Underground Evangelism: Missions During the Cold War

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Abstract

From the 1950s until the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, there were an untold number of Bible Smuggling organizations. Millions of dollars were raised every month during this period, and there were countless Christian spies who made contact with persecuted Christians and brought them contraband bibles. This paper is an analysis of East European evangelical missions before and after the great transformation of 1989. A few of these missions were able to adjust to the post-Cold War era and have effective ministries in Eastern Europe today. The sources used in this treatment are texts dealing with premillennial eschatology, popular evangelical writings, and interviews with mission leaders, and personal observations based upon author's experience as a former bible courier and leader of one of the largest East European missions. A major source for this paper has been the flagship American evangelical magazine, Christianity Today.

Introduction

Commenting on the significance of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, historian Walter Laqueur noted: "There is always some doubt with regard to periodization in history, but seldom have the parameters been so obvious as in this specific case." 1989 was a watershed year that marked the end of the Cold War and the complete reordering of geopolitical thinking, not just in Europe, but around the world. While the East European revolutions of 1989 were momentous in political terms, they were also a bombshell that exploded in the midst of the evangelical community. This means that the presuppositions, goals, and structures of largely American evangelical missions to Eastern Europe that had been in existence since the 1950s were radically and fundamentally altered.

This paper is an analysis of East European evangelical missions before and after the great transformation of 1989. A few of these missions were able to adjust to the post-Cold War era and have effective ministries in Eastern Europe today. The missions that collapsed, this paper will argue, were trapped by the Cold War past and were therefore unable to break free of anti-communist rhetoric, ideology, and eschatology. It is my intention to discuss the East European missions prior to 1989. I will look particularly at the forces that shaped evangelical thinking toward communism in general and the Soviet sponsored regimes in particular during those decades, and most importantly, why many of the missions were unable or unwilling to transform themselves and accept the challenges of what American President George Herbert Walker Bush called the new world order.

The sources used in this treatment are texts dealing with premillennial eschatology, popular evangelical writings, interviews with mission leaders, and personal observations based upon my experience as a former bible courier and leader of one of the largest East European missions. A major source for this paper has been the flagship American evangelical magazine, Christianity Today. There are various reasons for leaning so heavily on the popular evangelical magazine that was the brainchild of a young Billy Graham. From its very first issue in the autumn of 1956, there was a strong emphasis on foreign missions, especially in relationship to outreach in communist countries. This was in part due to the fact that first editor of Christianity Today was Dr. Nelson...
views

Bell, Graham’s father-in-law, and a former Presbyterian missionary to China. Throughout its years of publication, Christianity Today emphasized the conflict between Christianity and Western culture versus communism and official atheism. While not monolithic, the writers and essayists that contributed to Christianity Today were mostly white, middle class, well educated, and theologically as well as politically conservative. Seeking to become an evangelical alternative to the more liberal Christian Century, Christianity Today became, according to Martin, “the nation’s most widely read serious religious publication.”

Missions Versus Communism

In the opening issue of Christianity Today in October of 1956, the editors stated that the publication’s vision was rooted in a determination ‘to speak with conviction and love, and to state its true position and its relevance to the world crises.’ The primary world crisis for evangelicals was clearly the struggle between Christianity and communism. Coincidently, the first issue of Christianity Today was released at the same time that the Hungarian Revolution was raging. In responding to the brutal Soviet crushing of the uprising, M. Eugene Osterhaven prayed, ‘God give us the courage and strength to respond.’ The vital issue for evangelicals was how best to respond to the horror of communism and how to aid East European believers who were suffering for their faith. However, as we will see, there was never a unified response to these perplexing issues even within the contours of American conservative evangelicalism.

At no point was the conflict simply between evangelicals and the Kremlin. There was strong animosity between evangelicals and the theological liberals that were represented in several of the traditional denominations. Cold War issues played a prominent in this mutual antagonism especially as conservative evangelicals viewed theological liberals as basically communists. Statements made by liberals that were interpreted as not being sufficiently anti-communist, regularly incensed evangelicals. According to Michael Bordeaux of the Keston Institute in Oxford, when a prominent liberal theologian was ‘confronted with one of the first lists of Baptist prisoners in the Soviet Union’ during the early 1960’s, he provocatively held up the list “before a meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and asked, ‘What are 200 prisoners in a country of over 200 million people?’"

The other great struggle was an inter-evangelical conflict between the groups, usually denominational, that insisted on operating exclusively through official channels, and the missions normally interdenominational and part of the vast independent evangelical world who took great pleasure in working illegally to outfox communist authorities. In 1977, the United Bible Society reported that it decided “to place on record its disassociation from Bible work done by illegal means.” Evangelicals committed to underground work, on the other hand, accused their enemies of compromising with the communist authorities and of virtually functioning as KGB operatives.

In 1974, a book entitled Diversion without Dynamite was published by the Soviets. The book sold 200,000 copies and attacked a long list of missions to Eastern Europe. According to the book, the underground missions and organizations were ‘part of the anti-communist front that was trying to overthrow the Soviet system.’ In 1986, the Soviet Union distributed an official booklet entitled Arguments with a chapter headed ‘Lies in the Atmosphere.’ In it, author T.V. Mikhailov wrote that Western, religious propaganda is part of an ideological and psychological warfare with the purpose of destroying the confidence of Soviet citizens in Marxism-Leninism.

These publications served to embolden the underground missions and convince them that they were without question on the correct path and the Soviet documents served as a means of legitimizing their work. The argument went that if the communists were attacking them they must be a lethal threat to the Soviet system. Therefore, the communists validated the concept of breaking the law and the Soviets in turn used the missions as a weapon that was employed against their evangelical opponents.

Some of the missions even suggested that they were the target of communist agents. In 1978, Joe Bass, founder of Underground Evangelism, published a 14-page booklet entitled Conspiracy, which alleged that there was a “plan to destroy Underground Evangelism” which “involved an Agency of Communist Bulgaria, its Moscow-Trained Officials, and others.” Bass developed a theory that the conspiracy implicated a variety of Bulgarian Orthodox officials, some of which
had been trained in Moscow. Some of the missions went to great pains to emphasize the total irreconcilability between communism and Christianity, East and West, intentionally desiring that East European Christians believe that they must be staunchly anti-communism, and even unpatriotic.

One of the stigmas that the underground missions had to endure was that a good deal of scandal was attached to some of the larger missions. The largest mission was Underground Evangelism. Several other missions were created out of that massive organization. One such spin-off was the mission, Jesus Christ to the Communist World, headed by Richard Wurmbrand, a persecuted Romanian pastor who spent fourteen years in prison before he was ransomed out of detention by western evangelicals. He made headlines when speaking to the U.S. Senate about his experience in Romanian prison, suddenly took off his shirt to show the scars on his back, the results of intense torture in Romania. For a time Wurmbrand worked for Bass, significantly boosting the support level of Underground Evangelism. However, they soon separated and something resembling a war ensued.

Tension between the two organizations reached such a point of friction that multi-million dollar defamation lawsuit that made headline news. In the midst of the suit, Wurmbrand published a 78-page booklet entitled The Evidence against Joe Bass, which contained a copy of Bass’ arrest record of 1959 and a love letter from Underground Evangelism representative David Hathaway to Joe Bass’s wife Lois written on mission stationery. Underground Evangelism retaliated by accusing Wurmbrand’s son Michael of complicity in the supposed conspiracy to destroy Underground Evangelism. Michael Wurmbrand, according to the accusation, was the ‘chief tool of the communists.’ The lawsuits were so well known that the Soviet Newspaper Izvestia drew attention to the scandal.

A further criticism of the underground missions was a lack of accountability. By the 1980’s there was such fierce competition amongst the various missions that they all claimed high success figures, but these could never be verified in the interests of ‘security’. Success was measured in numbers of Bibles and Christian books distributed. One problem was that the extremely high literature figures often included small tracts.

Most of the missions smuggles Bibles and literature through a fleet of specially built vehicles that could conceal as much as 1,000 Bibles and books per trip. However, the security checks, sometimes-outright interrogations, at some East European borders became so intense, that alternative means of transporting literature were employed. Some missions stationed their workers in Western ports where they attempted to bribe Soviet sailors to take quantities of literature back home. These attempts, needless to say, proved less than reliable. In one instance, a single engine airplane flew across the Bering Strait toward some of the outlying islands belonging to the Soviet Union and dropped plastic bags that contained a gospel tract, a stick of chewing gum, greetings from the United States, and a drinking straw to make the plastic bags buoyant on the water. It seems that such stunts were more for Western consumption and used for fund raising purposes than anyone else. A regular source of income for the missions was a steady stream of popular paperbacks with titles such as God’s Smuggler, Tortured for Christ, Tortured for His Faith, Czechmate, and Forgive me Natasha.

One of the larger missions, Slavic Gospel Association, concerned about the culture of the Bible smugglers and their lack of cultural understanding, launched the Institute of Slavic Studies in order to produce informed couriers who would have up to two years of language study and obtain knowledge of East European culture and society. There were mixed reviews on the effectiveness of the Institute. While students did learn basic Slavic languages, they were not given enough information about East European culture, and perhaps even more importantly, about the evangelical sub-cultures of the region. However, it did some good in dispelling rumors that most smugglers were young, ill equipped Americans, out for nothing more than romantic adventures.

Premillennialism and East European Missions

Eschatology and in particular Premillennial Dispensationalism provided a theological, political, and cultural framework in which the East European missions and their supporters functioned. In particular, Premillennialism is committed to a belief in many evangelical circles that contends that Christ will return before the millennium and will in fact establish it when He comes to earth.
According to some premillennialist interpretations of obscure Old Testament Scriptures such as Ezekiel 38 and 39 along with the book of Revelation, a consensus emerged that the Soviet Union was inspired and created by Satan himself to march on Israel and play a prophetic role in the last day's scenario. According to Duffield and Cleave,

With the Middle East being the chief oil source of the world, coveted by Russia, and with Russia at odds with Israel, an ally of the United States, that Moscow would invade regathered Israel at some near future date is neither impossible nor unthinkable.23

Television and radio commentator understood Jack Van Impe understood Russia as Gog mentioned in Ezekiel and was known for his hysterical tirades against the Soviet Union and frequently trashed the nations of Eastern Europe. He also wrote popular evangelical paperbacks such as The Coming War with Russia.24 Some of the prophecy writers looked forward to a confrontation between the Soviets and the Untied States. According to Wilson, the premillenarians expected, if not welcomed, a fight with Russia.25 David Wilkerson suggested that Russia might not just attack the United States, but destroy it because America had become 'a nation of counsel.'26

There was a strong dose of American parochialism as well as ignorance of the world during the Cold War period by many of the prophecy writers. Were they referring to Russia alone, the entire Soviet Union, or communism in whatever form it was manifested throughout the world? In the darkest days of the Cold War, most of the writers seemed to be speaking about all of Eastern Europe, naively believing that all of the East European states fell under the Moscow orbit, even Yugoslavia and Albania. According to many of these premillennial evangelicals, the Soviet Bloc was not just the political enemy of the United States, but the nation's spiritual foe. The Cold War could never end, therefore, because of the fact that the communist system was destined to play a crucial role within the end time's scenario. Many evangelicals often denounced political leaders who attempted a rapprochement with the Soviet bloc because, according to the premillenialists, heightened international tensions meant the imminent return of Christ. Therefore, all attempts at summits and U.N. conferences were seen as attempts to prevent the coming of the Lord. The imminence and certainly of global catastrophe was used as a means of encouraging missionary effort so that the nations would hear the Gospel before nuclear was struck. Therefore, missions to Eastern Europe occupied a strategic place in premillennial thinking.27

The significance of such thought is the influence that premillennial missiology had upon the United States as a nation and especially upon conservative political leadership. The New York Times expresses concern that "Armageddonist" advisors could have the capacity to influence U.S. nuclear policy. According to that same editorial, one hundred prominent religious leaders had urged President Reagan to reject the evangelical claim that nuclear holocaust is foreordained in the Bible, as such a belief system could lead to "historical fatalism."28 Boyer observes:

We cannot fully understand Cold War politics and culture without close attention to this religious component. National opinion surveys in the mid 1980's revealed that a quarter of Americans viewed the U.S.-Soviet conflict in theological terms, and over half endorsed Reagan's view of the Soviet Empire as an 'Evil Empire.'29

Gorbachev and the End of the Cold War

When Mikhail Gorbachev appeared on the scene in 1985, views were so entrenched amongst evangelicals that there could be no acceptance of change in terms of either international relations or an improvement in the conditions of East European Christians. According to Karl Fuchs, 'conditions for religious believers are not likely to improve under the new General Secretary of the Communist Party.'30 James McKeever of Omega Ministries went so far as to state, 'Glasnost is a KGB-inspired campaign to soften Western resolve against communism.'31 Charles Taylor of Bible Prophecy News declared, 'Wake Up America! The Soviets are going to attack the USA soon! Do not be fooled by Gorbachev.'32 One year after the ascension of Gorbachev, reaction had not changed. 'The only thing that appears certain,' according to Brian R O'Connel, is that Soviet evangelicals 'need the continuing concern and support of Christians in the West.' Some reports indicated that persecution had even intensified, due in part to a siege mentality of behalf of Soviet
and East European evangelicals, unable to imagine a future in which state-led repression of believers could cease. For example, when this writer asked a group of Underground Baptists in Kiev in June of 1990 what they would do with the new freedom, their response was, "Wait for the next persecution to begin."  

Despite such extreme skepticism, in the aftermath of the great transformation that occurred in 1989, there were initially positive elements with respect to East European missions. The contention between the official organizations like the United Bible Society, some denominational bodies, and several underground missions was partially healed and cooperation ensued. This occurred within a post-1989 context when a large segment of the evangelical community sought through official channels to meet an unsuitable desire for Bibles in a newly liberated Eastern Europe. The need for clandestine ministry disappeared in a heartbeat and three decades of contention between the various groups seemed irrelevant. There was also greater cooperation between the formerly underground missions. According to Christianity Today, early in 1990, the representatives of several mission organizations met in Dallas for the purpose of 'sharing information and strategies for working in the rapidly changing Communist block.' Significantly, the 110 mission leaders present acknowledged that just about all of the groups were 'unprepared for the dramatic changes' of 1989. Ralph Mann of Mission Possible and one of the conference organizers said that the missions 'are rushing to what many feel may be a limited opening for western agencies.' However, such cooperation was to be short lived in the early post-Cold War era. Even in the midst of the apparent spirit of cooperation that was occurring at the Dallas Conference, one of the participating missions sent out a fund raising appeal claiming that they alone were prepared to shape the future of the church in Eastern Europe.  

KGB conspiracy theories were numerous in the immediate months and years following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. They included the possibility that official permission to import Bibles might be a ploy to obtain the names of believers who would in turn receive late night visits from the secret police. It was believed by many evangelicals that the new opportunities would be very brief, followed by intense persecution of the East European church, and a crackdown on all Western missions. Charismatic evangelical personalities such as Pat Robertson prophesied that a door of opportunity had been opened, but only for an extremely brief period. In 1991 Robertson wrote that East European Christians, 'have only months before this window of opportunity is closed by the possibility of new policy changes and restrictions inside the Soviet Union.' In retrospect, this seems like a shortsighted comment, considering the fact that not only was there no crackdown, but the entire Soviet Union collapsed the same year that Robertson made those remarks.  

The history of Eastern Europe in the Cold War era seemed to confirm this view. Evangelicals were mindful of the few brief days when the Hungarian church, both Catholic and Protestant, enjoyed religious freedom, albeit within a chaotic setting, before the Soviet tanks crushed the rising. Even more recently was the Prague Spring of 1968 when it appeared that the reforms of Alexander Dubcek and his policy of religious toleration were to endure. Thirty Czech pastors met with associates of Billy Graham in Prague to discuss the possibility of a future Graham crusade in the Czechoslovakian capital. No crusade ever occurred however, because Soviet troops ruthlessly crushed the Prague Spring in August 1968 and destroyed any hope of religious freedom. With those examples in mind, many evangelicals felt in 1990 that in some sense the God given opportunities of 1956 and 1968 had been a time of wasted opportunities and that the door of opportunity should not be spent in vain. Believing that the walls of communist repressive rule would be re-built without warning, it was believed that American evangelicals should rush into Eastern Europe to engage in mission with lightning speed and energy.  

Such a conviction led to intense frenetic activity and an uncoordinated amount of relatively large numbers of missionaries from the west traveling into Eastern Europe with little language, cultural, or missiological training. While missions like the more culturally sensitive Slavic Gospel Association were of help here, the generally negative impact of such a barrage of foreigners was soon felt in Eastern Europe. Manfred Kern, a Baptist minister and general secretary of East Germany's Evangelical Alliance, noted that some missions "possess more missionary zeal than wisdom." Kern emphasized that western missions should adjust to the local context and work in conjunction with existing neighboring organizations. Kern summed up the sentiments of a number of East European
views

church leaders:

We are open to working with para-church organizations, but we have observed that some representatives of these groups came into our country and worked us like a horse. They didn’t consult the church; they just walked in and collected people from here and there, gave money, and said, ‘now we will do our own thing.’

The strong feelings of several East European pastors like Kern contributed to an end to the ministry of several of the missions and their eventual collapse in the United States and Britain.

Conclusion

The activities of the missions following 1989 are partially understandable when one considers that they were essentially established within a Cold War framework for operating paternalistic missions. They were the givers and the East Europeans were the receivers. Needless to say, unhealthy dependency relations were fostered. Even if democracy was in Eastern Europe to stay, it was not the practice of the missions, with some notable exceptions, to enter into cooperative relationships with East European church leaders and their congregations. Within a few years the missions began to suffer financial loss, reduce their staff, and some died out completely.

However, the principle issue was one of ideology. During the Cold War there was something inherently patriotic that appealed to large segments of America society about the underground missions that were not only assisting persecuted Christians, but were radically anti-communist. Some of the missions shrewdly portrayed themselves as crucial players in the great ideological struggle against Soviet domination. An impression was created that the missions were so effective that the Soviets targeted them for attack and sought their destruction. Without the great conflict between Christianity and communism, which was after all their existence, where could the missions go?

A few missions transformed themselves into organizations that transported food and medicine to parts of former Yugoslavia during the conflicts that ravaged the Balkans in the 1990’s. However, after 1989, Eastern Europe no longer had the escape for supporters that the regions once held for evangelical supporters. Some of the missions diversified and operate Bible smuggling missions to China and North Korea. However, more important was the transference of covert activity from Eastern Europe to the Islamic world. While adherents of Premillennialism and their pessimistic view regarding Eastern Europe could initially not accept the reality of a changed world system and were trapped by the Cold War past. However, after September 11, 2001, many American evangelicals demonized radical Islam as they had formerly demonized communism. Interest in prophecy was unabated, but merely shifted from Russia to Baghdad. The years of the Cold War provided models for certain Eastern European missions as they now seek to aid Christians in the Islamic world and pose a threat to largely Middle Eastern and North African regimes. Many evangelicals believe, as their predecessors did in the Cold War, that missions can play a role in the transformation of the current world order.

Notes

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3 Martin, 216.
5 M. Eugene Oesterhaven, Paths of Hungarian Protestantism, CT, 26 November 1956, 11-12.
6 Michael Bordeaux, Gorbachev, Glasnost, and the Gospel (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), 1.
9 As quoted in Arthur D. Moore, staff writer for Evangelical Missions Information Service at Wheaton College, After the Thaw, CT, 23 April 1990, 21.
10 Sawatsky, 402.
12 Sawatsky, 405.
13 Sawatsky, 396.
14 Sawatsky, 407.
15 Sawatsky, 408.
16 Sawatsky, 407-8.
17 Sawatsky, 403.
18 Sawatsky, 397.
19 Sawatsky, 397.
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21 Sawatsky, 399.
22 Robert P. Lightner, The Last Days Handbook
27 Boyer, 136-137.
29 Boyer, 175.
30 Karl Fuchs, CT, April 1985, 43.
31 As quoted in Boyer, 177-178.

32 As quoted in Boyer, 177.
33 Brian F. O’Connel, “Soviet Christians One Year After Gorbachev,” CT, 21 March 1986, 44.
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