Remembering How it Was When we Were Still Brothers How Russian Evangelicals Are Responding to the Crisis in Ukraine

William Yoder Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol34/iss2/3
REMEMBERING HOW IT WAS WHEN WE WERE STILL BROTHERS HOW RUSSIAN EVANGELICALS ARE RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS IN UKRAINE

By William Yoder

William Yoder, Ph.D. Yoder is an independent journalist and a consultant for the foreign office of the Moscow-based "Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists" as well as the "Russian Evangelical Alliance". He resides in Orsha, Belarus. Has lived, travelled, and reported on religious issues from many parts of Eastern Europe. This is his periodic report sent on March 8, 2014. He has served on the Board of Advisory Editors of Religion in Eastern Europe and has contributed several articles to our publication. This is his Journalistic release #14-01.

Smolensk -- The primary reaction of Russian evangelicals to the present Russian-Ukrainian crisis has been one of silence and sadness coupled with multiple days of fasting and prayer. Their sadness and nostalgia were expressed by the prayer of a layman in a Moscow Baptist service on 2 March: "Remind us of how it was when we were still brothers!" Eduard Grabovenko, the Perm-based head bishop of the Pentecostal “Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith” wrote: “We observe with anxiety and pain developments in Ukraine, where two fraternal people with a common history and destiny are on the verge of armed conflict.”

While Ukrainians tend to stress the autonomous and distinct nature of their country and culture, Russians point to the commonalities. Indeed, many Russians question if Russia and Ukraine truly represent two distinct and different cultures. Late in the 9th century, Kiev had been declared the “mother of Rus cities”; it predated Moscow as the capital and cultural cradle of the Eastern Slav nation. For most Russians, removing Kiev from the cultural equation would be akin to cutting Philadelphia out of a map of the United States.

These two (?) nations are in any case hopelessly intermarried and intertwined. Ukraine was the Soviet Union’s Bible belt, and at least a large minority of Russia’s Protestant leaders are of Ukrainian origin. It also happens in the inverse direction: One of the most vehement

Copyright © 2014 Dr. William E. Yoder. Used by permission of the author.
Baptist defenders of Ukrainian sovereignty is the youthful Kiev theologian Mikhail Cherenkov, a Russian from Samara/Volga.

Generally, Ukrainian Protestant leadership has toed the line of the country’s pro-Western and pro-EU parties. On 3 July 2012, both Vyacheslav Nesteruk and Grigory Komendant, present and past president of the “All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists”, signed a statement with the unsuccessful demand that then-president Viktor Yanukovich cancel plans for installing Russian as a secondary official language in certain parts of the country. The letter warned that such legislation would "deepen social division, strengthen political resistance and undermine the foundations of the Ukrainian state" (see William Yoder’s release of 11 July 2012). An attempt by the country’s parliament to repeal this law immediately after the fall of Yanukovich in late February now appears to have precisely that effect.

In a statement from 11 December 2013, young Baptist theologians distanced themselves from Nesteruk for describing their church as “apolitical” and insisting: “We are not active on Maidan Square.” But a Protestant statement from 11 February strongly supporting the protest movement included the signature of Valery Antonyuk, Nesteruk’s primary deputy. A major interconfessional statement from 2 March calling for Russia to “recover its senses and halt its aggression against Ukraine” again carried Nesteruk’s signature.

Ukraine’s political disputes have generally pitted the country’s largest church, the “Russian Orthodox Church -Moscow Patriarchate”, against the remainder. Only in Russia does the ROC-MP enjoy occasional Protestant support. In an article from 2 March, Mikhail Cherenkov decried Russia’s “Chekist state machine and Chekist church” and described its Orthodox church as governed by “the cross and the bayonet”. He demanded that at least Russia’s Protestants rally to the defense of Ukraine.

But only a few days before, on 25 and 26 February, the Baptist Vitaly Vlasenko had presided along with the Orthodox Metropolitan Ilarion (Alfeyev), and Moscow’s Roman Catholic archbishop Pavel Pezzi over meetings held by the “Christian Inter-Confessional Advisory Committee for the CIS-Countries and Baltics” (CIAC) in St. Petersburg. Pastor Vlasenko, head of the Russian Baptist Union’s Office for External Church Relations, enthused afterward: “We had great fellowship and all groups present – including numerous Lutherans were offered the opportunity to speak.” The CIAC, founded in 1993, is a regional, Eastern alternative to the Geneva-based “Conference of European Churches”.
In a kind of prayer request lofted through the Internet on 4 March, Sergey Shindryaev, reported: “We had other great news this morning. In response to a Russian invasion, the United States has sent an aircraft carrier strike group toward the Black Sea in order to respond to developments on the Crimean peninsula of Ukraine. The super-carrier USS George H.W. Bush plus 17 other ships and three submarines passed through the Aegean Sea this afternoon. We can see that people all around the world have not remained indifferent to Ukraine -as (was the case) in Hitler’s Anschluss of Austria in 1938.”

Shindryaev, a blogger apparently no longer resident in Russia, was applauding a lengthy statement made by Peter Kuzmič, a respected Croat-Slovenian theologian from Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts. Kuzmič, no friend of rapprochement between East and West, writes of “amoral hesitation” and complains that the US government “has befriended Putin and his satellites for all too long. The Western countries have voiced their condemnation in unison -unambiguous and unexpectedly severe.” Kuzmič also denies the legitimacy for countries such as Russia, India and China to create a power bloc – see BRICS – apart from the West. The ROC-MP has “uncritically supported (Putin’s) megalomaniac plans to restore Russia as a superpower through the creation of a Eurasian Union in order to compete with both the European Union and the USA”.

In view of the cross-border ties, the new Ukrainian government also has its supporters within Russia. Immediately, after Alexander Turchinov’s election as president on 25 February, VSEKh (BCEX in Russian), a loose, Moscow-based coalition of mostly Pentecostal and Evangelical-Christian denominations, sent him a hearty greeting. VSEKh called Turchinov “our brother in Christ” and assured that the new, acting president would “promote law and order in Ukraine”. Yuri Sipko of Moscow, an Ex-President of Russia’s Baptist Union and political commentator who no longer speaks for his church, wrote on 3 March: “Russia can never wash away the shame for such brazen lies and aggression against the brotherly people of Ukraine. There is never any excuse for violence. There is no justification for an armed intervention in Ukraine.”

Bishop Sergey Ryakhovsky, perennial head of the Charismatic and Pentecostal “Associated Russian Union of Christians of Evangelical-Pentecostal Faith” (ROSKhVE), is often accused of being pro-Putin, of being a Patriarch Kirill in Protestant form. But he may once again have demonstrated his statesmanlike qualities in a statement from 4 March: “Note how tensions are being pumped up – not only between fraternal nations, but also within our churches. How important it is that political and societal changes not lead to the most horrible of diabolical provocations: that we begin to hate each other! . . . Let’s not give in to the world’s evil voices and let’s retain our unity and mutual respect.”
But oligarchs in Eastern Ukraine have flip-flopped their allegiances from Yanukovich to Turchinov in recent days. Developments appear to indicate that the majority of Ukrainians – including Protestants – may be of similar persuasion: They are in a waiting mode and will accept either form of government. Whoever can deliver stability, jobs, housing and social justice will have their support.

**Caution: Author’s Political Commentary**

“Thank God, the dictatorial regime has collapsed!” exulted Anatoly Kaluzhny, bishop of Ukraine’s small “Conference of Independent Evangelical Churches”, on Facebook. But Yanukovich had been elected president not by the street, but by the European-monitored elections of 7 February 2010. Applauding the unconstitutional takeover of the country by a political segment at the expense of another segment does not give credence to the claim that the West adheres to and teaches democratic procedure.

I believe it would be difficult to convince a Martian arriving on Planet Earth – or any other completely neutral and uninformed outsider – that Russian activity on the Crimean peninsula qualifies as an “invasion”. Crimea became a part of the imperial Russian empire in 1783 and was only ceded to the Ukrainian Socialistic Soviet Republic in 1954. A majority of Crimeans remain pro-Russian and a treaty stemming from 1997 allows Russia the right to retain 25,000 troops on the peninsula until 2042. Reports place present troop strength at 16,000.

In January, Malkhaz Songulashvili, archbishop of the Baptist church of Georgia and a longtime ally of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kiev Patriarchate, visited Kiev. In a letter of 28 February, the Baptist lauds the efforts of the Ukrainian Patriarch, Filaret (Denysenko), to join NATO: “Patriarch Filaret often travels to Europe and America to lobby for the integration of Ukraine into the European Union and NATO. He views this as a matter of the restoration of historical justice.”
But it must then be asked whether lobbying for the final military-strategic encirclement of Western Russia is a fitting evangelical endeavor. John Glaser, senior editor for the “antiwar.com”-website, points out that 12 countries in Central Europe once allied with or part of the USSR (three are ex-USSR) have been accepted into the NATO alliance. The big, missing link in that chain is Ukraine. This flies in the face of the non-binding, gentlemen’s agreement made with Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990.

US-presidential candidate Ron Paul claimed in September 2011 that his country has 900 military bases located in 130 foreign countries. A retort from the “Washington Post” claimed that only 40 countries are involved. Yet the “Post” accepted the number 900 as essentially accurate. According to Wikipedia, the Russian Federation has military bases in 11 countries. Yet only one of the 11 is outside the borders of the former USSR: Syria. The USA is striving for the strategic encirclement of China, yet China itself still has no foreign military bases.

Glenn Greenwald, the Brazilian-based cohort of Moscow’s very own Edward Snowden, wrote on 3 March that imperialistic powers generally do not tolerate others doing what they themselves are already doing. Regarding the Crimean conflict, he penned: “Basically, the U.S. is objecting to attempts by Russia to play a smaller and even far less aggressive version of its own world game.”

Regarding Russia, John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, stated on the TV show “Face the Nation” on 2 March: “You just don’t in the 21st century behave in 19th-century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped-up pretext.” That in turn left the Moscow-based journalist Robert Bridge aghast, who retorted: “After all, Washington wrote the book on violating the territorial integrity of sovereign states with its 2003 invasion of Iraq.”

The USA has had a military base in a sealed-off Guantanamo/Cuba since 1903. Is that presence more legitimate than the Russian presence in Sevastopol? Essentially, US foreign policy has a problem with double standards. Evangelicals being part-and-parcel of that hypocrisy damages their witness in the eyes of a watching world.

“Ethical imperialism” is a new term for the attempts of the West to expand globally under the banner of self-defined human rights. Of course, if only the NATO bloc is a morally legitimate one, then a crusade against all other power blocs and states is only logical. In contrast, all attempts at collective security assume the legitimacy of competing, adversarial forces. Henry Kissinger’s proposal for the militarily neutral, Finlandization of Ukraine would seem to be the most logical option for retaining the country’s unity.
But the Russian authorities also have cause to beat their own breasts: The new Russia has been incapable of concocting a social model attractive to its neighbors – including Ukraine. In the tradition of Potemkin’s village (that was in Crimea, 1787), Russian leadership continues to confuse appearance with substance. The $50 billion-dollar-ticket for Sochi’s Olympics stands vis à vis a society groaning under the burden of grossly-underfunded education and health programs. Without new, more merciful priorities, Russia’s foreign appeal will be going nowhere.

**How Baptist is Alexander Turchinov?**

Alexander Turchinov (Ukrainian: Oleksandr Tyychnov) is one of many “outsiders” grafted into the Protestant tree early in the post-Soviet era. After a long pilgrimage through the Protestant and Charismatic landscape of Ukraine, he was baptized in 1999 in Kiev’s Baptist “Word of Life” congregation. Turchinov apparently retains contact with the Charismatic “Church of Christ” movement. (Both names are confusing, for they are used by multiple organizations in the evangelical world.)

Turchinov was born into a secular family in Dnepropetrovsk/Eastern Ukraine in 1964. He received a degree in metallurgy in 1986 and began his political career as the head of agitation and propaganda in the local Komsomol, the Communist youth league (1987-90). Yet he quickly became involved in attempts to reform and democratize the party. In 1992 he moved to Kiev along with his political cohorts. Two years later, he founded the party “Hromada” along with Pavlo Lazarenko, a business partner of Yulia Timoshenko. An ally of Timoshenko ever since, Turchinov entered parliament in 1998. After a scandal involving Lazarenko became public the following year, Turchinov and Timoshenko broke with him. Reputed to be a fair-and-just broker, the Baptist raised eyebrows by serving a seventh-month term as Ukraine’s first-ever civilian minister of state security beginning in February 2005. Under Timoshenko, he was the country’s senior vice-president from 2007-10.

Turchinov’s “Word of Life” congregation belongs to Nesteruk’s 125,000-member “All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists”. Its building is located in an exclusive neighborhood at Michurina 66-70 in the eastern part of Kiev. Its senior pastor, 73-year-old Vladimir Kunets, is said to possess the rare East European-Baptist gift of relating well to society’s high-and-mighty. Though the current edifice is modest and the congregation by no means a mega-church, the local paper “Vesti” reported on 27 February that a new structure costing over $20 million is nearing completion.
That same report mentions that an overly-taxed Turchinov was never in church during the recent Maidan protests. Numerous members were also active on Maidan and requested that Sunday services be kept brief in order not to postpone their appearance at the square. Turchinov can best be described as an occasional lay preacher in the church – he is not an ordained minister. “Vesti” reports that his wife, the linguist Dr. Hanna Turchinova, is ailing and therefore rarely in church. Their son Kirill (born 1994), a student, attends more frequently. Another leading member of Turchinov’s “Fatherland” party, Viktor Ukolov, attends regularly and sings in the choir along with his spouse.

At Turchinov’s meeting with church leaders on 25 February, Leonid Padun, leading bishop of the Charismatic “Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church” denomination, expressed hope that the traditional privileging of the Ukrainian Orthodox at Protestant expense is now over. He stated in a report the following day: “Alexander Turchinov supported us and agreed with our wishes.” Padun spoke of a “Christian world” consisting of 30% of the population – a percentage which can only include Orthodox and Catholic allies. Ukraine’s population is 45 million.

Turchinov has been accused of covering up the transgressions of the country’s oligarchs and mafia. In one instance, he was taken to court for destroying files pertaining to Semion Mogilevich (see Wikipedia), wanted by the FBI as one of the world’s most dangerous mobsters. Mogilevich is said to reside primarily in Moscow. The afore-mentioned, one-time colleague Pavlo Lazarenko spent 2006-12 in a US jail for money laundering, extortion and fraud (see Yoder report from 24.3.2013). Yet in the “Vesti” article just mentioned, Pastor Kunets assured that no oligarchs were funding the massive new church edifice: “Turchinov says that such funds are dirty.” The soft-spoken and modest Alexander Turchinov is very likely less-compromised in financial matters than his old and tempestuous colleague Yulia Timoshenko.