

Russian Evangelicals Hold a Congress

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The over-riding impression for foreign observers attending the 41st All Union Congress of the Evangelical Christians and Baptists in Moscow, 11-13 December 1974, was one of spiritual triumph. The evangelical movement in Russia is obviously growing whether one measures it in terms of baptisms (12,000 in the last five years), total membership (announced at 535,000), the building of churches (especially in the Caucasus and the Ukraine) or in terms of one very interesting statistic, namely, that 351 of the 483 delegates had been Christians for less than ten years. The long report by the general secretary covered all aspects of Church life it seemed. The second class had graduated from the two-year Bible correspondence course. This now makes a total of 179 graduates. There had been successes in publishing. These were of course very small but did include the publication of a song book with musical notation for choirs (5,000 copies it is estimated), a calendar, and on the eve of the Congress they had taken delivery of 20,000 New Testaments with Psalms. On the final day one saw delegates coming to their seats carrying brown paper parcels containing their allotments. There were also more standard reports on contributors and their contributions to the bi-monthly periodical, *Fraternal Herald*. The number of copies per issue was raised by a thousand.

Perhaps the 35 speeches by delegates were more interesting to hear. Many of these speakers were of course safe, non-controversial supporters of the *status quo*, but even they provided helpful information on local churches which is difficult to obtain elsewhere. Others offered slightly daring calls for more improvement. Several delegates spoke boldly and forcefully in favour of introducing music courses into the curriculum of the Bible correspondence course, and even more spokesmen urged that this course be opened up to choir directors and even lay leaders. Delegates frequently referred to the severe shortage of Christian literature, remarking also that they never saw the official journal, *Fraternal Herald*. Others made it clear that their expectations included more literature in their mother tongues, namely in Ukrainian, Latvian, Estonian or German. This is of course not a complaint against the Church leadership but more an appeal to keep pressing the State for more concessions.

Although there is an explanation for this Congress being the 41st, the

fact remains that congresses have been relatively rare. This was the fourth *regular* one. Following an organizing Congress in 1944, despite various appeals for a congress, none was held till 1963. Then they were held every three years till 1969 when it was decided to space them five years apart. No other denomination in the USSR is allowed to hold such regular deliberative congresses. Perhaps this explains why Metropolitan Nikodim, standing in for Metropolitan Yuvenaly, showed such great interest in the proceedings. The presence of Orthodox representatives, by the way, was in itself a moving sight for those who remember Russian history.

Obviously, as one foreign observer put it, there was a new wind blowing warmer air. Such open acknowledgements of State limitations on their work would not have been expressed publicly five years ago, and this time they were said in front of foreign observers. There were 20 of these, 11 from capitalist countries representing Baptist organizations in the main, but also others. The AUCECB is made up of at least four denominations and is a member of several international religious bodies. Notably absent from the list of foreign guests were representatives from the Pentecostal churches and the World Council of Churches.

As always, the Congress theme was unity. The major single concern was the split in the Church going back to 1961, but of course unity meant more than this. In a very real sense each of the Congresses from 1963 to 1974 has failed to restore unity. Perhaps this was the last time for making such an attempt. One delegate remarked that he hoped they could now put a period on the motto – “Keeping the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace” – which hung above him. There had been no unity negotiations since the previous Congress. The AUCECB had issued two invitations to the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (CCECB) to resume negotiations, the last one in December 1973, but the latter showed no interest. At the Congress itself a seven-man CCECB delegation, which arrived on opening day, was turned away because, as the Mandate Commission chairman Fadiukhin explained to the delegates, they had not come with good will. Six others from the Rostov region who requested observer status were warmly received. The major emphasis is now placed on winning individual believers or groups from the group which has split away.

It is difficult for a foreign observer to form a judgment on this unity question. According to the *Fraternal Herald* No. 4, which arrived in the West in late December, the AUCECB had specified in its offer to resume talks that it was laying down no pre-conditions. In July the AUCECB invited all persons of evangelical persuasion to participate in the Congress and in the local conferences preparatory to it. This invitation included

all those not officially in the union and all those in unregistered churches, apparently a generous offer. Yet the suggested procedures for such participation printed immediately below this invitation would have required all participants to go through the regular channels for electing delegates. The chances of delegates from these other groups getting elected would have been slim indeed. Well, those are points for quibbling. Most determinative was the fact that the State was holding for trial the leader of the CCECB, thus making it morally impossible for his associates to negotiate.

Perhaps hope for formal reunion of AUCECB and CCECB is now dead, but in another sense there is room for optimism. Contacts between the two groups are still considerable. Some delegates told of cooperation at local levels, while the AUCECB leadership acknowledged that approximately as many had joined the CCECB as had left the CCECB to return to the AUCECB. Very significant was the fact that the AUCECB asked its general secretary, Bychkov, to intercede with the authorities for imprisoned *Initsiativniki*. It is also significant that the Baptist World Alliance leadership took the opportunity to plead for clemency for Georgi Vins and others when they went to see the Deputy Chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, Makartsev. They were told, so they reported, that during the two month period, October to December, 60 prisoners had been released. This information has now been confirmed after a fashion from *Initsiativniki* sources. Whereas there were 170 prisoners on 1 October, by January 1975 there were only 110. As far as we can tell, 12 of these were special releases¹ while the remaining 48 were due for release anyway.

The Congress was a time for fellowship, for reporting on achievements, for the presentation of new proposals by delegates, and above all a time for the election of members to the All Union Council. This took place behind closed doors, reminding one how much it meant to have open sessions for so much of the Congress, as several delegates pointed out in their speeches. There is still considerable concern about getting positive treatment for their Church in the Western press. The July 1974 meeting of the AUCECB which approved the invitation of foreign guests, also approved a resolution which included the charge "that certain religious journals and newspapers abroad are printing information about the life of our Church and our people which does not correspond to reality but distorts the pure life and service of our brotherhood".² A similar line was pursued by Bychkov in the abbreviated version of his report to the Congress which was given to the foreign guests.

Ilya G. Ivanov, the 76-year-old president became honorary president.

The new president is Andrei Klimenko, Senior Presbyter for the Volga region and a vice-president since 1971. He is 61. The 46-year-old Alexei Bychkov was re-elected as general secretary. As expected, there were few changes in the membership of the 25 member Council and the smaller (now 10 member) Presidium. In the main, those who had died or retired were replaced. Viewed from a longer time perspective, it is obvious that the present leadership is new when compared with those who were in office at the time of the split in 1961. They are younger men, accustomed to Soviet ways, and often without the prison experience of their fathers. Future developments will be very much their responsibility since they must negotiate with authorities whose attitude is officially still one of temporary tolerance.

We wish them well and I think there are grounds for optimism.

¹ The names of the 12 released prisoners are :
Anatoli N. Balatsky, Voroshilovgrad (45) 2 dependants, 1972-75.
Vasili A. Golub, Voroshilovgrad (44) 7 dependants, 1972-75.
Stepan N. Missiruk, Odessa (43) 7 dependants, 1969-78.
Ivan F. Saez, Khmel'nitsky r-on (55) 3 dependants, 1970-78.
N. Smirnov, Dedovsk since 1974.
Vasili Ya. Smirnov, Dedovsk (56) 3 dependants, 1972-75.
Mikhail L. Seigarev, Omsk (46) 10 dependants, 1972-76.
Mikhail D. Bartachuk, Brest (49) 2 dependants, 1970-75.
Ivan G. Karpovich, Beresino (49) 6 dependants, 1970-75.
Nina F. Massiuk, Minsk r-on (44) 1 dependant, 1970-75.
Ivan F. Pintchuk, Gomel r-on (44) 6 dependants, 1973-76.
Ivan J. Truchan, Minsk r-on (48) 6 dependants, 1973-77.

² See *Fraternal Herald*, No. 4, 1974, p. 63.

MOSCOW

Hurry up and see Moscow. Soon there will be nothing left of the Russian capital except the Kremlin, by permission of Posokhin, chief architect, or rather chief destroyer of Moscow. The capital of Russia (formerly Muscovy), an ensemble of historic monuments, an architectural chronicle of the greatness and beauty of the culture of the Russian people, is seeing its last days. The team of vandals led by Posokhin and called CentAPA (Central Architectural and Planning Administration) is successfully moving towards its cherished goal – to wipe historic, “national” Moscow from the face of the earth and in its place raise a new Babylon on the worst lines of Detroit and Chicago. In destroying Moscow, CentAPA is not devising anything new, it is simply implementing the general plan of 1935. The cunning general plan for the reconstruction of Moscow was adopted on the initiative of Kaganovich, with a long-term perspective. Above all, gold-headed Moscow was decapitated. Atheist propaganda offered the basis for the destruction of crosses and cupolas, which created the unique aspect of what was virtually the seventh wonder of the world.

Moscow's Last Day, Vladimir Osipov