

How Indigenous Was the Baptist Movement in the Russian Empire?

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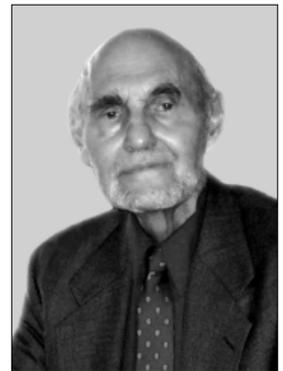
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In reviewing a religious movement, the question often arises: How indigenous is it? Such a question often produces intense debate. Some researchers stress the contribution of the foreign missionary as against others who stress the role of native personnel, divorcing a movement from all Western or imperialistic associations. In a recent issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jeffrey Cox, who has written on British missionary history, has come to the conclusion: «Yet Third World Christian churches are neither independent of Western influences nor purely indigenous; in historical terms, they are hybrid, the results of a dialectical relationship between missionaries and non-Western Christians.»^[1]

What about Baptists in Russia? From the start, Baptists have been attacked for being a foreign import, incompatible with the culture of the country and a threat to society. N. I. Petrov, in his article, «Novyya svedeniya o shtundisme,» wrote:

...in the beginning of the 70s missionaries of Baptism were deliberately sent out from Hamburg to the German Kherson colonies; they find there fortuitously Ukrainian workers—people for a long time already isolated from the family and society with the church [—] without difficulty they master them and turn them into an instrument of spreading their heresy among the people, never having had knowledge of the heresy.^[2]

One of the chief proponents of rejecting the indigenous character of the evangelical movement or Stundism in Russia is Alexii Dorodnitsyn, a Russian Orthodox anti-sectarian missionary,



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^[1] Jeffrey Cox, "What I Have Learned About Missions from Writing *The British Missionary Enterprise Since 1700*," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, XXXII/2, (April, 2008): 86-87.

^[2] *Trudy Kievskoi Dukhovnoi Akademii*, No. 3 (1887): 383.

later a bishop and rector of Kazan Religious Academy, a collector of official documents, and writer of a number of works on Stundism and Baptists. His 1903 work, *Yuzhno-Russkii Neobaptizm», izvestnyj pod imenem» shtundy* (South-Russian Neobaptism, known by the name Stunda), first of all identifies the Baptist movement with continental Anabaptism, including its revolutionary manifestation in Munster, Germany—an old falsehood. He rejects the thesis that Ukrainian Stundism arose from the German colonies in Russia but insists it is a product of German Baptist missionaries from abroad. He wrote at a time of intense Germanophobia, a fear of Germans and Germany that was also directed against the German colonists in Russia. In such a climate, Orthodox writers, upholding Russian autocracy and Orthodoxy as the only legitimate religion for native Russians/Ukrainians, stressed the German ties with Stundism or the Baptists, thereby discrediting both in the eyes of the populace. But can such a position be sustained?

1. Dispersion of Religious Bodies

Before one considers these contentions, one should first of all consider some other factors. First, from its beginning among Aramaic-speaking Jews in Jerusalem, Christianity has remarkably flowed from one foreign culture to another. It spread to Hellenistic Jews and then to Greek-speaking Gentiles. In the West it reached Latin-speaking peoples and later Germanic, Celtic, and English peoples. In the East it spread to Armenians and Copts in Egypt and

became the state church of Byzantium or the Eastern Roman Empire and later entered Russia. Russian Orthodoxy itself is a foreign implantation, along with other Christian groups that have entered the Russian state.

Second, the Baptist movement itself has had a varied history. One might start four hundred years ago with John Smyth, an Englishman living in The Netherlands, but his movement of General Baptists soon transported itself to England. Another segment of the Baptist denomination, Particular Baptists, began in England but soon spread to Wales and Ireland. Both movements reached America. Finally, in the early nineteenth century Baptists arrived on the European continent. Although Johann Oncken, the father of the continental European Baptist movement, was German-born, in his younger years he lived in the British Isles where he learned English. In Hamburg, Germany, he joined an English Reformed Church. In his missionary work, the word soon circulated about a «new English faith»^[3]

Mikhail Timoshenko, a Russian Baptist leader, in his 1911 article, «Baptisty i ikh» protivniki» (Baptists and their adversaries), declared, «The Baptist movement is not foreign but clearly international. For as all people on the earth need bread, water and air, so also all need spiritual nourishment.»^[4] Baptists are not a cult with their own special revelation. It is a movement that tries to approximate the faith and life of the apostolic church and to proclaim to all in any nation the gospel of Jesus Christ. But all religious movements come in a cultural garb. And so the question still remains—how indigenous to Russia was the Baptist movement?

^[3] Hans Luckey, *Johann Gerhard Oncken und die Anfänge des deutschen Baptismus*, (Kassel: J. G. Oncken, 1934), 70-71.

^[4] *Baptist*, No. 9 (1911): 69.

2. Stundism

Years before Baptists appeared in the Russian Empire, other Protestants such as Lutherans and Reformed had already arrived some centuries before, settling not only in towns but especially as German colonists in southern Russia. Stundism, a pietistic movement stressing personal religious experience and holy living, took root among the German colonists. Stundism came from the German word, «Stunde,» meaning «hour.» Stundists, led by the laity, gathered for an hour or more for prayer, Bible reading, and singing. German Stundism was primarily a movement within the established Lutheran and Reformed churches. Their adherents, by and large, were not separatists but remained in their own parish churches, attending services and observing the sacraments, including infant baptism.

German Stundism influenced neighboring Ukrainian villages. The Reformed parish of Rohrbach, northeast of Odessa, with its pastor, Karl Bonekemper, was an important Stundist center, even attracting neighboring Orthodox peasants to their meetings. One such peasant was Mikhail T. Ratushnyi (ca. 1830–1915), who, from Stundist influence and reading the Scripture for himself, became an evangelical believer at the beginning of the 1860s. As a Stundist leader, he led his followers to break with the Orthodox Church and in time accept Baptist principles.

Because of the influence of Ephraim Pritzkau and his son Johann, the German colony of Alt-Danzig, a number of kilo-

meters northeast of Odessa, became another important Stundist center. Ivan G. Ryaboshapka (1831–1900), who lived nearby, also from German Stundist influence and reading the Scripture, became a believer and a Stundist leader.^[5]

Besides the influence of German Stundism, indigenous elements within Ukrainian society also pushed the first Ukrainian believers towards Stundism. Of first importance was the circulation of the Scripture. For some years the British and Foreign Bible Society, although under restriction, circulated various translations of the Bible, including Russian. In 1861 the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church produced its own Russian version of the four Gospels and in the following year the complete New Testament. The Old Testament would come later.^[6]

Another factor was the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Even though emancipation did not meet the full expectations of the peasant masses, it nevertheless was a significant turning point in Russian society. Peasants were no longer tied to the land and were free to move. With economic emancipation came also an emancipation of the mind; new ideas were possible and literacy became a more attainable goal.

A third factor was the vulnerable position of the Orthodox Church, the established church for the native Slavic peoples of the nation. On the one hand, the church was powerful, protected by laws that forbade heresy and the proselytism of its adherents. On the other hand, it was failing to meet many of the religious needs of the population. Although able to administer the rites of the church, priests were often poorly trained, possessing little biblical knowledge, and frequently lived on no higher a moral level than their

^[5] *Quarterly Review* (July 1874): 5-6.

^[6] William Canton, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: John Murray, 1904-1910), III, 340-64.

own parishioners with their addiction to drink and other vices. Priests conducted the liturgy in Old Church Slavonic, a language the masses did not understand, and their lack of preaching left the people with little or no biblical understanding of the Christian faith. Piety was centered on the rites of the church that included the sacraments, worship before icons, relics, and special fasts and holy days.

German Stundism was an important element in the rise of Ukrainian Stundism, but the latter followed its own path of development. Ukrainian Stundists did not produce any purely Reformed or Lutheran congregations, not accepting their confessions of faith, church government, or sacraments. From the beginning Ukrainian Stundism was congregational and anti-sacramental, rejecting both the sacramentalism of Orthodoxy and the sacramentalism of the established Protestant churches. Unlike most German Stundists, it was also a separatist movement. It rejected the counsel of Karl Bonekemper not to leave the Orthodox Church. Instead, it became a dissenting movement.

In January 1905, *Missionerskoe obozrenie*, the Orthodox anti-sectarian periodical, published a perceptive article by Sergei Troitskii entitled, «V kakom otnoshenii uchenie russkago shtundizma nakhoditsya k nemetskomu protestantizmu» (What is the relationship of the teaching of Russian Stundism to German Protestantism). Because of its rapid spread among the indigenous population, the author argued that it could not have been simply a foreign import; if it were only that, it would fade and disappear. He pointed out that German Stundism

helped to create among the Orthodox a critical attitude toward the Orthodox faith but that few Ukrainians became pure Lutherans or pure Reformed. On the other hand, he stated that Russian Stundism borrowed more from various Protestant sects, including the Baptists. He felt that Russian Stundism took the greater part of its Protestant teaching in fragments, not taking Protestantism in its pure original form. Russian Stundism ultimately developed its own form, adopting more from Protestantism on its negative side than on its positive side.^[7]

3. Baptist Influence among Germans

Although the Orthodox author Troitskii may have overstated the case for Ukrainian Stundism developing on its own even though it borrowed from a number of sources, he nevertheless was on the right track in recognizing sectarian influence. This brings one to the question of the role of the German Baptists. German Baptists, if the opportunity presented itself, would have been more than happy to evangelize in the Russian Empire. Oncken in Hamburg corresponded with Mennonite and German Baptist leaders in Russia and even visited the country twice.

But German Baptists were largely prevented from evangelizing the native population because of the language barrier and also the strict penalties for proselytizing among the Orthodox. German Baptists had a difficult time sending missionaries even among the German settlers. As Arsenii Rozhdestvenskii, the Orthodox writer on Russian Stundism, pointed out, German Baptist missionaries could not stay for any length of time. He pointedly wrote, «...they were sent

^[7] *Missionerskoe obozrenie* (January 1905): 55-57.

packing (*vyprovazhivali*) abroad, that is, sent out without ceremony.¹⁸¹ He was right. In my research I have found only one German subject who stayed for any extended time—August Liebig. In his career in Russia his work was almost entirely among Germans, and even he was exiled twice from the country.

Aside from Liebig, Germans who were born in the Russian Empire did most of the Baptist mission work among the German population in the country. The earliest of these men was Gottfried Alf (1831–1898), my great-great grand uncle, the first ordained Baptist minister in the Russian Empire.¹⁹¹ Alf was born in Russian Poland and preached in both German and Polish. While a teacher and still a Lutheran, he had a religious experience that led him to preach the gospel. Opposition from the Lutheran authorities forced him out of his church. Although not knowing the Baptists, he soon heard of them and decided to become a Baptist since they appeared to be in accord with Scripture. His immersion as a believer in 1858 began the Baptist movement in Poland, a movement that also spread into Volhynia in Ukraine. Although Alf went to Hamburg and received support from abroad, the Alf movement was indigenous, developing its own workers and churches. Such German-Russians as Karl Ondra, A. R. Schiewe, and Johann Pritzkau also led the German Baptist work in Russia.

German Baptists developed special ties with Mennonite Brethren, a pietistic revival movement that broke from other Mennonites in the Ukraine. Without

knowing Baptists, but influenced by a Baptist tract, Mennonite Brethren began to immerse believers in 1860. Oncken corresponded with Abraham Unger, a future Mennonite Brethren leader, possibly as early as 1859 and sent August Liebig in 1866 to visit Unger and other Mennonites. Both Johann Pritzkau of Alt-Danzig, who was immersed as early as 1864 by Mennonite Brethren, and Johann Wiewer, a Mennonite Brethren, both met with Oncken in Hamburg at the end of the 1860s. In 1869 Oncken himself traveled to Russia and visited Mennonite Brethren, constituted the German Baptist church in Alt-Danzig, and even consulted with Ukrainian believers.

Baptist work in the Caucasus began with the migration in 1861 of Martin K. Kalweit (1833–1918) with his wife and two sisters to the area of Tiflis, today Tbilisi in the country of Georgia. Kalweit was a German of Lithuanian extraction but born a Russian subject and lived in Kovno Province near the Russian-German border. After his migration, Kalweit at first felt isolated and almost abandoned, even fearing the Russian people. He nevertheless began to hold worship services, using both German and Russian. On August 20, 1867 (o.s.), Kalweit baptized Nikita I. Voronin (1840–1905), the first Russian Baptist convert, a Molokan who was searching the Scripture and sought baptism. Molokans were a native Russian sect that rejected all sacraments, including those of the Orthodox Church.

Voronin preached among his fellow Molokans, gathering a group that numbered ten by 1871. About this time Kal-

¹⁸¹ Arsenii Rozhdestvenskii, *Yuzhnorusskii shtundizm* (St. Petersburg, 1889), 101.

¹⁹¹ For the career of Gottfried Alf, see Albert W.

Wardin, Jr., *Gottfried F. Alf: Pioneer of the Baptist Movement in Poland* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2003).

weit's group broke up and joined the Voronin body. This work produced outstanding leaders, including Vasilii Pavlov and Vasilii V. Ivanov, as well as Ivan (Johann) V. Kargel, a Turkish subject who later became naturalized. Although Pavlov, Ivanov, and Kargel went to Hamburg and met with Oncken, yet the work in the Caucasus in its origins and leadership was indigenous.^[10]

German Baptists did not relate to the Orthodox population in the Ukraine until after the Stundist movement had started. If anything, Ukrainian Stundists reached out to Baptists rather than Baptists reaching out to them. Baptist influence among Ukrainian Stundists did not take root until 1869-1870. Until then Ukrainian Stundists knew little, if anything, about Baptists. The year 1869, however, would be a banner year for Baptist penetration. That June a large baptism was held in Alt-Danzig, which included the baptism of Efim Tsimbal, a Ukrainian believer, who surreptitiously but illegally was immersed by Abraham Unger, who was invited to officiate. Before the end of 1869 Tsimbal will immerse Ryaboshapka, and Ryaboshapka in 1871 will immerse Ratushnyi.^[11]

In 1869 Johann Wieler accompanied Oncken to Odessa where he would remain, beginning a German-speaking church. But more important, he developed a close relationship with Ratushnyi and

other Stundists who were looking for help. With his relations with both Mennonite Brethren and German Baptists and his competency in both the German and Russian languages, he was in a strategic position to lead them. He counseled them to withdraw entirely from the Orthodox Church and form their own congregations. In 1870 he drew up *Pravila veroispovedaniya novoobrashchennago Russago Bratsva* (Regulations of the confession of the newly-converted Russian Brotherhood). It was a confessional statement of ten articles in conformity with the confession of the German Baptist Union but shortened and not an exact translation of it.^[12] Even though the Russian authorities were greatly adverse to the acceptance by Stundists of Baptist principles, in the face of persecution Ratushnyi and Ryaboshapka carried forth as Stundo-Baptist leaders. As Wieler wrote in 1874, «Notwithstanding all persecutions, the awakening is spreading through the feeble instrumentality of simple brethren...»^[13] The movement continued under indigenous leadership.

4. Mladostundism

Although Ratushnyi and Ryaboshapka were now leaders of a Stundo-Baptist movement, it did not mean all Stundists would follow them. A break occurred between Stundo-Baptists and other Stundists,

[10] For information on the Kalweit and Voronin groups, see *Missionsblatt* (October, 1868): 160 and (September 1869): 129-32; *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (January, 1870): 19-21; *Baptist* No. 5 (1927): 13-14, and *Bratskii vestnik* No. 3 (1957): 28.

[11] For the Russian report on Tsimbal's baptism, see Aleksii Dorodnitsyn, *Materialy dlya istorii religiozno-ratsionalisticheskogo dvizheniya na yuge Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XIX-go stoletiya* (Kazan,

1908), document 58. For Pritzkau's reports, see *Quarterly Reporter* (October 1869): 394-95 and (July, 1870): 837.

[12] Lawrence Klippenstein, ed. and tr., "Johann Wieler (1839-1889) among Evangelicals: A New Source of Mennonites and Evangelicalism in Imperial Russia," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, V (1987): 49-50. For a copy of the *Pravila*, see Dorodnitsyn, document 301.

[13] *Quarterly Review* (July 1874): 6.

called Mladostundists (Young Stundists) or Novostundists (New Stundists), which shows that the Stundist movement was not monolithic, included indigenous elements, and continued to negotiate its own way. The Mladostundists not only opposed the priesthood and the sacraments of the Orthodox Church but also rejected any new hierarchy or new rites. They wished to continue the original Stundist pattern of devotional gatherings with all believers equal. They opposed the administrative role of the «elder brother,» one who might also appeal for money for mission trips and propaganda.^[14]

Mladostundists also spiritualized the ordinances of baptism and communion and opposed their observance. One of their leaders, Gerasim Balaban declared, «Rites—this is theater.» They argued that baptism was only an external sign that had no power; one must receive the living water and be baptized in the Spirit. Christ's baptism was for Himself alone. Nor does one receive Christ in the Lord's Supper, but from Christ Himself and His Word. In time Baptists would modify somewhat Mladostundist practice, but nevertheless the division persisted for some time. In the end, however, the Stundist movement would become Stundo-Baptist in its entirety.

At this point, it should be recognized that German Baptists took advantage of the evangelical movement already developing in the Russian Empire. They were not initiators of the movement but facilitators in moving it to what they considered were more consistent biblical principles such as separation from non-evangel-

ical churches and believer's baptism by immersion. They took advantage of a religious situation that was turning in their favor. This was true for the Alf movement in Russian Poland and also for the Mennonites, German Stundists, Ukrainian Stundists, and Molokans. They were at the right place at the right time.

5. Indigenous Elements Today

Russian Evangelical Christians-Baptists exhibit their indigenous character today. This is seen particularly in their worship, whose tenor and pulse significantly differ from that of the West. The intensity of worship, paralleling the reverence in the Orthodox Church, is serious and personal. Services last at least two hours, which include, besides the singing of hymns, sermons from three or four preachers and a number of choir anthems if not also special musical numbers. Stundists and Baptists adopted hymns from Western evangelical sources, but they also composed hymns of their own. The services are also punctuated with periods of prayer. Worshipers kneel or stand to pray. Men or women lead out in extemporaneous prayer with all joining in with a whispered undertone. Some worshippers observe the kiss of peace, confined to members of their own sex. Scriptures adorn the walls of the church, frequently including the phrase, «God is Love.» As in the Orthodox tradition, Easter is the most important Christian holy day.

Baptists in Russia were never known for the strict Calvinism of many Regular Baptists in the West. Unlike their Southern Baptist brethren, many Russian Baptists tend to accept the prospect of falling from grace rather than belief in the security of the believer.

^[14] See Rozhdestvenskii, 105-106, 174-75, 266-67, for the differences between the Mladostundists and Stundo-Baptists.

How indigenous are Russian Baptists? There is no easy answer. In origin or development they are simply not an implantation from another nation or culture. On the other hand, Protestant as well as Baptist impulses from abroad have

influenced them. As other religious movements, they too may be a hybrid. How much they incorporate foreign elements and how much they incorporate indigenous elements may simply be in the eye of the beholder.

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