

Bible Work in Eastern Europe since 1945 (Part 1)

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At best only about 75 per cent of the people living in the nine communist countries of Eastern Europe have received a portion of scripture during the past 28 years. About one third of these people were fortunate enough to obtain a Bible or New Testament, the rest had to be content with a Bible portion. This situation varies from country to country. For example, in the GDR in which about 58 per cent of the population has a religious affiliation, 28 per cent had access to scripture. Bulgaria with a religious affiliation of 83 per cent received enough scripture to supply 0.36 per cent of the people. By far the largest country, the USSR, with at least 20 per cent of the population actively religious, continues to have the greatest Bible shortage. Perhaps 1.25 per cent of the population has received a portion of scripture since World War II. There are 50¹ million people living in the USSR unable to speak Russian who could not read a Bible, should they receive one, since a translation in their language does not exist. Numerous reports from travellers still confirm that believers will pay from 60 to 100 roubles for a Russian Bible. In Moscow, itself, leading intellectuals who recently converted to the Russian Orthodox Church had never read even the Gospels, their theological understanding being based on Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*.

Establishing the facts about the Bible situation in Eastern Europe seems an insoluble problem. Statistics from the Bible Society on legal distribution are of uneven quality since the UBS (United Bible Societies) depended on reports from local contacts who could not always write regularly. The UBS also varied its presentation of statistics so that the annual reports invariably sounded optimistic, a natural enough tendency.

Sometimes UBS figures included local production done under other auspices. If in addition one seeks to determine how much Bible distribution took place at the non-legal level, the obstacles are manifold. Some missions to Eastern Europe report their distribution figures openly and systematically. Others cite them spasmodically to emphasize a new financial drive as for example—"20,000 Russian Bibles off the press this past month alone". Does this mean the organization averages that many Russian Bibles a month or was that the month for printing Russian Bibles? Did they distribute these 20,000 or will these be shared with another mis-

sion which announces a distribution of 10,000 Russian Bibles? Then there are the missions which leave the counting up to God because they feel that the less publicity the better for the continuation of their work. A few keep vague records to save themselves embarrassment.

It is not my purpose to rate the effectiveness or integrity of the missions. Instead I wish to establish a fair estimate of what the Bible situation is in each country. How much Bible work has been possible since these countries were taken over by a communist regime? Where is there now a severe shortage? Where have there been significant breakthroughs and what do these mean?

This study is partly prompted by the fact that there is now a degree of rivalry between the ever increasing number of organizations working in Eastern Europe, a rivalry which seems counter-productive. One is asked more often one's views about this or that agency and its programme claims than about the needs in the East. While certain mission supporters have been attracted by the excitement of "smuggling" and others have decided that some sort of extra-legal approach is necessary owing to the continued restriction on free publication, still others have been repelled by the ethics of smuggling, reported financial mismanagement, or right wing views of certain mission leaders. This latter group has listened with more than both ears to the reports from the United Bible Societies of growing progress in Eastern Europe through legal channels. At times misquoting the UBS they will say that smuggling is now unnecessary since East Europeans can buy all the Bibles they desire in their own country, some of them imported and some even locally produced.

In the most recent report coming from the General Office of the UBS on Bibles in Eastern Europe, the Rev. Ulrich Fick began by stating simply that :

There is a tremendous need for Bibles in Eastern Europe. With the exception of Yugoslavia, the GDR and Poland, Bibles published so far cover only a small part of the great need which exists within the Christian churches. For any activity reaching out to all church members, or possibly beyond them, many more Bibles would be needed: the number for which publication or import has been so far authorized can be considered only as a beginning.²

Fick went on to assert that "it was not realistic to expect an immediate sensational breakthrough or sweeping successes". Rather it was a step by step process which at times even involved some steps backward. The tone of statements coming from the missions to Eastern Europe recently is also more moderate than the general public seems to think. Barring a few well known exceptions, these men are deliberately avoiding the word "smuggling" to describe their work.

What follows is a country by country survey of what has been done, identifying problems and breakthroughs briefly. It is based on a careful assessment of the published statistics and news releases of the UBS with cross checking from other sources where possible. These figures are in a general way reliable although it is impossible to identify sometimes how many locally produced Bibles were exported, or kept in storage and distributed later, and perhaps counted twice. This gives a certain picture but it is not a full picture. Having visited four of the nine countries covered, the author knows that in many of these countries there are more Bibles than the official figures suggest. Obtaining actual statistics on the unofficial importation of Bibles is nearly impossible but it has been attempted on the assumption that an educated guess might be less misleading about the true situation than a complete omission of unofficial statistics. Accordingly the unofficial totals are based on partial, verifiable data, supplemented by estimates based on apparent trends and patterns. I have adopted the principle of accepting the validity of figures cited (unless there is evidence to make verification possible). Although the results reveal a fairly general severe shortage of Bibles, my personal hunch is that I have erred on the side of over-estimating. I should like to thank officials from the UBS and many missions who so kindly provided additional information to that filed at the CSRC.

Bible work continued following the Second World War in a few countries such as Poland, the GDR and Hungary, but was stopped in the rest. It began again in the mid-1960's due to several factors, the most important of which was the easing of the Cold War. This meant renewed travel and communication. A handful of missions had been active earlier but on a small scale. The public interest was then awakened through the publication of the book *God's Smuggler* by Brother Andrew, a Dutchman; and by the publicity given to a series of emigrants from the East who had been in prison and now talked and wrote of their experiences, emphasizing the need for Bibles. Perhaps best known of these is a Romanian named Richard Wurmbrand who first worked for Underground Evangelism and then launched his own mission. The UBS also launched a new programme for Eastern Europe in 1967 through the appointment of a secretary for Europe including Eastern Europe and by creating a European Continental Production Fund. This fund which was related to the World Service Budget (another innovation dating from 1966) served among other things, to facilitate increased production in the East and for the East. European Bible Societies were asked to contribute an extra one million dollars over a five year period. Bible distribution figures at the official and unofficial level shot up dramatically. Roughly speaking, over two thirds of the scrip-

tures distributed since the war were distributed in the last seven years.

It is also only recently that the hitherto largely Protestant Bible Societies have begun to cooperate with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Olivier Beguin, the late UBS General Secretary, had noted as early as 1950 the renewed Biblical movement in the Roman Catholic Church (more marked after Vatican II) and regularly urged cooperation. This bore fruit in 1968 when the UBS and the Catholic Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity jointly drew up some "Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation in translating the Bible". In 1970 the UBS was recognized as an agency to which Roman Catholics could turn to implement the Second Vatican Council's concern for easy access by all men to Holy Scripture. UBS-Orthodox cooperation will be referred to frequently in the country by country survey. †

East Germany (GDR)

Although there is currently an increased concern for the condition of the Christian Church in East Germany, it still has the best supply of scripture. Scripture distribution has been continual since World War II. Complete statistics are hard to obtain since the statistics for the two Germanies were lumped together till 1969. In 1972 a Bible Society official from the GDR estimated that 1.5 million Bibles, 1.2 million New Testaments and 2.7 million Scripture portions had been produced between 1946 and 1971.³ This would be a total of 5,862, 110 for the period 1946-1973. To this must be added the unknown number imported legally and otherwise. It seems that the missions could not have brought in much more than 100,000 pieces since their emphases were elsewhere, but there was also considerable private transfer of Bibles. In any case as early as 1956 the General Secretary of the UBS stated that :

The great dearth of scriptures in Eastern Germany is over . . . The Bible Societies find it rather difficult, in some cases, to get rid of their products. Whereas for a number of years the demand was still greater than the supply, the time has now come when the demand has to be stimulated.⁴

East German Bible work this past year encountered growing demands again thanks to the new translation *Die Gute Nachricht* employing the principles of "dynamic equivalence". To date 80,000 copies have been circulated, which involved obtaining two separate licences. There are 14 Bible Societies in the GDR which cooperate, a particular necessity since only one society has received a licence to print. In the GDR scriptures are distributed through 20 Christian bookstores, through some State bookstores, and through the local churches. An additional feature is the production of Braille scriptures for use in the GDR and abroad.

Poland

A total scripture distribution of 3,263,840 pieces from 1945-73 makes the story in Poland seem almost as optimistic as in the GDR (an estimated 125,000 was brought in unofficially). It should be noted, however, that Poland has twice the population, currently around 33 million. Whereas the GDR has a heavily Protestant population, 97 per cent of the Polish population is Roman Catholic. Further only 618,403 of the Polish distribution figure represents Bibles and New Testaments, the remainder were scripture portions. The Roman Catholic Church has itself produced Bibles, one recent unsubstantiated report estimates a production of 86,000 pieces annually, but presumably true only for recent years. There has been a standing import agreement between UBS and the Polish Bible Society but in local production the situation reflects Polish political history somewhat. Generally speaking, there was some production from 1948-58, then a gap of 11 years with no production, and then from 1969-72, 317,500 scriptures were produced. This figure increased even more rapidly in 1973 when 30,000 New Testaments and 300,000 Gospels were produced.

A new translation of the entire Bible (NT having been published in this translation in 1966) is now in production. It is the first to be printed locally through the Polish Bible Society since 1945. Although the Bible Societies have stated that a Bible can be bought in their bookshop in the centre of Warsaw, it must be emphasized that there are no sales of scripture possible through the regular bookshops. The Bible Society office sells them over the counter (60 different translations are in fact available), through the mails, and through the congregations. There is also an agreement with the State to permit sending Bibles to listeners who respond to a religious broadcast in Polish beamed in from the West. At the first Sacred Music Festival held in Krakow in the summer of 1973, Roman Catholic youth distributed 5,000 scriptures.

Hungary

This is a country culturally very different from its Slavic neighbours which has been much more independent of the UBS. After 1967 through increased consultation on translation work the relationship with the UBS has improved and in 1973 the Hungarian Bible Council became an associate member of the UBS. There have been infrequent productions of small quantities of scripture usually as supplies in the Budapest Office went down. There has been a total production of 332,000, not very much even if Hungary has only 10.5 million people. It is estimated that 55 per cent of the population is Roman Catholic, and 24 per cent is Protestant.

With an estimated figure of 669,400 scriptures through unofficial distribution, it seems that two out of every three recipients received their copy unofficially.

These figures do not seem to account for all the Bibles present in Hungary. It has been possible for several years to send books including scriptures to Hungary from the West through the mail, though not in bulk packages. There is much communication between Hungarian nationals living in Hungary and abroad. The Hungarians have officially printed for the Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia and Romania and these regions are also seen as Hungarian responsibility at the unofficial level.

For official Bible work the problem is much less that of production than of distribution. Permits for the latter are needed. Distribution is inhibited as well because the Bibles must be purchased by the different church headquarters through the Press department of the Reformed Church in Budapest. Among Hungarian pastors one encounters a resigned attitude and an indication that they see the Bible work more as a business (through a store) than as a means of evangelism. Thus a stockpile in Budapest does not indicate saturation level for the entire country.

At the moment a new revision of the Hungarian Bible for Roman Catholics (31,000 copies) and a completely new translation for Protestants are being printed. Hungarians have long used a translation produced by the literary genius of one Gaspar Karolyi in 1590. Although representing for Hungarians what the Luther Bible does for Germans, it needed updating and correction since it does not stand up to modern standards of Biblical scholarship. Work was begun before the war and even today one encounters conflicting answers on whether the new translation is now finished. There were delays due to the war and more recently apparently due to State resistance, but much of it was due to the intense interest in the project throughout the country. After the translation committee had printed a sample version, the committee was flooded with suggestions and criticisms not only from pastors and theologians in the country, but from many laymen as well. One mechanic arrived late on a Saturday night at a translator's home having come by motorcycle. He had learned Hebrew on his own because of his interest in the project, and he and the translator talked without stopping about certain renderings of a number of Hebrew passages till it was time to mount the motorcycle for work on Monday morning. Although a planned printing of the new translation has been announced frequently during the last four years, it is now finally in production and 30,000 copies are expected.

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

Reasons of space prohibit the detailed citing of sources used. In the main this article is based on the UBS *Bulletin* 1950-1974 (a quarterly journal with annual statistical summaries), various printed literature produced by the many mission societies, press articles, private communications from UBS and Mission leaders, and personal observations by the author on recent travels.

¹ Population statistics from the 1972 *Yearbook of Encyclopedia Britannica*. Additional statistics have been brought into conformity with Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour. Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe*. Fontana, 1974.

² "The Bible in Eastern Europe", UBS General Office, Stuttgart, May 1974. A mimeographed six-page "up-dated report on developments".

³ An interview in *Evangelisches Pfarrerblatt*, Heft 5, (May, 1972).

⁴ UBS *Bulletin*, No. 33, 1958, p. 38.

Prisoners Sunday

7 DECEMBER 1975

Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has designated 7 December as **Prisoners Sunday** in Catholic Churches throughout England and Wales in response to Pope Paul's Holy Year Message, in which he expressed the hope that governments would "as a gesture of clemency and equity consider the possibility of releasing some prisoners where it is prudent to do so, especially those who have given sufficient proof of their moral and civil rehabilitation or who have been caught up in riots and uprisings too irresistible for them to be held fully responsible". Further information from:

Fr. Henry Townsend,
Farm Street Jesuits,
Holy Amnesty Committee,
114 Mount Street,
London W1Y 6AH.

Aid to the Church In Need

17 - 18 OCTOBER 1975

Vigil of Prayer for the persecuted Church to be held in Westminster Cathedral Conference Centre, Ashley Place, London S.W.1 (adjacent to the cathedral) from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. Father Werenfried van Straaten (the Bacon Priest)—Founder of ACN—will preach at the Opening Mass.