regional languages of the Russian Federation, from Buryat to Ossetian.\footnote{\textit{2008 Yearbook}, 236, 38.} In addition, the Governing Body launched a major effort to create versions of its New World Translation of the Bible in all the major Eastern European and Slavic languages. Previously, Eastern European Witnesses had relied on translations produced by other religious organizations and publishers, which created some confusion when discussing biblical texts.
that appeared in Watch Tower publications. Shortly before 1991, the Governing Body began translation of the Bible into Russian. In 2001, it released its Russian-language New Testament, followed by the Old Testament in 2007.\textsuperscript{1389} The organization’s large-scale printing facilities in Germany supplied all of the literature for Russia through 2010, while a team of volunteers at the Russian branch office created the official translations of publications.\textsuperscript{1390}

Prior to legalization, Soviet Witnesses had communicated with the Governing Body and European offices solely through smuggled reports written in code and clandestine meetings with middlemen. It is remarkable how well this system worked, given its limitations, but the post-Soviet era now allowed direct contact between the branch office and the Brooklyn headquarters. In short, it became both possible and imperative that the organization establish much closer control and oversight over its Russian operations. The nearby branch office in Finland provided initial guidance for some of the early administrative work, helping to organize conventions and sending fifteen special pioneers to Russia in 1992. The Polish branch made an additional contribution of more than 170 volunteers, including many special pioneers.\textsuperscript{1391} Personnel from these offices, combined with other foreign volunteers, allowed the organization to retrain Soviet-era elders, giving them the new skills they needed to work within a legally operating organization. The Watch Tower organization also doubled the 1992 class size at Gilead, its American school for training foreign missionaries, and offered Gilead Extension classes in Germany and India to train additional

\textsuperscript{1389} Ibid., 237.
\textsuperscript{1390} Ibid., 218-20.
\textsuperscript{1391} Ibid., 203-05.
full-time missionaries specifically for Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{1392}

The Watch Tower organization functions through national branch offices run by full-time volunteers in countries where it has legal standing, and it moved quickly to extend this system to Russia. The administration of such a massive territory required the construction of a sizeable branch complex. In 1992, the organization purchased land in the St. Petersburg suburb of Solnechnoe and began construction with the aid of Finnish and other international volunteers. By 1993, the new country committee relocated to the area and a new branch committee, headed by Vasilii Kalin, assumed the responsibilities of the previous Soviet-era committee.\textsuperscript{1393} The organization officially opened its Solnechnoe center with a public dedication in June 1997.\textsuperscript{1394} The 1998 Yearbook related the feelings of long-standing Russian members in attendance at the dedication ceremony: “What a joy it was to be present when brothers and sisters in the large courtyard spontaneously began singing in four-part harmony Kingdom songs that they had sung when they were exiles in Siberia decades earlier!”\textsuperscript{1395}

Even with volunteer assistance, expanded translation of literature, and the recently opened administrative center, establishing a unified “theocratic” organization proved difficult. First, the territorial administrative divisions from the Soviet era had to be reworked to fit into the worldwide model. This included the appointment of circuit and district overseers who travel within a given territory and provide guidance to congregations. One circuit comprises roughly twenty congregations, and about ten circuits constitute a district. In the Soviet era, elders had periodically traveled to visit small groups, but it had not been

\textsuperscript{1392} 1992 Yearbook, 253-55.
\textsuperscript{1393} Ibid., 205-10. For a biography of Kalin, see “Exiled in Siberia!,” Awake!, April 22, 1999, 20-25.
\textsuperscript{1395} 1998 Yearbook, 26.
possible to function with the level of regularity or uniformity of branch organizations in
democratic countries. One of the first post-Soviet circuit overseers recalled how the new
system created some initial confusion:

I sent a letter about the upcoming visit to one congregation in Petrozavodsk, Karelia.
The letter outlined how the meetings should be conducted during that week. When
my wife and I arrived for the visit, an elder met us at the railway station, and we went
to his home. He showed me the letter and said, “We received this letter from you, but
since we did not understand what it meant, we decided to do nothing and wait until
you came and explained everything.”

As this encounter suggests, direct oversight of congregations represented a fundamentally
new phenomenon for Witnesses and elders, and required an adjustment period.

The establishment of an overseer system, combined with the rapid growth in Witness
membership, created a serious shortage of qualified elders. In more established Witness
communities in democratic states, a typical congregation will include a body of elders, as
well as ministerial servants who assist them. In comparison, a single elder sometimes
supervised as many as five congregations in Russia in the mid-1990s. The problem was
especially acute in areas without well-established Witness communities, as nearly all the
members had only recently joined the faith and did not have the experience necessary to
assume leadership roles in their congregations. A 1992 *Watchtower* article reported that in St.
Petersburg, for example, more than half of the members of one congregation had been
baptized in the last year. Some congregations remained several times larger than usual
because they lacked sufficient elders to allow for new congregations to be formed.

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1396 *2008 Yearbook*, 209.
1397 Ibid., 225.
1399 *1996 Yearbook*, 51.
shortage of elders began to resolve itself only as membership gradually stabilized in the 2000s.

Witnesses took advantage of their newfound religious freedom and membership growth to hold district conventions in major Russian cities in the 1990s. Until the Gorbachev era, Soviet Witnesses had never gathered en masse. Now, the Russian branch office could rent sports facilities from local governments. In 1992, Russian Witnesses hosted their first international convention, held in St. Petersburg at Kirov Stadium. One long-time member, who came to the event, recalled, “What happiness, what freedom! We never even dreamed we would see such freedom in this system of things. But Jehovah made it possible.” More than 46,000 people attended, including 17,000 from countries outside the former Soviet Union. Before the gathering, the organization distributed a million flyers to the city’s residents. Poster-size announcements appeared on the city streets and metro entrances.

Mass conventions and assemblies became a regular, public feature of post-Soviet Witness communities, in line with the organization’s worldwide practices. The year the Soviet Union collapsed, 74,252 members attended the seven conventions held in the USSR. Two years later, 112,326 gathered at eight conventions held in four of the former Soviet republics. In 1999, 282,333 were present at eighty district conventions across the region, at which more than 13,000 individuals were baptized. In stark contrast to the secret meetings of past decades, the Witnesses now proclaimed their intentions to local residents and officials, no longer fearful of state reprisals.

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1400 2008 Yearbook, 203.
Not Everyone Wants a Knock at the Door

Yet the prominent public face of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, combined with steady door-to-door preaching work, did not sit well with all Russians. Even as some Russian citizens responded favorably to the Witnesses’ message, most remained indifferent or hostile. They did not appreciate the appearance of Witnesses in their cities, at their doorsteps, and in their sports stadiums. These tensions worsened by the late 1990s, by which time many Russian citizens had settled on a new religious affiliation during the broad religious revival in the 1990s. For the most part, they did not convert to the Witnesses, but instead joined larger faith organizations such as the Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Baptist Churches.

Proselytism in itself was a new and not always pleasant experience for citizens, who were unaccustomed to sharing their personal religious beliefs with strangers and often resented intrusion into their homes.

The Witnesses’ condemnation of other Christian churches aggravated tensions over proselytism, as many citizens saw Witness beliefs as an attack on their own newly acquired faith traditions. Watch Tower publications regularly contain articles expressing the belief that all other organized religions are a tool of Satan. One 1996 brochure told readers: “If a religion teaches lies about God, it really serves the purpose of Satan. People who are members of false religions may sincerely believe that they are worshipping the true God. But they are really serving Satan.” Some post-Soviet era Watch Tower publications printed articles that specifically targeted Orthodox religious traditions and the Church itself. A 1993 news blurb in *Awake!* blamed the rise of paganism in central Russia on the failure of the Church’s leadership. In a similar vein, a 2000 article commented, “The Russian Orthodox

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Church, like the Roman Catholic Church, has kept people in ignorance of the Bible.” A 2005 *Watchtower* article criticized the post-1991 revitalization of Christmas celebrations, claiming that a “deep disappointment soon set in” among Russians due to the commercialization and excess associated with the holiday. The author reminded readers that Witnesses believe Christmas to be pagan and inappropriate for Christians. Several articles denigrated the use of icons in Christianity, which the Witnesses consider unscriptural. While these views were not new to the Witnesses, most Russian citizens, including Orthodox clergy, had not previously encountered them. The literature also touched a raw nerve by portraying Soviet-era clergy as collaborators with the Soviet state while presenting Witnesses as the only true Christians who refused to compromise their beliefs.

The Russian Orthodox Church, as the predominant religious institution in Russia, had the strongest reaction to the Witnesses. Like other religions, it experienced the early post-Soviet period as a time of spiritual revival. Unlike the Witnesses, it had gained semi-legal status in the Soviet Union since World War II, with the state allowing it to retain a patriarch and an institutional structure (albeit skeletal). This position, however, cost the Church its ability to act as a moral opposition to the Soviet state, which kept close watch on Church activities. The party-controlled Council for Religious Affairs had approved or appointed most

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Church hierarchs, making the Church into a quasi-state religion.\textsuperscript{1409} The Church thus came out of the Soviet period weakened and politically compromised, but nonetheless eager to regain its standing as the moral and spiritual center of Russian culture. In contrast, however, to many of the Western religious organizations setting up shop in newly democratic Russia, it was not well prepared to handle competition. While the Church had conducted missionary activities among national minorities in the tsarist period, it had less experience selling Russian Orthodoxy to an ethnically Russian audience. It had never done the sort of proselytism practiced by Western Christian organizations such as the Witnesses in the 1990s.

The Church’s initial reaction to the presence of what it deemed “nontraditional” religions was immediate and visceral. The patriarch and other Church officials denounced the state for opening up Russia’s borders to “spiritual colonizers.”\textsuperscript{1410} Many Orthodox believers saw Western religious organizations as exploiting the “spiritual vacuum” created by seventy years of official atheism at a time when the Church was still weak, poor, and unorganized.\textsuperscript{1411} Russian citizens, Orthodox clergy argued, needed to develop a better understanding of religion and spirituality before making a commitment to a specific faith. While they waited for this to happen, foreign missionaries cajoled naive Russians into making an uninformed and immature spiritual commitment.

Yet beyond an appeal for cultural stability, between 1989 and 1992, the Russian Orthodox Church lacked a clear strategy for dealing with this sudden appearance of well-funded religious competition. The man who ultimately provided new direction and leadership

\textsuperscript{1409} Chumachenko, \textit{Church and State}, 46-47, 115-17.

\textsuperscript{1410} Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, “Gospel and Culture,” in \textit{Proselytism and Orthodoxy}, 74.

to addressing this problem, Aleksandr Dvorkin, was uniquely positioned to contextualize the Church’s desire for more restrictions on religious proselytism within an ostensibly Western, democratic framework. Dvorkin understood both the Russian Orthodox and the Western perspective on religious tolerance because he considered himself part of both societies. Born in Moscow in 1955, Dvorkin emigrated to the United States in 1977. His Soviet citizenship revoked, he received American citizenship while obtaining a higher education in New York. During the late 1980s he worked for Voice of America, and this led to Russian media speculation about his possible ties with the CIA.\textsuperscript{1412} Baptized Russian Orthodox in 1980, Dvorkin returned to Russia in 1992 to work at the newly opened Department of Religious Education at the Moscow Patriarchate.\textsuperscript{1413}

The conflict between Russian Orthodoxy and minority faiths, particularly more recent arrivals to Russian soil, did not strike Dvorkin as something altogether new. He had emigrated to the United States during the rise of the first modern Western anticult movement, developed in response to groups such as Children of God, the People’s Temple, and the Hare Krishnas. In the 1970s and 1980s the American media reported on a “cult crisis” that allegedly endangered America’s youth. Newly formed anticult networks, supported by the works of prominent sociologists and psychologists, introduced a new vocabulary to describe the cult threat. The new language emphasized the psychological harm done to members; the

\textsuperscript{1412} Dvorkin’s time in America, as well as his reasons for leaving and returning to Russia, are not fully accounted for, fueling rumors in the Russian media as to Dvorkin’s true allegiances, most commonly to the CIA. None of the allegations cite credible proof to back up these claims, which are addressed and disputed on the Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center (SILIC) website, in a posting entitled, “A. L. Dvorkin—Sect fighter? Zionist? Mason? CIA agent?,” D. Ugriumov, \textit{SILIC Official Website}, July 10, 2003, http://iriney.vinchi.ru/polemic/011.htm (accessed March 7, 2005). Dvorkin himself has stated that he was forced to emigrate after having been arrested for participating in a “youth counterculture group.” Alina Dal’skaia, “Vozvrashchenie iz Nju Iorka v Moskvu: Beseda s Aleksandrom Dvorkinym,” \textit{Foma}, May 20, 2003, http://www.fomacentreru (accessed April 18, 2006).

\textsuperscript{1413} A. L. Dvorkin, ed., \textit{Sekty protiv tserkvi (Protsess Dvorkina)} (Moscow: Moscow Patriarchate, 2000), 6.
terms “brainwashing,” “mind control,” and “deprogramming” entered the popular lexicon about religion. Arriving in New York one year before the mass suicide of Jim Jones’ followers in Jonestown, Dvorkin began his major publication on sects with a recounting of this tragedy.1414

Following the American model, the Russian anticult movement led by Dvorkin focused on marginal religious organizations, instead of more established faiths. It began partly in response to meetings between Dvorkin and parents concerned over their children’s involvement in homegrown Russian sects. In 1993, after hosting a conference on these groups, Dvorkin founded the Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center (SILIC) under the umbrella of the Moscow Patriarchate, which served as the organizing center for the anticult movement.1415 It gradually expanded to include over a dozen branch offices across Russia, united under the Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religion and Sects.1416

During a 1993 seminar on homegrown Russian NRMs, Dvorkin coined the term “totalitarian sect,” which thereafter served as the linchpin of the anticult message and would be applied frequently to the Witnesses.1417 If Dvorkin himself became synonymous with the

1414 Jim Jones founded the People’s Temple in the 1950s in the United States. In the 1970s the Temple established a settlement, named Jonestown, in the jungle of Guyana. In November 1978, on the heels of a congressional investigation into alleged human rights abuses, the 914 inhabitants of Jonestown, including Jones, committed mass suicide. See David Chidester, Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the People’s Temple, and Jonestown (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).


anticult movement, then his term “totalitarian sect” occupied a similarly central position as the catch-all label for NRM and for older, but still marginal faiths such as the Witnesses. Dvorkin defined a totalitarian sect, a term he occasionally alternated with “destructive cult,” as an organization that “violates the rights of [its] members and inflicts harm on them through the use of certain methods known as ‘mind control.’” Under this definition, Dvorkin portrayed members of these religions as passive victims of greedy, power-hungry organizations that lured them in under false pretenses and then retained their loyalty through psychological manipulation and threats of violence. To explain why Russians allowed themselves to be victimized, the anticult movement referred frequently to the “spiritual vacuum,” which allegedly made Russians ignorant and naive in religious matters, and thus easy prey for totalitarian sects.

Through SILIC, Dvorkin adapted the Western anticult movement to the Russian situation, a move crucial to mobilizing support and gaining legitimacy with state and society. The anticult movement sponsored conferences to attract media attention and to network with Russian religious scholars and international representatives of the European anticult movement. Similarly, Russian anticultists attended conferences hosted by their European counterparts. Dvorkin promoted his message throughout Russia, lecturing at universities and giving interviews with local and national newspapers and TV and radio stations. SILIC published brochures on the dangers of cults and created a n informational website. Numerous other anticult publications appeared across Russia, with the various works of Dvorkin

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1419 For an example of the “spiritual vacuum” argument, see Sergei Filatov, “Sects and New Religious Movements in Post-Soviet Russia,” in Proselytism and Orthodoxy, 164.

1420 M. Iu. Medvedev, Piat’ dnei v Orkhuse ili pravoslavnii vzgliad na “Novuiu dakhovnost’” (Perm: [s.n.], 1995).
dominating bookshelves on the subject.

In addition to SILIC, Russian Orthodox students and priests formed organizations in other locales to provide anticult resources to the local population and to conduct media campaigns publicizing the threat of so-called totalitarian sects. Most importantly for the Witnesses, Orthodox family members of Witnesses and other minority faiths formed groups independent of the Church. These groups later spearheaded legal challenges to the Witnesses’ registration status. The Committee to Save Youth from Totalitarian Sects formed in Moscow, while the Committee to Protect the Family and the Individual established a similar group in St. Petersburg. Together, this loose network of organizations formed a Russian anticult movement, which, though lacking a formal structure, presented a fairly united front determined to prevent the further encroachment of minority faiths on Russian soil.

Overall, SILIC moved the Russian Orthodox Church toward accepting new political realities by setting practical, achievable goals. The anticult movement focused the Church’s concerns over religious pluralism on the most marginal and easily marginalized religious organizations, few of which had any significant presence in the Soviet era. In selecting its targets, the anticult movement chose enemies it thought it could defeat. The Western anticult movement and more mainstream religious organizations had already criticized the Witnesses, Scientology, the Unification Church, Hare Krishnas, and Aum Shinrikyo. These efforts provided a wellspring of information that proved useful for the Russian anticult movement.

By narrowing in on these types of religious organization, the anticult movement sought

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1421 Orthodox students at Moscow State University established “Sektor” to warn young people not to join sects, and promoted the anticult movement in their student newspaper. Outside Moscow, the Information-Consultation Center on Sects at the Church of Aleksandr Nevskii in Novosibirsk, as well as similar centers in Ekaterinburg and Ufa, worked in cooperation with SILIC. Egortsev, Totalitarnye sekty, 48.
powerful allies in its fight against “sects.”

The European Stamp of Approval

In many respects, the Russian anticult movement is best seen as a variant of the European anticult movement. SILIC established a strong working relationship with the institutional center of Europe’s anticult movement, the Dialog Center, based in Denmark, and Dvorkin served as one of its regional vice presidents. Russian anticult materials referred to Western scholarship for historical background on marginal religions and for “expert” opinions that these groups support violence and harm their members. For example, Russian and Western anticult works both stress the psychological damage of belonging to an insular community that strictly controls members’ actions. Dvorkin cited Dr. Jerry Bergman in particular, who suggests that Witnesses exhibit abnormally high rates of mental illness due to the damaging effects of their apocalyptic doctrine on the human psyche.

For Dvorkin, while the United States provided the richest resource for anticult materials, the country’s endorsement of broad religious freedoms with little government

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1422 This cross-religious endorsement of the anticult movement is evident in the makeup of conferences hosted by Russian anticult organizations. A 1994 Conference, “Totalitarian Sects in Russia,” included representatives of the Roman Catholic Church; German, Finnish, and Danish branches of the Lutheran Church; Russian and American branches of the Pentecostal movement; the Methodist Church; the Presbyterian Church; the Church of England; and Russian and American branches of the Baptist Church. Similarly, a 2001 conference on totalitarian sects included two German Lutheran pastors. The conference opened with welcoming remarks from representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and also from representatives of the local Jewish and Muslim communities. Dvorkin, *Dvorkin, Desiat’ voprosov*, 43-44, and A. L. Dvorkin, A. I. Starichenkov, and E. V. Trosnikov, eds., *Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoprakticheskoi konferentsii “Totalitarnye sekty—Ugroza XXI veka”* (Nizhnii Novgorod: Bratstvo sv. Aleksandra Nevskogo, 2001).


1424 See, for example, Franz, *In Search of Christian Freedom and Crisis of Conscience*; Wilson, *Awakening of a Jehovah’s Witness*; and Schnell, *Thirty Years a Watch Tower Slave*.

oversight made it the prime example of how Russia should not respond to marginal religions. Dvorkin frequently invoked tragedies such as Jonestown as evidence of what happens when states do not take strong measures. In this view, the United States produced the most anticult literature because it had the most cults and therefore, the most victims of cults. Some Russian anticult publications accused the United States of deliberately exporting its cults abroad in an attempt to destabilize Russia and destroy its culture. Dvorkin went so far as to suggest that the U.S. government used Scientology members as CIA agents to spy on the Russian government.\textsuperscript{1426} Such sentiments fit in well with a growing distrust of American institutions and the American model of democratic capitalism. Anticult publications stressed the need for Russia to find an alternative route to religious pluralism that would both privilege the Russian Orthodox Church and provide for greater regulation of religious organizations.

Thus, in translating the Church’s demands into action, the anticult movement looked to Europe, not the United States as a model. In the 1990s anticultism reached new heights in Europe, just as Russians began to construct their own movement. Scholars James T. Richardson and Massimo Introvigne, in a survey of European parliamentary and administrative reports in the late 1990s, concluded that the earlier American anticult rhetoric of "brainwashing and mind control is alive and well in Europe." They noted that "those ideas have helped to promote a moral panic in some European countries over cults and sects."\textsuperscript{1427} In 1984, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for greater monitoring of NRMs by its member states, information sharing between countries, and the creation of crisis


centers for former members.\textsuperscript{1428} Many countries established parliamentary inquiry commissions to study the alleged dangers of NRMs and formulate a state policy to address this issue.\textsuperscript{1429} The Belgian commission recommended new laws that would criminalize the use of psychological or physical pressure by religious organizations, while the French commission issued a report listing 173 “potentially harmful sects.” France funded cult-awareness programs for the judiciary, law enforcement, and education system. In 1998 the French National Assembly established the Interministerial Mission to Combat Sects, as well as a separate commission to investigate the finances of major NRMs.\textsuperscript{1430}

European governments likewise took measures to warn the public about the alleged dangers of these groups. Both France and Austria set up crisis hot lines for believers and their relatives.\textsuperscript{1431} Austria printed and distributed pamphlets through the Federal Ministry of the Environment, Youth, and Family, warning of the dangers of sects.\textsuperscript{1432} Germany went further than most states, especially in its attacks on Scientology. Derek Davis notes that anticultism in Germany included “police raids against independent Pentecostal churches, the denial of employment, political participation, and state licensure to Scientologists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, the distribution of state-prepared pamphlets warning of contact with the Mormon ‘sect,’ and the expulsion from schools of children whose parents belong to the Unification


\textsuperscript{1429} Willy Fautre, “The Sect Issue in France and Belgium,” in International Perspectives, 47.

\textsuperscript{1430} Austria, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Sweden also established inquiry commissions. For information on Belgium, see Wah, “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” 590. For France, see Fautre, “The Sect Issue,” 44-46.

\textsuperscript{1431} Wah, “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” 595.

\textsuperscript{1432} Fautre, “The Sect Issue,” 43-44.
Russian anticult literature consistently evoked the “What Would Europe Do?” line of reasoning to justify its demands. According to this logic, Russian anticultism simply had to frame its own goals within a European context to gain a democratic aura. The Russian anticult movement received direct positive reinforcement from France, whose Interministerial Mission chairman, Alain Vivien, aligned himself publicly with the European anticult movement. In 2001, Vivien delivered a talk entitled, “The State and Sects: France’s Experience,” at a conference on totalitarian sects sponsored by the Russian Orthodox Church in Nizhnii Novgorod. Although the Witnesses are not, technically speaking, a new religious movement, many European countries treated them as such. In the late 1990s, the French tax administration assessed the Watch Tower organization for taxes on individual donations amounting to fifty million dollars. The resulting court battle temporarily paralyzed the organization in France, constituting a serious encroachment on freedom of conscience for one of the Witnesses’ largest international communities. The right of Witnesses to practice has also been contested in Greece, providing the basis for a successful appeal to the European Court of Human Rights in 1993. In Germany, the state refused to register the Witnesses as a “statutory corporation” until 2006, when it finally granted this status to Witnesses, first in Berlin on a federal level, and by 2009 to Witnesses in individual German states. The same basic pattern occurred in Austria, where Witnesses also received the status


1434 Sociologist Marat Shterin has addressed the links between the two anticult movements in his 2000 article “New Religious Movements.” See also Shterin and Richardson, “Local Laws,” 157.

1435 Alain Vivien, “Gosudarstvo i sekty: Opyt Frantsii,” in Materialy, 13-16.


Russian newspapers frequently cited foreign examples when discussing domestic opposition to the Witnesses.\footnote{See, for example, Iurii Kukanov, “Ostorozhno: Sekty! Deti novykh bogov,” \textit{Slovo}, April 16, 2004, 13.} One 1999 article in \textit{Rossiiskaia gazeta}, for example, noted that many European states also consider the Witnesses to be a totalitarian sect.\footnote{“Svideteli Iegovy v roli obvinitelei,” \textit{Rossiiskaia gazeta}, December 15, 1999.} A 2001 article in \textit{Moskovskaia pravda} falsely claimed that a majority of European countries banned the Witnesses.\footnote{Galina Snopova, “Otvetchiki groziat Strasburgom,” \textit{Moskovskaia pravda}, February 20, 2001, 1.} Some articles stated that the Witnesses did not even have official registration as a religious organization in the United States, failing to mention that this legal designation does not exist in the US.\footnote{See, for example, Dmitrii Makarov, “Tainoe i iavnoe. Iegove sluzhat zombi?,” \textit{Argumenty i fakty}, February 8, 2006, 40.} A letter to the editor of \textit{Rossiiskaia gazeta} in 1999 from the mother of one Witness declared, “What future awaits our children? Will the government help the victims of nontraditional religions again become free and whole individuals, as it does in democratic European countries?”\footnote{Valentina Kozlova, “Armageddon dlia moei docheri uzhe nastupil,” \textit{Rossiiskaia gazeta}, October 21, 1999.}

Examining Russia’s anticult movement in the larger European context reinforces the fact that democracy requires a continual negotiating of boundaries. NRM\textsuperscript{s} may not have gained a serious foothold in European society, but their significance, as James Richardson writes, “is not in their numbers but in their demonstrations of the limits of tolerance in modern European society.”\footnote{James T. Richardson and Barend van Driel, “New Religious Movements in Europe: Developments and Reactions,” in \textit{Anti-Cult Movements}, 131.} This is evident in the manner in which the anticult movement

\begin{itemize}
\item\footnote{Gerhard Besier, “How to Understand Religious Freedom in Germany,” in \textit{On Religious Liberty}, 331-32.}
\item\footnote{See, for example, Iurii Kukanov, “Ostorozhno: Sekty! Deti novykh bogov,” \textit{Slovo}, April 16, 2004, 13.}
\item\footnote{“Svideteli Iegovy v roli obvinitelei,” \textit{Rossiiskaia gazeta}, December 15, 1999.}
\item\footnote{Galina Snopova, “Otvetchiki groziat Strasburgom,” \textit{Moskovskaia pravda}, February 20, 2001, 1.}
\item\footnote{See, for example, Dmitrii Makarov, “Tainoe i iavnoe. Iegove sluzhat zombi?,” \textit{Argumenty i fakty}, February 8, 2006, 40.}
\item\footnote{Valentina Kozlova, “Armageddon dlia moei docheri uzhe nastupil,” \textit{Rossiiskaia gazeta}, October 21, 1999.}
\item\footnote{James T. Richardson and Barend van Driel, “New Religious Movements in Europe: Developments and Reactions,” in \textit{Anti-Cult Movements}, 131.}
\end{itemize}
addressed the boundaries of freedom of conscience. Almost every anticult publication began or ended with a declaration of support for religious freedom and toleration, while bemoaning the misuse of these freedoms to destabilize the fledgling Russian state. One such work commented, “Democracy in and of itself is not guilty, but rather the negative aspects that accompanied its establishment—the weakness and underdevelopment of legislation and law enforcement, created under new conditions.”

The back cover to a book compilation of media coverage on totalitarian sects proclaimed:

> We live in an amazing time, when everything is turned upside down. Religious guru-criminals are labeled martyrs for their faith; those who attempt to protect the population from spiritual slavery are accused of “inciting religious discord,” and called “fighters against religious dissidents;” passivity and indifference are compared to “religious tolerance,” while freedom of conscience transforms into freedom from conscience.

Totalitarian sects, the argument went, took advantage of the unstable political situation in Russia to establish themselves. Once they gained members, they denied them freedom of conscience, manipulated them psychologically and emotionally in violation of their human rights, and endangered their health and well-being.

**Turning Witnesses into a “Totalitarian Sect”**

While the anticult movement did a good job of making anticultism relevant to ordinary Russians, it would not have reached much beyond the walls of the Church without the media to transmit its message to Russian society. National and regional newspapers willingly published frequent stories on the Witnesses and other targeted religious faiths,

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1444 N. A. Trofimshuk and et al., eds., *Slovar’-Spravochnik: Novye religioznuye kul’ty, dvizheniia i organizatsii v Rossi (Moscow: Rossiiskaia Akademiia Gosudarstvennoi Sluzhby pri Prezidente Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 1998)*, 16.

1445 Egortsev, *Totalitarnye sekty*, back cover.
including testimonials by distraught parents; accounts of violence, corruption, and psychological and physical manipulation of members; and countless interviews with Dvorkin. The media adopted the language of the anticult movement and made “totalitarian sect” a household term. Few reports included interviews with the religious believers themselves and instead favored the accounts given by their relatives. Similarly, articles often amounted to little more than sensationalist or hysterical calls for alarm. For example, an article published in 2000 closed with a plea for members of religious sects to “find protection and undergo a course of rehabilitation,” along with a listing of the SILIC website and phone number.\textsuperscript{1446} Several national newspapers in 2000 printed rumors that the Witnesses had brutally murdered one of their members as part of a religious ritual.\textsuperscript{1447} A sampling of article titles conveys the tone of Russian media coverage, which presented the Witnesses and NRMs as a clear and present danger to Russian society and the state: “Spiritual Aggression,” “Where To Find Protection from Totalitarian Sects,” “Professor Dvorkin’s Cross,” “Wolves in Sheep’s Clothing,” “Social Infection,” and “Zombies from Jehovah.”\textsuperscript{1448} The flood of media coverage made both the targeted minority religious organizations and the anticult movement appear much more pervasive than actual membership in either suggested.

Much of the anticult rhetoric bore a strong resemblance to Soviet-era discourse. As in Soviet publications, the Russian media frequently portrayed ordinary Witnesses as victims of greedy, manipulative American leaders who exploit this gullibility and whose veiled political


\textsuperscript{1447} See, for example, “Ritual’noe ubiistvo pod elkoi,” \textit{Vechernaiia Moskva}, June 26, 2000.

rhetoric poses a threat to national security. One vocal opponent of the Witnesses, Father Oleg Steniaev, spelled out in his book on the Witnesses how the organization uses religious language to code its violent plans, interspersing the Witnesses’ beliefs with his own commentary: “This war will destroy all traces of Satan’s earthly organization (in other words, all civilization – OS) and give surviving humanity (that is, the faithful remnant of Jehovah's Witnesses – OS) the opportunity to delight in unending blessings (on the corpses of more than six billion people! – OS).” Such statements echoed Soviet-era accusations that Witnesses supported a third world war or the nuclear annihilation of the Soviet Union due to their belief in Armageddon.

Yet anticult rhetoric did not represent a simplistic carryover of Soviet-era tropes, but rather an amalgamation of this language, Western anticult rhetoric, and uniquely post-Soviet Russian elements. For example, anticult rhetoric combined Western scholarship on the psychological harm of cults with Soviet-era language that cast rank-and-file members as “victims” of manipulative leaders. The allegedly dangerous psychology of “cults,” a major tenet of the Western anticult movement, entered into Russian anticultism. Anticult publications popularized the terms “brainwashing” (promyvanie mozgov), “deprogramming” (deprogramming), and “mind control” (kontrolirovanie soznaniia), the “victims” of such practices being described as “slaves,” “robots,” and “zombies.” Newspapers referenced Western anticult sources in claiming that Witnesses were psychologically harmful to members. A 2003 article in Novaja gazeta, for example, cited a study claiming that the suicide rate for Witnesses was seven to ten times higher than for the general population.\(^{1450}\)

\(^{1449}\) The parenthetical remarks appear in the original text. Father Oleg Steniaev, Svideteli Iegovy: Kto oni? (Moscow: Lepta-Press, 1996), 41.

Much of the focus on the psychological dangers of cults occurred because the West, particularly the United States, had paved the way for this analysis by supplying the experts to back it up in numerous publications.\textsuperscript{1451}

Western anticult psychology allowed Russian critics to argue that restricting the Witnesses, far from denying their freedom of conscience, would actually ensure this right. Indeed, the anticult movement expressed its sustained support for broad religious freedom. Dvorkin declared that no Russian citizen freely joins a totalitarian sect because he or she is never given a full account of what the organization believes and expects of members.\textsuperscript{1452}

Sociologist Eileen Barker, writing on the powerful role of language in framing anticult discourse in the Western arena, notes that:

nouns such as “cult,” “pseudo-religion,” verbs such as “brainwash,” “manipulate,” “exploit,” adjectives such as “bizarre,” “fanatic,” “violent,” and the use of the passive voice for “victims” who have been duped and had to be rescued, effectively diminish the likelihood that members of NRMs could have made choices and/or be capable of leaving (although, in fact, most do, of their own free will).\textsuperscript{1453}

Russian media eagerly adopted the terminology that Barker criticizes. One publication referred to Witnesses as “prisoners of the watchtower.”\textsuperscript{1454}

Dvorkin, offering advice for engaging with street proselytizers, reminded readers, “Remember that the man standing

\textsuperscript{1451} The anticult movement also found domestic psychologists to add credence to these claims, most notably Fedor Kondrat’ev, a psychologist at the Serbskii Institute, who publicly promoted the anticult message and served as an expert witnesses in court proceedings against the Witnesses. The Serbskii Institute itself, a psychiatric institution devoted primarily to the criminally insane, acquired a notorious reputation in the 1970s for supporting the Soviet state in declaring prominent dissidents and religious believers mentally ill, and incarcerating them in mental asylums. For a detailed account of the political use of psychiatry, see Sidney Bloch and Peter Reddaway, \textit{Russia’s Political Hospitals: The Abuse of Psychiatry in the Soviet Union} (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1977).

\textsuperscript{1452} For example, A. Egorstev writes, “there cannot be genuine freedom of choice without complete information, and this is exactly what the leaders of totalitarian sects fear.” Egorstev, \textit{Totalitarnye sekty}, 3. For comments by Dvorkin, see Polina Dobrovoliubova, “Ostorozhno: Sektanty,” \textit{Parlementskaia gazeta}, May 20, 2003.


\textsuperscript{1454} Egorstev, \textit{Totalitarnye sekty}, 62.
before you is first and foremost a victim, and that he deserves sympathy and consideration.”

Alleged cult violence reflected a broad insecurity over the process of democratization as the economy faltered, social safety nets evaporated, and Russians lost confidence that democracy offered an improvement over Soviet-style communism. The media and anticult publications drew links between the totalitarian sects and four prevalent concerns of Russians adjusting to life after the Soviet Union’s collapse: fears of a return to state-sponsored violence and repression, uneasiness with the transition to a market economy, anxieties regarding the ongoing war in Chechnya and terrorism by ethnic and religious extremists, and anxiety over the alleged moral decay of Russian society and its youth in particular.

First and foremost, the totalitarian imagery played on fears of a breakdown in Russia’s fragile democracy and a return to Soviet-era repressions and state-sponsored violence. Anticult rhetoric claimed that, beyond destroying democratic choice through their psychological control over members, Witnesses and other totalitarian sects seek to replace the democratic political system with totalitarian, theocratic rule. Publications drew on the imagery of the “great terror” under Stalin, the Holocaust, and global terrorism. In his short work on the Witnesses, Dvorkin declared that the Witnesses “have achieved that which the totalitarian communist regime could not: a new man, disposing of the ‘accursed past’ once and for all. Homo jehovisticum has been created.” He further alleged that Witnesses intend to purge nonbelievers from their millennial kingdom.

\[1455\] Dvorkin, Desiat’ voprosov, 16.

\[1456\] Khvylia-Olinter and Luk’ianov, Opasnye totalitarnye formy, 70.

\[1457\] Dvorkin, Psevdokhristsianskaia sekta, 68.

\[1458\] Dvorkin provides several comparisons between the Witnesses and the Soviet Party-state, both in terms of
The press repeated these concerns about repression and violence. A *Komsomol’skaja pravda* (Komsomol Truth) article, for example, claimed that Witnesses teach their members that they will help Christ kill all non-believers during Armageddon. According to this logic, totalitarian sects endorse violence over democracy and thus do not deserve the privileges afforded by a democratic state. By allowing totalitarian sects to exist, democracy was in effect sowing the seeds of its own destruction. The alleged violence of totalitarian sects reinforced Russian apprehension that society was disintegrating. The fact that Soviet-era publications also accused the Witnesses of secret support for a third world war never earned mention in such works.

Indeed, while anticult rhetoric employed the imagery of totalitarianism, purges and concentration camps, the Witnesses ironically had been the victims of repression by the two “totalitarian” regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. As Witnesses could not play the role of both victim and perpetrator of totalitarianism in the anticult drama, depicting Witnesses as totalitarian required erasing or manipulating the past. Anticult literature frequently used a “blame the victim” line of reasoning, according to which the Witnesses “sacrificed” their members and urged them to provoke the state in an attempt to win international sympathy. Anticult publications accused the Watch Tower leadership of attempting to collaborate with Hitler, and, when this failed, of forcing members into a confrontation with the Nazi state. Another work claimed that the Soviet state exiled Witnesses in 1951 because they had collaborated with the Gestapo during World War II. One headline on the SILIC website asked, “Who is guilty in the sufferings of the Jehovah’s

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1460 Egortsev, *Totalitarnye sekty*, 68.
Witnesses?"  

The answer was taken to be self-evident.

Anticult publications described the Soviet-era mass arrests, imprisonment, hard labor, exile, confinement in psychiatric hospitals, loss of child custody, and continual police harassment of Witnesses as merely one thread in the policy of state repression. This depiction denied the Witnesses’ experiences any special recognition and made the Witnesses’ victimization less about their religious beliefs and more about a totalitarian state repressing all members of society equally. The anticult movement also noted how the Bolshevik Party had initially sought out religious sectarians as potential allies against tsarist Russia and later granted believers considerable freedom. In the anticult movement’s view, this served as damning proof of the collusion of sects with Bolsheviks for the purpose of destroying the Russian Orthodox Church. Just as in the 1990s, sects attacked the Church in a moment of weakness, using their newfound freedoms under Soviet power to lure Russians away from Orthodoxy.  

For many Russians, economic instability trumped political concerns about the alleged dangers of fringe religious movements. Free market reforms led to widespread disillusionment among Russians and introduced a new vocabulary to describe the rampant corruption and organized crime that characterized the privatization of the Russian economy. Anticult coverage borrowed heavily from this lexicon, referring frequently to the alleged “criminal character” of sects. Dvorkin compared NRMs to “mafia networks.” His accusations

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appeared not only in anticult publications, but in Russian newspapers as well. In his framework, the sect leader took on the role of a religious mob boss, raking in cash from needy and gullible Russians and then abandoning them when the money evaporated. Much like the oligarchs who bought up Russia’s major industries for kopeks, “rich” sects used their Western cash and goods to “buy” members. A 2005 *Komsomol’skaia pravda* article characterized sect leaders, including Witnesses, as opportunists and swindlers. A local newspaper in Tiumen’ oblast described the Witnesses as “more like businessmen than proselytizers or missionaries.”

The ongoing war in Chechnya furthered heightened social anxiety in the post-Soviet period. The conflict exacerbated religious tension between Muslims and Orthodox Christians and fueled concerns that Russia could further disintegrate because of hostile ethnic and religious groups. Terrorist attacks in Russian cities in the late 1990s brought the war closer to home. When the media and anticult supporters made connections between sects and violence, they often mentioned global terrorism, transforming sectarians into crazed militants, brainwashed to fulfill the orders of their power-hungry leaders. This painted sects as a time bomb waiting to explode in Russia’s urban centers. A 2003 roundtable on NRMs in Moscow was entitled, “Totalitarian Sects: Weapons of Mass Destruction.” The supposed willingness of NRMs to resort to violence legitimated the Russian Orthodox

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1466 See, for example, Irina Otagava, “Mir v chernuiu i beluiu kletku,” *Kuznetskii krai*, August 17, 2002. The article portrayed the Witnesses as a potential terrorist organization.

Church’s demands for tougher laws and increased state involvement in religious affairs.

Finally, anticult discourse played on fears that political, social, and economic instability had corrupted Russian society, leaving it without a moral compass and thus vulnerable to “bad influences” such as totalitarian sects. A letter from the mother of a fifteen-year-old Witness who committed suicide expresses her sense of helplessness: “Who is protecting Russia’s children? This is a cry from the soul! Help me!” According to anticult statistics, youth under the age of twenty-five made up as much as 70 percent of members, of whom the majority were students. In an article on the presence of NRMs in higher education, one anticult supporter argued that totalitarian sects target students for their youthful zeal and infiltrate schools and universities to find Russia’s best and brightest. The fight against sects in this context meant a battle for the hearts and minds of Russia’s next generation. Similarly, media coverage drew on the high levels of drug and alcohol abuse among Russia’s youth, equating membership in an NRM to an addiction. According to this analogy, totalitarian sects created a cycle of physical and psychological dependency, making members incapable of voluntarily withdrawing from NRMs. The inability of members to break the habit, or even to recognize their addiction, invoked the need for a third party to intervene. In this context, Dvorkin wrote that “just as the alcoholic will deny his need for spirits,” sect members could not be taken at their word when they claim they are content and do not need help. Only after members had been freed from the grip of the totalitarian sect

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1471 Dvorkin, *Desiat’ voprosov*, 28.
could they begin the process of recovery.

Few sources cited interviews with current or former Witnesses, preferring to concentrate on the outrage of their relatives and family members. A 1996 article in *Krasnaia zvezda* (Red Star), for example, entitled, “How My Son Ended Up in the Jehovah’s Witnesses,” told the story of a young Witness through the critical eyes of his father. The father despaired that his son no longer greeted his mother on International Women’s Day, no longer wanted to protect his homeland, and had no interest in his former career plans. The man referred to the Witnesses as a “religious monster” that robbed Russians of their children.¹⁴⁷² The framework of such articles deprived the Witnesses of agency and left readers clueless as to why anyone would join the Witnesses, if not as a result of trickery and psychological pressure from manipulative sectarians. Focusing on youth who had joined the Witnesses also helped portrayed these individuals as victims, whose immaturity and inexperience made them especially vulnerable. The newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* (Arguments and Facts) advised readers in 2006 that the only way to protect themselves and their families was to keep close watch over what those close to them read to make sure it was not Watch Tower literature.¹⁴⁷³ A 2001 newspaper article quoted one man as stating in regard to Witness proselytism, “I am not afraid for myself, but for my children.”¹⁴⁷⁴

Not all newspapers uniformly adopted the anticult language, instead attempting a more objective tone by covering controversy over the Witnesses and printing statements from both Witnesses and their critics.¹⁴⁷⁵ This type of reporting featured primarily in newspapers


affiliated with or sympathetic to liberal political parties. Some newspapers praised the Witnesses or criticized the overheated rhetoric of Orthodox critics. Rossiiskaia gazeta (Russian Newspaper) allowed an official from the Russian branch office to write a guest editorial criticizing the paper’s recent attacks on the Witnesses. The piece, “Nostalgia for the Totalitarian Past,” addressed many of the media’s misconceptions about the religion, its beliefs, and practices. In 1997, Literaturnaia gazeta (Literary Newspaper) published a strongly positive article about the Witnesses’ resistance to Nazi Germany. A handful of newspapers carried articles or comments from religious scholar Sergei Ivanenko, one of Russia’s most vocal defenders of the Witnesses’ and their right to practice. A few journalists reported on violent attacks of Witnesses during their door-to-door preaching work, and they criticized local police for failing to punish those responsible. Nevertheless, negative coverage dwarfed neutral or positive reporting, and even the latter often uncritically recycled anticult terminology, referring to Witnesses as a “sect,” or using the derogatory term “Jehovists” for the organization and its members.

Witnesses and other religious organizations singled out for criticism by the media did not passively endure these attacks. For example, the Witnesses took several steps to address

1475 See, for example, Oleg Silin, “‘Svideteli Iegovy’ oboshnovalis’ pod Sankt-Peterburgom,” Nezavisimaia gazeta, July 2, 1997.


1478 See, for example, Sergei Ivanenko, “Osvoboshdenie Cheliabinska ot inovertsev,” Moskovskie novosti, February 26, 2001, 18.

1479 See, for example, Aleksandra Samarina, “‘Ia i sem’ minuvshikh dnei. Svidetelei zakazyvali?,” Obshchaia gazeta, November 29, 2001, 4.
growing criticism in Russian newspapers of their refusal of blood transfusions. To respond to the perception that this stance put members’ lives in danger, the Witnesses extended methods they use in other countries to reduce societal tension over this issue and to allay public fears. In 1995, the Russian branch established the Hospital Information Desk and hospital liaison committees to provide information about Witness beliefs to medical personnel and to improve communication between doctors and Witness patients. In 2001, the Ministry of Health issued “Instructions on the Use of Blood Components,” which advised medical personnel to respect a patient’s religious objections to blood transfusions. Witnesses also circulated information on transfusion alternatives so that their members could receive viable medical care that conformed to their beliefs. This did not have a significant impact on the press and the public, but it did address concerns by medical personnel treating Witness patients.

More important, the Watch Tower organization demonstrated its intent to use the legal system to protect its members’ right to freedom of conscience and to contest misinformation from the anticult movement and Russian media. Over the past century, the organization has carefully used courts in democratic states to construct “a legal wall of protection” for believers, and they applied this body of knowledge to Russia. In 1996, following the lead of Gleb Iakunin, the head of the nongovernmental organization Committee for the Protection of Freedom of Conscience, several Witnesses, along with religious

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1481 2008 Yearbook, 222-23.

believers from other faiths, filed suit against Dvorkin for slander in his pamphlet, *Ten Questions for the Intrusive Stranger: Or Advice for Those Who Don’t Want to be Recruited.* While the court dismissed the lawsuit, *Iakunin v. Dvorkin*, Witnesses proved their willingness to contest the “totalitarian sect” label. Iakunin, himself a defrocked Orthodox priest and former Duma deputy, referred to the Russian Orthodox Church on occasion as the “largest totalitarian sect.” Similarly, when the newspaper *Komsomol’skaia pravda* attacked the Witnesses in an August 1997 article, “Sect Petersburg,” the organization brought a libel suit against the newspaper and the article’s author. The Russian Federation Presidential Judicial Chamber for Media Disputes, which heard the case, ruled in favor of the Witnesses in 1998, finding the article to be in violation of the federal law regulating mass media. The court issued a written reprimand to the journalist and advised the paper to print an apology.

Regarding public perceptions, Witnesses offered their own counternarrative to the prevailing negative characterization of their activities and beliefs, stressing their status as victims of Soviet repression. They also taught their members how to view challenges to their faith. A 1998 *Watchtower* article told readers that Witnesses “are not surprised by such opposition. In fact, they expect it.” Beginning in the 1990s, Watch Tower publications featured numerous inspiring stories of Witnesses who overcame Soviet-era repression and spotlighted the Witnesses’ history in the Soviet Union. For the fiftieth anniversary of the 1951 exile, the organization released a documentary film, *Faithful under Trials*, with

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interviews from scholars and Soviet Witnesses. Soviet stories were meant to demonstrate to Witnesses and to outside readers that believers have not and will not compromise their faith for any outside authority. A 2005 Watchtower article, for example, cited the 1951 exile, concluding, “Jehovah’s Witnesses around the world trust in God to help them remain faithful and obedient to him despite persecution. They rejoice in knowing that the reward for their faithfulness is great.”

**New Legal Challenges**

Hysterical anticult coverage fueled the perception that the state needed to intervene to prevent Russia from falling under the totalitarian spell. The anticult movement’s focus on the dangers these religious groups posed to citizens and the fledgling democratic state found an eager audience in Russia’s parliamentary body, the Duma. Support for the movement allowed Duma deputies to align themselves with the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church and democracy simultaneously. In general, Russian politicians quickly learned to appeal to their electorate by invoking the Church, a symbol of stability, unity, and national culture. Russians, including atheists, almost unanimously viewed the Church as a positive institution. In contrast, Russians had at best an ambiguous attitude toward NRMs and other marginal faiths. According to a 1997 opinion poll, only 40 percent of Russians supported full equality for all religions and churches. A 1999 survey of Russians found that 38 percent of respondents had not heard of the Witnesses or had no opinion of them. But

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1487 Kaariainen and Furman, “Religiosity in Russia,” 56.

only 14 percent of those surveyed had a positive attitude toward them and 47 percent had a negative attitude—the highest of any religious group.\footnote{Kaariainen and Furman, “Religiosity in Russia,” 56.}

Public hostility toward the Witnesses meant that Russians were less willing to grant Witnesses the freedom to practice their religion. A survey conducted among urban Russians in 2003 to 2005 asked respondents how they felt about the following statement:

Some people think Jehovah’s Witnesses are a religious cult that presents a danger to Russian society and should be forbidden from distributing literature on the street. Other people think that, regardless of whether they present a danger to Russian society, Jehovah’s Witnesses should have the right to distribute literature on the street.

Only about 20 percent of those surveyed agreed that Witnesses should have the right to hand out their literature. A mere 10 percent of Russians had not heard of the Witnesses, itself a remarkable fact given that Witnesses had only recently appeared in most Russian cities. And, as most of what these respondents knew about the Witnesses came from the Russian media, it is not surprising that urban attitudes toward Witnesses were hostile.\footnote{Vanessa A. Baird and Debra Javeline, “The Persuasive Power of Russian Courts,” Political Research Quarterly 60, no. 3 (2007): 433-34.}

The public’s reticence to grant Witnesses religious freedom reflected a broader disillusionment with democratic reforms and a lack of strong popular support for civil liberties. A 2003 survey of Russians found that 78 percent considered democracy “a facade for a government controlled by rich and powerful cliques.” Fifty-three percent stated that they disliked the idea of democracy. Such results reflected a populace increasingly alienated from power. For example, 82 percent of those polled in Moscow in the early 2000s felt they had no voice in national government; 72 percent felt the same way about local government. A poll in 2003 to 2004 found that 76 percent of those surveyed favored state censorship of
the mass media. Similarly, a study of residents in Voronezh oblast during the same period found only 11 percent of respondents would not trade their basic freedoms for stability; 29 percent would forfeit these freedoms even without a promise of order.\textsuperscript{1491}

Overall, Russian politicians clamored to align themselves with the Russian Orthodox Church and few defended the rights of religious minorities protected by the 1990 law. The Church called for the state to tighten religious restrictions, with the patriarch suggesting a five-to-seven-year waiting period for questionable foreign religious organizations to register. Religious scholar Alexander Agadjanian has argued that “the anti-Western and anti-cult state of mind dominated” the political landscape.\textsuperscript{1492} In response to pressure, the Duma amended the 1990 law in 1993. The modifications would have placed considerable obstacles in the way of foreign missionary activity, but President Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin (1991-1999) vetoed the bill twice.\textsuperscript{1493} The Duma revisited the issue in 1995, seeking to replace the 1990 law with a new law, “On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations.” Passed by an overwhelming majority in June 1997, the bill was also vetoed by Yeltsin, who criticized it for setting up unconstitutional barriers for foreign organizations.\textsuperscript{1494} The Duma adopted minor changes, and in September, Yeltsin reversed his initial opposition and signed the bill into law.\textsuperscript{1495}


The law’s passage included much that concerned the Witnesses. The preamble recognized the Russian Orthodox Church, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity in general as part of Russia’s cultural and historical heritage. It also set up a two-tiered system of religious registration based on the length of an organization’s legal existence in Russia, a system that benefited the Church while seriously disadvantaging the Witnesses, who had not received legal recognition until 1991. Most disturbingly for Witnesses, the law introduced a list of vague reasons for revoking registration that, if loosely interpreted, would have caused most religious organizations to lose their legal status. The list included threatening public order and safety, extremist actions, undermining the family, infringing on citizens’ rights and freedoms, endangering the health of citizens through denial of medical care, and inciting citizens not to fulfill their civic duties. Witnesses understood that their refusal to serve in the military or accept blood transfusions made them vulnerable to legal challenges. In practice, the law gave the anticult movement a means to contest the Witnesses’ registration, but left the ultimate impact of the law up to the judiciary. Prior to the law’s passage, thousands of Witnesses wrote letters to the Russian government protesting the proposed legislation.1496

The law garnered international criticism from scholars and politicians who felt it encroached on Russian citizens’ basic right to freedom of conscience. Yet initial indications suggested that the state had little interest in fully enforcing the most controversial aspects of the law. The law did not reintroduce a separate state agency for monitoring religious life or for identifying possible violations of the law, making it less likely that the state would revoke registration from religious organizations. In fact, almost all religious organizations, including the Witnesses, received federal registration under the new law. The Ministry of Justice re-

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registered the Witness organization under the new law in April 1999. More broadly, Russia's Constitutional Court ruled later that year that religions that had previously registered under the old law did not need to meet the fifteen-year minimum to retain their status as registered religious organizations. By 2001, some 360 Witness communities had successfully registered under the new law.

Further, while Yeltsin yielded under heavy internal pressure to sign the law, his governing strategy was largely one of decentralization, not of amassing new powers and responsibility for the federal government. In fact, many of the most egregious encroachments on religious toleration during the Yeltsin era occurred at the local level due to a lack of federal oversight. By 1999, for example, over one-third of Russia’s regional governments had enacted laws limiting the rights of non-Orthodox religious organizations. Some of these regulations included bans on all foreign religious organizations. In certain instances, authorities consulted with the local Russian Orthodox Church on whether to grant registration to a particular organization. All of this suggests that the major problem in the Yeltsin era was not central control, but rather the lack thereof, which led to numerous local violations of federal law.

1497 “Watching the World: Jesuits Denied Registration in Russia,” Awake!, January 22, 2000, 28.


1500 Lauren B. Homer and Lawrence A. Uzzell, “Federal and Provincial Religious Freedoms in Russia,” in Proselytism and Orthodoxy, 286.

1501 Novye religioznye organizatsii Rossii destruktivnogo i okkul'tnogo kharaktera: Spravochnik (Belgorod: Missionerskii otdel Moskovskogo Patriarkhata Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi, 1997), 20.

1502 Phillip Walters, “Religious Freedom in Russia,” in International Perspectives, 140.
The law itself reflected the decentralized power structure of Yeltsin’s Russia by allowing both federal and local registration of religious organizations. In essence, it was possible for a local court to revoke a religious organization’s registration within its jurisdiction, even if the federal government had registered the organization. This aspect of the law led to a major test case involving the Witnesses. Prior to the law’s passage, anticult organizations in Moscow had tried and failed to bring criminal charges against the Witnesses. They saw the new law as a second chance to make their case.1503 In 1998, at the behest of the anticult group, the Committee to Save Youth from Totalitarian Sects, the Moscow prosecutor brought suit in the Golovino Intermunicipal Court against the Witness organization for violating the new law.

In the trial, the defense and prosecution presented two starkly different views of freedom of conscience. The defense lawyers repeatedly referred to their client’s Soviet-era repression and called on the judge not to let “history repeat itself.”1504 They argued that the outcome of the trial would determine whether or not Russia had moved beyond its repressive past by guaranteeing religious freedom for all its citizens. The defense cast refusal to recognize the Witnesses as an endorsement of the Soviet political order, asserting that the court’s verdict would determine if Russian citizens could indeed now choose what God to worship, what faith to practice, and what literature to read.1505

In turn, the prosecution dismissed the notion that the Soviet legacy had any bearing

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1503 The Moscow procuracy fielded cases regarding the Witnesses, including four criminal proceedings against the organization on charges of “inciting people to religious intolerance, destroying families, engaging in activities against the State, and infringing on the rights of other citizens.” The courts dismissed all four cases due to lack of evidence. 2008 Yearbook, 251.


1505 Moscow Trial, February 16, 1999; February 23, 1999.
on the case, while nonetheless branding the Witnesses as “totalitarian.” It painted the Witnesses as intolerant of other religious organizations and opposed to democratic rule. Witnesses, the prosecution argued, refused to acknowledge the Orthodox victims of Soviet religious repression. When the defense asked Dvorkin, one of the prosecution’s star witnesses, if he was familiar with the Soviet persecution of Witnesses, he responded, “I am aware of the fact that millions of Orthodox believers were executed for maintaining their faith in, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses so elegantly put it, a phallic symbol,” a reference to the fact that Witnesses believe Christ was crucified on a stake, not a cross. In general, the prosecution downplayed the Witnesses’ Soviet experience by placing it within the larger context of state suppression of all religions.

More relevant to the 1997 law, the prosecution accused the Witnesses of illegally inciting religious discord through its criticism of other religions. It painted Witnesses as extremists who endangered the existing political and social order. Prosecution expert witness I. V. Metlik testified that the organization intended to set up “work camps” after Armageddon and that Christ’s millennial kingdom closely resembled the “theory and practice of totalitarian governments.” Numerous family members also testified to the alleged psychological damage to their relatives by the Witnesses’ belief in Armageddon. All of this provided the prosecution with evidence that the Witnesses had violated the new religious law, which made it illegal for religious organizations to undermine state security, divide families, and harm the physical and mental health of their members.

The court proceedings more broadly reflected a society in transition, attempting to

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1506 Moscow Trial, February 9, 1999.
1507 Moscow Trial, February 5, 1999.
1508 Moscow Trial, February 25, 1999.
construct a democratic system on Soviet foundations. References to European precedents and
the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) seemed to bewilder the judge, who had little
practice in weighing decisions with a mind to international law. Religious matters proved
even more confusing. Numerous incidents exposed the unfamiliarity of the judge with the
religious issues under consideration. For example, when Metlik referred to the apocalypse as
largely “symbolic in character,” the judge interrupted, “Then what is the Bible for?” As
Metlik attempted to explain that the Bible is open to varying interpretations, the judge
interjected, “Well then, our Christian faith, for instance – does it speak about the end of the
world?” Metlik replied that it did.1509 These remarks reflect the religious climate after 1991,
in which most Russians considered themselves Russian Orthodox as a matter of birth, but
often had a limited understanding of what this meant in terms of beliefs or practices.

In part for this reason, the Watch Tower organization was pessimistic about the
chances of a fair trial, writing in a September 1998 press release, “The court is not expected
to adhere to the Russian Constitution in trying this case.”1510 The trial began in September
1998, but immediately encountered numerous delays in the proceedings. The Witnesses’
predictions notwithstanding, the judge in the case proved willing to consider both sides of the
issue, frustrating and encouraging both the prosecution and the defense at different points
during the trial. The longest delay came in March 1999, when the judge suspended the court
case to allow an “expert panel” to review Watch Tower literature, in part due to her own

1509 Moscow Trial, February 24, 1999.
ignorance of the religious questions under debate.\textsuperscript{1511} The trial resumed two years later, in February 2001, after four of the five expert panelists found in favor of the prosecution.\textsuperscript{1512} Despite this finding, the court ruled against the prosecution on February 23, 2001. Unfortunately, the Witnesses had won only the first round in a series of court decisions regarding their registration. An immediate appeal of the verdict in the Moscow City Court had a less favorable outcome for the organization. The second trial largely retraced the first trial, assembling a new expert panel to investigate the Witnesses’ publications. This time, however, the court found in favor of the prosecution in March 2004 and quickly rejected an appeal by the organization. Other local courts followed Moscow’s example, delaying or obstructing the registration of the Witnesses under the 1997 law.\textsuperscript{1513}

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Enforcement of the Moscow ban was arbitrary and inconsistent. During the trial, the organization lost leases on several properties they used for Kingdom Halls, resulting in overcrowding at the remaining available spaces.\textsuperscript{1514} A police raid abruptly ended the annual Memorial service in April 2006 in Moscow.\textsuperscript{1515} Yet in 2007 the organization rented Luzhniki...


\textsuperscript{1512} The members included the chief scientific advisor for the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (M. M. Gromyko) and a professor of psycholinguistics at Moscow State University of Linguistics (V. P. Belianin). The one dissenting member was religious scholar Sergei Ivanenko, the author of two highly positive works on Witnesses in the Soviet Union and Russia aimed at disproving the anticult movement’s accusations against the Watch Tower organization.

\textsuperscript{1513} For example, Witnesses faced liquidation attempts against locally registered communities in the regions of Luchegorsk and Tatarstan. In both cases, the courts eventually found in the Witnesses’ favor. “Press Release: Tatarstan Supreme Court Orders Local Justice Ministry to Register Jehovah’s Witnesses,” \textit{Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Media Web Site}, December 11, 2000, http://www.jw-media.org/rus/20001211.htm (accessed January 26, 2011); and Slupina, “Problems,” 208-09.


\textsuperscript{1515} Carl Schreck, “Police Target Jehovah’s Witnesses,” \textit{Moscow Times}, April 14, 2006.
Stadium in Moscow for its district convention, attended by nearly 30,000 people. Overall, the Witnesses continued to devise ways to practice their faith in Moscow, but found themselves on shaky legal footing. The lack of registration in the city did not apparently dampen the Witnesses’ membership growth. At the start of the case, in 1998, the city had forty-three congregations; in 2006, there were ninety-three congregations.  

The Witnesses were one of only a handful of previously registered religious organizations to encounter such serious obstacles to registration under the new law. All told, by 2001, 12,000 religious organizations and groups had received registration. Only 200 had been refused, primarily due to having not filed complete paperwork as required by the law. The Salvation Army was the only other major organization to confront obstacles similar to those faced by the Witnesses. As with the Witnesses, the Moscow justice department denied the Salvation Army’s application for registration in 1999, calling it an illegal paramilitary organization. The district court quickly decided against the Army; this judgment withstood an appeal in 2000. Yet soon after, in 2001, the federal government approved re-registration of the organization at the federal level. The local Moscow legal battle continued nonetheless, ending with a final court judgment against the Salvation Army in 2003. As with the Witnesses, federal approval of the religious organization did not guarantee its right to operate at the local level.

Moscow’s actions fed into an increasingly hostile climate for Witnesses throughout Russia. By the late 1990s, members ran into growing difficulty in finding spaces to rent for

1516 2008 Yearbook, 255.
1517 Ibid.
conventions due to local opposition, primarily from government officials and Russian Orthodox clergy. Some Orthodox communities held demonstrations outside of the conventions in protest.\textsuperscript{1519} A number of facilities canceled rental contracts with Witnesses, forcing the organization to scramble to find last-minute alternative accommodations. At least a few conventions received anonymous bomb threats, forcing evacuations and delays.\textsuperscript{1520} Witnesses also confronted barriers to acquiring new property for Kingdom Halls and found many landlords and local officials hostile to attempts to rent property.\textsuperscript{1521} For example, authorities in Khabarovsk and Ekaterinburg cancelled rental agreements for facilities to be used for the yearly Memorial Service in 2004.\textsuperscript{1522} In 2002, the mayor of Velikie Luki in Pskov oblast cited local residents’ opposition to justify why the city had denied Witnesses the right to buy land to build a Kingdom Hall.\textsuperscript{1523} The meeting space issue posed a major problem for Witnesses, as even with the rapid construction of Kingdom Halls in the 1990s, the organization struggled to keep pace with the demand generated by the massive increase in membership. The 1997 Yearbook noted that 85 percent of congregations in Russia lacked a permanent meeting space.\textsuperscript{1524} Opposition from property owners and officials only compounded the problem, which continued through 2010. In Murmansk, the head of the city administration told the press in 2007 that the city had chosen to reject the Witnesses’ request for permission to build a Kingdom Hall, citing the organization’s “aggressive-intrusive

\textsuperscript{1519} 2008 Yearbook, 233-35.

\textsuperscript{1520} “Russians Treasure Freedom,” 27.


\textsuperscript{1522} Wolfram Slupina, “Problems,” 207.

\textsuperscript{1523} Iurii Moiseenko, “V Velikikh Lukakh ne liubiat iegovistov,” Novaia gazeta, November 14, 2002.

\textsuperscript{1524} 1997 Yearbook, 25.
methods of proselytism” and a petition signed by more than 3,000 residents opposed to the
construction. Such incidents were more and more common by the late 2000s.

If the early 1990s had represented a time of rapid membership growth and interest in
the Witnesses’ message, by the late 1990s Witnesses faced rising hostility from citizens and
local police during their door-to-door preaching. Opposition could turn violent at times. In
Volgograd in 2000, men identifying themselves as “Cossacks of the Almighty Troops of the
Don” attacked Witnesses at a religious gathering, striking one man with a whip and
destroying religious literature at the site. Witnesses also faced attacks on their local
Kingdom Halls. In 2008, arson destroyed a Kingdom Hall in Chekhov, a town forty miles
south of Moscow. Given that police often dismissed complaints brought by Witnesses,
proselytism became a potentially dangerous activity. For example, in 2005 a resident in a St.
Petersburg apartment building attacked two female Witnesses while they preached. When the
two women appealed to the police, an officer refused to bring charges, telling them that he
supported the attacker.

The Witnesses encountered other legal problems unrelated to the 1997 law. Courts
sometimes considered the Witnesses’ religious affiliation when deciding custody disputes,
finding in favor of non-Witness parents. A number of these decisions cited the Moscow

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1526 “Press Release: Russian Cossacks Attack Religious Gatherings of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” Jehovah’s
January 26, 2011).


Provided by the Jehovah’s Witnesses Office of Public Information.

1529 “Press Release: Russian Supreme Court Breaks New Ground in Religious Freedom Case Involving Child
court ruling to justify denying custody of children to Witness parents.\textsuperscript{1530} More commonly, Witnesses faced continued state pressure to enlist in the military. Although the Russian Constitution grants citizens the right to complete alternative civil service if they have religious objections, the lack of an alternative service law until 2004 made this right available to Witnesses only in theory.\textsuperscript{1531} As a result, the state forcibly conscripted some Witnesses and sent them to military units.\textsuperscript{1532} Even when it finally offered alternative service under the 2004 law, the state nonetheless sporadically attempted to compel Witnesses to serve in the military, albeit in a civil capacity, an option that Witnesses refused to consider.\textsuperscript{1533} As of 2005, the Witnesses reported over forty criminal cases against believers for refusal to complete alternative military service. The court handed down fines or assigned community service in many of these cases. At least a few local draft commissions ruled Witnesses ineligible for alternative military service.

**Witnesses as Extremists?**

The Moscow trials, which dragged on for several years, overlapped with Yeltsin’s resignation and his replacement by Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, whose leadership style shifted Russia toward a more centralized form of state control with greater restrictions on individual freedoms. During Putin’s tenure, first as President (2000-08) and then as Prime

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1530} One 2004 case in Primorskii regional court, for example, both referenced the Moscow case and labeled the Witnesses as “totalitarian.” “International Religious Freedom Report 2005.”
\item \textsuperscript{1531} The law was passed by the Duma in 2002 but did not go into effect until 2004. Oleg Volkov, “Bykhodi stroit’sia. Prezident podpisal zakon ob al’ternativnoi sluzhbe,” *Vremia novostei*, July 30, 2002, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{1533} Natal’ia Konygina, “‘Svideteli Iegovy’ razocharovalis’ v al’ternativnoi sluzhbe,” *Izvestiia*, September 22, 2005, 2.
\end{itemize}
Minister (2008-), the central state firmly asserted its authority over Russia’s regions, concentrating power within the office of the presidency.\textsuperscript{1534} The state also cultivated greater ties to the Russian Orthodox Church. For Russians who belonged to Western Christian religious organizations (roughly two million out of Russia’s 142 million citizens), particularly more marginal faiths such as the Witnesses, the state proved less tolerant and less interested in church-state cooperation.\textsuperscript{1535}

Putin’s rise to power coincided with a series of domestic terrorism incidents linked to the ongoing war in Chechnya. Putin’s ability to show strength, respond quickly to this violence, and reestablish Russian control over the breakaway region helped secure his popularity.\textsuperscript{1536} The war also gave the state more leeway to pass new laws that, under the guise of fighting terrorism, provided an avenue for it to restrict the activities of other groups it found threatening to public order and safety. With this in mind, the Duma passed the Law on Countermeasures against Extremist Activity in June 2002. The law barred organizations, including religious ones, from a host of ill-defined activities, including creating illegal armed formations and undermining state security. More troublingly for religious organizations, it prohibited propaganda on the exclusivity or superiority of citizens on the basis of religion,


\textsuperscript{1536} Historian Mark Kramer writes that “Putin earned public acclaim in Russia for his conduct of the war and became by far the most popular figure in the Russian government” on the eve of Yeltsin’s resignation in December of 1999. Mark Kramer, “The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia’s War in Chechnya,” \textit{International Security} 29, no. 3 (2004-05): 8.
social class, race, nationality, or language. Under this law, Russian courts could declare certain religious publications extremist and add them to the Federal List of Extremist Materials. This would make it a crime to import or distribute them. The court could issue heavy fines or sentence violators to as many as five years in prison.

The law had no initial impact on the Witnesses, but amendments to the law in 2007 suggested the state’s intent to broaden the law’s application to clamp down on free speech and silence political opponents. Although Putin stepped down from the presidency in 2008, he won election as prime minister, essentially retaining his previous powers under a different title. The new president, Dmitrii Anatol’evich Medvedev, hand picked and endorsed by Putin, had limited independent power to set important policy. Immediately after his inauguration in spring 2008, Medvedev instructed the Federal Security Service (FSB) that “serious attention should be paid to counteracting manifestations of ethnic and religious intolerance.” He stressed the need for the FSB to demonstrate further progress in this area.

In the wake of the 2007 amendments to the anti-extremism law, local prosecutors and officials began investigations into Witnesses for extremist activity, first in Rostov-on-Don oblast, and then in North Ossetia, Altai republic, Ekaterinburg oblast, Sverdlovsk oblast, and

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To determine if the Witnesses publications qualified as extremist under the law, local officials ordered “expert studies” of Watch Tower literature. Geraldine Fagan, an expert on religious freedom in Russia, has commented on these studies that, “in some cases, it’s quite farcical. If the texts say that their faith is the best or the truest, then that is understood as extremist. But that is an integral part of any religion.”\footnote{Alissa de Carbonnel, “Russia Uses Extremism Law to Target Dissenters,” \textit{Reuters}, December 16, 2010, http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6BF17U20101216 (accessed January 18, 2011).} Following this pattern, the study in Rostov-on-Don found that two Watch Tower publications “contain statements humiliating a person’s dignity on the principle of his or her attitude to religion,” and that this amounted to incitement of religious hatred.\footnote{Fagan, “Are Turkish Teachers.”} Some of the expert conclusions bordered on the absurd. My \textit{Book of Bible Stories}, for example, retells the story of how the Jewish high priests called for the execution of Jesus Christ. The expert found that this story made clergymen seem “hypocritical, mercenary, [and] cruel,” among other things.\footnote{“Examples of Literature Banned by the Russian Federation Supreme Court, Including Expert Analysis,” \textit{Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Media Web Site}, http://www.jw-media.org/rus/publications/rusban.htm (accessed January 18, 2011).}

In the wake of the new wave of investigations into Witness activity in the late 2000s, local authorities blocked Witnesses from holding summer congresses in eight locations in 2008; another roughly thirty congresses took place despite interference by local officials. Local government opposition went far beyond the sporadic and usually unsuccessful attempts of local officials in previous years to obstruct large scale Witness gatherings.\footnote{Geraldine Fagan, “Is Mass Disruption to Jehovah’s Witness Congresses Coordinated?,” \textit{Forum 18 News Service}, July 22, 2008, http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1161 (accessed December 16, 2010).} Some
human rights experts concluded that the sheer number of such instances suggested a coordinated campaign from the central government. This interpretation gained further credence in February 2009, when the state initiated investigations into Witness communities countrywide on the basis of the extremism law.

The Witness organization interpreted the state’s actions as the first step in a move to liquidate the administrative structure of the organization. While the federal government kept silent on its role in orchestrating the investigations, the human rights organization Forum 18 obtained documents suggesting the First Assistant General Public Prosecutor Aleksandr Bastrykin in Moscow had ordered the investigations. According to Forum 18, “Authorities are now ‘trawling’ for information to shut down the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Russian headquarters and over 400 dependent organizations.” Local authorities and education departments were asked to provide information on any problems they had with Witnesses, including in regard to blood transfusions and the involvement of minors in religious activities. Following this request, officials examined registration documents for possible errors that could establish a basis for revoking a congregation’s registration.\textsuperscript{1546} Within a short period, more than 500 communities faced some form of government scrutiny.\textsuperscript{1547} In the spring and summer of 2009, the Russian government deported four foreign lawyers for the Witness organization, a move likely intended to undercut the organization’s ability to defend itself in court.\textsuperscript{1548} In an equally worrying development for the Watch Tower organization, in February 2009 the Ministry of Justice strengthened the powers of its advisory board on

\textsuperscript{1546} Fagan, “Nationwide Strike.”

The Supreme Court’s action meant that local authorities could stop and question Witnesses for distributing extremist material.\footnote{In the wake of these developments, Russian human rights advocates issued a statement on January 20, 2010, to the Russian government decrying their actions against the Witnesses. “Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia: Once Exonerated, Now Objects of Renewed Persecution,” \textit{Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Media Web Site}, http://www.jw-media.org/ru/20100120_e.pdf> (accessed January 18, 2010).} Even prior to the ruling, FSB agents detained eighteen members at a local Kingdom Hall in Ekaterinburg in 2009 for eight hours.
and seized the congregation’s literature. After the decision, large numbers of Witnesses were arrested when they engaged in door-to-door proselytism. The Russian human rights monitoring agency SOVA counted over 150 detentions and police searches in three months alone. Police harassment of Witnesses reached such a high level in 2010 that the international Watch Tower organization created an interactive map on its official website to catalog all incidents under the categories “arson/assault,” “arrest,” “actions by public,” and “actions by authorities.”

In the fall of 2010, for the first time since the Soviet era, trials of Witnesses for preaching activity began in seven areas. In the earliest trial in Gorno-Altaisk city court, the prosecution charged Aleksandr Kalistratov, a congregation elder, with inciting religious discord (Article 282 of the Russian criminal code) after he gave two Watch Tower magazines to a local resident who had requested them. The actual incident predated the Supreme Court decision regarding the Taganrog community by over a year. The FSB involved itself in the case, intercepting the mail and tapping the phones of Kalistratov and other members of the congregation. The trial, which began in October 2010, focused on the confiscated religious literature seized from Kalistratov’s home. Two local Orthodox priests testified at the trial, neither of whom knew the defendant. Their knowledge of the Witnesses, the priests


1556 The city of Gorno-Altaisk is situated in the Altai republic, a southern Siberian region that borders Kazakhstan, China, and Mongolia.

admitted, was limited largely to the works of Dvorkin. The court trial continues as of this writing, but the court’s willingness to pursue the case based on a retroactive application of a court ruling and flimsy expert testimony strongly suggests a negative outcome for the Witnesses.

In February 2010, the Witnesses began a media campaign throughout Russia to bring the public’s attention to government harassment. Russian Witnesses distributed twelve million copies of the brochure Is History Repeating Itself? A Question for Russian Citizens. It highlighted the Soviet repression of Witnesses and recent actions against the Witnesses for extremism. The brochure concluded by stating, “Repression will never succeed. We will not stop speaking tactfully and respectfully about Jehovah God and his Word, the Bible. (1 Peter 3:15) We did not stop when subjected to the horrors of Nazi Germany, we did not stop in the darkest days of our country’s repression, and we will not stop now.” Yet given Russian ambivalence toward democratic rule and the rights of minority religious organizations, most citizens may have greeted this brochure no more favorably than they did issues of The Watchtower. It certainly did not lead to any public outcry against state repression of the Watch Tower organization.

**Losing Freedoms at Home, Winning Freedoms Abroad**

Even as the Witnesses faced an uphill battle to retain their legal status in Russia, they won court decisions in their favor in the international arena. In 1996, Russia joined the

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Council of Europe and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights in 1998.\textsuperscript{1560} Article 9 of the convention recognizes the right of every citizen to exercise freedom of religion. This includes the “freedom to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice, and observance,” and allows for restrictions of this right only as “are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”\textsuperscript{1561} By ratifying the convention, the Russian state gave citizens the right to appeal domestic court decisions to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). For the Witnesses and other minority groups, the Convention granted them much needed protection from increasingly hostile Russian courts. These groups made frequent use of the ECHR and by 2008, more than a quarter of all applications pending in the court were against Russia.\textsuperscript{1562}

The Witnesses already had a strong established presence in ECHR case law as the first religious organization to win a case in the court on the violation of Article 9. Kokkinakis v. Greece in 1993 granted Witnesses the right to proselytize in Europe and established them as a recognized religion. In fact, the majority of decisions by the ECHR regarding religious freedom have involved the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1563} In Manoussakias and Others v. Greece in 1996, the Court overturned another Greek decision against Witnesses who had rented space for their


\textsuperscript{1562} Trochev, “All Appeals,” 148.

meetings without prior authorization from the state.\textsuperscript{1564} In 1993, the ECHR ruled in \textit{Hoffman v. Austria} that courts could not discriminate on the basis of religion in making child custody decisions. Other decisions in 1997 ruled against Greek courts for convicting Witnesses who refused to complete military service while granting exemptions to Greek Orthodox clergy.\textsuperscript{1565} Overall, Witnesses in Russia had the benefit of prior ECHR case law that established their religious organization as legitimate and protected by Article 9.

In the wake of the Moscow court decision against the organization, the Russian Witnesses filed a claim with the ECHR for violation of Article 9. The Witnesses also submitted an application, \textit{Kuznetsov and Others v. Russian Federation}, in 2002 after police in Cheliabinsk forcibly shut down a meeting of deaf Witnesses in 2000.\textsuperscript{1566} The ECHR found in their favor in 2007.\textsuperscript{1567} Giving Witnesses additional confidence that the ECHR would support their Moscow appeal, a 2006 ruling by the ECHR found against the city for its refusal to register the Salvation Army.\textsuperscript{1568} In June 2010, the ECHR overturned the Moscow court’s decision barring the Watch Tower organization and rejected an appeal by Russia in December 2010.\textsuperscript{1569} It remains to be seen if Russia will honor the ECHR’s decision.\textsuperscript{1570} In the

\textsuperscript{1564} Edge, “The European Court,” 684-87.


\textsuperscript{1566} Slupina, “Problems,” 211.


\textsuperscript{1568} “Moscow Branch of the Salvation Army v. Russia.”


meantime, the Witnesses have filed additional appeals of the recent court decisions regarding the extremist nature of Watch Tower literature.

The example of the ECHR points to the broader importance of the Witnesses in establishing legal precedent on the boundaries of freedom of conscience. In Europe, the ECHR has provided the Witnesses with an avenue to protect their religious freedoms. The case law created by the Witnesses also helps guarantee those same rights and protections for other minority faiths in Europe. In this regard, the Witnesses are more than a barometer of religious freedom. The Witnesses’ advocacy pushes legal boundaries and ensures that states respect religious pluralism in the broadest sense allowed by the law. Ironically, given that an increasingly non-democratic Russia may choose to ignore the ECHR decisions, Russian Witnesses may have the greatest impact not on their own right to practice, but on the rights of Witnesses and minority faiths in other, more democratic European states, most of which do respect the court and its rulings. Thus, even as Witnesses are denied certain freedoms domestically, their legal challenges advance the cause of religious freedom beyond Russia’s borders.

Nor is the European example unique, as numerous scholars have noted how Witnesses have played an active role in securing broad civil liberties and religious freedom in other democratic countries, primarily in the United States, but also in Canada and elsewhere.157¹ Indeed, it is often the unpopular religions and groups that set the legal

parameters of freedom of conscience and civil liberties because they, unlike more mainstream religions and groups, require the protection of the state against an often hostile public. The Witnesses have championed this notion that their actions benefit everyone. In a 2000 pamphlet distributed in Russia entitled *It Could Happen to You!*, the organization advised Russian citizens that they should “be concerned” about recent media slander against the Witnesses: “Ultimately, it involves YOU and your rights. If slanderous accusations against the members of one religious group are allowed to stand unchallenged today, you and your beliefs could be targeted tomorrow.”

**Conclusion**

At the dawn of Russia’s independence in 1991, Russian Witnesses had reason to celebrate. The 1990 law granted broad civil liberties and religious freedom to all Russian citizens, including those marginalized and persecuted throughout the Soviet era. One Witness, attending his first international convention, expressed a sense of disbelief that such a rapid transformation in religious policy had taken place: “For many years we have been waiting for this day, and now we are here at this international convention. We find it difficult to grasp all of this and take it all in. It is like a dream.” In the years that followed, the Watch Tower organization grew rapidly, finding new members throughout the Russian Federation and establishing its administrative structure over hundreds of local congregations, most of them only recently created.

Yet continued social, economic, and political instability in Russia left citizens less optimistic about the country’s long-term prospects as a democracy. The need for stability...

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1573 *1990 Yearbook*, 17.
overshadowed the desire to protect minority voices. The Russian Orthodox Church, itself struggling to adjust to changing realities, demanded stronger measures against marginal religious organizations that it felt threatened its position as Russia’s traditional religion. The anticult movement painted the Church’s religious competitors as predatory, psychologically manipulative, and largely foreign. It suggested that, to ensure social cohesion, public welfare, and state security, the Russian government needed to take strong measures to restrict freedom of religious expression.

A new religious law in 1997 triggered a major shift in church-state relations and a renewed tension between the state and Witnesses. Putin’s rise to power aggravated the situation by applying further pressure on the Watch Tower organization through the selective application of the 2002 anti-extremism law. Less than two decades after Soviet Witnesses finally secured their freedom to practice their religion without state hindrance, this right was again under serious question. Russian Witnesses today are prepared for a return to Soviet-era repression, clandestine meetings and literature distribution, and the possibility of arrest and imprisonment for speaking about their beliefs to others. This scenario does not surprise them, but it does motivate them to apply every available legal tool to prevent it.

Ultimately, Russia’s actions will have implications not just for Witnesses themselves, but also for the future of Russian democracy and religious pluralism. Court rulings against the organization have set a clear precedent. They allow the state to liquidate any religious organization, ban their activities, and restrict the right of citizens to express their personal opinions when these views conflict with state interests. Yet even as Russian Witnesses prepare for the worst, they and other minority faiths in Europe benefit from the victories won in the ECHR by Russian believers. Ironically, although the European anticult movement may
have bolstered its Russian counterpart, Europe has proven uninterested in taking the extraordinary measures against Witness activity enacted by Russia in the last decade. The deterioration of religious pluralism in Russia, it seems, may have the opposite effect in Europe by establishing legal precedents for protecting Witnesses. The legal fate of the Russian Witness community remains in limbo. However, the history of Soviet Witnesses and of the organization worldwide make it clear that Russian Witnesses will continue to exist, to preach, and to meet together as a faith community, regardless of the circumstances.
CHAPTER EIGHT

WITNESSES IN POST-SOVET MOLDOVA AND UKRAINE

“I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.” John 4:35

Witnesses were a relatively new phenomenon for most Russians in the 1990s, as Soviet-era Witnesses had lived in a handful of provincial locations far from the political center. In contrast, Moldova and Ukraine had longstanding Witness communities in several major areas and high concentrations of members in northern Moldova and western Ukraine. By the end of the millennium, some of these communities included four or even five generations of Witness families.\textsuperscript{1574} While the former Soviet Union as a whole experienced a rapid increase in Witnesses, there continued to be far more Witnesses in Moldova and Ukraine than anywhere else in the region. In 2009, only 1 out of 903 citizens in Russia were Witnesses, compared to 1 in 312 in Ukraine, and 1 in 202 in Moldova.\textsuperscript{1575}

The Watch Tower organization pursued a similar strategy in Ukraine and Moldova as it had in Russia. In all three countries, it established a legal existence, implemented standard operating procedures for all congregations, and intensified its efforts to find new members. Like Russia, Ukraine and Moldova shared a post-Soviet religious climate dominated by various branches of the Orthodox Church that felt threatened by both homegrown new religious movements and foreign missionaries. Ukraine and Moldova also faced common

\textsuperscript{1574} To give just one example, Parfin Palamarciuc joined the Witnesses in his home village of Grimăncăuți (then Romania, now located in Moldova) in 1923. As of 2009, his great-granddaughters are now members of the faith, along with his surviving children and grandchildren. Palamarciuc, interview; and 2004 Yearbook, 91-92.

\textsuperscript{1575} 2010 Yearbook of the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 2010), 36-39.
challenges with Russia after 1991 in establishing viable independent states and negotiating their new position in the European and global community.

Freedom of conscience represented only one aspect of a broader regional transition from authoritarianism toward some form of democratic governance. In the mid-1990s, Russia began a gradual shift toward more exclusionary religious policies and exerted a serious influence over its neighbors, making it hard for them to ignore Russian trends. At the same time, many post-Soviet states set goals of greater integration with Europe. Admission into and cooperation with European institutions required conformity to certain democratic standards and limited the extent to which states could enact restrictive legislation against minority religions. Russia and Europe offered Ukraine and Moldova slightly different models for religious policy, and both represented key economic and geopolitical partners. Each state had to negotiate between the two options with a mind to broader political and economic goals post-independence.

By 2010, the post-Soviet transition had produced a significantly different outcome for religious freedom in Ukraine and Moldova than in Russia. Ukraine and Moldova established and maintained relatively broad religious freedoms, while the breakaway republic of

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Transnistria within Moldova’s borders pursued a strategy more in line with the Russian model.

**The Two States of Moldova**

The 1991 collapse of the USSR brought Soviet Moldavia independence (now called the Republic of Moldova, hereafter shortened to Moldova), but not territorial integrity. In the fall of 1990, separatists proclaimed the creation of an independent state, the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (abbreviated in Russian as PMR), over Moldovan territory east of the Dniester River. This attempt at self-determination escalated into a more serious problem once Moldova itself received independence and international recognition in 1991. The PMR refused to accept Moldovan control over its territory, fueled in large part by fears of a Romanian annexation of the nascent republic. A small war broke out between the PMR and Moldova, resulting in a few hundred casualties and a ceasefire in July 1992. Talks between the two parties and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe failed to produce any movement toward reunification. Instead, the PMR and Moldova both pursued separate courses of state-building, making reintegration increasingly problematic and undermining Moldova’s strategy of greater integration with Europe.

Making matters even more complex, each new state pursued a different course of action on religious affairs. Both states struggled to create some measure of religious freedom,

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1577 The PMR (Pridnestrovskaia Moldavskaia Respublika) is known as Republica Moldovenească Nistreană in Romanian. However, I have chosen to use the term PMR as it is the more common acronym for the territory.


while also satisfying the demands of a resurgent Orthodox Church and community. Yet Moldova, as a small landlocked country with few natural resources, needed to take into account international and European standards if it hoped for vital economic and political ties. The PMR, in contrast, with similar needs but no hope of support from other states, had little reason to conform to their dictates. Its only erstwhile ally, Russia, had not recognized its sovereignty, but had supplied the military backing necessary to win the ceasefire and now had peacekeeping troops on its soil. As such, the PMR needed to find a religious policy that met its own internal interests without provoking hostility from Russia.

Religious organizations in Moldova grappled not only with how to create a new legal entity in the newly independent state, but with how to conduct their work in the PMR, a quasi-independent state with no international standing. In setting up its operations, the Witness organization established a single unified organizational structure that included both the Republic of Moldova and the PMR. Given the lack of qualified personnel, the Governing Body initially assigned the Russian branch, and then in 1995, the Romanian branch, the task of exercising control over the Moldovan office until it could train staff and set up an operation in Chişinău capable of running the organization without intermediary oversight.\textsuperscript{1580} Since 2006, the Moldovan office has reported directly to the international headquarters.\textsuperscript{1581} This model proved to be a shrewd move as the relatively secure organization in Chişinău could then provide support to the communities in the PMR. The following two sections will explore the post-Soviet situation for Witnesses in the Republic of Moldova, and then examine the challenges faced by Witnesses in the PMR.

\textsuperscript{1580} 2004 Yearbook, 128.

\textsuperscript{1581} Gorobeţ, interview.
The Republic of Moldova

In Moldova, once early momentum toward unification with Romania lost steam, the state turned its energies to establishing a viable independent state with ties to its post-Soviet neighbor states and an eye to greater integration with Europe. The Moldovan economy struggled to adjust to independence, as the territory’s industrial wealth was located primarily in the PMR. With few domestic economic resources, Moldovans faced a weak economy, an outdated infrastructure, and a minimal social safety net. As of 2000, an estimated 65 to 75 percent of citizens lived in poverty and as many as a third of adults worked abroad illegally to support themselves and their families. Mounting frustration with the economic situation brought the Moldovan Communist Party back to the political stage, where it captured the presidency and a parliamentary majority in 2001. Civil unrest in spring 2009 challenged this status quo and eventually resulted in a new, non-communist coalition government at the end of that year. On the whole, throughout the post-Soviet period, Moldovans faced a difficult social and economic situation that politicians proved incapable or unwilling to adequately address.

Moldova codified its commitment to freedom of conscience in its 1992 Law on Cults and its 1994 constitution. The law offered a path to registration for religious organizations

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1583 Ibid., 606.

and provided for the creation of a governmental body to oversee the registration process.\textsuperscript{1585} The law also reflected early discomfort with the recent arrival of foreign missionaries and included a ban on “religious proselytism.”\textsuperscript{1586} The state likely intended the statute to eliminate aggressive recruiting tactics by foreign religious organizations, but with no definition of proselytism provided, it was open to interpretation and impossible to enforce. In 1999, the state modified this portion of the law to meet standards set by the European Convention on Human Rights. The new version allowed proselytism except in cases of “abusive proselytism,” which it defined as proselytism through the use of force or abuse of authority.\textsuperscript{1587} In 2002, the new criminal code made the “preaching [of] religious beliefs or fulfillment of religious rituals, which cause harm to the health of citizens, or other harm to their persons or rights, or instigate citizens not to participate in public life or of the fulfillment of their obligations as citizens” a punishable offence. Yet, as of 2009, the state had not used the statute against any religious organization.\textsuperscript{1588}

In 2007, this time partly under pressure from the Council of Europe, Moldova passed a new religious law intended to streamline the registration process for religious organizations. The law responded to domestic demands for more regulation by strengthening its ban on abusive proselytism to include “psychological” pressure, a redefinition no doubt influenced by anticult rhetoric about how sects brainwash or “zombify” members. As with

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\item[1586] “Zakon Respubliki Moldova o kul’takh,” 2.
\item[1588] Dirksen, “Moldova and Transnistria,” 308.
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Russia’s 1997 law, the new Moldovan law recognized the unique role played by the Orthodox Church in Moldovan history.\footnote{2009 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127325.htm (accessed January 26, 2011).} So far, the new legislation has not had a major effect on freedom of conscience, nor resulted in significantly greater hurdles for religions seeking registration. Unlike in Russia, Moldova showed little interest in using its laws to eliminate marginal religious organizations such as the Witnesses.

The Moldovan state also resolved the military service issue much more quickly than Russia. In 1992, it enacted an alternative service law, thereby removing the last major Soviet-era legal barrier to Witnesses. The law made it possible for Moldovan Witnesses to avoid active military duty and designated Witness elders and full-time volunteers at the branch office in Chișinău as members of the clergy. This status gave them an exemption from the alternative service as well.\footnote{“Zakon Respubliki Moldova o voinskoi obiazannosti i voennoi sluzhbe grazhdan Respubliki Moldova,” Nezavisimaia Moldova, April 15, 1992, 2. Information on its application to Witnesses provided by David Grozescu (MJW), April 28, 2009, Chișinău, Moldova.} The 1992 law eliminated a major source of potential conflict between the state and the organization. Young Witness men, who had seen their grandfathers, fathers, and even older brothers spend years imprisoned for their refusal to serve, could now enter adulthood and start families without fear of being marked as criminals.

Under the 1992 Law on Cults, the Witnesses received official registration in July 1994.\footnote{2004 Yearbook, 127.} By 1999, the organization had 147 registered religious communities.\footnote{Igor Pinzaru, Liudmila Kovali, and Nicolae Fuștei, “‘Organizațiile religioase din Moldova au potențial mare de dezvoltare’,” Opinia, August 10, 2004, 7.} Without interference from the government and with steady access to literature and other resources, membership grew at a correspondingly fast pace. The Watch Tower organization does not
provide differentiated statistics for the PMR and the Republic of Moldova, but instead estimates its total membership at the time of independence at roughly 4,000.\footnote{2011 Yearbook, 130. This figure is in line with data from the CRA for 1985, which lists 51 groups and 4,100 members in Moldova. GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3130, l. 46.} By 1995, this figure grew to 9,320 active members.\footnote{1996 Yearbook, 38-40. This source provides data for 1995, the first year that the organization published statistics for individual post-Soviet states.} In 2000, the organization listed 16,856 members.\footnote{2001 Yearbook, 36-38.} Growth then proceeded at a somewhat slower, but still steady pace, with 19,918 members as of 2010.\footnote{2011 Yearbook, 44-45.}

Religious freedom and a surge in membership ushered in a new era for the national Witness organization, which now had unimpeded contact with the Brooklyn headquarters. As in Russia, the Governing Body worked with local Witnesses to reconfigure the underground structure of Witness communities to conform to its international standards. This involved a great deal of work for both parties. Local communities had to adjust to the new way of doing things, while the Brooklyn leadership needed to first determine the exact condition of these communities and then communicate and enforce rules and procedures. The local organization had many illiterate or functionally illiterate older members and almost no members with advanced degrees. Since the initial arrival of Witnesses into the territory under Romanian interwar rule, most members in Moldova lived in the northern districts and rural areas, with few members in Chișinău, the capital.\footnote{As of January 1991, the Witnesses reported only 350 members and two congregations in Chișinău. 2004 Yearbook, 130.} The organization had to establish an urban base for itself and train elders to run the country office. In 1989, sixty Moldovan members traveled to
L’viv, Ukraine, for instruction in running the organization. In addition, the Governing Body sent experienced foreign volunteers to Moldova in the early 1990s. In 1998, the organization began constructing a permanent administrative center in downtown Chișinău to provide office space and to house its full-time staff. The branch opened in early 2000.

Religious freedom required a major monetary investment by the Witnesses to build Kingdom Halls so members could congregate outside of private homes. While Witnesses met primarily in groups of less than a dozen persons in the Soviet era, now they formed into congregations of roughly a hundred members each. Meeting times switched from the middle of the night or early morning to regular daytime and evening hours. Preliminary construction began on the first Kingdom Hall in 1990. Building projects proceeded at a rapid pace in the early 1990s in the northern districts, due to the great need for meeting places, massive volunteer labor donated by members, and a weak Moldovan currency that made such projects relatively inexpensive. Even with this work, the rapid membership growth meant that space for congregations remained an issue and construction continued to occupy considerable time and resources into the 2000s.

How Witnesses practiced their faith changed significantly after 1991. Meetings in the newly built Kingdom Halls conformed to a more uniform format, made possible in part by uninterrupted access to Watch Tower publications. While families may have previously

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1598 Ibid., 123.
1599 Ibid., 128-29.
1600 Ibid., 124-25.
1601 Ibid., 126-27. Some congregations rented space from the local public schools, but this generated some hostility, as in the case of one school in Chișinău, which received complaints from local Orthodox citizens. Preot. V. Ciobanu and D. Tolicu, “‘Martorii lui Iehova’ la școala medie nr. 72 din Chiși, ” Curierul ortodox, December 1-15, 1997, 2.
shared or hand-copied issues of *The Watchtower* or *Awake!*, all members now had their own copies to study at home before meetings. Massive investment in translation work made it possible for Moldovan Witnesses to read Romanian- and Russian-language versions of all major publications. Further, yearly conventions, held mostly in public stadiums, allowed for mass baptisms of new members in swimming pools rather than rivers and lakes. These changes allowed members to openly socialize with a wider community of fellow believers and for the Witnesses to present a public face to the broader community.

By 2000, post-Soviet converts made up a strong majority of members. The greater geographic diversity of members and stronger urban presence attracted a diverse ethnic mix of Russian, Romanian, and Ukrainian converts. Many joined for the same reasons as those of past generations. The organization offered a close-knit community and provided spiritual guidance and hope during a difficult or traumatic period. One man, for example, found comfort and meaning in the Witnesses after a stranger brutally murdered his wife. While serving time for drug trafficking after her death, he studied the Bible with a Witness prisoner and was baptized while still in prison.\textsuperscript{1602} The Witnesses’ strong support network had particular relevance in the post-Soviet era, a time of political and social instability and economic hardship. On a broader level, Witnesses have experienced the strongest growth in recent decades in third world and poor countries, and Moldova fit in with this larger trend.\textsuperscript{1603}

Some of those who joined came from Witness families or had Witness relatives, but Soviet repression had made the faith seem dangerous and unappealing. Lidia Sevastian’s mother and grandmother both joined the Witnesses under Romanian rule, but not her father.

\textsuperscript{1602} Victor Magari, interview by author, July 27, 2010, Chișinău, Moldova.

\textsuperscript{1603} In general, Witnesses tend to experience a surge in membership during their initial arrival into a new country or territory, which eventually gives way to a much slower, steady pace of growth. In Western European countries in recent decades, membership has remained roughly the same or increased only slightly.
The family, including the father, went into exile in 1951, and Lidia was born nine years later in Tomsk oblast. While her father continued to support the family, he saw that Lidia received a secular education and did not get involved with the faith. She eventually married a man opposed to the Witnesses. Only in 1993, while recovering from back surgery, did she renew her contact with the Witnesses after learning that her son had been baptized at that year’s international convention in Kiev. Following his example, she began a Bible study with the Witnesses and was baptized in 1995. In an odd twist, even her father joined the Witnesses a few years later before his death.\textsuperscript{1604}

As in the Soviet era, many people joined the Witnesses not as individuals, but as family units. As Lidia’s story demonstrates, the conversion of one person could spark a chain reaction of parents, spouses, children, and relatives following them into the organization.\textsuperscript{1605} Inna Țmokno began a home Bible study with the Witnesses in 1998. Her mother did not approve and chased the Witnesses out of her home. Inna persisted and eventually the mother expressed interest in learning more about the religion her daughter found so appealing. The mother joined Inna in her Bible study and both were baptized in 2002.\textsuperscript{1606} In general, the religion spread in large part through family and friend networks, as people responded more favorably and seriously to proselytism from someone they knew and respected.

The new converts differed from Soviet-era Witnesses in their demographic makeup. One scholarly article in 2004 cited data indicating some interesting trends. Similar to the 2000 study of Moscow Witnesses, it found that most Moldovan Witnesses were younger than

\textsuperscript{1604} 2004 Yearbook, 113-15.

\textsuperscript{1605} To cite one example, four members of the Daniliuc family joined at roughly the same time. Tatiana Daniliuc, interview by author, July 27, 2010, Chișinău, Moldova.

\textsuperscript{1606} Inna’s brother was also baptized in 2002. Inna Țmokno, interview by author, August 3, 2010, Chișinău, Moldova.
thirty and a significant percentage had university degrees.\footnote{1607} Anecdotal evidence based on my own interactions with Witnesses confirms both of these observations in regard to post-Soviet converts.\footnote{1608} Tatiana Daniliuc, for example, came from a family of college professors and earned a teaching decree from the State Pedagogical University in 2010. She was baptized in 2007.\footnote{1609} At least a few converts held positions of prominence or power. Prior to joining, Valeriu Mărza served as the vice mayor of Soroca, a mid-sized town, and was a member of the Communist Party.\footnote{1610}

The Witnesses also took greater advantage of the religious revival during this period than the Orthodox churches, which did not invest the same amount of time and resources into missionary work. As in Russia, foreign missionary organizations arrived en masse after 1991 with the goal of winning new followers to their faiths. One man, baptized in 2000, recalled how, in the early 1990s, all sorts of religious organizations flooded Chișinău. He attended events held by the Hare Krishnas and the Word of Truth before ultimately joining the Witnesses.\footnote{1611} While Moldovan Witnesses engaged in the traditional door-to-door preaching conducted by members worldwide, they also proselytized in parks and on the streets. One woman joined the Witnesses after a member approached her in a park and set up a home

\footnote{1607} This data should be treated with caution as the author makes a few factual errors regarding the Witnesses and provides no footnotes for his data. Andrei Jitari, “Mișcările religioase neoprotestante și orientale din Republica Moldova în perioada anilor 1991-2000,” Revistă de istorie a Moldovei (2004): 97-98.

\footnote{1608} To cite two examples, Inna Țmokno, baptized as a Witness in 2002, is a licensed lawyer. Țmokno, interview. Tatiana Cravciuc, baptized in the mid-1990s, graduated from a medical college and worked as a nurse prior to volunteering full-time at the branch office. Tatiana Cravciuc, interview by author, July 27, 2010, Chișinău, Moldova.

\footnote{1609} Daniliuc, interview.

\footnote{1610} 2004 Yearbook, 130-31.

\footnote{1611} Sergei Zolotukhin, interview by author, July 27, 2010, Chișinău, Moldova.
Bible study with her.\textsuperscript{1612} In short, Witnesses and other missionaries made proselytism a regular feature of post-Soviet life for Moldovan citizens.

Given the relatively high concentration of Witnesses in Moldova compared to most of Russia, and the long legacy of anti-Witness campaigns under Soviet rule, it is surprising how quickly and smoothly Witnesses managed to establish free practice of their faith. Yet while the Witnesses confronted few serious state or legal challenges in post-Soviet Moldova, they did encounter public hostility and negative media coverage. As in Russia, much of the opposition to the Witnesses came from Russian Orthodox clergy and believers. In the advent of religious pluralism, roughly 90 percent of Moldovans adopted some form of Orthodoxy, either under the Moldovan Orthodox Church (subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate) or the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (subordinate to the Bucharest Patriarchate).\textsuperscript{1613} Orthodoxy increasingly became a feature of Moldovan national identity, placing other religions by definition outside of the national narrative. At the same time, divisions over allegiance to Romania versus Russia created a less cohesive Orthodox community and reflected the relatively weak and unstable state of national identity among Moldovans. For them, the post-Soviet identity crisis revolved primarily around a choice over Romanian, Russian, or a third,

\textsuperscript{1612} Cravciuc, interview.

‘Moldovan’ identity. Unlike in Russia, therefore, foreign missionaries and Western religious influence were of secondary importance in post-Soviet Moldova. 1614

Most of the hostility to foreign missionaries came from the Orthodox churches and was fueled by the successful importation of the Russian-based anticult movement to other post-Soviet states by the mid- to late 1990s. Anticult rhetoric granted newly independent states the ability to sharply criticize marginal religious organizations while still voicing support for democracy and European standards of religious freedom. It also provided an outlet for lingering Soviet-era suspicions about Western Christian minorities. As in Russia, Witnesses became a frequent target of these attacks, in part because Russia supplied a steady stream of critical information on the organization. If Russia borrowed heavily from 1970s-era American anticult literature, other post-Soviet states, such as Moldova, equally relied on Russian media sources in transmitting the anticult message in their national presses.

Russian anticult terminology and materials appeared in the Moldovan press beginning in the late 1990s. 1615 The Russian-language daily, *Kishinevskie novosti* (Chișinău Daily), printed stories of citizens allegedly victimized by the Witnesses and described the psychological pressure employed by Witnesses on potential converts. 1616 The Romanian-language paper *Țara* (Country) published a nine-part series on the Witnesses in 1997 under the title “The Sectarian Phenomenon.” 1617 Its author described the Witnesses as having a “totalitarian mentality” and sects in general as “maladaptive” and “parasitic.” 1618 The

1614 For discussion of Moldovan nation-building and national identity, see King, *The Moldovans*.


language borrowed from Soviet-era depictions as well, comparing the Witness organization to a “spider web.”  

1619 At the same time, it portrayed the Witnesses, not religious intolerance, as the real threat to democracy. The Witnesses, it alleged, continued communist practices through their totalitarian-esque hierarchy. It claimed that the organization instructs members to obey the leader, whether he is “the führer or the president.”  

1620 The Orthodox press also readily published materials borrowed from the Russian anticult movement, and from Dvorkin in particular.  

1621 A 2004 paper listed Dvorkin’s classification model for different types of members of totalitarian sects.  

1622 Other papers cited Dvorkin’s published works as reference.  

1623 Resentment over the financial resources of Western religious organizations spilled over into attacks on the Witnesses. In a climate of relative poverty in Moldova, the rapid growth of the Witnesses, their distribution of free literature, and their construction of Kingdom Halls fueled allegations that conversions to the faith amounted to little more than bribery. *Kishinevskie novosti* sent one of its reporters to a Witness meeting in 1998 to investigate the situation. Giving little attention to the content of the service itself, he instead focused on the more than eighty lei (Moldovan currency) collected from members. Afterward, he visited the congregational elder’s office and described its computers, fax machine, copy machine, printer, and new furniture, all of which he saw as evidence of aid.


from the West.\textsuperscript{1624} In fact, although the organization did invest major funds into development in Moldova, it relied heavily on local donations and almost entirely on local volunteers to build its Kingdom Halls.\textsuperscript{1625}

In contrast to Russia, public distrust of Western religious organizations did not translate into sweeping changes to the existing religious legislation, nor did it usher in major violations of freedom of conscience that had to then be resolved through the national and international court systems. Instead, it fed into a climate of public hostility and recurrent clashes between Witnesses and local government, clergy, and citizens. Equally important, it continued lingering distrust of the Witnesses that had survived well after the collapse of the Soviet system. For many Moldovans, Witnesses remained the dangerous and secretive sect described in the official Soviet press. Changes in attitude toward the religion did not come quickly, as neither the late Soviet nor the early post-Soviet press seriously attempted to debunk earlier notions and to present an objective view of the organization.

Thus, while more Moldovans than ever before responded positively to the Witnesses’ message, most remained wary, if not suspicious. Ironically, the same proselytism that brought the organization converts became the primary source of local friction. In the 1990s, the Witnesses’ door-to-door proselytism put them in more frequent direct contact with their neighbors than under Soviet rule. Not everyone liked the idea of having religion pitched to them in their homes, particularly since the majority religion, Orthodoxy, did not endorse or practice this method. Witnesses reported numerous confrontations during their preaching work, some of them violent. Some members clashed with local Orthodox clergy who

\textsuperscript{1624} Sviatchenko, “Kto oni,” 6.

\textsuperscript{1625} In northern Moldova, with its more established Witness communities, members constructed many early Kingdom Halls solely with local financing. In southern Moldova, the Governing Body stepped in to provide the necessary resources. \textit{2004 Yearbook}, 125-27.
attempted to prevent them from preaching in what they saw as Orthodox communities. In December 2008, an Orthodox priest assaulted a Witness woman.\textsuperscript{1626} A handful of local mayors took measures to block Witnesses from entering their villages, sometimes at the behest of Orthodox clergy. One mayor told two Witnesses that he and the local priest did not want them in the village and warned them not to preach there again.\textsuperscript{1627} These incidents have not kept Witnesses from continuing their door-to-door work. Instead, they reinforce their belief that true Christians will face persecution from the outside world until Christ establishes his millennial kingdom.

Overall, Moldovan Witnesses enjoyed strong growth and relatively few hurdles in the two decades after independence. They faced their greatest challenges in transforming their underground organization into a legally operating structure and in counteracting continued distrust and hostility from the press, clergy, and some local citizenry. The central government affirmed their right to practice and Witnesses encountered little state resistance to their organization. This relative freedom contrasted sharply with the experiences of fellow believers in Russia.

\textbf{Witnesses in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (PMR)}

Following the 1992 ceasefire, the Transnistria Moldovan Republic joined the list of so-called “frozen conflict zones” in the former Soviet Union. With no thaw in sight, it increasingly came to resemble a full-fledged independent state. Yet even Russia did not recognize its independence. Its citizenry faced a difficult situation as members of a country


with no legal standing. The territory’s political leadership, in turn, had little outside pressure to conform to international standards on human rights. The result was moderate democratic reforms, continued Soviet-era state attitudes toward religious organizations, and a pro-Russia orientation in setting policies. Rampant internal corruption added a decidedly arbitrary element to official determinations regarding freedom of conscience.

For the Witnesses, the PMR’s status created a serious obstacle to establishing their organization. In most democratic and semi-democratic states, the international organization prefers to use the existing legal system and international pressure to secure its right to practice. In the PMR, both of these options were limited. The Witnesses in Transnistria also had to take into account that they had no access to international redress in the European Court of Human Rights, in contrast to Russia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Equally important, the PMR received virtually no attention in the foreign press. The Watch Tower organization could therefore expect little media coverage of threats to religious freedom and other human rights matters. Although this situation may have resembled in some respects the isolation they experienced under Soviet rule, Witnesses now had greater access to support from the organization both in the Republic of Moldova and in Brooklyn.

The PMR’s policy toward religion was in keeping with its general line of deferring to Russian example and Soviet precedent, with some modifications. A 1995 law affirmed religious freedom, but with several major reservations that reflected the broader regional backlash against foreign missionaries and proselytism. While providing a process for registration, the law allowed for the liquidation of religious organizations to protect state order and the morality and health of its citizens. In this aspect, it bore close resemblance to Russia’s 1997 law that was already in draft form by 1995. However, the PMR law was

Also in line with Russia, despite rather restrictive religious legislation, Transnistria registered the vast majority of the religious organizations on its territory. This included the Witnesses, who had a sizeable membership in the region by this time. Compared to the Republic of Moldova, the Transnistrian Witnesses consisted of smaller communities with more recent converts. Many of its new members joined for the same reasons as they did in Moldova. Personal tragedies often made people more responsive to the Witnesses’ message of a coming earthly paradise. Sergei Vorobev’s mother found comfort in a Bible study with the Witnesses after her friend was murdered in 2000.\footnote{Sergei Vorobev, interview by author, December 8, 2009, Bender, PMR.} Overall, ongoing political instability and widespread poverty made the Witnesses’ strong community network appealing to Moldovans on both sides of the Dniester River.

Igor Azivov provides one portrait of a new convert. Born in 1961 in Ukraine, he studied acting and music at university in the 1980s. At about the same time, he experienced a serious desire for religious faith and decided to be baptized into the Orthodox Church. After the local priest failed to satisfactorily answer all of Igor’s spiritual questions, however, he quickly left the church and dabbled in Adventism and Pentecostalism. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he met American missionaries from a charismatic church and spent two years taking courses with them in the Baltic states before opening his own church in Ribnița,
a city in the north of the PMR. There he served as pastor, publishing a church newspaper and even taping his sermons for local TV. Still not certain he had chosen the right faith, he continued to seek out biblical knowledge and came into contact with the Witnesses. Satisfied with their explanations of the Bible, he left his church and converted yet again. None of his former congregants followed him into his new faith. Azizov’s path to the Witnesses mirrors the larger religious revival in post-Soviet states. Many people experienced a renewed need for spirituality, or at least for a religious identity, and were often drawn to foreign, primarily American missionaries. As Azizov’s story demonstrates, these initial and sometimes hasty conversions did not always endure. Many people experimented with several religions to determine which best fit their needs.

The story of Azizov, a formerly well-known city pastor, illustrates that Witnesses managed to find at least a few converts among the relatively prominent and successful strata of the population. This included Elena Efimova, the former presidential press secretary, and later Supreme Court press secretary. Soon after retiring in 2003, she announced in an interview with the Transnistrian newspaper *Novaia gazeta* that she had been baptized into the faith. O. Didur, a former professional athlete and trainer, joined the Witnesses along with his wife in 1992. As in Moldova, many of the younger members I met during my research had graduated from the university or technical schools or intended to do so.

As in Moldova, the conversion of one person frequently led to other conversions within the same family. The Golubenko family is typical in that respect. The parents began a

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1631 Igor Azizov, interview by author, December 7, 2009, Ribnița, PMR, and Court decision for Ribnița city and Ribnița regional court on September 25, 2009 (MJW).


Bible study in 1996. The mother was baptized in 1997, the father in 1998. Their three children soon followed. Elena Efimova’s son also joined the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and so did Didur’s wife. When Sergei Vorobev and his mother began their Bible study, the family patriarch, Sergei’s grandfather, voiced such strong opposition that they had to meet at a neighbor’s apartment. Yet, in the end, the grandfather relented and even began to show interest in the Witnesses. In 2003, both Sergei and his grandfather were baptized. Azizov’s wife followed her husband into the faith and their two children regularly attended meetings and participated in proselytism work.

By 2009, the Witnesses had 2,425 members in the PMR, comprising roughly 12 percent of the total membership for Moldova that year. Some areas, however, still had little Witness presence. A 1998 Yearbook report noted that “large rural areas of Moldova are virtually virgin territory as far as preaching the good news is concerned,” and cited two villages near Bender where proselytism led to several baptisms. Hoping to expand their preaching work into this territory, the Witnesses resolved to establish a legal organizational structure, appoint elders, create new congregations, and build Kingdom Halls, as they had

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1634 Sergei Golubenko, interview by author, December 8, 2009, Bender, PMR.

1635 Efimova’s son appears to have joined the organization prior to her conversion, and may in fact have been a major reason for her decision to join. Safonov, “Obretenie liubvi,” 8.

1636 Vorobev, interview.

1637 In fact, their daughter initiated a conversation on my beliefs all the way from the family apartment to the bus station, stopping only when I boarded the bus back to Chişinău, where I happened to end up sitting next to yet another Witness for the four-hour ride. Azizov, interview.

1638 Transnistrian data was provided by MJW on March 3, 2010. Moldovan data is available from 2004 Yearbook, 36.

1639 While Bender is technically located on the western side of the Dniester River and thus outside of the geographical territory of Transnistria, it is nonetheless under the administrative control of the PMR. 1998 Yearbook, 12.
done in Moldova. But the PMR presented challenges to implementing these plans and also to individual Witnesses seeking to freely practice their faith.

Universal military service for men was the first major and enduring obstacle, as the state lacked an alternative military service law that granted exemptions on the basis of religion. The 1995 religious law specifically barred citizens from refusing to fulfill their civic duties as a result of religious belief. From the time they reached adulthood, every male Witness in the PMR entered a frustrating cycle that ended only once he aged out of military service. While the penalties no longer involved prison time, the court process itself was time-consuming and sometimes costly. Upon receiving the initial draft notice, the Witness typically reported to the military medical commission. This provided him with an opportunity to state his religious objections and to potentially receive a medical exemption, but such exemptions were rarely granted. Next, he received his date to report for duty. Once it passed and he failed to appear, the military transferred the matter to the legal system, which opened up a criminal case and held a hearing. The courts usually ordered probation, although in some situations it assessed fines or garnished wages. During the probationary period, the Witness reported regularly to the state; at the end of the period, the case was closed. Within weeks or months, he generally received a new military summons, and the process started over again. Some men went through three or more separate criminal cases, which strained their work and family life, while probation limited their mobility. Some young men chose to temporarily relocate to Moldova, or at least establish residency there in order to avoid prosecution.\textsuperscript{1640} Through these cases, the state basically extended the criminalization of religious belief that existed under Soviet rule.

\textsuperscript{1640} Vorobev and Golubenko, interviews.
The importation of religious literature presented a second challenge to the organization’s smooth operation. Despite the lack of any law barring mass importation of religious literature, Transnistrian Witnesses could not establish regular literature deliveries across the Moldovan border due to random and arbitrary search and seizures of publications by customs officials. Instead, Moldovan Witnesses had to drive the literature to the border area where they parceled it out in small quantities to Transnistrian members who then discreetly transported it to their congregations.\(^{1641}\) Given the central importance of literature to meetings and proselytism efforts, this placed a substantial burden on the organization. As with military service, the literature problem forced Witnesses to rely on Soviet-era practices, such as semi-clandestine literature deliveries.

Registration created an even more serious hurdle to free practice of their faith. Each individual congregation required local registration to obtain or rent property, hold public meetings, and distribute literature. In the early 1990s, the Witnesses succeeded in registering two of their primary religious communities: in Tiraspol, the capital, and in Ribniţa to the north.\(^{1642}\) However, most of their members operated in areas without local registration. This barred the organization from constructing enough Kingdom Halls to meet the needs of the growing membership. As a result, the vast majority of congregations met in private apartments. Without official recognition, the Witnesses also had less legal protection against harassment and opposition from local clergy and officials.

\(^{1641}\) Witnesses attempting to transport large quantity of literature in their cars have been stopped and had their literature confiscated by border control. Letter from Commander of Troop Unit 4043 A. V. Parkalaba to D. V. Podolian on November 2, 2007; Complaint to Commander of Troop Unit 4043 A. M. Nosov from D.V. Podolian on October 19, 2007; and Notice of withdraw of complaint by D. V. Podolian on April 11, 2008 (MJW).

The greatest obstacle, however, came in the form of the new commissioner in charge of religious and “cultic” affairs, Petr Zalozhkov, appointed in 1997. A man with no academic or professional training in religious matters, and a machinist prior to independence, he was a seemingly strange choice. In 1989, he headed the Tiraspol city strike committee, then briefly served as a Supreme Soviet deputy in Soviet Moldavia. From 1990 to 1995, he was a deputy in the PMR Supreme Soviet before accepting the position of religious commissioner in 1997. His lack of qualifications did not prevent him from quickly establishing himself as the primary arbiter of religious life in Transnistria. Signaling his support of the growing anticult movement in Russia, he promptly voiced his opposition to the Watch Tower organization. In an interview with a Chişinău daily paper in 1998, he described how members of sects “persecute us everywhere: on the street, knocking on apartment doors.” He then focused on the unique threat of Witnesses, who turn people into “zombies,” and stated that such sects produce dependence in their members similar to alcoholism or drug addiction.

For Zalozhkov, Russia provided clear guidance on how to deal with Western religious organizations and he eagerly cited Russian expertise in justifying his actions. Allowed to write the section on religion for a PMR high school history textbook, Zalozhkov devoted an entire page to the Witnesses, using the Russian buzzword “totalitarian” and declaring them a “pyramid scheme” out to fleece converts of their money. Soon, not just Zalozhkov, but

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others in the Transnistrian media began to borrow heavily from the language of Russia’s anticult movement. The term “totalitarian sect” appeared in articles on Western religious organizations, while Zalozhkov became the Dvorkin of Transnistria, appearing as a defender of gullible citizens against tyrannical cults.1646 One 1997 article called on Zalozhkov to intervene against the Witnesses’ registration. The reporter claimed to have heard a Tiraspol Witness say, “Jehovah is all-powerful and he has a lot of friends. Now we are registered and the city will be ours.”1647

With Zalozhkov in power and waging a personal campaign against the organization, Witnesses faced an increasingly difficult and tenuous legal situation. Registration attempts for Witness congregations came to a standstill and the two communities in Ribniţa and Tiraspol faced opposition to their continued legal status. Major legal problems began first with the Tiraspol congregation, likely because of its location in the state’s capital and the willingness of the city prosecutor to get involved with the matter. The city had registered the organization in 1991, and the Ministry of Justice issued a statute confirming the Witnesses’ legal standing in 1994 and again in 1997.1648 In December 1997, however, the Ministry of Justice responded to a request by Zalozhkov and abruptly confiscated the organization’s registration documents; it also issued a letter annulling their registration. This action violated Transnisteria’s own registration law, which required a court process to revoke registration. Nonetheless, the Witnesses soon found themselves on shaky ground, without the documents


necessary to prove their right to practice. Circulating their name on a list of forbidden “destructive religious organizations,” Zalozhkov declared that the Witnesses no longer had legal status in Transnistria. He intervened with the city architect to hinder construction of a Kingdom Hall in Tiraspol.

Ten years and dozens of hearings later, the Witnesses won court decisions demanding that Zalozhkov cease his illegal measures against the organization, but the matter remained unresolved as of December 2009. The court system could not force Zalozhkov to obey its decisions, and he knew it. Instead of conceding, he began a second attack on the organization through the city procuracy. In 2002, the city prosecutor instigated liquidation proceedings against the organization for violations of freedom of conscience. According to the suit, by refusing to celebrate birthdays, befriend their neighbors, and accept blood transfusions, Witnesses damaged families and violated the rights of minors and the civil rights of all citizens. The suit described the organization’s door-to-door proselytism as a violation of the right to private life guaranteed in the Transnistrian constitution. In response, the Witnesses filed several complaints through the court system against the illegal measures by

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1649 Letter from the Chair of the Religious Society of the Jehovah’s Witnesses for Tiraspol S. R. Muzchyka to the Minister of Justice on February 29, 2000 (MJW).

1650 Report from the Commissioner of Religious and Cultic Affairs P. A. Zalozhkov to the Ministry of Enlightenment on October 9, 2001 (MJW).

1651 Letter from the Commissioner of Religious and Cultic Affairs to the Tiraspol Chief City Architect A. V. Narol’skii in October 2001; Complaint lodged by A. V. Cravciuc on behalf of the Tiraspol Jehovah’s Witnesses against P. A. Zalozhkov in Tiraspol City Court on January 8, 2002; and Letter from P. A. Zalozhkov to the Supreme Court of the PMR in February 2002 (MJW).

1652 In addition to these complaints, the suit listed seventeen other aspects of the Witnesses’ faith and practices that allegedly violated the law. Statement of Claim on Recognition of Re-registration of the Tiraspol Jehovah’s Witnesses as Invalid and Liquidation of the Society, filed in Tiraspol City Court by the city prosecutor on June 20, 2002; appended on June 22, 2008 (MJW).
Zalozhkov, the courts, and the prosecutor. Progress on the liquidation issue stalled due to repeated delays in the trial by the presiding judge.\footnote{Decision of Tiraspol City Court on July 9, 2004; Determination of Supreme Court PMR on August 16, 2007; Decision of Tiraspol City Court on July 4, 2007; and Motion for Postponement of Implementation of Court Decision filed by P. A. Zalozhkov on February 7, 2008 (MJW).}

A parallel situation developed with the only other registered Witness community in Transnistria, Ribnița, where the local government effectively barred Witnesses from using their newly constructed Kingdom Hall. In September 2009, local police conducted a raid on the site, arresting eighteen Witnesses for doing basic maintenance work. One of those arrested, Igor Azizov, wrote a report of the incident entitled “How I spent my weekend,” detailing his brief imprisonment at the local jail without food, water, or access to a toilet before he and the others were finally brought before a court and found innocent of any wrongdoing.\footnote{“How I Spent My Weekend.” Report from I. R. Azizov in September 2009. Courtesy of I. R. Azizov.} Similar attempts to liquidate the community and revoke their legal status, also at the behest of Zalozhkov, began through the court system, but progress toward resolution has been slow.

Ultimately, Witnesses in the PMR found themselves trapped in an unwinnable situation that reflected the unstable power dynamics within the government. Even when the national and local courts ruled in favor of the Witnesses, they lacked any power to force officials to abide by these decisions. Individuals within the government, instead, had nearly unlimited ability to pursue their personal politics with only minimal regard for the constitution or state laws. While Witnesses in Moldova enjoyed recourse to a higher court system, the ECHR, Transnistrian members had no such outlet and thus had no choice but to fight through a deeply flawed internal legal system.
The sustained legal battles also perpetuated Soviet-era notions of the Witnesses as a secretive, dangerous sect. This climate, and the clear signals sent by the government through Zalozhkov, made it easier for local officials to take measures against individual Witnesses. Not surprisingly, Witnesses faced growing police harassment during their door-to-door proselytism. In 2001, president of the Moldovan Witnesses Anatolie Cravciuc received a fifty-ruble fine for distributing *The Watchtower* in Tiraspol. A court, however, ruled in his favor and agreed with the Witnesses that their organization had never been legally deprived of registration.\(^{1655}\) This did not prevent similar incidents from occurring in the city and elsewhere. Like Cravciuc, Tiraspol Witnesses received fines or brief detainments for distributing religious literature without proper registration. Ironically, some Witnesses were fined for proselytizing outside of the territorial boundaries of the Tiraspol congregation as outlined in its 1994 registration.\(^{1656}\) In other words, sometimes they got fined for not being registered; other times they got fined for violating their own registration documents.\(^{1657}\)

Overall, Witnesses had to deal with sustained local police harassment, including raids of private homes in the PMR. In one 1999 case in the Bender suburb of Protiagailovca, roughly thirty police officers raided the home of a Witnesses and confiscated not only religious literature, but, with no explanation, a Russian dictionary and a medical encyclopedia as well.\(^{1658}\)

\(^{1655}\) Decision of the Tiraspol City Court on July 26, 2001 regarding the complaint filed by A. V. Cravciuc on the Resolution of the Administrative Commission (MJW).

\(^{1656}\) The 1994 registration applies only to the local congregation within the Tiraspol city limits, and does not grant congregants the right to practice their faith in other locales.

\(^{1657}\) Letter to A. V. Cravciuc from the First Deputy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs O. L. Beliakov on June 16, 2003 (MJW).

\(^{1658}\) Determinations of Supreme Court PMR on December 13, 2003, and on December 18, 2003; Petition to Bender city prosecutor from a group of eyewitnesses and the homeowner in the village of Protiagailovca (MJW).
The state’s opposition to the Witnesses reflected the preferential treatment granted to so-called traditional religions, particularly Russian Orthodoxy, whose clergy were vocal in their hostility toward new religious movements and Western Christian organizations such as the Witnesses. As in the Republic of Moldova, pressure from the Orthodox Church motivated many of the local police incidents against Witnesses. Zalozhkov’s public stance against the organization also gave the Church relatively free reign to take its own measures without government interference. During a March 2008 Memorial service held at a private home in the village of Parcani, the local Orthodox priest led a group of citizens, some dressed in Cossack uniforms with Cossack whips, to protest the service. Having first gathered at a nearby church, they then traveled to the Memorial site carrying placards with slogans such as “Caution: Life-Threatening Sect!” and “Today the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Tomorrow, NATO.” They passed out brochures telling random passerby and attendees not to “betray the faith of your fathers and grandfathers for a kilogram of spoiled grain and used jeans.” Meanwhile, two police cars watched the entire event, making no attempt to control the crowd or ensure that Witnesses could enter the private home without harassment. The central government made it clear that such local actions would not be prosecuted, in effect giving others free reign to take similar initiatives to block Witness proselytism and even private meetings. Responding to a complaint about the Parcani incident, Zalozhkov defended the priest and the police inaction, calling the priest’s involvement a “positive factor” in the event. He then blamed the Witnesses for the conflict, since they were the ones distributing literature offensive to “90 percent of the population.” Both Zalozhkov’s statement and a separate response from the Ministry of State Security suggested that the Witnesses themselves had broken the law, given their lack of registration in the village.1659

1659 Notification of a crime from nine Jehovah’s Witnesses to the Ministry of State Security PMR on June 16,
The PMR and Zalozhkov, however, diverged in some respects from the example set by the Russian state and by the Russian anticult movement. Most importantly, Zalozhkov proved willing to offend Orthodox sentiments in order to strengthen his own power over religious affairs. He pushed for legislative changes to the law on freedom of conscience to allow him to remove church leaders from their posts, close churches if found to be in a state of disrepair, and control the ability of foreign church leaders to visit Transnistria. In 2004, the Transnistrian bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church issued a public excommunication of Zalozhkov, calling his demands reminiscent of Soviet-era religious persecution. The same document acknowledged the need for changes to the law to deal with “totalitarian organizations,” but nonetheless renounced the same intolerant attitude when applied to its church.1660

Ultimately, the PMR did succeed in enacting a new religious law in 2008, but not the one demanded by Zalozhkov. In fact, the law abolished Zalozhkov’s post. Lawmakers passed the law over a veto by PMR President Igor Nikolaevich Smirnov. Under the new legislation, all registration of religious organizations took place through the Ministry of Justice. Despite this, Smirnov quickly diluted the effects of the law by appointing Zalozhkov as his special advisor on religious affairs. The position had no constitutional or legal basis, but with backing from Smirnov, Zalozhkov used the title to retain most of his previous authority. The potential setback did not appear to change his negative view of the Witnesses. The court challenges in Ribnița and Tiraspol remain unresolved as of 2010 and have forestalled

2008; Letter to Minister of State Security V. Iu. Antiufeev from P. A. Zalozhkov on August 14, 2008; and Letter from Minister of State Security Antiufeev to V. V. Radulov on August 20, 2008 (MJW).

Witness attempts to openly practice their faith and legally register their organization throughout the PMR.\textsuperscript{1661} Major political changes are necessary to solidify rule of law and remove the arbitrary nature of its application. But, in the absence of any strong outside pressure, the PMR has little reason to reform itself and establish real freedom of conscience for its citizens.

**Witnesses in Ukraine**

Although the transition to democracy in Ukraine evolved unsteadily, Ukrainian Witnesses encountered the least hindrance to their right to practice of the three post-Soviet Witness communities. While the state struggled to create a democratic government capable of responding to the needs of its citizenry, it nonetheless maintained a relatively stable religious policy based on perestroika-era legislation. The law and the 1996 constitution guaranteed basic rights to registered religious organizations, and provided a straightforward process for registration.\textsuperscript{1662} Second, the major churches in Ukraine after 1991 had more important concerns than the Witnesses. The Orthodox community had divided into three major factions: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate; the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kiev Patriarchate; and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, each with its own clergy, congregants, and property holdings.\textsuperscript{1663} All of the churches sought control over the Orthodox community and church property in Ukraine, and made little

\textsuperscript{1661} 2009 Annual Report.

\textsuperscript{1662} Article 35 of the 1996 Constitution provides for freedom of conscience, as well as separation of church and state. *Konstytutsiia Ukrainy (chynne zakonodavstvo zi zminamy ta dopovnenniamy stanom na 1 bereznia 2009 roku)* (Kiev: A. V. Palyvoda, 2009), 9.

\textsuperscript{1663} On the post-Soviet Orthodox situation in Ukraine, see contributions by Bohdan Bociurkiw, Vasyl Markus, and Serhiy Bilokin in *Politics of Religion*. 501
progress toward unification.\footnote{The threat of their Orthodox rivals pilfering their territory loomed far greater than the potential danger of relatively small Western Christian religions. Moreover, the factionalization of Orthodox life in Ukraine made it impossible for the state to follow the Russian model of alliance with the major church.} Ukraine also faced several popular homegrown new religious movements that further distracted much of the attention from Western religious organizations.\footnote{Thus, while the anticult movement did gain some presence in Ukraine, it never received the same level of attention from the state and churches that it did in Russia or Transnistria, nor was anticult fervor ever as focused on the Witnesses.}

The Watch Tower organization quickly realized that Ukraine, with the highest concentration of Witnesses in the former Soviet Union, needed a strong administrative structure to meet the needs of its large membership base. In 1993, the Governing Body created a separate Ukrainian branch office that reported directly to the Brooklyn headquarters.\footnote{The Watch Tower organization estimates that it had 25,448 members in Ukraine in 1991—or more than in the rest of the entire Soviet Union.} Ukrainian membership rose to 55,660 in 1995, and to 108,184 in 2000.\footnote{Over the next decade,}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item In a December 1990 conversation with the Ukrainian CRA commissioner, N. A. Kolesnik focused almost entirely on the in-fighting among Catholics and various branches of Orthodoxy, clearly the biggest issue on the eve of Ukrainian independence. Stanislav Volnianskii, “Ne meshat’ veruiushchm ulazhivat’ svoi konfliky,” \textit{Pravda Ukrainy}, December 21, 1990, 3.
\item \textit{2002 Yearbook}, 234-35.
\item Ibid., 234. The last available statistics from the CRA in 1989 list 19,518 total members in Ukraine. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 536, ark. 9.
\item \textit{2001 Yearbook}, 36-38.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
growth slowed, but in 2010, the organization counted 146,387 members. Large scale public events showcased the surge in converts to the religion. In 1993, Kiev hosted the Divine Teaching International Congress of Witnesses at its Olympic stadium, where 7,402 Witnesses were baptized. The number broke the organization’s record, set in 1958, for the most baptisms at any convention worldwide. The organization held a second international congress in Kiev in 2003. Organizers connected six simultaneous gatherings of Witnesses elsewhere in Ukraine to the main event via Internet.

As the organization grew, it expanded outside of its traditional bases in villages and small towns, gaining converts in the major cities and in eastern Ukraine. Just as during their initial entrance into Ukraine in the 1920s, Witnesses relied on local contacts and family connections to find new members. The preaching requirement for all members brought Witness beliefs to the doorsteps of most Ukrainians. It also gave Witnesses an edge on other faiths that shied away from such direct missionary methods. While the door-to-door method remained the standard preaching technique for members, they also used more public methods, such as passing out literature on the street and in public transit. Some members set

1670 2011 Yearbook, 46.

1671 2002 Yearbook, 237-38, and P. L. Iarotskii, ed., Istoriiia religii v Ukraini, vol. 6, Second ed. (Kiev: Surma 2008), 613. The high-profile convention did not occur without some backlash from state officials. In advance of the event, the minister of sports and youth warned of the dangerous influx of “nontraditional” beliefs in Ukraine, which he feared would cause increased “religious fanaticism and extremism.” He expressed displeasure at the fact that youth and children would attend the event and urged the city’s Religious Affairs Department to be more cautious in hosting such events in the future. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 700, ark. 48-49.


1673 CRA statistics for 1989 list no Witnesses in the four oblasts of Zhytomyr, Kharkiv, Cherkasy, and Chernihiv, and only one congregation in Kiev oblast. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 441, ark. 95-96. By 1993, this had grown to four congregations in Zhytomyr, four in Kharkiv, and seven in Kiev (including both the city and the oblast) according to official statistics. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 716, ark. 37, 73, 83; spr. 717, ark. 67.
up display stands for their literature in public areas. Instead of approaching people, they waited for them to show interest in the literature, and then began a conversation.\textsuperscript{1674}

Ukrainian Witnesses attracted followers for many of the same reasons that the religion found converts in Russia and Moldova. Some new members felt dissatisfied with their previous religion. Boris, an elderly blind musician, found the Witnesses more appealing than either the Catholic Church, which he had been baptized into, or Baptism, whose meetings he had attended years prior.\textsuperscript{1675} He came from a village in Cherkasy oblast, which prior to 1991 had no Witnesses according to the official statistics.\textsuperscript{1676} Like Boris, some converts faced physical disabilities, personal tragedies, and other hardships and found hope in the Witnesses’ message of an earthly paradise. One man struggled to earn enough money to provide food and heat for his home, but found a strong support network among the Witnesses.\textsuperscript{1677} To cite a second example, Tatiana, and her sister joined the Witnesses during an incredibly difficult situation. Their mother had recently been killed by their brother, a mentally unstable man, and their father committed suicide soon afterward. Unable to cope, Tatiana recalled in a 2000 article that she also considered suicide, but her sister introduced her to the Witnesses and soon they both were baptized. Tatiana worked as a translator for the organization and even attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to convince her brother to repent and

\textsuperscript{1674} "Provided With a Hope that Sustains Me," \textit{Awake!}, December 22 2000, 22. I personally witnessed this method in several locations in both Moldova and Ukraine in 2009.

\textsuperscript{1675} Boris noted that he joined the Witnesses despite having read newspaper coverage describing them as a dangerous sect. “My Love for Music, Life, and the Bible,” \textit{Awake!}, August 7 2007, 29-23.

\textsuperscript{1676} The CRA listed no members or Witness communities in Cherkasy oblast in its 1989 statistics. TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 441, ark. 95-96.

\textsuperscript{1677} The organization cited this man in their 2002 \textit{Yearbook} as an example of self-sacrifice for the faith. The man’s sister gave him money so he could attend a training program for new Witness elders. 2002 \textit{Yearbook}, 247.
join the faith.\textsuperscript{1678} For people like Tatiana, the Witnesses offered a strong community of support, a clear religious interpretation of the world around them, and a prescription for eternal salvation.

The rapid increase in their membership placed incredible demands on the organization. The vast majority of Witnesses no longer came from long-standing Witness families; most had never experienced any serious persecution for their faith. The organization had to appoint and train elders to minister to congregations that were filled almost entirely with neophytes. To meet these needs, the organization constructed a new administrative center outside L’viv, in the suburb of Briukhovychi, to house their offices and full-time staff. Construction of Kingdom Halls began in the 1990s and continued into the 2000s as the organization struggled to provide adequate space for its expanding congregations.\textsuperscript{1679}

While the Watch Tower organization offers little information on this issue, it certainly had to deal with the task of convincing long-time oppositionist or neutralist communities to rejoin the organization. These efforts had already revived in the late 1980s as the Governing Body negotiated its initial registration with the Soviet state, and appeared to meet with success. During a 1990 trip to Rivne oblast, CRA inspectors noted that the organization had issued a call for unity among the factions and that the oppositionists responded favorably to this outreach.\textsuperscript{1680} The state’s registration of the Witnesses through the Brooklyn headquarters designated the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society as the only recognized source of authority for Ukrainian Witnesses. The Soviet state did not pursue

\textsuperscript{1678} “Provided With a Hope,” 20-24.


\textsuperscript{1680} TsDAVO, f. 4648, op. 7, spr. 551, ark. 32-33.
separate registration for the rival factions. These communities largely disappeared in the post-Soviet period and there is no information to suggest they sought new members or formed their own organizational structures. Without any legal entity, those that remain are unlikely to survive past the current generation of adherents.

All of the major religions in Ukraine experienced their own religious revivals after the fall of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{1681} As in Russia and Moldova, most Ukrainians identified themselves as members of one of the Orthodox churches. In a 2003 national survey, roughly 75 percent of respondents described themselves as believers, while 22 percent did not. 90 percent of those who said they believed in God identified themselves as Christian, primarily Orthodox.\textsuperscript{1682} Similarly, 2004 government statistics listed 918 Witness communities in Ukraine, compared with almost 15,000 communities for the three main Orthodox churches. In addition, the Greek Catholic Church accounted for 3,328 communities, and the Baptist Church, with its roots in Ukraine reaching back into the nineteenth century, for another 2,311.\textsuperscript{1683} Simply put, the Witnesses remained a small, but growing religious minority in Ukraine.

The Witnesses’ post-Soviet success was made possible in part by legislation passed in the final months of Soviet rule. In early 1991, Ukraine’s Supreme Soviet enacted the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations, which guaranteed basic freedom of conscience for all citizens through a non-discriminatory registration process for religious

\textsuperscript{1683} These statistics list 10,310 communities for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate; 3,352 for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Kiev Patriarchate; and 1,154 for the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Of the Witnesses’ 918 communities, 579 had achieved registration, while 339 were awaiting registration. The organization also listed 1,936 “church servants,” almost all of them native Ukrainians. “Religiyni organizatsii v Ukraini stanom na 1 sichnia 2004 roku,” \textit{Liudyna i svit}, no. 1 (2004): 32.
organizations. Under this law, the Witnesses received registration in Ukraine in February 1991, a month prior to their registration in the Russian Federation. The law remained in force following the Soviet Union’s collapse. The independent Ukrainian government registered the Witnesses in March 1992, and renewed this registration in 1999, and again in 2006. While a 1993 revision of the religious law included tougher visa restrictions for representatives of foreign religious organizations, it had little effect on the Witnesses. In 1992, Ukraine also guaranteed alternative service for religious believers who refused to complete mandatory military service. As a result, Witnesses faced no major legal barriers to practice their faith.

While the growth of minority religions put pressure in the mid-1990s on Ukraine to adopt more restrictive legislation, the state diverged from Russia in retaining its original law despite extensive parliamentary debate on the matter. In 1998, the recently appointed head of the State Committee on Religious Affairs, Viktor Bondarenko, denied that Russia’s 1997 law had any effect on how his agency intended to conduct religious matters. He cited his


1685 2002 Yearbook, 233-34.

1686 Unlike in Russia, but similar to Moldova, Ukraine continued the practice of using regulatory bodies to oversee religious affairs. The State Committee for Religious Affairs was formerly abolished by decree of President Iushchenko in 2005 following the Orange Revolution, but was ultimately replaced by the State Committee on Nationalities and Religions in 2006. These bodies controlled the registration process for all religious organizations as required by the 1991 law. 2005 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51569.htm (accessed January 26, 2011), and 2008 Annual Report.


1689 V. M. Petryk and V. V. Ostroukhov, eds., Zbirnyk normatyvno-pravovikh aktiv shchodo svobody sovisti ta diial’nosti religiynykh organizatsiy (Kiev: Evropeys’kyi Universytet, 2002), 44-47.

greatest challenge not as dangerous sects, but the ongoing inter-Orthodox conflict.\footnote{1691}{“Ne znaesh iak chynyty—chyny za zakonom,” \textit{Liudyna i svit}, no. 1 (1998): 20-23.} In another interview, Bondarenko acknowledged concerns about “totalitarian” and “destructive cults,” but cautioned that, until he received credible, actionable information on specific groups, he could do no more than suggest that Ukrainians trust their own judgment in choosing a religion.\footnote{1692}{Larysa Kozyk, “Tserkva v Ukraini,” \textit{Naddniprians’ka pravda}, March 25, 1997, 4.} These statements reflected the fact that while Ukraine was aware of Russia’s legislative actions toward religious organizations, the government did not want to be seen as following Russia nor as taking measures against religious freedom. Further, the divided Orthodox community lacked the political power of the Russian Orthodox Church to force the government to endorse its views on minority religions.

Despite the newfound religious pluralism in Ukraine, the nascent free press failed to fully reflect this new climate of tolerance. Newspapers and journals, which for decades had printed sensationalist articles against the Witnesses, printed few, if any, retractions. One rare exception was the national atheist journal, \textit{Liudyna i svit}, which refashioned itself into a religious studies journal in the final years of Soviet power.\footnote{1693}{Elens’kyi, “Vy budete meni svidkamy,” 42-48, and Elens’kyi, “Ukrains’ke suspil’stvo i ‘sekty’,” 9-12.} In general, the journal kept its commitment to printing generally factual information on religious affairs in the post-Soviet period. In the late 1990s, it also published balanced accounts of the anticult movement that avoided inflammatory rhetoric and even criticized the press for uncritically employing terms like “totalitarian cults.” Other than this journal, however, the press gave little indication that its Soviet-era depictions of the Witnesses had been inaccurate. This left Ukrainian citizens to assume that the Soviet press had correctly depicted Witnesses as dangerous fanatics.
Not surprisingly, then, anticult rhetoric spread rapidly to Ukraine in the mid-1990s and was directed against homegrown cults, Western religious organizations, and foreign missionaries.\textsuperscript{1694} The media was especially preoccupied with the Ukrainian White Brotherhood in the early 1990s, a fringe religion that it alleged planned to commit mass suicide in Kiev in 1993—an event that failed to take place.\textsuperscript{1695} In general, the press employed vitriolic anticult language with little reflection, including the reprinting of information against sects from the Russian Orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{1696} In his study of post-Soviet Ukrainian press coverage of the Witnesses, religious scholar Konstiantyn Berezhko noted the heavy use of quotes from anticult movement leaders and statements from former believers as evidence to support negative conclusions about minority faiths.\textsuperscript{1697}

The Witnesses garnered negative media attention that drew heavily from Russian anticult rhetoric, although the Witnesses appeared less frequently in the press in Ukraine than they did in Russia.\textsuperscript{1698} One 2008 Kievan newspaper article cited Dvorkin as an expert on the Witnesses, and related a case from the city of Sumy where a Witness mother allegedly neglected her child after joining the organization.\textsuperscript{1699} Another piece from a Chernihiv


\textsuperscript{1695} Borenstein, “Articles of Faith.”


\textsuperscript{1697} In regard to the Watch Tower organization in particular, Berezhko identified the following characteristics of Witnesses as presented in the Ukrainian press: “Jehovah’s Witnesses are a totalitarian sect; their organization is banned in Russia and in some European countries; the believers are mentally ill; they are criminals; they use illegal missionary methods; parents let their children die by refusing blood transfusions; the Witnesses disrupt families, and so on.” Konstantin Berezhko, “Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mass Media in the Ukraine in the Communist and Post-Soviet Period,” in \textit{On Religious Liberty}, 175-76.

regional paper praised a priest who assaulted two Witnesses on a city bus as a hero for standing up for his faith.\footnote{Mykhailo Moskalenko, “Iak batiushku do militsii prytiagnuly,” Visti Borzniashchyny, April 28, 2009, 4.} A sensationalist article in 2009 covered a gruesome murder in Dnipropetrovs’k in which two Witnesses confessed to the crime. Without evidence, the journalist blamed the faith itself as the culprit and pointed to the hypocrisy of Witness claims that their religion forbids them to kill. The article contained speculation that the murder was motivated by the victim’s unwillingness to convert to the faith.\footnote{“Sektanty ubivali rodstvenniki, ssorias’, kto bol’she nanes smertel’nykh udarov,” Interesnaia gazeta, July, 2009, 15. The Watch Tower organization released a press statement on the murder, condemning the crime and affirming its commitment to the commandment “thou shall not kill.” It pointed out that the press rarely notes the religion of criminals, certainly not when they are Orthodox believers. “Concerning the Murder in Dnepropetrovsk,” Press Release of the Religious Center of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Ukraine, June 4, 2009.}

While anti-Witness sentiments appeared more rarely in Ukraine than in Russia, they nonetheless perpetuated Soviet-era stereotypes of the Witnesses as dangerous fanatics and inhibited their integration into the broader community. Witnesses had to combat these impressions among their coworkers, neighbors, and classmates. A 2005 article in \textit{Awake!} praised one eleven-year-old girl who used organizational literature to convince her classmates that the Witnesses were not a sect, as they had previously believed.\footnote{“Her Classmates Changed Their Opinion,” \textit{Awake!}, November 22, 2005, 32.}

Surprisingly, the sudden public presence of Witnesses and door-to-door proselytism occurred with only sporadic violent resistance and with a lesser degree of confrontations than in Russia and Moldova. Reported incidents of violence against Witnesses during their preaching work were rare, but did occur.\footnote{In 2006, the Witnesses reported two instances of violent assault on their members while conducting preaching work, including one incident where a priest beat a Witness with a cane after the believer entered his property. \textit{2006 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom}, U.S. Department of State, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71396.htm (accessed January 26, 2011).} In 2005, a Russian Orthodox priest attacked a group of \footnote{“Kak ne stat’ zhertvoi religioznykh kul’tov?,” \textit{Kriminal’noe obozrenie}, no. 1-2, 2008, 5.}
Witnesses preaching in his village in Cherkasy oblast. A local court granted the priest amnesty, absolving him of responsibility. In fact, most of the assaults on Witnesses in the 2000s involved local Russian Orthodox clergy, and law enforcement proved reticent to apply criminal charges. 1704

Some tensions arose between Witnesses and local governments wary of the organization. In 2006 in L’viv, the oblast council appealed to the central government for permission to declare the Witnesses illegal, in part at the behest of other Christian churches. The Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, rejected the council’s request. Also in L’viv, a city council moved to block construction of a Kingdom Hall based on complaints from Greek Catholic and Orthodox residents. The regional court ruled the council’s action illegal. In both cases, attempts to prevent Witness activity or building construction have come from local government and been overturned or ignored by higher-ranking authorities. 1705

One of the Witnesses’ few conflicts with the central government occurred in 2008 with the publication of a new eighth-grade health textbook, which included a brief section on “destructive cults” and named the Witnesses in a list of such “banned” groups, along with Satanists, Scientologists, and Mormons. The text encouraged students to talk to adults before making any decisions about religion and warned against the threat of psychological manipulation. The book bore a stamp of approval from the Ministry of Justice, ironically the same body that had registered the Witnesses. At the Witnesses’ behest, the Ministry of Education issued a retraction to schools asking them to cut out or paste over the offending


section in the book. Witnesses sent representatives to the schools to determine if they had complied with this demand.\textsuperscript{1706}

The textbook issue suggests that, while the government itself proved ready to register and work with the Witnesses, the organization and its members confronted a considerable amount of hostility to or ignorance about their religion and its practices. Soon after the textbook publication, a private publisher released a supplement for teachers. The book includes information on teaching the section involving sects and lists three levels of dangerous sects (Witnesses were a “category two” danger). The author described the Witnesses as a rich and “aggressive” organization whose members use “light hypnotic methods” to recruit, and told teachers to advise their students to avoid proselytizers. If children nonetheless expressed interest in a sect, the author suggested that parents should take them to an Orthodox Church to talk to a priest, and repeat this action several times if needed.\textsuperscript{1707} Not surprisingly, the Witnesses received reports of Witness children being harassed or bullied about their faith because of school health classes.\textsuperscript{1708}

In Ukraine, legal protections did not come about due to widespread public tolerance, but rather \textit{despite} continued hostility to many minority religions. Also, as seen in Ukraine and Moldova, increased interaction with Witnesses did not necessarily lead to greater understanding and acceptance. In L’viv, with its high concentration of Witnesses, members found fliers proclaiming “Warning!!! The totalitarian sect, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, is very active in your district!!” Other fliers detailed the alleged heresies of the faith and listed a help

\textsuperscript{1706} Ruslan Mel’nyk, discussion with author, October 14, 2009, Briukhovsky, Ukraine, and T. E. Boichenko, I. P. Vasilashko, and N. S. Koval’, \textit{Osnovy zdrov’ia} (Grade 8) (Kharkiv, 2008), 99.

\textsuperscript{1707} M. O. Vrubelevs’ka, \textit{Usi uroky z kursu ‘osnovy zdrov’ia’} (Kharkiv: Osnova, 2008), 124-25, 31.

\textsuperscript{1708} Mel’nyk, discussion.
line for victims of the Witnesses. Residents even found brochures in their mailboxes in 2009 criticizing Witness proselytism and stating that this time would be better spent adopting homeless children in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{1709} Acceptance of the Witnesses’ place in religious life, and of their historical roots in Ukraine, remains a goal, not a reality. Until then, Ukraine’s law will continue to protect Witnesses and other minority faiths.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Moldovan and Ukrainian independent states diverged significantly both from their Soviet-era practices and the example set by Russia. Perhaps most remarkable, both countries implemented and maintained democratic religious policies despite continued popular hostility to minority religions and to the sudden influx of foreign-based religious organizations. Indeed, Ukrainian and Moldovan media borrowed much of the language of the Russian anticult movement in their national and regional presses and through Orthodox churches. Unlike in much of Russia, Witnesses also had to deal with the strong legacy of more than forty years of hostile propaganda from the Soviet state. Yet it was in these territories with a long history of public and official hostility to Witnesses that the organization faced fewer obstacles after 1991.

There are two major factors that help account for this difference. First, the Orthodox Church in Russia enjoys greater political power and suffers less from internal divisions than in Moldova and Ukraine. This allows it to mount a more successful campaign to protect its interests and ward off competition from other religious organizations. In Moldova and Ukraine, infighting between various Orthodox churches overshadowed other religious issues,

\textsuperscript{1709} Fliers courtesy of Ukrainian branch office of the Jehovah’s Witnesses on October 14, 2009. The fliers have been produced by multiple agencies, including the Russian Orthodox Church, Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic seminaries, and the anticult Institute of Research on Totalitarian Religions and Religious Knowledge.
preoccupied state institutions in charge of religious affairs, and made the anticult movement a phenomenon largely relegated to the media. Second, and perhaps equally important, the promise of European integration put pressure on Ukraine and Moldova to make their religious policies conform to European standards. Most major challenges to this process came from within the Orthodox community, as the states struggled to implement a fair, democratic procedure for treating the various Orthodox churches. The example of Transnistria represents the flip-side of this phenomenon. There, the stronger pull of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, combined with isolation from European institutions, led to a religious policy that bears strong resemblance to Soviet practices and Russian trends.

For the Witnesses themselves, religious freedom in Ukraine and Moldova had a transformative effect on their organization and fundamentally altered the practice of their religion. Members who had previously met only in secret could now gather en masse in city stadiums to proclaim their faith to the wider world. By 2010, first-generation Witnesses with no personal ties to Soviet-era persecution constituted the majority of members. Despite the advent of religious freedom, Witnesses retained the same basic theological principles and worldview that had previously protected them and helped them to make sense of life under Soviet rule. They celebrated their newfound freedoms, but also steeled themselves for the inevitable persecution that they believe will face all true Christians in the final days before Armageddon. This position solidified their faith as they encountered new obstacles in their door-to-door preaching and grappled with a lack of democratic progress in Transnistria.
CONCLUSION

“When I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.” Revelation 14:6

When Charles Taze Russell visited the Russian Empire in 1891, he found “no opening or readiness for the truth in Russia.” His Bible Students had begun to preach beyond America’s borders, but Russell held out little hope for converts on Russian soil. Yet World War II brought the Bible Students (now called Jehovah’s Witnesses) onto Soviet territory through border changes and the forced resettlement of ethnic Ukrainians from Poland to Soviet Ukraine. Once there, Witnesses actively resisted state pressure to abandon their faith. Instead, they set up a complex, hierarchical underground network and continued to preach to find new converts. A hundred years after Russell’s pessimistic prediction, his faith had an estimated 45,000 followers in the Soviet Union. In the two decades since the USSR’s collapse, the Witnesses rapidly gained new members in conditions of relative religious freedom in Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova. Today more than 380,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses live and preach in these lands.

Several elements set Witnesses apart from most other religious organizations. Understanding these unique features helps illuminate what makes the Witnesses’ history in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet states important and distinct from those of other religious communities. First, the Witnesses follow a rigid interpretation of the biblical injunction for Christians to be in the world, but not of the world.\textsuperscript{1710} For them, Satan has corrupted human

\textsuperscript{1710} The call to be “in the world, but not of the world” appears in multiple passages of the Bible. For example, Jesus says of the disciples: “I have given them Your word; and the world hated them because they are not of the
society. The Bible instructs Witnesses that “whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”\textsuperscript{1711} While most Christians are familiar with this verse, Witnesses have a much broader definition of “the world,” one that includes all churches, governments, secular institutions, and individuals who do not belong to the Witnesses. This position has put Witnesses at odds with “the world” and has fueled state repression, hostility from mainstream churches, and mob violence in countries worldwide throughout the twentieth century and into the next.

Second, Witnesses carry the firm conviction that all Christians must expect and welcome this persecution as a sign of their loyalty to the true faith. This makes Witnesses remarkably resilient to state and social opposition. The belief that God will soon rectify the current, corrupt “system of things” also helps Witnesses to withstand outside pressure to conform.\textsuperscript{1712} They feel confident they do not have to resist much longer before God intervenes. In fact, pressure on Witnesses to renounce or reform their beliefs and practices has often strengthened their resolve not to betray their commitment to God and the Watch Tower organization, which they believe to be God’s instrument for true Christianity on earth. Once Witnesses appear in a country, no modern states have managed to eliminate them.

Third, the call to preach compels Witnesses to engage with the world even as they reject it. For them, passive faith is no faith at all. Witnesses hold that a true Christian shares his beliefs with others, regardless of the danger. The requirement that Witnesses actively share their highly controversial beliefs to a mostly indifferent or hostile populace enhances

\textsuperscript{1711} James 4:4.

\textsuperscript{1712} The Witnesses frequently use the phrase “system of things” to refer to the current, corrupted state of human existence. This phrase comes from Matthew 13:49. Other Bible editions translate “system of things” as “age,” or a broad unit of time.
their persecution. It also motivates them to fiercely protect their right to freedom of expression to ensure that they can fulfill their preaching duties.

Fourth, active membership means that, for Witnesses, state authority is second to the authority of their religious organization. All baptized Witnesses attend regular meetings to study the Bible and official Watch Tower publications. They must comply with the directives of their elders and the Governing Body. When secular law contradicts the organization’s interpretation of God’s law, Witnesses put God’s law first. The Witnesses’ need for literature and instructions from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society in order to practice their faith requires a high level of organization that led to highly cohesive and uniform Witness communities worldwide.

Fifth, as a result of the elements listed above, modern states have struggled over how to respond to the Witnesses. For both democratic and authoritarian states, Witnesses’ beliefs and practices challenge the boundaries of civil liberties and religious freedom. Witnesses require a state to grant them the rights of citizens without requiring of them many of the basic duties expected of citizens, such as voting and military service. More broadly, Witnesses demand that a state grant freedom of expression to a religious organization that preaches the state’s corruption and imminent destruction. Further, the Witnesses openly affirm that their first allegiance is not to the state, but to the Watch Tower organization, its community of believers, and its interpretation of God’s laws. Not surprisingly then, Witnesses have frequently sought protection from the courts to guarantee their rights. The resulting court decisions have played a central role in several states in pushing the boundaries of civil liberties and religious freedom.
These unique features of the Witnesses, along with the specific nature of Soviet ideology and governance, made them the object of state persecution well out of proportion to their membership. For the Soviet state, the Witnesses’ condemnation of secular governments and institutions was inherently political in that it rejected the promise of communism and the Soviet ideological project. Witnesses denied the Soviet state’s authority over them and instead deferred to God’s judgment in deciding when or if to participate in society and Soviet political life. The Witnesses’ refusal to vote or to complete mandatory military service represented particular affronts to the state’s authority and its ability to force citizens to participate in its institutions. Because the Soviet state viewed the Witnesses as political, it used many of the same measures it employed against other perceived political threats to repress Witness communities.

The ideological clash between Witness belief in an imminent Armageddon and Soviet belief in the achievement of communism made it difficult, if not impossible, for the state to reconcile itself with this religious organization. Both ideologies promised the establishment of perfect governance and justice on earth. For the Soviet state, this made Witnesses a dangerous competitor for citizens’ hearts and minds. Equally important, the Witnesses, not content with worshipping God in secret among fellow believers, established a vast, hierarchical underground network based on hundreds, and later thousands of local study groups of believers who met together to read and discuss the Bible and illegal Watch Tower publications. The underground organization had its own internal hierarchy, reporting procedures, and financial records that made possible an extraordinary degree of cohesion and control over the Soviet Witness communities. The Witnesses considered their illegal
activities, underground printing presses, smuggling channels, and preaching activities as requirements of true Christians.

How the Soviet state responded to the Witnesses changed over time due to broader shifts in the Communist Party’s leadership, ideological orientation, and key policy objectives. When the Witnesses first arrived in the Soviet Union under Stalin, their apocalyptic beliefs and denunciation of secular society posed a particular threat to the postwar Soviet order. The state, eager to implement sovietization of its newly acquired western borderlands, showed little tolerance of the Witnesses’ refusal to participate in these efforts. The state saw the Witnesses’ resistance to the military draft, collectivization, postwar elections, and other critical components of sovietization as anti-Soviet and dangerous, and marked them for sweeping state repression. In response, it carried out mass arrests and trials of Witnesses for anti-Soviet agitation and other state crimes. In 1949 and 1951, the state targeted entire Witness communities for exile to Siberia, a practice generally reserved for suspect economic classes, nationalities, and political opponents.

With the death of Stalin in 1953, the new Party leadership committed itself to a much more limited use of hard-line coercive measures against perceived political threats. It asserted that the Soviet Union could achieve communism without violence, but it struggled to deal with groups such as the Witnesses who refused to buy into its ideology. Under Khrushchev’s tenure, the state revived antireligious propaganda and agitation as part of a broader push to build communism in the near future, tasks that Khrushchev felt had been neglected during Stalin’s last years. Further, the Khrushchev era saw the creation of two basic dichotomies in Soviet religious policy. First, the state extended the possibility of legal registration to most religious communities, albeit with major restrictions on what they could
and could not do. At the same time, it denied any legal standing to other religious communities, including the Witnesses. This created a semi-legal existence for mainstream churches, while singling out certain religions for repression. Second, the state drew a clear distinction between two groups of believers: the ordinary, rank-and-file believers and the leaders or fanatics. The former had to be convinced to renounce the faith and rejoin society, while the latter had to be removed from society by force. These policies fueled the state’s increased attention to antireligious work among Witnesses and justified its continued criminalization of Witnesses, who received prison and labor camp sentences until the late 1980s.

In the post-Stalin period, state and Party institutions, Soviet media, and antireligious propaganda depicted the Witnesses as an anti-Soviet political organization guised as a religion. Official discourse portrayed the Watch Tower organization and its elders as anti-Soviet fanatics and criminals who duped uneducated, vulnerable citizens into joining their illegal underground network. The Communist Party, Komsomol, and Knowledge Society helped transmit this view of Witnesses to the Soviet public, hoping to deter potential converts. The state felt confident that Soviet citizens, if given adequate information and education, would always choose communism over religion, even as its own reports and statistics suggested otherwise. This propaganda had the added goal of justifying to Soviet citizens and foreign observers that the Soviet Union did not persecute religious believers for their beliefs, but rather for their illegal actions. Party agitators and lecturers also worked among the Witnesses themselves to convince them to abandon their faith and embrace communist ideology. This work succeeded to the extent that it limited the Witnesses to a small community of believers on the margins of Soviet society. But the state failed in its
mission to wipe out religious belief and thus secure this necessary precondition for achieving communism.

During Brezhnev’s tenure, most of these state policies remained in force, but the state abandoned its campaignist call to wipe out religious belief in the near future for an emphasis on controlling and regulating Soviet religious life. By the late 1970s, the state lifted the official ban on registering the Witnesses, but refused to modify the conditions for legalization to make registration a viable option for Witnesses. While religion showed a remarkable ability to adapt to changing conditions, the Soviet state’s religious policy betrayed a lack of dynamism that reflected the broader stagnation in Party leadership and the ossification of official rhetoric. Only under the energetic leadership of Gorbachev did relations between the state and the Witnesses undergo a serious transformation. The gradual introduction of democratic governance, free speech, and religious pluralism made it possible for Witnesses to practice their faith in the Soviet Union without fear of reprisal. In 1991, the state finally registered the Witnesses as a recognized religious organization.

Throughout the Soviet era, Witnesses proved their capacity to adapt to changing conditions and to resist official attempts to destroy their communities. Their story provides a much broader image of dissent in the late Soviet era that contrasts to the more well-known urban, intellectual dissident movement. Witnesses constructed alternative communities based on strict biblical morality, mutual support, and obedience to their organization. Largely rural, most with only a basic education, Witnesses lived on the margins of Soviet society. They did not conform to even the most basic cultural norms of Soviet life. Their children did not participate in after-school activities and their young men did not serve in the military. Witnesses avoided movie houses, clubs, houses of culture, village and work meetings, and
refused to vote in elections. Their lives revolved around the practice of their faith in fellowship with other “true Christians.”

Unlike other Soviet dissenters, Witnesses did not heavily invest themselves in Soviet cultural and political institutions and were already marginalized from society. This made them less guarded about speaking out against the system. While many critics of the Soviet political system advocated an alternative, but still Soviet, state, Witnesses prophesied the state’s destruction. The history of Soviet Witnesses demonstrates the need to recognize and study the impact of religion on discussions of subjectivity in the Soviet Union, where religion could provide the foundations for stalwart resistance to the Soviet ideological project. The Witnesses show how religion provided some Soviet citizens with an alternative belief system and religiously-motivated critique of Soviet power that compelled citizens not to conform, to create communities and cultures outside of the official order, and to push the boundaries of state control.

In the post-Soviet period, Witnesses encountered a new set of challenges in the former Soviet states. This dissertation has examined the three states with the highest concentrations of Witnesses: Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova. There, Witnesses had to construct a viable legal organization that conformed to the worldwide administrative structure. This meant building or renting hundreds of spaces for Kingdom Halls where believers could hold weekly meetings. It required renewed attention to translating and distributing standardized versions of Watch Tower publications in all major regional languages. Newly created national branch offices needed trained full-time volunteers to lead the organization through this transition period. The massive influx of new members in the
first post-Soviet decade made these tasks all the more challenging. Still, this membership growth encouraged the Witness communities that hard work would yield rich rewards.

With far more Witnesses preaching publicly in new regions throughout the former Soviet states, the Watch Tower organization soon faced renewed hostility to its beliefs and practices. The resurgent Russian Orthodox Church in particular called for limits on proselytism and the activities of new religious movements and minority faiths such as the Witnesses. Orthodox critics found support for their views in the broader European anticult movement, which they adapted to fit their needs and to reflect the major concerns of post-Soviet citizens. By the late 1990s, anticult rhetoric, most of it based in Russia, permeated the regional media. In all three countries discussed in the dissertation, anticult supporters called for stricter measures against “totalitarian sects” while still proclaiming their support for freedom of conscience. Membership growth slowed and Witnesses faced significant public antagonism, even sporadic acts of violence, as they went about their door-to-door preaching work.

State actions regarding minority religious communities, however, differed in response to broader political and social concerns. In Ukraine and Moldova, the need to achieve some measure of integration with Europe limited the states’ desire to impose legislative restrictions on religious freedom. Internal strife between various Orthodox churches also created a more divided Orthodox community for whom internal church unity was more important than secondary concerns about foreign missionaries and marginal religious organizations. These two case studies suggest that post-Soviet states were sometimes able to uphold basic religious freedoms in the absence of strong public support for many minority religious
communities. The Witnesses did not achieve wide social acceptance in these two countries, but they did win the right to practice their faith.

In contrast, the Russian example demonstrates the difficulties in maintaining religious pluralism in the absence of strong state support. First, a united Orthodox Church yielded greater political power than in Ukraine or Moldova and the federal government could not easily ignore its demands. Yet, during the Yeltsin era, the state fostered closer relations with Europe that tempered its response to minority religious communities. Even the Russian anticult movement carefully framed its critiques within a pan-European discourse about the dangers of sects. As a result, the more restrictive 1997 religious law did not immediately lead to major limitations on freedom of religion. The major shift in church-state relations came as a result of new national leadership. During the Putin presidency, the Russian state showed waning interest in winning European and American support for its domestic policies and clamped down on civil liberties with increasing severity. New laws allowed the state to limit religious expression under the guise of protecting citizens and national security from dangerous extremists. Federal courts began to interpret these laws more broadly to include political opponents and minority religious groups such as the Witnesses in their definitions of extremism.

As the Russian state’s commitment to democracy slowly deteriorated, so too did its support for religious freedom. Russia’s political developments found reflection in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (PMR). The breakaway republic depended on the support of its only ally, Russia, and eagerly mimicked the state’s crackdown on Witnesses. The example of the PMR shows the obstacles to protecting the basic rights of citizens in unrecognized states that exist outside of international institutions governing human rights.
Even when domestic courts ruled in favor of the Witnesses, they lacked any mechanism to enforce their decisions on a hostile executive branch with its own agenda. With no accountability to outside states and institutions, the PMR had even less reason than Russia to maintain a superficial commitment to freedom of conscience. Indeed, the PMR’s actions at times exceeded those of the Russian government in regard to its response to the Witnesses.

By the end of 2010, Witnesses have achieved a great deal since their initial arrival in the Soviet Union. In Ukraine and Moldova, despite considerable public hostility, they preach and worship Jehovah with few restrictions. At the same time, in Russia and the PMR, the Witnesses are on the brink of returning to a Soviet-style underground network of believers. Each day, new information emerges from Russia about the arrest, detainment, and trial of believers for practicing their faith. Signs suggest that the federal government may soon take action to de-register the Witnesses, which could lead to a new era of state repression. For the Witnesses, the tenuousness of the religious liberty won under Gorbachev confirms that secular authorities cannot be trusted to guarantee freedom for true Christians. Only God’s destruction of worldly governments will bring about a permanent end to religious persecution.

Still, there is reason for Russian Witnesses to take comfort in the current situation. When I started this project in the early 2000s, I believed that Russian federal court decisions regarding the Witnesses might well follow the model of other democratic countries. In the United States and Canada, for example, important case law protecting citizens’ civil liberties emerged from disputes involving Witnesses. Now, nearly ten years later, the outcome in Russia has been slightly different than I expected. Russia courts have ruled against the Witnesses, marking them as outside the permissible boundaries of freedom of conscience.
The refusal of Russian courts to find in favor of the Witnesses has brought matters to the European Court of Human Rights. Ironically, the Witnesses’ inability to set legal precedents in Russia has helped them set broader, European case law through landmark decisions in the ECHR. Thus, even as Russian Witnesses lose their rights at home, they may well protect these same rights for their European fellow believers.

No matter what the post-Soviet states choose to do, however, Witnesses in these countries will find ways to practice their faith. Mass exiles, arrest, and KGB infiltration could not eliminate the Witness organization. The current challenges Witnesses face, which seem mild in comparison, can hardly succeed in destroying this stalwart religious community. For now, Witnesses await the establishment of the millennial kingdom. Until then, they will continue to push the limits of religious freedom in modern states. The story of Jehovah’s Witnesses demonstrates that, even in the most repressive of societies, for those willing to risk their lives or livelihoods, there is always room to challenge, to create spaces for dissent, and to construct meaning outside of official norms.
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