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THE MEDIA AND THE RUSSIANS: THE NCC TAKES ANOTHER BEATING*

by Alan Geyer

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Any American news junkie (and I am one) who has spent any time traveling in the Soviet Union knows how absolutely frustrating it is to obtain reliable news in that country about the outside world. Between such sensational headline stories as last month's increased tractor production in Volgograd Oblast and radio propaganda about mass peace demonstrations in the wicked imperialist countries, it's pretty difficult to find out what's really going on.

But then one returns to the States and discovers, all over again, how poorly served we are by our own media's coverage of world affairs—not least in interpreting the ambiguities of Soviet politics and U.S.-USSR relations. That has been the experience of hundreds of Americans in the summer of 1984, including the largest group of Christians ever to visit the USSR.

Do not doubt that the print and electronic media of the Soviet Union are captive to the official policies of a closed authoritarian system. So are the Soviet Peace Committee and friendship societies that typically trot out rather unpeaceful, unfriendly parrots of the Politburo to greet foreign visitors.

But the media of the United States, whether captive to policies, profits or plain ignorance, are too often unworthy of the trust of an "open" and "free" society. (Some stellar exceptions will be noted below.)

*Reprinted by permission of author and publisher from Christian and Crisis (October 1, 1984), pp. 349-352.
American journalism shares responsibility with our educational and, yes, religious institutions for what John Stremlau, associate director of the Rockefeller Foundation, calls "a dangerous and self-inflicted ignorance" about the Soviet Union. That ignorance, combined with the relentless manipulation of virulent, know-nothing, anti-Soviet sentiments by political demagogues and special interests, is the most serious challenge confronting the leadership of all our public institutions. It is downright depressing to confront the reality of this regression to the most primitive levels of three decades ago. Only this time the perils are infinitely greater.

An unfortunate confrontation over U.S.-Soviet issues developed this summer between major elements of the press and the churches. It must be said with candor that U.S. churches have been slow to develop a serious, sustained, professional approach to the nation's Enemy Number One. While there have been periodic exchanges and dialogues going back to the 1950s, only in the past several years have mainline churches begun to make this a priority—and still only a very limited and precarious one. It was the Geneva "Choose Life" Consultation on Disarmament in March 1979 that launched a series of more frequent discussions, leading to some joint programming, a National Council of Churches Committee on U.S.-USSR Church relations, and an intensified program of ecumenical exchanges. The reality of tens of millions of Soviet Christians, along with the vitality and growth of their churches, has deeply affected many U.S. church leaders' attitudes toward their "atheistic" enemy.

Under the able chair of Bruce Rigdon, church historian and specialist in Russian Orthodoxy at Chicago's McCormick Seminary, and with knowledgeable staff and consultants, the NCC organized an unprecedented 266-member seminar in the Soviet Union in June, 1984. Why so big? It was a response to the Soviet churches' difficulties in meeting the piecemeal requests of fractious American denominationalism and congregationalism for separate programs—always in the English language, of course.

The seminar required an ambitious preparatory reading program, including Trevor Beeson's sober account of the hard life of Soviet churches in his definitive study, Discretion and Valour. There was a four-day orientation in New York. Seminar members heard a tough-minded
Kremlinologist from the Library of Congress, former director of Soviet affairs from the State Department, a renowned specialist in Soviet law and human rights from Harvard Law School, Orthodox and Jewish leaders concerned about Soviet repression. Almost everywhere the seminar and its ten subgroups traveled in the USSR, the issues of peace, human rights, and dissent were discussed. At times the Soviet views were uncomfortably harsh, propagandistic, and one-sided. But the utter seriousness of Soviet Christians and non-Christians about avoiding war could not be doubted.

A SET OF DOMINOES

How distressing, then, that this fledgling but competent effort of the churches to foster a balanced and realistic understanding of Soviet religion and society should meet such gross caricatures and misrepresentations in the U.S. press. What this seminar experience most dramatically reveals is the excessive dependence of the media upon the credibility of the New York Times. While the Times has a rather modest paid circulation, the circulation of its reportage through other channels is often extraordinary. Here, for the first time in print, is Geyer's "domino theory": When the Times falls down, most of American journalism seems to fall down beside it.

To be sure, the Times over the years has offered its readers some gifted interpreters of Soviet life and institutions: Harrison Salisbury, Hedrick Smith, Leslie Gelb, Serge Schmemann, others. But something seemed to happen to the paper's policy a couple of years ago. Apparently, there was a right turn in both editorial columns and political reporting, a turn that reflected more than the objective deterioration of superpower relations.

It was a June 21 Times story by Seth Mydans that triggered much of the renewed media assault on the NCC. While not demonstrably malicious, the story offered a grievously distorted picture of the NCC seminar and its closing press conference in Moscow. Perhaps the press conference should not have been held: American journalists in the Soviet Union sometimes seem like caged lions, eager to pounce on visitors, and likely to publish rather bitter volumes of Moscow memoirs when they get repatriated to the States. Soviet officialdom can make a reporter's life rather miserable at times. The wonder is that there remain any open
windows at all for the Western press. At any rate, several members of the Moscow press corps were clearly out to provoke a hot story out of a rather uneventful, if extraordinary, seminar. They were obsessed with an incident that occurred two nights earlier in the Moscow Baptist Church.

That incident, recorded on videotape by a photographer who accompanied the seminar, concerned an internal dispute among Soviet Baptists as to whether their congregations should register with the government. Soviet law requires all groups, religious or otherwise, to register. Some dissenting Baptists, now reduced to a few thousand out of perhaps a million or more, have bravely refused, on grounds of conscience, to register their congregations. Some pastors have been incarcerated. Leaders of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists have taken a generally conciliatory attitude toward dissenting congregations.

On the evening of June 18, the ecumenical Americans and hundreds of Russian Baptists gathered for worship and for the premier of a stunning cantata for chorus and orchestra, composed specially for the occasion by Baptist choir director E. Goncharenko. Titled "Life and Peace," the cantata will soon be performed by American choirs as the score becomes available. Following the cantata, three apparently unregistered Baptists in the balcony unfurled banners that, in English, called attention to the plight of their imprisoned pastors. Members of the host congregation, having failed to persuade the dissidents to remove the banners (which were dropped on the pews below), ushered them outside after a brief scuffle. There was no visible police involvement. Two of the demonstrators hurried away on their own, while a third remained in the street to talk with the American visitors after the service. These facts were confirmed by George Cornell, veteran religion editor of Associated Press, who was an eyewitness covering the event. Seminar leaders were painfully torn between respect for these courageous demonstrators and the embarrassment of the host congregation.

The opening sentence of Seth Mydans' Times account reported that the delegation "ended a two-week tour of 14 cities with praise for the status of religion in the Soviet Union and condemnation of the United States' role in the arms race." That loaded couplet was followed by a
second sentence alleging that seminar leaders "voiced irritation that the harmony of their visit had been marred" by demonstrators at a Baptist service. Subsequent paragraphs implied that the seminar was manipulated by Soviet propaganda, recalled Billy Graham's hapless remarks in Moscow in 1982, and quoted this writer inaccurately and out of context as saying that the breakdown of the Geneva arms talks "is not the Soviet Union's fault."

This, then is the picture that emerges from the Mydans story: NCC leaders are naive about Soviet church life, hold pro-Soviet views on foreign policy, and are insensitive to persecution. Nearly a month later on July 15, as if to twist the knife, Mydans followed up with a more general commentary on Soviet religious life, charging that the seminar participants came away "persuaded that religion was thriving" and unaware of "the web of controls that limit the life of the churches to little more than the rituals they have witnessed."

FOR THE RECORD

Herewith a contrary judgment: Probably no Americans today are more thoroughly aware of that "web of controls" than the leaders of the June seminar, committed as they have been to maintaining ecumenical ties with these martyred Soviet churches. As for the charge of one-sided condemnation of the U.S. for its arms policies: What was said repeatedly at press conferences and meetings was that both superpowers were to blame for recent escalations of the nuclear arms race but that many Americans (including presidential candidates, members of Congress, and strategic experts) believed Reagan's Geneva proposals were simply too one-sided to be genuinely negotiable. At a Georgetown University conference last May, occasioned by the visit of 19 Soviet church leaders, my own address on U.S.-USSR relations was a main object of attack by two Soviet priests, especially because of questions raised about Andrei Sakharov and Soviet SS-22 missiles.

If it was the New York Times story that triggered many other media commentaries, it was a Moscow correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, Robert Gillette, whose obsession with the dissidents' banners and aggressive questioning throughout the press conference did most to prevent a fuller and fairer account of the seminar. Gillette's June 21
story led off with the fatuous claim that NCC leaders "criticized Soviet protesters," then quoted nameless Western diplomats (perhaps primed by Gillette?) as accusing the seminar of "an apparent lack of awareness of restrictions the Soviet state imposes on religious practice." Gillette, too, likened the seminar to Billy Graham's reported 1982 remark that he "saw no evidence of religious repression in the Soviet Union."

Nearly two months later, Gillette was still at it. In a scathing threepage, 13-column attack on U.S.-USSR dialogue (Aug. 12), Gillette linked the NCC seminar to two famous targets of Cold War hostility, Henry Wallace and Owen Lattimore, whose 1944 visit to the USSR was reportedly a showpiece of Soviet deception and concealment. As if that were not enough of a smear, Gillette went on to suggest that NCC leaders, like Catherine the Great in 1787, were duped by "Potemkin villages": two-dimensional facades named for Prince Grigori Potemkin, who set them up along the Dnieper River to persuade the empress that commerce was flourishing in an area that was actually undeveloped wilderness.

But back to that other Times of the East and the domino theory:

The Washington Post, invoking the earlier flawed testimony of the Times, on June 25 pontificated editorially under the sarcastic head, "In the Soviet Paradise." Accusing seminar leaders of "ignoring the voluminous record of the Soviet state's outlawing and persecution of all independent forms of religious activity," the Post focused on the Baptist incident as proof of Soviet cruelty and NCC insensitivity, inventing the absolute fiction that the demonstrators were "trashed by the police." This compounded untruth was effectively challenged by two eyewitnesses to the incident, prominent Washington church leaders whose letters were published, chiding the Post for its unprofessional journalism in accepting the Times' report. As if to atone further for this embarrassing boo-boo, the Post also published a major roundup on the seminar by religion writer Marjorie Hyer (June 30), whose interviews with participants gave a candid and balanced picture of the program.

The piling on continued when the Wall Street Journal (June 27), ignorantly accepting the Times' errors and oblivious to the seminar's lay majority, editorially scorned the "Deferential Reverends." Seminar
leaders were termed "the NCC's specialists in U.S.-Soviet fellow-
feeling" who promote a "rose-colored diplomacy."

Who could then be surprised that Time magazine joined the Times-
believing bandwagon? Under still another sarcastic head, "See and Hear
No Evil," Time's "news" story on the seminar (July 2) charged that its
leaders went to the USSR "without much discernment." The article
celebrated the unregistered Baptists for revealing the true face of
Soviet repression. Time went at it yet again in a snide commentary on
"moral vacations" in which Bruce Rigdon was perversely quoted out of
context (Aug. 27). Referring to the three demonstrators and the apparent
lack of police action or arrests, Rigdon had said: "We believe they are
free." He clearly meant they had not been jailed--that, and nothing
more. But Time made it out to be a naive and duped claim of unlimited
religious freedom in the USSR, which neither Rigdon nor anybody else in
NCC leadership would assert.

Then there were those predictably canned, syndicated editorials in
the Scrips-Howard newspapers. First two sentences, Knoxville News-
Sentinel, June 23 (Pittsburgh Press, June 26, et cetera, et cetera):
"For many years leaders of the National Council of Churches have been
moving to the political left. Judging from a news conference they gave
in Moscow the other day, they have completed the voyage." Last sentence:
"One wonders what the 40 million Christians represented by the council
think of its leaders acting as supporters of and apologists for the
totalitarian left."

Two WNBC-TV editorials in New York (July 9 and 10) stated that NCC
leaders' observations "defy those of all noncommunist journalists who
have worked in Russia....They helped neither the cause of religion or of
peace. They were, simply, hoodwinked."

No doubt gleefully, the July newsletter of the rightwing Institute
on Religion and Democracy reported, in its very first sentence: "The
National Council of Churches is taking a public relations beating over
its recent delegation to the Soviet Union." The newsletter's opening
story, "Serving Peace or Propaganda?," quoted the beatings administered
by the New York Times and the Washington Post, then mischievously
pointed to just one positive story on the seminar: in the U.S. Communist
The IRD also invoked the accusation of Rabbi A. James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee that the NCC seminar missed an enormous opportunity for moral suasion and moral leadership." Rudin, too, had apparently taken the Mydans account on faith. For some reason he neglected to reveal to the press that his own recommended literature and speaker on the problems of Soviet Jewry had been included in the seminar orientation.

BOTH JUSTICE AND PEACE

There is another dimension of the peace vs. human rights agendas that any religious or political delegation to the USSR must think through carefully: It is the question of wisdom in how to relate the two agendas. If human rights is used as an ideological bludgeon to promote the arms race, both justice and peace are the losers. The history of U.S.-USSR relations makes clear that the positive incentives of a relationship based on mutual interests tend to liberalize the Soviet performance in human rights. But, as Anthony Lewis noted in a May 23 New York Times column on the Sakharov case, "using human rights as a political weapon against the Russians reduced the chances of helping the dissidents and those who wish to emigrate. Frontal political challenge just makes the Soviet system react, close up." That is precisely what has happened in the Reagan years: The cause of human rights itself has been severely wounded by hostile rhetoric and unbridled militarism. Shill confrontations with Christians and others in the Soviet Union promote neither justice nor peace.

This new round of media assaults on the NCC, much in the style of the CBS "60 Minutes" and the Reader's Digest blasts, have presented the Council with a wider audience and capital opportunity to interpret what is at stake in ecumenical relations with Soviet churches. That opportunity may be squandered unless policies and/or personnel change in the press department at 475 Riverside Drive. The lack of firm guidance from NCC press staff in Moscow, followed by a lack of press leadership in New York when the media wars began, compounded the problems of distortion and red-baiting. The Council badly needs a more pro-active strategy of interpretation of its inescapably controversial ministry.

Now to some of those stellar exceptions. Myriad local newspapers,
radio and TV stations have provided positive coverage of the NCC seminar and its participants. Phil Donahue's talk show devoted a full hour to five seminar leaders. NBC-TV, which had first broadcast Rigdon's remarkable specials on "The Church of the Russians" in 1983, repeated them this summer in the face of baseless attacks from a group artfully misnamed Accuracy in Media (AIM). Then NBC followed up with a new panel show on religious life in the USSR, moderated with conspicuous sensitivity by Bob Abernethy, NBC's two-week September series on "The New Cold War" provided vivid exposure to Soviet life and leaders, as well as U.S. experts.

Who knows? Maybe our churches most vital ministries need all the controversy they can get. But, for the 266 Americans who prayed and sang and talked and supped with Soviet sisters and brothers in June, ecumenism and peace are not all fun and games. They are costly commitments, now and always.