

**Georgi Vins: A Case Study of One Man's Justification of Civil  
Disobedience and its Unintended Consequences**

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## Abstract

Georgi Vins, a Baptist pastor living in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 70s, spent eight years in prisons and hard labor camps for defying his government's religious laws. Yet, after his exile to the United States in 1979 he declared that he was a man of peace, not politics. This thesis examines the way in which one individual, a Baptist pastor living in the Soviet Union, justified his disobedience to the governmental authorities based on his doctrinal positions while considering the basic question of whether or not it was possible for a fundamental Baptist to be a good citizen of the Soviet Union.

Basing my discussions on the concept of the *cosmion* as defined by Eric Voegelin, I have used a variety of secondary sources to outline the basic ideas regarding Soviet citizenship. I then used this as a backdrop for examining issues confronting the Baptist community at large in the Soviet Union in the 1960s. After establishing a historical precedent for non-Orthodox dissent in Russia and the Soviet Union, I outlined the basic theological statement of Georgi Vins which in turn governed his political actions. In determining his beliefs and interpreting his behaviors I relied heavily on a large body of speeches, interviews, and testimony before the United States Congress that Vins gave in the years after his forced emigration to the United States.

What I found was a man who was well trained in fundamental, Bible-believing, Baptist theology. These convictions governed all of his daily actions and provided him with a world view which was capable of withstanding Soviet repression. What I also discovered was a man who never forgot his homeland and spent the rest of his life working for religious freedom, or after *perestroika*, the continued support of Baptist in the former Soviet Union.

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One: The Conundrum of Soviet Citizenship</b> .....	<b>10</b>
1.1 <i>The Theory of the Cosmion as it Applied to the Soviet Union</i> .....	11
1.2 <i>Soviet Citizenship Defined</i> .....	14
1.2.1 <i>Lenin’s Leadership and Initial Laws</i> .....	15
1.2.2 <i>Stalin’s Continued Definition</i> .....	16
1.2.3 <i>The “New Man”</i> .....	18
1.3 <i>Citizenship and the Clash with the Baptist Community</i> .....	19
1.3.1 <i>Soviet Laws on Religion</i> .....	20
1.3.2 <i>The Conflict with the Baptists</i> .....	21
1.3.3 <i>Two Opposing World Views</i> .....	24
1.3.4 <i>Deciding When to Disobey</i> .....	25
<b>Chapter Two: Laying the Groundwork for the Dissent of the 1960s</b> .....	<b>28</b>
2.1 <i>The Impact of the Intelligentsia</i> .....	29
2.2 <i>Criticism From Within the Intelligentsia</i> .....	30
2.3 <i>The “Golden Age” for the Protestants</i> .....	32
2.4 <i>The Stalin Years</i> .....	34
2.4.1 <i>Repression and Purge</i> .....	34
2.4.2 <i>New Life for Churches</i> .....	38
2.5 <i>Another Reversal of Fortunes: the Khrushchev Years</i> .....	40
<b>Chapter Three: Doctrine That Dictated Action</b> .....	<b>44</b>
3.1 <i>The Historical Roots of Vins’s Theology</i> .....	45
3.2 <i>Baptist By Conviction</i> .....	47
3.3 <i>The Centrality of Christ</i> .....	54
3.4 <i>Suffering Saint or Martyr?</i> .....	57
3.5 <i>Biblical Separation and the Implications for Citizenship</i> .....	59
3.6 <i>No Condemnation</i> .....	62
<b>Chapter Four: A World View That Required Civil Disobedience</b> .....	<b>64</b>
4.1 <i>Identifying the Ideological Enemy</i> .....	65
4.2 <i>Personalizing the Fight</i> .....	68
4.3 <i>Faith Forced Into Action</i> .....	72
4.3.1 <i>The Question of Registration</i> .....	73
4.3.2 <i>Youth Work</i> .....	77
4.3.3 <i>The Publishing Ministry</i> .....	79
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>82</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>87</b>

## Introduction

In 1979, Georgi Petrovich Vins, a Russian Baptist pastor, was released from a Soviet prison camp and sent immediately to the United States where he and four other men (political dissidents) were exchanged for two Soviet spies. This event represented the first time that the United States had exchanged Soviet spies for Russian prisoners. Immediately upon their arrival in America, Vins was asked by the other former prisoners to be part of a formal written protest against the Soviet government, yet he refused. At the time he stated, “I am a man of peace and not interested in politics.”<sup>1</sup>

However, as Michael Bourdeaux recounts in his book, *Religious Ferment In Russia*, in 1965, Vins, as secretary of the newly formed Baptist organization Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians – Baptists (CCECB), coauthored a document which eloquently laid out the case for greater religious freedom in Russia. Bourdeaux reflected that “they [Vins and the CCECB] are prepared to speak out in a new way, disregarding the fear of reprisal.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Vins spent a total of eight years in Soviet prisons or hard labor camps and another seven in hiding – this is not the history of a man who lived in compliance with all Soviet religious regulations. It would be a shame to allow this seeming contradiction to go unexplained.

This thesis is about one man’s struggle to remain true to his faith and maintain a clear conscience before God while living under a political system which he viewed as oppositional to his world view. The West was first introduced to Georgi Vins because of the research on religious dissent in Russia done by Michael Bourdeaux. His books *Religious Ferment in Russia* (1968) and *Faith on Trial in Russia* (1971) remain the most important works to date on the subject of Baptist dissent and the political life of Georgi

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<sup>1</sup> “Georgi Vins: “My Way is a Special One.” *Christian Leader*. 22 May 1979, p. 18

<sup>2</sup> Michael Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia* (London: MacMillian, 1968), pp. 98, 185.

Vins in the 1960s. Yet, those books were published forty years ago. It was virtually impossible for Bourdeaux to fully understand the doctrinal positions which guided Vins's actions when he wrote his books. It was not until Vins was exiled to the United States that the world was given a much clearer understanding of the thought processes and motives behind his actions. Therefore, I have chosen to focus much of my research on what Vins himself had to say once he was free from Soviet controls and regulations. The passage of time, significant political changes in the former Soviet Union, and far greater access not only to the events of his life, but knowledge of region in the 1960s in general, make revisiting the story of Vins important for the historian.<sup>3</sup> What makes this study new is that to date, no one has published a study of Vins's comments post-exile.

A review of the legal status of religion in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, the events which led to the split in the AUCECB, Vins's work as secretary of the CCECB, and his political activities in the 1960s have been meticulously documented in Bourdeaux's two books and do not need to be repeated here in detail. But, a brief rehearsing of those events is necessary for a better understanding of Vins's actions. This thesis asks questions about *why* Vins chose his seemingly political path. Do we learn anything new from his statements after his release from prison? Does his theology match his actions? I will focus my research on identifying the theological convictions that led Vins into specific acts of disobedience to governmental authority and then focus on the impact of those choices.

Like so much of Russia, Georgi Vins is a complex figure. On the surface, he appears to be a man whose views on civil disobedience were formed not by the tradition of dissent in Russia per se – rather, by his personal religious faith and the traditions within his own family. However, despite his claim of not being a man of politics, his civil

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<sup>3</sup> Vins, in the years just before his death, was able to finish writing an autobiography. Unfortunately, at this point it is only available in Russian.

disobedience, while guided by his personal faith, did indeed become a political issue and therein lies the riddle wrapped in an enigma as Winston Churchill so famously said.

To me, Georgi Vins is a study in contrasts. He was a man whose passions could succeed in convincing you of the rightness of his cause. He was a man of elegance – if I dare to use this description for one tempered by the hardships of life in the Soviet Union and in possession of a character forged by the loss of so much that mankind holds dear. There was an air of dignity about him; his unquestioning faith in God provided a sureness of action without regard to the consequences.

Yet, to some, especially those who did not understand or share his faith, Vins may have appeared stubborn, immovable in matters of conscience, even arrogant in matters of conviction. He was criticized for fostering a martyr's complex, not only for himself, but for those who became a part of the movement which he served. The leadership of the established evangelical organization in the Soviet Union could, with some cause, chastise him for his inability to compromise. It may even seem that his personal beliefs actually hindered religious reform in the Soviet Union.

From the vantage point of a modern world which is comfortable, well connected, and increasingly global in nature, it may be hard to relate to this man – an individual who never forgot his roots in the soil of the Ukraine he knew and loved. For how do you understand a man who endured the murder of a father, unjust imprisonment, the loss of all his worldly possessions, and eventually his citizenship without bitterness or rancor? Indeed, while he often spoke of the desire for change in the Soviet Union, there was never animosity or hatred in his voice towards the very institution which in human terms was the cause of all his pain.

To better understand the man and his actions and his commitment to the people of the Soviet Union, it is helpful to understand a little of his family history.<sup>4</sup> Born in Siberia 1928 to the parents of an American trained, Russian Baptist pastor, Georgi knew very little of his father. In the late 1920s the NKVD began arresting Russian pastors and in 1930, Georgi's father, Peter Vins was sentenced to three years in prison. The elder Vins was arrested two more times before being executed in August, 1937. After his father's final arrest, Georgi and his mother moved to Kiev where he finished his schooling, earning a degree in electrical engineering.

Vins was ordained as a Baptist pastor in 1962. However, he quickly came into conflict with the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) and emerged as one of the leaders of the Reform Baptists. Due to differences in an understanding of the separation of church and state, the AUCECB went into schism and in 1965, Vins and others formed the Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptist Churches.

During these years he was also politically active, involved in petitioning the government as well as taking part in organized protests. These activities did not go unnoticed by Soviet authorities, and in 1966, he was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison; his first year was spent at Lefortovo Prison followed by two more years at a hard labor camp in the Ural Mountains. Released in 1969, he continued his pastoral duties, and once again, the Soviet authorities prepared a case against him. In 1970, he was sentenced to one year of hard labor, but this time, he was assigned to a factory in Kiev and allowed to continue to live at home.

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<sup>4</sup> The following biographical information was taken from two sources. The first is the introduction to Vins's autobiographical work, *Three Generations of Sufferin*, trans. Jane Ellis, ed. Michael Bourdeaux (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook, 1975). The second source is a 1998 special addition of *The Russian Gospel Messenger* which was distributed after the death of Georgi Vins on 11 January 1998, "Georgi Vins: Promoted to Glory," *The Russian Gospel Messenger* (Elkart, IN: Russian Gospel Ministries International, Special Edition 1998). This newsletter was published by the then called Russian Gospel Ministries International, an organization founded by Vins after his exile to the United States.

In June or July of 1970, the Soviet authorities prepared a new case against Vins and in August of that year, he was summoned to appear before the authorities to surrender his passport. Vins refused and went into hiding. He remained underground, away from his wife and five children for the next four years before being captured in March, 1974. While being held without a trial for next several months, prominent figures such as Andrei Sakharov and Henry Kissinger appealed to Soviet authorities for his release, but to no avail. Finally, in January, 1975 he was tried and sentenced to ten years imprisonment. Spending only five years in prison, on 27 April 1979, he was suddenly stripped of his Soviet citizenship and exiled to the United States where his mother, Lydia, and family soon joined him.

Soviet officials may have hoped that by exiling Vins to the United States he would, in effect, go away. Nothing could have been further from the truth. He helped to establish an organization called International Representation for the Council of Evangelical Baptist Churches of the Soviet Union which was designed to provide legal council and aid for those persecuted for religious reasons in the USSR. He traveled throughout North and South America, Europe, and Australia speaking extensively on the behalf of those believers in the Soviet Union who had no voice. In 1988, when the last of the Baptist prisoners was released, he renamed his organization Russian Gospel Ministries, and continued to work for the Baptist communities in Russia and Ukraine.

In placing Georgi Vins into a historical perspective, I have been able to rely on a body of secondary literature which deals with the religious and political situation in the Soviet Union. Hans Brandenburg is an important source for understanding the historical roots of non-Orthodox religious sects in nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia. Walter Sawatsky continues this study by tracing the fortunes of Evangelicals in the post-

World War II era. And, William Fletcher has written extensively on the theme of religious dissent and specifically the Baptist movement.<sup>5</sup>

The most detailed accounts of the Reform Baptists and the split within the Baptist movement in the 1960s were written by Michael Bourdeaux. Yet, even Bourdeaux admits that at the time he was writing these books, very little was actually known about Georgi Vins.<sup>6</sup> Written between his two prison terms, Vins's was able to contribute to the body of literature about him with a book first titled *Three Generations of Suffering*, later renamed *Testament from Prison*, which was smuggled out the Soviet Union and published in 1975. These books, while providing valuable information for this study are however incomplete. Vins continued to play an active role with the Reform Baptist churches until his death in 1998 and the above mentioned research needs to be brought up to date.

In doing my research, I have relied heavily on a close reading of an abundance of well-known secondary source materials to help me define the nature of Soviet citizenship and the potential conflict with religion as well as to establish the historical setting in which to place Georgi Vins. However, in my efforts to determine Vins's mindset, the reasons why he did what he did, I have used his own words. Sometimes those words were published verbatim in Bourdeaux's books or, of course, in his own published autobiography. In the months that followed Vins's arrival in America he gave several interviews and speeches which provide an important overview of his doctrinal position, the condition of the Reform Baptist churches in Russia, the nature of the persecution of both individual believers and churches, as well as his views on politics. This information, some of which is unpublished,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hans Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), William Fletcher, *A Study in Survival* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), "Protestant Influences on the Outlook of the Soviet Citizen Today," in William Fletcher and Anthony Strover, eds., *Religion and the Search for New Ideals in the USSR* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), pp. 62-82, and Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Kitchener, Ontario, Canada: Herald Press, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Bourdeaux, *Faith on Trial in Russia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Many of these sources, including four unpublished speeches or sermons and an unpublished essay were obtained from the JS Mack Library at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina. The MP3 files for these four speeches and sermons, as well as another speech obtained through the radio station associated with

is the focus of much of this thesis. The sheer number of these sources, spread out over an eleven year time period, allow me do a great deal of comparison to determine not only the accuracy of his statements, but also what was important to him based on how often various ideas were mentioned.

I first came into contact with the life of Georgi Vins when I was in college in the late 1980s. Although I never had the privilege of meeting him, we traveled in many of the same religious circles and have been educated in the same Baptist, doctrinal traditions. While I have great respect for the work of Bourdeaux, Sawatsky, and Fletcher, none of these men have written about Vins or the Reform Baptist movement from theological perspective similar to his own and therefore have not understood the importance of some of his most deeply held beliefs. My fundamental perspective coupled with the statements he made after 1979 make this thesis a new addition to the body of literature on Vins and the Evangelical, religious history of the Soviet Union.

Divided into four chapters, this thesis is largely descriptive in nature and designed to provide a broader political and religious context for the beliefs and actions of Vins. In chapter one, I examine the theoretical framework of Eric Voegelin's concept of the *cosmion*. With this as a backdrop, I explore the technical nature of Soviet citizenship, and tracing its roots in the Bolshevik Revolution and specifically examining its regulations regarding religion, Stalin's 1936 Constitution, and look at some of the new regulations which were passed during the Khrushchev years. I then am able to use the Baptists in the Soviet Union as a case study to highlight some of the difficulties that religious faith posed for Soviet citizenship.

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Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio are presently in my possession. I also have a copy of the unpublished manuscript "The Hidden Side of *Perestroika*" and a partial copy of the English translation of the manuscript for Vins's book *Along the Path of Faithfulness* which was originally published in Russian. E-mail conversations along with the notes from a phone interview with Natasha Vins are in my possession.

Wanting to place Vins into a historical perspective, chapter two traces the history of dissent in Russia. Focusing primarily on the ideas, and less on the individuals, I examine the intellectual roots of dissent from the early nineteenth century up through the 1960s. Georgi Vins was a deeply religious man with many well thought out and articulated theological positions and in the following chapter I will outline his religious world view and establish the biblical basis for his political actions. Then, finally, chapter four is an overview of Vins's political ideas and the activities which were considered illegal by the Soviet regime.

Establishing a terminology for the movement of which Vins was a central figure is somewhat problematical. The AUCECB, which was first organized in 1944, went into schism in the early 1960s. The group that broke away, and of which Vins was a part, was known initially as the *Initsiativnaya gruppа* (Initiative or Action Group), or more often, just *Initsiativnaya*, due to their efforts to bring about a congress of the AUCECB. By September, 1965, they became known as the Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christians and Baptists (CCECB) because at that point, they had established a complete break with the AUCECB. Thinking of this group as a reform movement, Michael Bourdeaux chose to refer to them as Reform Baptists<sup>8</sup> yet; William Fletcher used the term Action Group or *Initsiativnaia*.

Vins's daughter Natasha pointed out that Vins himself did not like the term Reform Baptists because the CCECB never attempted to reform anything, only hold to what they saw as a more Biblical view of the separation of church and state. Vins himself always referred to the movement as the "persecuted church."<sup>9</sup> While wishing to show the utmost respect to his sentiments, I have chosen most often to use the term Reform Baptists because it can refer to the movement as a whole without restricting it to a specific time period (like

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Natasha Vins, e-mail dated 29 May 2008.

*Initsiativaya*). It may not be the most accurate wording, but, the influence of Bourdeaux's writing has made this term the most recognizable, and therefore, the logical choice for this thesis.

One of the inherent dangers of a work of this nature is the possibility of presenting a man in a way that he did not see himself. I do not believe that Georgi Vins ever saw himself as a political figure. At no time did he attempt to align himself with the political dissidents in the Soviet Union or marry his actions to broader political goals. Rather, he took great pains to obey the laws of his homeland whenever possible and only spoke out on matters of faith and conviction. However, he was also a man who held a clearly defined world view which naturally, then, affected every area of his life. Thus, what he saw as actions predicated on a faithfulness to God and His Word, others, operating apart from his philosophical understanding, could interpret a political activities.

In many respects, this is not only the story of one man's journey to publicly match faith with action; it is the story of a family and a community of believers in Russia who shared a common bond in Jesus Christ. In the pages to follow I will introduce the reader to Pastor Vins's father who was murdered during the Stalin purges; his mother, Lydia, who spent three years in jail for her role in opposition to Soviet laws; and his daughter Natasha, who after Vins's final arrest and imprisonment began her own work with the underground press in Russia. These individuals, along with his wife and four other children, all played a role in this man's crusade for individual liberty and freedom for believers in the Soviet Union. And, while Vins may be the visible symbol of the plight of the Reform Baptists, he himself never forgot the needs of the people he left behind in the homeland he so dearly loved.

## Chapter One: The Conundrum of Soviet Citizenship

On August 25, 1968, in Moscow's Red Square seven young people were determined to express their displeasure regarding the recent Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. They were, of course, immediately taken away, beaten by the secret police, and placed under arrest. In explaining his reasons for his participation in the event Vladimir Dremluga stated, "All my conscious life I have wanted to be a citizen – that is, a person who proudly and calmly speaks his mind. For ten minutes, I was a citizen."<sup>10</sup>

The rights of peaceful protest, the ability to assemble, freedom of speech, choosing your own path for religion, or choosing no path at all, are hallmarks of modern Western style democracies. While these concepts needed time to mature, and have often sparked controversy, these freedoms are now ingrained in an understanding of the benefits of citizenship for those who live under these systems. However, practically speaking, this was not the case in the Soviet Union. The tension between the Soviet regime and its citizens was acutely felt. The totalitarian government saw itself as the arbiter of a values system predicated on compliance, while, by the 1960s, the populace increasingly desired the freedom to follow their individual conscience.

Eric Voegelin, in his essay "Introduction to the *History of Political Ideas*," which was written in the spring of 1940, but just recently published, provides a theoretical framework for understanding the conflict between the all-powerful political regime which finds it necessary to define citizenship in terms which are at times non-negotiable and the individual who wishes to express alternative opinions. I will show that when the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia they began creating a new concept of citizenship based on Marxist doctrine which was intended to fulfill mankind's need for political happiness

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Marshall Shatz, *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p. 127.

and personal fulfillment. However, a Voegelin predicted, this new concept of citizenship left many, specifically the Baptists, in opposition to the regime and individuals were faced with the question of how to be a good citizen in a structure which was diametrically opposed to their beliefs. Could they learn to work within a system in which atheistic principles often dictated governmental action? How this group responded to the problem was neither clear cut nor uniform and ultimately, the question of whether to obey God or man was not answered in a uniform way. Some, citing the Biblical command to obey God-ordained authority, acquiesced to the government's demands. Others felt the need to defy the government's wishes, following their conscience in matters related to the church.

### ***1.1 The Theory of the Cosmion as it Applied to the Soviet Union***

Voegelin claims that it is necessary for governments to create and then maintain, through force if necessary, a cosmion which he defines as a "little world of order" capable of providing "a shelter in which man may give to his life a semblance of meaning."<sup>11</sup> This is a reflection of humanity's desire to fashion a system capable of governing their everyday thoughts, actions, and political identities. History, he says is full of examples, whether it is the Egyptians, the Carolingian Empire or twentieth century totalitarian regimes which have attempted to provide a meaningful existence for the individual. He says:

The political cosmion provides a structure of meaning into which the single human being can fit the results of the biologically and spiritually [productive, procreative] energies of his personal life, thereby [relieving] his life from the [disordering] aspects of existence that always spring up when the possibility of the utter senselessness of a life ending in annihilation is envisaged.<sup>12</sup>

He argues that man is searching for transcendence, or as he says, man desires "to overcome the essential incompleteness and relativity of human life by means of an image of divine completeness and absoluteness."<sup>13</sup> The use of the term transcendence here means

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Edited by Athanasios Moulakis. Vol. 19, *History of Political Ideas* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), p. 225.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 227.

that man has an innate desire to look beyond, the tangible, material world and believes that something exists apart from himself. This creates a tension between the reality of a finite human existence and the hope for something greater, an “absoluteness”.<sup>14</sup> The battle is not simply a struggle for power; rather it is a struggle for the very basic elements of meaningful existence.

This search for the divine has found a variety of solutions. In a polytheistic system there is the belief in a God who, through a mediator, such as a king, rules in the finite realm, but then another God governs the soul in the afterlife. Under monotheism the political realm is married to the “charismatic order of the body of Christ” as in the Carolingian empire.<sup>15</sup> He further argues that twentieth century atheistic governments have offered a somewhat different solution to the desire for the divine. Choosing instead the “deifying of the finite group, be it a nation, a race, or a clan,”<sup>16</sup> atheistic systems in essence turned man into his own god. And finally, totalitarian systems have attempted to remove what he calls the apolitical realm of experience,<sup>17</sup> or this search for something greater than finite man, and replace it with human ability alone.

It is these last two areas which directly apply to this study. Atheism, which transforms the individual into a deity, becomes the primary target for members of the Russian Baptist community who seek to guarantee the complete freedom of conscience as well as a total separation of church and state. And, as I will show, under the Soviet concept of citizenship, the totalitarian system’s desire to remove the apolitical realm all together transformed the meaning of citizenship into an ideal where the “New Man” would find his happiness and personal fulfillment here on earth, through his work and civil duties. These cases however, deny the existence of any greater good beyond the individual and at the very

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

least, have the potential to clash with those who wish to live their lives in light of an unseen reality or an absoluteness which is greater than themselves.

Divorcing humanity from the transcendent and insisting only on finite objective realities is likened, in Voegelin, to a form of magic.<sup>18</sup> He argues that this magical process leads ultimately to a government struggling to maintain its control and legitimacy. Basing his ideas on La Boétie's essay *Voluntary Servitude* he says:

When the magic has lost its spell and the façade of government becomes transparent, the disillusioned observer can discover nothing but acts determined by tradition and [heredity] or [...] and interest and lust of power. And disenchantment, having reached this stage, gives rise to a spirit of revolt against an unjust, crudely materialistic state of things....<sup>19</sup>

He argues here that men will in time realize that the true nature of a finite government based on materialistic principles is unsatisfying and leaves the individual wanting something more, something fulfilling. This inspires some to voice their displeasure with the existing system of government because they do not perceive that it fits with their own personal view of what the cosmion should be; therefore, they are relegated to "second rank ... nonconformists."<sup>20</sup>

The problem for any cosmion is how to deal with those who dissent. What type of threat do people who disagree with the established political order pose for the stability of the existing power and for the very essence of life as understood by those in any given historical period? In a democratic society where freedom of speech and thought are cherished, the right of dissent is often tolerated, and in some cases even celebrated. Henry David Thoreau in his famous 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience" personified this clash between the force of government and the will of the individual, choosing jail rather than paying taxes to support a government he felt was acting unjustly. To him, a government

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 231.

possessed only superior strength, not any type of moral integrity which can force its citizens to comply with its actions.<sup>21</sup>

But the situation is far different in totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union. The atheistic solutions of the Communist regime which created the “God-manhood,” as described by S. Bulgakov in “Heroism and Asceticism,”<sup>22</sup> deified the concept of man and turned the collective group into a force not only capable of establishing a meaningful existence for all, but which would showcase themselves as the true arbiters of mankind’s cosmion. The Soviet system established a set of principles based on dialectical materialism and the perfectibility of man and sought as much as possible to eliminate any need for religious life or experience, believing rather that meaning was ultimately to be found in the collective, greater good. According to atheism, a transcendent human nature was in fact a myth. Happiness was to be found in the communistic endeavor and enforced through a redefined understanding of the role of the individual and his relationship to the state.

### ***1.2 Soviet Citizenship Defined***

Soviet conceptions of citizenship were based on philosophies developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Marxist tenet that man’s primary goal was economic abundance found a very receptive audience in Russia. The historic poverty of the villages and mill towns<sup>23</sup> galvanized the revolutionary leadership’s singular goal of improving the lot of the people *en masse*.<sup>24</sup> For the Russian Marxists, however, the masses (both peasant and workers) were unable to govern because they would naturally seek their own material gain food, shelter, and items to make their lives easier.

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<sup>21</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” in Hugo Bedau, ed. *Civil Disobedience in Focus* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 28-48.

<sup>22</sup> S. Bulgakov, “Heroism and Asceticism” in *Signposts*. Marshall Shatz and Jusith Zimmerman, translators and editors (Irvine, CA: Charles Schlacks Jr. Publisher, 1986), p. 26-31.

<sup>23</sup> John Hazard, *The Soviet System of Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 2, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Semen Frank, “The Ethics of Nihilism” in *Signposts*, p. 136.

### 1.2.1 Lenin's Leadership and Initial Laws

Believing that strong leadership was required for leading the people towards the ultimate goal of communism, Lenin and the core leadership group of the Bolsheviks worked to define just what the cosmion should be. The people could not be trusted to know what they wanted, rather, they were to be educated and molded so that their wishes conformed to the vision of their leaders. The extermination, via any methods, of the people's dissenting opinions was seen as vital to achieving this end result.<sup>25</sup> However, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, the severity of the repression of those who disagreed with the existing political order varied according to the realities of the period. As this new regime established its legal traditions in the 1920s, the attempt to eliminate dissenting opinion had a dramatic impact on the concept of citizenship in the eventual Soviet Union.

The first constitution of the R.S.F.S.R, adopted on July 10, 1918, identified citizenship in terms of one's relationship to a particular class. Article 20 of the Constitution reads:

Recognizing the solidarity of the laboring masses of all nations the RSFSR extends all political rights enjoyed by Russian citizens to foreigners working within the territory of the Russian Republic, provided that they belong to the working class or to the peasantry working without hired labor.<sup>26</sup>

Class was so central to the concept of citizenship that a foreigner who was a member of the working class enjoyed the full rights of a Soviet citizen; however, a Russian of bourgeois origin was denied membership. The 1918 Constitution restricted voting rights from groups such as the bourgeois, private traders, clerics, agents of the tsarist police and White Army, people who hired labor for the purpose of profit or who lived off unearned income, and all others who hindered the socialist revolution.<sup>27</sup> Subsequent laws in 1924, 1930, and 1931, further define the concept of citizenship in the Soviet Union. The net result of these laws

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<sup>25</sup> Hazard, pp. 6-7, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Durward V. Sandifer "Soviet Citizenship." *The American Journal of International Law* 30, no. 4 (1936). [links.jstor.org/sici/sici=0002-9300%28193610%2930%3A4%3C614%3ASC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/28193610), p. 614.

<sup>27</sup> Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts* (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 2-3.

was an understanding of citizenship based on an acceptance into Soviet society of anyone willing to associate with the proletariat and hoping to distance himself from the former tsarist regime or Western capitalistic governments.

Soviet citizenship was difficult to renounce, yet children born to parents of mixed citizenship had the right to choose Soviet citizenship at age fourteen. Women were given complete equality with men, yet entire classes of people were deprived of their right to vote simply because of their identification as bourgeois. And, while citizenship in the Soviet Union was clarified under the above mentioned laws, a person's status in society was often times dependent not on the rule of law, but on a fluctuating set of administrative regulations and decrees. However, underpinning all of this is an adherence to the Communist doctrine of an international interest of workers. This leads the assistant to the legal adviser at the US Department of State, Durward Sandifer to acknowledge that Soviet citizenship is nothing more than an extension of Soviet foreign and domestic policy.<sup>28</sup>

### *1.2.2 Stalin's Continued Definition*

Under Stalin, the evolution of the concept of the Soviet citizen continued. Needing to establish an aura of legitimacy to other nations, he preached a message of democracy by instituting a new constitution in 1936 which guaranteed voting rights to all citizens and even included a "bill of rights" which seemed to hold great promise for its citizens.<sup>29</sup> Initially, the people appeared to hold some measure of faith in this new document. It was during this time that Peter Vins, father of the Russian Baptist pastor Georgi Vins, along with several other men were on trial. They were accused under article 58 of the Criminal Code because preaching about Christ was considered anti-Soviet agitation. At the trial which took place towards the end of 1936, just after the new constitution was released, the individuals who had made the initial accusations against these men retracted their statements and accused the

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<sup>28</sup> Sandifer, pp. 614-631.

<sup>29</sup> Hazard, pp. 8-9.

authorities of threatening and intimidating them in order to have the necessary testimony to bring these charges.<sup>30</sup>

Georgi Vins, writing several years later in his autobiography, recounts what happened next: “Great discomfiture for the court! But it wanted to be objective: after all, the 1936 Constitution of the USSR had only just been published. The trial went on for a few days, and ended with the release of all the accused.”<sup>31</sup> The new constitution had, for a short period of time, raised the hopes of the people that they would now be able to enjoy the promises of equality and freedom.<sup>32</sup> Yet, as John Hazard, a specialist in Soviet law and professor at Columbia University, pointed out, at the very moment the new constitution was being heralded as holding democratic promise for the people of the Soviet Union, Stalin was establishing counterweights which ensured that the citizens would not be able to use any of these “freedoms” to influence government policy or select leaders.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Peter Vins, initially freed in 1936, was rearrested and in 1937 was murdered in one of Stalin’s prison camps during the purge which followed the new constitution.<sup>34</sup>

The 1936 Constitution was far more specific in terms of defining the benefits and obligations of citizenship. In this document every citizen was guaranteed the right to work, the right to vacation time, the right to material support in old age or following disability, and the right to a free education. Certainly, as Golfo Alexopoulos, author of the book *Stalin’s Outcasts* and professor of history at South Florida University indicates, these statements guaranteeing broad social welfare programs were extremely popular.<sup>35</sup>

However, it is in the statement on civil liberties that the Stalin constitution appears contradictory. Soviet citizens were guaranteed many of the same rights so familiar to

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<sup>30</sup> Georgi Vins, *Three Generations of Suffering*, p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Golfo Alexopoulos, “Soviet Citizenship, More or Less: Rights, Emotions, and States of Civic Belonging,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 7 (2006) 3, p. 517.

<sup>33</sup> Hazard, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> “Georgi Vins: Promoted to Glory,” p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Alexopoulos, “Soviet Citizenship,” p. 516.

Western societies: freedom of speech, religion, the press, assembly, and protest. In the ensuing years, Soviet citizens became disillusioned because they realized that these rights existed far more on paper than they did in reality.<sup>36</sup> The counterweights mentioned previously ensured that the people were never able to fully enjoy these ideals.

Continuing in the Marxist-Leninist tradition, as well as the statements made in the 1918 constitution, Stalin's constitution emphasized the role of labor for determining an individual's status in society. Those who did not work would be punished.<sup>37</sup> But, this obligation to perform useful labor was just one of many requirements placed on Soviet citizens. They were expected to obey the laws, respect the rules of communal life, and defend Russia. One author reflected in 1938 that the Soviet Union was creating "a new Soviet citizen, one capable not only of exercising rights but of fulfilling the sacred obligations placed before him by the country of socialism and its great Stalin Constitution. The rights of Soviet citizens are indissolubly bound with their sacred obligations before the socialist motherland."<sup>38</sup>

As a culmination to the development of the legal concept of citizenship, one final new law on Soviet citizenship was passed in 1938. In this brief law, only eight articles long, Stalin succeeded in centralizing all citizenship procedures in what Alexopoulos identified as the four pillars of Soviet citizenship: acquisition of citizenship, renunciation of citizenship, deprivation of citizenship and reinstatement or restoration of citizenship. This final law remained the legal basis for citizenship laws for the next forty years.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.2.3 *The "New Man"*

Nearly twenty years of laws and constitutions which developed the ideas of Soviet citizenship resulted in an emphasis on engineering a new concept of man – an individual

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 516-17.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 517.

<sup>38</sup> B. M Volin, *Grazhdanin SSSR* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1938) p. 26 as quoted in Alexopoulos, "Soviet Citizenship," p. 518.

<sup>39</sup> Alexopoulos, "Soviet Citizenship," 489, 516.

completely freed from the harmful effects of a bourgeoisie, capitalistic society<sup>40</sup> and firmly grounded in historical and dialectical materialist doctrine.<sup>41</sup> This new man must be active in Soviet civic life,<sup>42</sup> and, according to Stalin, there was no room for passivity. Citizens were expected to be engaged in various forms of activities whether it be joining trade unions, cooperative associations, various youth organizations, or scientific societies. Furthermore, not only were they to actively participate in these things, they had to like them as well.<sup>43</sup> In Voegelinian terms, the Soviet regime had established a *cosmion*, a political order, which was completely capable of providing meaning for the individual. Any religious definition of transcendence which relied on a deity outside of one's self or the collective group, as the purges of the late 1930s will testify to, was unacceptable.

### ***1.3 Citizenship and the Clash with the Baptist Community***

The “new man” was now to look to the state, not just for financial security as promised by the 1936 Constitution, but for the enjoyment of everyday life. But, what if, as Voegelin predicted, an individual's concept of happiness was determined by a set of convictions which did not fall in line with that of the state? Such was the case with many Baptists in the Soviet Union. Could they be good citizens, honest and faithful members of the Soviet community, if they did not believe in the “new man” as he was defined by party leadership and enforced through Soviet laws?

According to Harold Berman, “For Lenin and the Russian Communist Party, atheism represented man's power to replace God, that is to do by himself, by his intellect

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<sup>40</sup> Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts*, pp. 6, 10. It's interesting to note here that this concept of the “new man,” may have in fact not been new at all. According to Shatz in *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective*, p. 80, Trotsky insisted that the “new man” as defined by Russian Marxism was a concept rooted in the reforms of Peter the Great who, by design, turned his back on the traditional ways of the past and looked forward to a modern, Europeanized model of existence. The Russian radical intelligentsia revived this conceptual man and imbibed him with nihilistic ideology.

<sup>41</sup> Gustav Wetter, “Antireligious Implications of Party Doctrine” in Max Hayward and William C. Fletcher, eds. *Religion and the Soviet State: A Dilemma of Power* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), pp. 19-24.

<sup>42</sup> Harold Berman, *Faith and Order: Reconciliation of Law and Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), p. 356.

<sup>43</sup> Alexopoulos, “Soviet Citizenship,” pp. 523-525.

and his will, through collective action, what Christianity – and especially Russian Christianity – had taught that only God can do; namely, create a universal peace in the hearts of men.”<sup>44</sup> However, the Bolsheviks had in fact inherited a religious society and simply proclaiming the victory of dialectical materialism was not going to bring an immediate change in the hearts and minds of the people.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, almost immediately, legislation was enacted in an attempt to facilitate a shift in the thinking of the people as part of a two-phase plan to eliminate the need for religion in citizens of the new Soviet society.<sup>46</sup>

### *1.3.1 Soviet Laws on Religion*

Beginning in December of 1917, the Bolsheviks issued a series of laws aimed at restricting the influence of the church. First, they nationalized all land, therefore bringing the vast church holdings under the control of the government. Second, they secularized the birth, marriage and death registration process. Third, they ended the practice of government support of the clergy.<sup>47</sup> And finally, in January of 1918, the decree which guaranteed the separation of the Church from the State and of the School from the Church was issued. These laws stipulated that there would be no publication of religious literature in state published houses, churches were not to give money to the poor or educate the youth, and schools were to actively teach atheism.

A subsequent law, passed in 1929 and repeated in the 1936 Constitution, said that there was freedom of religious worship; however, churches were forbidden to provide any type of material aid to the poor or to educate youth or women. In addition, local congregations were not to have libraries or keep books other than those that would be used for religious services. The result of this law was to bring to an end any form of evangelism,

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<sup>44</sup> Berman, *Faith and Order: Reconciliation of Law and Religion*, p. 356.

<sup>45</sup> William Fletcher, *A Study in Survival* (London: S.P.C.K., 1965), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Q. Blane, “Protestant Sectarians in the First Year of Soviet Rule” in Richard Marshall, *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 301-02. The second phase of the plan, according to Blane, was to create a socialist order in which through the use of education religion would seem anachronistic, and therefore no longer necessary in society.

<sup>47</sup> Fletcher, *A Study in Survival*, p. 12.

youth work, or activities Baptists normally associated with a healthy, thriving church.<sup>48</sup>

Commenting on this shift in the religious laws in a letter to L.I. Brezhnev dated 14 April

1965 Kryuchkov and Vins make the following observations:

It would appear that this article [Article 13 of the Soviet Constitution of 1918 which guaranteed freedom of conscience], which openly set forth complete freedom of conscience and democracy, should have been unshakable. However, if in time it had to be altered, then the change should have been one of enlargement only... In fact, to change an article in the direction of restriction on citizens' rights entails betrayal of all one's pronouncements, of all one's promises and of one's programme. This means deceiving the people. Yet this has actually happened!... In order to carry out the intention of an administrative and physical struggle to destroy religion and the church, on 8 April 1929 a special resolution was passed... 'Concerning religious societies,' which aimed at reducing freedom of religion to nothing... It deprived citizens of the possibility of enjoying the right of freedom of conscience.<sup>49</sup>

There was a great concern on the part of these men for legality, the importance of written law and honesty in the process of change. Clearly, Kryuchkov and Vins understood the impact that the shift in religious laws from 1918 to 1929 had on the overall understanding of religious freedom in the Soviet Union.

### *1.3.2 The Conflict with the Baptists*

The existence of these 1929 laws contained great danger for the various sectarian groups throughout the history of the Soviet Union. Did they necessarily presuppose that a Baptist living in Kiev would automatically find himself in open conflict with government authorities, or could he remain a faithful, loyal citizen of the Soviet Union while holding on to his religious faith? According to William Fletcher, the Russian Baptist movement was one of the most significant sectarian groups in the Soviet Union and their struggles are reflective of the whole of the Protestant movement under communist rule.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, I

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<sup>48</sup> Berman, *Faith and Order: Reconciliation of Law and Religion*, p. 357 and Fletcher, *A Study in Survival*, p. 46.

<sup>49</sup> G.K. Kryuchkov and G.P. Vins "To the President of the Commission on the Constitution, Comrade L.I. Brezhnev." 14 April 1965. As quoted in Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 109. Kryuchkov served as president and Vins was the secretary of the CCECB.

<sup>50</sup> William C. Fletcher, "Protestant Influences on the Outlook of the Soviet Citizen Today," p. 62.

will use them as an example of how the concept of citizenship created practical difficulties for not only the individual believer, but the group as a whole.

In the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution many sects found initial support from Lenin's government. Believing that these groups had been unfairly treated under the tsarist regime, Lenin appeared willing to allow some measure of freedom for non-Orthodox religions. In fact, many Protestants saw the 1918 laws on religion as an important step towards religious freedom, but were cautious, adopting a "wait and see" attitude.<sup>51</sup> Some even espoused a form of Christian socialism.<sup>52</sup> For the Russian Baptist community, the command by the Apostle Paul in Romans 13 to submit to governmental authorities was taken seriously; however, they also were forced to grapple with a second Biblical command – that of Christ in Matthew 28:19-20 to preach the Gospel.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the difficult question arose – could a believer obey both God and man in the existing governmental system? This question was not answered with a unanimous voice within the movement.

The fortunes of the Baptist community, like those of other evangelical groups, went through periods of both growth and decline depending on the level of government scrutiny.<sup>54</sup> However, by the early 1960s, a major crisis arose in the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) over the issue of the council's desire to comply with Soviet restrictions on evangelization and the religious education of young people.<sup>55</sup>

Many believed that the AUCECB's decision to abide by Soviet law brought the church in

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<sup>51</sup> Blane, p. 302-304.

<sup>52</sup> Sawatsky, p. 37. In the 1920s a prominent leader in the Protestant community, I.S. Prokhanov proposed the creation of a Christian Socialist community which would be called *Evangelisk* (City of the Sun). However, the proposed community never materialized. According to Sawatsky, this concept of Christian Socialism was popular enough to warrant some concern from communist officials.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>54</sup> For an overall discussion of the history of evangelical movements in the Soviet Union through the 1960s see Sawatsky's *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II*. For the history of the Baptists in particular during the same period, the works of Michael Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia* and *Faith On Trial in Russia* are especially helpful.

<sup>55</sup> Fletcher, "Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen," p. 71 and Georgi Vins, "Advocates in Adversity" (speech given at the Legal Seminar Luncheon 12 October 1981 at Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina). JS Mack Library, Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina. Vins served as secretary of a group which broke away from the AUCECB and the speech referenced here gives strong support for these separatist actions.

direct conflict with Biblical teaching. Despite pleas for unity within the organization, a split occurred and the *Initsiativniki* (Initiative Group), led by A. F. Prokofev and G. K. Kryuchkov, placed themselves outside of the control of the AUCECB and continued to minister in unregistered churches.<sup>56</sup> In a letter of protest written by Barnaul and Kulanda in Siberia, dated February 2, 1964, the seriousness of the conflict between the state regulations which guided the AUCECB and personal convictions can be seen:

Dear Brothers and Sisters: the fact is that the world cannot permit the illegally acquired right atheistically to interpret the Bible to us... They condemn us not for evil deeds or for breaking the law but for good deeds, for non-recognition of the AUCECB and its "constitution" which destroy the church... The judges of this world condemn the children of God because the AUCECB has destroyed the church and its true servants in the world, in the same way as the High Priests, scribes and Pharisees betrayed Jesus Christ to Pilate.<sup>57</sup>

The concepts of loyalty to the communist regime and the idea of the development of the "new man" were called into question during this controversy. A correspondent for the publication *Izvestia* had the following commentary:

When the more literate of the petitioners [Reform Baptists] are asked why they are not satisfied with the leadership of the Baptist community [AUCECB], they answer more or less in terms like these: 'We recognize only the laws of God, whereas the present Baptist leaders recognize earthly laws as well.' This then is the substance of the matter. The people who are behind these petitioners do not want to recognize the laws of the Soviet state and do not wish to take into account the fact that sectarians are not only believers, but also Soviet citizens. Our laws protect the rights of believers, and also the freedom of their confession of faith. *However, the law obliges believers as well as atheists to carry out their duties as citizens* (emphasis added), as stipulated in the Constitution of the USSR, and to observe Soviet laws. Essentially, the leaders of the Organizing Committee are acting against the law, but they do recognize some laws, however. They regularly receive their pensions and are glad to accept paid holidays and other benefits of our society, against the establishment of which they protest.<sup>58</sup>

Even though the Baptist community itself could not come to a consensus on the issue of obedience to government authority, I would like to suggest that this crisis was not as a result of two opposing interpretations of Biblical teaching; rather, it is a conflict stemming from

<sup>56</sup> Fletcher, "Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen," pp. 68-73.

<sup>57</sup> Translated text of the letter may be found in *RCDA*, September 30, 1964, pp. 122-125. Quoted in Fletcher, "Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen," pp. 73-74.

<sup>58</sup> *Izvestia*, 5 June 1966, p. 6. As quoted in Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 114.

two opposing world views, two cosmions, which in the end could not be reconciled. These world views had a direct impact on an individual's interpretation of citizenship and the role they should play in Soviet civil society.

### 1.3.3 *Two Opposing World Views*

According to statements of faith published in the 1960s, Russian Baptists lived in the temporal world, but believed that their ultimate happiness and loyalty existed in the eternal. They maintained an irrefutable insistence on the Divine inspiration, and therefore the inerrancy, of the Bible. They held to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination which assumes the sinful nature of man. Among its adherents in the Soviet Union, this belief in predestination created a resignation to a life of suffering, if necessary, for the cause of Christ. They were apocalyptic in their outlook, believing in the Messianic promises of the Second Coming of Christ and judgment for all mankind.<sup>59</sup> As a result, they tended to be very missionary minded, not wanting to see any perish in judgment. As such, a description of the Christians under Roman persecution is equally applicable to Russian Baptists:

While they dwell in cities... as the lot of each is cast... the constitution of their citizenship is nevertheless quite amazing and admittedly paradoxical. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners... Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is a foreign country.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, according to William Fletcher, the Baptists had, throughout the Soviet period, maintained a significant level of social consciousness. Seeing proletarian roots in Jesus Christ, they sought to live peacefully in their local communities, believing that God had ordained the power of the Soviet state. Some within the community were even willing to adapt their teachings to communism's scientifically oriented society.<sup>61</sup> In contrast, Georgi Vins proclaimed that he was a man of peace and not interested in politics;<sup>62</sup> however, in a

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<sup>59</sup> Fletcher, "Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen," pp. 77-80.

<sup>60</sup> *Epistle to Diognetus* 7, 5 quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985) p. 51.

<sup>61</sup> Fletcher, "Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen," p. 80.

<sup>62</sup> "Georgi Vins: "My Way is a Special One," p. 18.

speech given in 1981, he argues that disobedience to Soviet laws is based on Philippians 1: 27-29 which emphasizes the need to, without fear, “stand fast in the faith.”<sup>63</sup> In the same speech, he claims that there are 2,000 unregistered churches with 100,000 members in the Soviet Union. These like-minded individuals, he says, fight against the militant atheism of the regime; the science of communism cannot be reconciled to religious faith.<sup>64</sup>

The doctrinal position of the Russian Baptists was completely contradictory to what Gustav Wetter argues was the world view of communism. In Marxist-Leninist philosophy, man is not a sinful, fallen creature, but a self-created individual capable of ushering in a new stage in history. The redemption of mankind is not found in the person and work of Jesus Christ, but in the progress of science. And, the future destiny of mankind is not found in eternal heavenly bliss or punishment in hell, but rather in a utopian society which will naturally arise once the harmful ideologies of religion are cast by the wayside. Atheistic doctrine, as Wetter argues, seeks not only to explain the world, but transform it.<sup>65</sup>

#### *1.3.4 Deciding When to Disobey*

Where then does that leave the ordinary Russian Baptist in his conceptions of citizenship? He cannot believe in the optimistic progress of communism because it is fundamentally predicated on a denial of the existence of God. Yet, he is commanded to obey governmental authority. It is a conundrum which the individual ultimately had to work through in his own mind, and according to the tradition of Baptists, allow his conscience to guide him in daily personal choices.

On both sides of the issue there were those who, through careful consideration, were deeply convinced of the rightness of their actions. For those who remained faithful to the AUCECB the answer was to remain obedient to man’s authority. For the *Initiativniki* and

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<sup>63</sup> Vins, “Advocates in Adversity.”

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Wetter, “Antireligious Implications of Party Doctrine,” pp. 19-24.

men like Georgi Vins, the answer was just as clear. Their first priority was to obey God rather than man, even if that meant spending time in prison, pastoring illegal churches, or giving the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. Regardless of the position the individual Baptist took, it was clearly not an easy choice to make.

Perhaps the clearest distinction between the cosmion of the Soviet system and the Russian Baptist community can be found in the writings of eighteen year old Aida Skripnkiova, a follower of the *Initsiativniki*.<sup>66</sup> On New Year's Eve, 1961, she distributed cards containing her own religious poems. This action led to a bitter attack on her in the article "Don't be a corpse among the living" in a local newspaper, *Smena*. Her response to the article articulates clearly and succinctly the complete incompatibility of atheism with those who choose to believe that man is transcendent. Concerning the argument for atheism she acknowledges:

You write: "We atheists are not against eternal life, but it must exist here on earth, not in a world beyond. Immortality consists for us not, as religion promises, in sitting idly in some sort of Elysian field, munching sticky buns and unconcernedly watching the larger part of humanity suffer agony in fiery Gehenna."

I do not know what 'religion promises', but the Word of God says this: "For the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17)

You write: "Man achieves immortality through his work." Even the very fact that you talk about immortality shows that, despite your atheism, you find it hard to conceive that you will disappear for ever....

In your opinion, "there is no nobler, brighter or more beautiful goal in the world than that of building communism and living under it." And you ask me whether I am prepared to work for this goal. No, I do not want to work for this goal, because I consider it neither bright nor noble. The society which you will build will never be just, because you yourselves are unjust... The goal of my life is to serve truth.<sup>67</sup>

Aida's words earned her a year in a Soviet prison, but as will be shown, her call for honesty and service to truth was not lost on those who followed in her footsteps. As these statements illustrate, for many Baptists in the Soviet Union, these two systems could not

<sup>66</sup> A full account of this story can be found in Bourdeaux *Faith on Trial in Russia*, pp. 76-81.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Bourdeaux, *Faith on Trial in Russia*, pp. 78-79.

peacefully co-exist. The story of Georgi Vins is in essence not just a story of Christian faith, but of one man's solution to the problem of how to live under a governmental system to which you are diametrically opposed.

## Chapter Two: Laying the Groundwork for the Dissent of the 1960s

In 1974, just before being sent into exile, Alexander Solzhenitsyn penned the essay, “Live Not by Lies.” In it, he exhorts his countrymen to retreat from the culture of dishonesty which the Soviet system fostered, “Let each of us make a choice,” he demanded, “...there are no loopholes for anybody who wants to be honest. Either truth or falsehood: Toward spiritual independence or toward spiritual servitude.”<sup>68</sup> Solzhenitsyn’s challenge to the people of the Soviet Union was quite clear; you cannot expect to bring about change in a corrupt political system by being corrupt yourself. Yet, Solzhenitsyn stands not at the foot of the mountain; facing a long, arduous, uphill journey which he may or may not have the stamina to complete. Rather, he was almost at the summit; for his call for morality, truth, virtue and dignity was similar to those voices in Russia who struggled and labored for those same values for almost two hundred years.

The tradition of religious dissent in the Soviet Union is one which began in earnest in the late 1920s and reached its zenith in the 1960s, but had its roots in the various sects of Old Believers, Baptists, Stundists, Molokans, and a variety of other eighteenth century groups who struggled for their right to come to God on their own terms.<sup>69</sup> However, it was not just the religious sects who fought for morality and truth in Russian society, it was the *intelligenty* themselves, or at least an educated variant of the group, who advocated a “better way” for Russian society. Despite the fact that the various political actors in this period did not act in a consistent manner when addressing religious issues, the fundamental principle

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<sup>68</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn "Live Not By Lies." The Augustine Club at Columbia University. <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/livenotbylies.html> (13 March 2008). This essay was printed in *The Washington Post*, p. A26, 18 February 1974 and is a striking example of how, in Solzhenitsyn’s view, the atheistic Communist government of the Soviet Union had destroyed the souls of its people. In this essay he throws down the gauntlet, imploring the people of the Soviet Union to use their most treasured possession – their personal integrity – to fight against the corruption that threatened the very life of the Russian soul.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Sidwell. "The Russian Baptists." *Fundamentalism File*. Fundamentalism File. [http://www.bju.edu/library/collections/fund\\_file/russianbap.html](http://www.bju.edu/library/collections/fund_file/russianbap.html) (13 March 2008). For a description of the various eighteenth century religious sects see Christie Lane’s work *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978.

of atheism remained a constant, undisputable tenet for Soviet leadership. This chapter will examine the historical thread of religious and moral dissent starting from the criticisms of the intelligentsia in the first years of the twentieth century, then trace the history of non-Orthodox religious dissent in the post-Revolutionary Soviet Union through to the dawn of the 1960s.

### **2.1 *The Impact of the Intelligentsia***

In 1909 a group of Russian educated elite published a series of essays under the title *Vekhi* (Landmarks, or sometimes translated Signposts). This group of eight believed in the supremacy of moral and religious principles, and their published work was essentially a call for the intelligentsia to adopt a much more Christianized view of man. While their ideas were vehemently opposed to by the radical revolutionaries and liberals,<sup>70</sup> the content is instructive because it represents a sharp critique of the values of the *intelligenty*. However, before turning to the *Vekhi* itself, it is important to review the ideology of the radical intelligentsia as it developed in the nineteenth century.

As noted by Richard Pipes, the terms “intelligentsia,” “*intelligenty*,” and “intellectual” are difficult to define – people themselves do not always make the necessary distinctions.<sup>71</sup> For my purposes I will define these as men of the eighteenth century through 1917 who were well educated but remained alienated from Russian society.

It is far beyond the scope of this essay to deal with the significant individuals or important literary works which fueled the intelligentsia. What is important for our discussion, though, are the ideals which united the radicals by the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution. When Peter the Great opened his proverbial window to the West and sent young men to obtain a Western education in the hopes of modernizing his empire, he unknowingly opened a floodgate of ideas which would ironically become, in part, the

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<sup>70</sup> Leonard Schapiro, *Russian Studies*. New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books, 1987, p. 65.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Pipes, ed. forward in *The Russian Intelligentsia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

source of the downfall of the Romanov Empire.<sup>72</sup> From the West filtered down Enlightenment ideas about man which served to focus the energies of the intelligentsia. The supremacy of reason and the significance of the individual gave way to the ideas of progress, utilitarianism, and the perfectibility of society. The key for the *intelligenty* was to discover the formula which would turn this new vision of society into a reality.<sup>73</sup>

One thing was abundantly clear for these individuals – what had to go was the autocratic system which arbitrarily left the individual unsure of his standing. According to Alexander Herzen:

In submitting, they are submitting only to force; the flagrant injustice of one part of the laws has led them to scorn the other. Complete inequality before the law has killed the bud of respect for legality in them. The Russian, whatever his class, breaks the law wherever he can do so with impunity; the government acts in the same way.<sup>74</sup>

To the intelligentsia, change was imperative. The educated nobleman was now fully aware of the importance of himself as an individual; however, due to the arbitrary nature of the existing order, his dignity was stripped from him, his position in society insecure.<sup>75</sup> Being a truly noble man now required that the individual be in complete opposition to the autocracy and its bureaucratic institutions.<sup>76</sup>

## ***2.2 Criticism From Within the Intelligentsia***

To the authors of *Vekhi*, former Marxists themselves,<sup>77</sup> this line of thinking was problematical to the Russian soul. In these authors we see the educated elite of Russia criticizing themselves on moral grounds. All eight of these essays have a spiritual nature and were published with three goals in mind. First, they saw the need for a moral re-education of the intelligentsia. Second, they believed in the need for legal order as the basis

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<sup>72</sup> Shatz, pp 14-16 and Bulgakov, p. 18.

<sup>73</sup> Shapiro, p. 68.

<sup>74</sup> Alexander Herzen, "Du développement des idées révolutionnaires en Russie," *Collected Works in Thirty Volumes* [Sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh] (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1954-65), VII, 121 as quoted in B.A. Kistyakovsky, "In Defense of Law" in *Signposts*, p. 94.

<sup>75</sup> Shatz, pp. 29-30.

<sup>76</sup> Shapiro, p. 68.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.

for any form of government. And third, they hoped to see a fusion of the state and the nation.<sup>78</sup>

What is significant to this discussion is the emphasis on the spiritual regeneration that is found in the *Vekhi*. S. Bulgakov in his essay “Heroism and Asceticism” is particularly critical of the lack of true spirituality among the intelligentsia:

The revolution [of 1905] exposed, underscored, and intensified certain of the intelligentsia’s spiritual features that only a few individuals (Dostoevskii especially) had previously divined in all their real significance. It was like a spiritual mirror for all of Russia, and for her intelligentsia in particular.<sup>79</sup>

He is extremely critical of the *intelligenty*’s myopic adoption of Western values and Enlightenment thinking, especially the ideas of the natural perfectibility of man and infinite progress which allowed man to become his own savior. There was no longer any need for a Christianity that taught of sin, redemption, and future happiness, instead, fulfillment could be found on earth in the here and now, if only the proper external system was put into place.<sup>80</sup>

But, perhaps another of the *Vekhi* authors, N. Berdiaev, most eloquently summed up the moral crisis of the intelligentsia when he says:

It [the Intelligentsia] succumbed to the temptation of the Grand Inquisitor, who demanded the renunciation of truth in the name of man’s happiness. The intelligentsia’s basic moral premise is summed up in the formula: let truth perish, if its death will enable to people to live better and will make men happier; down with the truth, if it stands in the way of the sacred cry, “down with autocracy.” This falsely directed love of man, it turned out, destroyed love of God, because love for the truth, like love for beauty or for any absolute value, is an expression of love for the Deity... Genuine love for people is not love against truth and against God, but in truth and in God; it is not pity, which denies a person’s dignity, but recognition of God’s own image in every human being.<sup>81</sup>

Almost seventy years before Solzhenitsyn’s plea for truth, both spiritually and in everyday occurrence, these authors of the *Vekhi* recognized and commented on the dangerous position

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<sup>78</sup> Shapiro, pp. 71-72.

<sup>79</sup> Bulgakov, p. 19.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 25-26.

<sup>81</sup> Nikolai Berdiaev “Philosophical Verity and Intelligentsia Truth” in *Signposts*, p. 6. The Grand Inquisitor in this reference is of course referring to book V of Dostoevskii’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.

in which man found himself once the philosophical ideals of the intelligentsia were allowed to govern.

This is precisely what happened after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. In the *Vekhi* we see sharp criticism of the atheism and lack of higher moral values by those in the forefront of the intelligentsia. This leads Bulgakov to declare that Russia is “sick in spirit.”<sup>82</sup> The men and women who follow, taking up the banner of religious dissent in the Soviet Union, were fighting against this very same atheism<sup>83</sup> and trying to maintain their human dignity, not through the science and positivism of Communism, but on a much more spiritual basis.<sup>84</sup>

### ***2.3 The “Golden Age” for the Protestants***

The decade that followed the Bolshevik Revolution proved to be an interesting one for the Protestant sects in the Soviet Union. In fact, some have called it the “golden age” of the evangelical movement.<sup>85</sup> According to Lenin, the Communists had to be very careful in their dealings with the people. He said, “In order to struggle with religious prejudices extraordinary care is needed. Much harm is introduced by those who would bring into this struggle an offense to religious feelings. It is necessary to struggle by means of propaganda, by means of enlightenment.”<sup>86</sup> Lenin understood that the people of the Soviet Union were, in fact, a very religious people, and matters of a spiritual nature had to be handled with great care. The simple proclamation of an atheistic, positivist, materialism would not alter public

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<sup>82</sup> Bulgakov, p. 25.

<sup>83</sup> For a brief outline of the history of how atheism developed in the minds of the intelligentsia see Bulgakov pp. 20-25.

<sup>84</sup> In his speech, “Advocates in Adversity,” given to a group of lawyers at Bob Jones University in 1981, Georgi Vins eloquently makes this case. He feels that the militant atheism of the Soviet Union was in the process of destroying the souls of the people. As a pastor therefore, it was his job to not only not compromise his faith by agreeing to the religious restrictions of the Soviet government, but to maintain their honesty and integrity by holding fast to their faith regardless of the consequences. See also Shatz, p. 76.

<sup>85</sup> Sawatsky, p. 28.

<sup>86</sup> V. I. Lenin *Polnoe sobranie sochiney* [ Complete collection of writings] 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Moscow, 1941-51), 28: 161, quoted in Marshall, p. 319.

opinion – education and time were the necessary ingredients to eliminate the religious nature of the people within the borders of the Soviet Union.<sup>87</sup>

In the words of Hans Brandenburg, the Bolsheviks “wooed the Evangelical circles.”<sup>88</sup> Public debates between atheism and Christianity were allowed to take place in the 1920s. The Christians often won the debate with no repercussions or punishment.<sup>89</sup> I. S. Prokhanov, the one time president of the Evangelical Christian Union in the Soviet Union, writing in exile in 1933, commented on the leniency of the Communists in the early days after the revolution. He notes that despite the laws demanding the separation of church and state which were passed in 1918, the Communists had in fact seen the sectarians as a kind of kindred spirit; both had been subjected to the authoritative whims of the tsarist regime.<sup>90</sup>

There was a tremendous amount of growth during this period. In 1905 there were an estimated 86,538 Baptists and 20,804 Evangelical Christians in the Soviet Union. However, by 1929, those numbers had swelled to approximately 500,000 baptized evangelicals with the possibility of as many as four million believers when family members were added to this number.<sup>91</sup> This can be further illustrated by the fact that according to Andrew Blane, by 1928, two different Baptist schools had trained and sent out over four hundred Christian workers.<sup>92</sup> This somewhat favorable relationship between the sectarians and the Bolsheviks did not last for long. The death of Lenin and the rise of Stalin proved to have a dramatic impact on the lives of the Protestant sectarians in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>87</sup> William Fletcher, *A Study in Survival*, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> Brandenburg, p. 168.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-72.

<sup>90</sup> I. S. Prokhanov, *In the Caldron of Russia* (New York: All-Russian Evangelical Christian Union, 1933), p. 175, quoted in Marshall, p. 319-20.

<sup>91</sup> Sawatsky, p. 27.

<sup>92</sup> Blane, p. 311.

## 2.4 The Stalin Years

By 1928, the Communist regime seemed to feel that it had consolidated its power to the degree that it could initiate new programs. Under Stalin's leadership, the first Five Year Plan was implemented. Not only was this a plan aimed at impacting the economy, but it was also intended to unify the Soviet citizens by wiping out religious thinking.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, coinciding with this were changes in the laws governing religion. Believing that the 1918 laws on religion left too much room for maneuvering, two decrees, the "Decree on Religion Associations" (*O religioznykh obedineniakh*) of 8 April 1929 and "Instructions of the People's Commissariat of the Interior" of 1 October 1929 also subtitled "On the Rights and Obligations of Religious Associations" (*O pravakh i obiazannostiakh religioznykh obedineny*) significantly altered the level of religious toleration in the Soviet Union.<sup>94</sup>

### 2.4.1 Repression and Purge

Not only did these laws place severe restrictions on religious activities, but they also signaled Stalin's desire to persecute the church.<sup>95</sup> They appeared to be directly aimed at the evangelization techniques of the Evangelicals which had proven to be so fruitful during the 1920s. In these new regulations the participation of minors was again severely restricted. Clergymen and preachers were limited in their ministries to the areas where their membership lived; this would bring to an end any attempts at missionary work in other locations. In addition to this, all non-registered activity was forbidden as was the giving of material aid to the membership, the creation of church libraries, or the holding of special meetings for children, youth or women.<sup>96</sup>

It is possible that the Soviet regime was fearful of the tremendous growth of the church and the fact that many of the Protestant believers called themselves Christian

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<sup>93</sup> Brandenburg, p. 189.

<sup>94</sup> Joshua Rothenberg "The Legal Status of Religion in the Soviet Union," in Marshall, pp. 72-73.

<sup>95</sup> For a detailed description of the types of restrictions these new regulations placed on churches see Rothenberg, pp. 73-78.

<sup>96</sup> Sawatsky, p. 46.

socialists. I. S. Prokhanov was considered to be one of the leading proponents of this movement which at that time was becoming increasingly popular among the Russian evangelicals. Prokhanov had even gone so far as to develop his own planned community, *Evangelisk*; it was to be a “City in the Sun”. This movement, and others like it, it was feared, could possibly overshadow the planned atheistic Communist communities.<sup>97</sup>

If the decade following the Bolshevik Revolution could be called the “golden age” for Evangelicals, then the decade which followed it must be referred to as the “red” or “bloody” age.<sup>98</sup> When so many perished for a variety of other reasons, it is difficult to determine just how many people died for their faith during the Stalin years. Pastor Vins claimed that from 1929 to 1945, 25,000 believers were arrested and 22,000 died in prison camps.<sup>99</sup> And, according to another source, in 1929, in the far east of the USSR alone, there were 193 Baptist and 118 Evangelical congregations, however, by 1933 that number had been reduced to a combined total of 85.<sup>100</sup>

Many of those persecuted by Stalin during these years were independent farmers and peasants of German heritage and Stundists in religious conviction. They were considered dangerous because of their supposed capitalist ideas and because they were people who still believed in religion, at least the religion of the non-Orthodox variety.<sup>101</sup> According to Hans Brandenburg, the new regulations instituted by the regime regarding religion were directed primarily at the Stundists (many of whom are identified as Baptists) because their “biblical-evangelical faith was immeasurably more dangerous to its own world-view.”<sup>102</sup> These men

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<sup>97</sup> Sawatsky, p. 37.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>99</sup> “The Trial of Georgi Vins” *Christianity Today*, 25 April 1975, p. 43.

<sup>100</sup> Sidwell

<sup>101</sup> Brandenburg, p. 189-90.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190. The recognition that religious people who were part of organizations which might be inclined to resist collectivization and therefore must be eliminated is also supported by Sawatsky, pg. 29.

and women of faith were encouraged to use their own consciences,<sup>103</sup> a trait not highly regarded in Soviet life.

Active Christians, both preachers and church leadership, were put on a blacklist. There were three major waves of arrests for the clergy; 1929-30, 1933-35, and 1937-38. Much of the leadership of both the Baptist and Evangelical groups were arrested and their organizational unions did not survive.<sup>104</sup> Their lives were made more difficult because they are seen as *lishentsy*, people with no electoral rights. Because, according to the regime, they were not involved in productive work, it became difficult to acquire ration cards and find housing. The result of this was that it did not take long before the leadership of these various Protestant sects found themselves in labor camps and their meeting houses closed down.<sup>105</sup>

These various factors coupled with the introduction of the six-day work calendar, one in which five-sixths of the population worked while one-sixth rested, made it extremely difficult for the non-Orthodox churches in the Soviet Union to survive.<sup>106</sup> In 1930 only one of the Baptist churches in Leningrad remained open while twelve preachers had been arrested and in Moscow there was only one Evangelical church and no Baptist church.<sup>107</sup>

Given the perspective of so many years and the vast body of literature now available on the subject of the Soviet persecution of religious figures, it can be a fairly easy task to document the ebb and flow of the religious history of the Evangelicals in the Soviet Union. However, this recounting of events does not sufficiently answer the question of why they were almost entirely wiped out in the years just prior to World War II. What was it that Stalin, or his successor Khrushchev found so dangerous in these people?

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Sawatsky, p. 29, 47.

<sup>105</sup> Brandenburg, 191.

<sup>106</sup> Sawatsky, p. 47.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

In 1936 when Stalin introduced his new constitution which guaranteed universal suffrage, he was confronted with a problem. Despite the attacks on the churches in the early and mid thirties, there seemed to be signs of religious revival. A report in 1935 made the following observation regarding the state of religion in the Soviet Union:

A series of ever-increasing minor ‘whispers and breaths’ of life say that religious consciousness in Soviet Russia not only remains but is even beginning to be aware of its power, to come out from the ‘catacomb’ period in order to act, to fight, to confront godlessness with its own assurance and its own truth of life.<sup>108</sup>

Also significant was the fact that young people seemed to be returning to the church. A correspondent for the *New York Times* noted the presence of numerous young people at evening church services – even the title of the article, “60,000 in Moscow at Easter Service” would indicate that, despite the pressure of the previous few years, religious life in Russia was still active.<sup>109</sup> The head of the League of Militant Atheists, Emil Yaroslavsky reported in 1937 that two-thirds of all the adults in the villages and one-third in the cities still believed in God.<sup>110</sup>

Stalin may have been concerned that the church would play too large of a role in the local elections. This was problematical for him because his new constitution promised universal suffrage – this included local church officials. Therefore, in the purges of 1937-38, the church was heavily persecuted and weakened. While in all likelihood voting rights was probably not the only reason for the attacks on the church in these years, it certainly can be considered one of the reasons.<sup>111</sup>

The Baptist in the 1930s had declared their intent to obey the laws of the Soviet Union, yet, they felt compelled to continue to preach the Gospel.<sup>112</sup> In 1935, just before his arrest, Peter Vins preached a sermon, “The Completion of What is Lacking in Christ’s

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<sup>108</sup> I. Lagovskii, “Da voskresnet Bog” (Let God arise), *Vestnik R.S.Kh.D.*, No. 6-7 (June-July 1935), p. 20 as quoted in Fletcher, *A Study in Survival*, p. 74.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Fletcher, *A Study in Survival* p. 74. The *New York Times* article was dated May 3, 1937, p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> Berman, *Russians in Focus* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1951), p. 116.

<sup>111</sup> Fletcher, *A Study in Survival*, pp. 79-81.

<sup>112</sup> Sawatsky, p. 38

Afflictions.” Throughout the text of the sermon, the message was clear, believers must expect to suffer for the sake of Christ:

Therefore St. Paul did not shun sufferings and hardship, realizing that just as he and other apostles claimed their strength from the matchless conduct of the Lord, foreseeing and enduring suffering, so the believers must and would be encouraged by his chains and his privations.<sup>113</sup>

But, it may be in his conclusion to the matter that the real danger posed to the existing regime by these various sects could be seen. Pastor Vins exhorted the members of the congregation to action, first calling on them to pray for each other. This was a call not just for comfort, but that they would not lose heart, that “they may be an example to us all by their steadfastness and courage.” He continued on by adding that the believers must ‘lighten their sufferings, taking on to [themselves] part of the burden of worry about families, and at times about themselves.’<sup>114</sup> The non-Orthodox sectarians like the Baptists and Evangelicals seemed to be unwilling to reject their conscience and buy into the atheistic system which the authors of the *Vekhi* had warned of less than twenty years earlier. Men like Peter Vins – and indeed – Georgi, his son who followed in his footsteps, proved far more willing to suffer for a cause believed to be right than to acquiesce to what was perceived as a godless Soviet system.

#### 2.4.2 *New Life for Churches*

When WWII broke out, Stalin reversed some of his policies regarding religion; true Christianity was to be seen as a “progressive event.” Also, pragmatically speaking, he had to be carefully not to alienate his allies, FDR and Churchill – or at least the people of the United States and Great Britain, for he desperately needed their help.<sup>115</sup> The war seemed to galvanize the people of the Soviet Union, encouraging them to work together.<sup>116</sup> To ensure

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<sup>113</sup> Peter Vins “The Completion of What is Lacking in Christ’s Afflictions,” as quoted in Georgi Vins, *Three Generations of Suffering*, p. 36.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>115</sup> Brandenburg, p. 193.

<sup>116</sup> Berman, *Russians in Focus*, pp. 118-20.

the support of the people, Stalin eased the pressure on religious groups throughout the country.<sup>117</sup> He expressed his gratitude to the clergy for their help in the war effort and churches found that many of the restriction had been lifted.<sup>118</sup> In a possible gesture of good will, he even encouraged the union of the Evangelical Christians, Baptists, and Pentecostals into one large organization, the All Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB).<sup>119</sup>

The result of this reversal of policy was a period of real religious growth and revival in the Soviet Union in the years following World War II. The AUCECB claimed to have anywhere between two to three million members with three thousand churches. In 1946, when American Baptists were able to travel to Russia and preach, they commented on how being in church in Russia was just like being back home.<sup>120</sup> The Baptists themselves found that they were having difficulty finding enough leadership to meet the needs of the growth in their churches, although, certainly some of this can be attributed to the decimation of the church leadership in the 1930s.<sup>121</sup>

However, just as the Soviet regime had become worried by the growth of the churches in the 1920s, this new revival proved to be troublesome for the Soviet state. Sawatsky argues that this attack on the church was in reality a response to growing Soviet fears about the Cold War and national security issues. In the last few years of Stalin's rule, the government once again cracked down on churches, pastors were arrested and restrictions were put into place. Church buildings were confiscated and independent-minded preachers who had not registered with the authorities were arrested, charged under Article 58 of the

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<sup>117</sup> Sidwell

<sup>118</sup> Berman, *Russians in Focus*, pp. 118-120.

<sup>119</sup> Sawatsky, pp. 84-91.

<sup>120</sup> Berman, *Russians in Focus*, p. 127.

<sup>121</sup> Sidwell, Swatsky, p. 56.

Criminal Code for anti-Soviet activities, and were commonly given twenty-five year prison terms.<sup>122</sup>

The death of Stalin in 1953 marked a period of religious revival throughout the Soviet Union, especially among the independent German congregations and the Pentecostals. Helped by the fact that they had been issued internal passports in 1956, Germans acquired German-language Bibles in the Baltic states and began to travel throughout the Soviet Union distributing this literature to German speaking peoples. The AUCECB was also in a period of growth, according to one source, they baptized 12,000 people in 1954. In that same year the organization claimed to have 5,400 congregations and 512,000 members. This number may be inflated, but growth within the organization was undeniable.<sup>123</sup>

### ***2.5 Another Reversal of Fortunes: the Khrushchev Years***

As had been the pattern throughout the twentieth century in the Soviet Union, when the church had been left alone and experienced revival, the regime became nervous and renewed its attacks, which brought new waves of persecution. This was exactly the case when Nikita Khrushchev assumed power. Despite the seemingly relaxed attitudes of the de-Stalinization process which allowed for some loosening of the restrictions on the freedom of speech, press and religion, Khrushchev prepared to wage war against religion once again.<sup>124</sup>

In a speech made to the Twentieth Congress in 1956, he hinted at what was in store for religion in the Soviet Union:

But it would be wrong to think that the survivals of capitalism in the minds of people have already been wiped out. Unfortunately, in our fine and industrious Soviet family one can still meet people who do not participate in productive labor

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<sup>122</sup> Sawatsky, pp. 62-63.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>124</sup> Sidwell. In an attempt to distance themselves from the legacy of Stalin, the Soviet government allowed Alexander Solzhenitsyn to publish his novel *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Churches also found themselves with greater freedom, being able to print limited numbers of Bibles and hymnbooks. Many of the clergy still alive who were imprisoned during the Stalin years were released from the prison camps and returned home to provide some much needed leadership and support for the Evangelical churches.

and do not perform useful work for the family or for society. One can also meet people who maliciously violate the rules of the socialist community. It is impossible to stamp out these ugly manifestations merely by administrative measure, without the participation of the masses themselves.<sup>125</sup>

Despite not referring to religion specifically, Lowrie and Fletcher, in their article, “Khrushchev’s Religious Policy,” believe that the mentioning of “survivals of capitalism<sup>126</sup>” and those who don’t participate in “productive labor” are clearly predictive of what is to come.<sup>127</sup>

If there was any doubt regarding Khrushchev’s intent to stamp out religious belief in the Soviet Union, that was wiped away with his speech to the Twenty-second Congress in 1961. In giving his support to an antireligious campaign already underway, he stated:

The battle with survivals of capitalism in the consciousness of the people, the changing by our revolution of the habits and customs of millions of people built up over centuries, is a prolonged and not a simple matter. Survivals of the past are a dreadful power, which, like a nightmare, prevail over the minds of living creatures.... Communist education presupposed emancipation from religious prejudices and superstitions, which hinder individual Soviet people from fully developing their creative powers. A well thought-out and well proportioned system of scientific atheist propaganda is necessary, which would embrace all strata and groups of society, to prevent the spread of religious attitudes, especially among children and juveniles... The interests of building communism require that questions of communist education stand at the center of the attention and activity of each party organization, of all communities.<sup>128</sup>

According to Lowrie and Fletcher, this antireligious campaign would be unlike the previous ones due to the attention given it by the highest members of the Communist Party. Stalin

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<sup>125</sup> Translation from Leo Gruliow, ed., *Current Soviet Policies*, vol. 2 (New York, 1957), p. 54, quoted in Donald A. Lowrie and William C. Fletcher “Khrushchev’s Religious Policy” in Marshall, p. 132.

<sup>126</sup> There was good reason to see a connection between the Baptists in the Soviet Union and Baptists in the West. In chapter three I discuss “the Americansky methods” introduced into Baptist churches in Siberia by Jacob Wiens, the grandfather of Georgi Vins. Russian and Soviet Baptists read many of the same theology books that were found in the West. Additionally, the doctrinal position of the Soviet Baptists was essentially the same as that of many fundamental Baptists in the United States. Certainly, from an outsider’s perspective this connection could be made.

<sup>127</sup> Lowrie and Fletcher, p. 132. While not the subject of this paper, the authors also mention the concern on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church after this speech. In the period following this speech, the Church excommunicates clergy who had become atheists and in 1960 they warn their leaders of the trouble brewing on the horizon.

<sup>128</sup> *Pravada*, 18 October 1962, as quoted in Lowrie and Fletcher, 133-34.

himself had never been involved in antireligious campaigns to this degree.<sup>129</sup> Sidwell notes that Khrushchev was especially concerned with stamping out the Baptist.<sup>130</sup>

During these years there was a massive campaign to introduce atheism into the thinking of the people, thereby arguing against any form of religious sentiment. The government employed various types of propaganda methods, from pamphlets, newspaper and journal articles, to new periodicals, and the mass media. However, special care was given to the introduction of atheism into the school curriculum at all levels.<sup>131</sup> As the Khrushchev years entered into the 1960s, this propaganda campaign was buttressed by a new wave of church closures (300 Baptist churches in 1961 alone) and arrests – and, in some cases, torture and murder of pastors, clergy and lay people.<sup>132</sup>

In 1964 Leonid Ilichov, Khrushchev's chief ideologist, wrote a twenty-four page article in the first number of the *Kommunist*, the journal that served as the chief voice of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In this article Ilichov asserted that dialogue between Christians and communism was impossible. Calling the privileges churches acquired after World War II illegal, he justified the renewed attacks on religion as merely an attempt to nullify those brief gains. He was especially clear regarding the need to halt the growth of religion among women, and noted that the illegal activities of the Baptists (most significantly, their work with young people) and Muslims must be stopped.<sup>133</sup>

Such was the state of non-Orthodox Christianity in the Soviet Union at the dawn of the 1960s. Georgi Vins, speaking to a group of lawyers in the United States not long after his exile to the United States in 1979, described the condition of the official Baptist

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<sup>129</sup> Lowrie and Fletcher, p. 135.

<sup>130</sup> Sidwell

<sup>131</sup> For a more complete discussion of the level to which the Soviet government went in its antireligious propaganda see Lowrie and Fletcher, pp. 135-43.

<sup>132</sup> Sawatsky, pp. 131, 137-145.

<sup>133</sup> As reported by Bourdeaux in *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 93. The original article appeared in *Kommunist* I, 1964.

churches at this point as dying out, full of old women, and without any leadership due to the purges of the 1930s. Faced with new restrictions regarding the baptism of believers and the evangelization of their young people, change had to come. And it did. According to him, the church was about to embark on a twenty year revival, one which, at the time of his speech, had not ended. The church, despite all the government forces stacked against it, despite the pressures to conform, and despite the intensive propaganda effort to reject their faith in God (for the atheism of communism had not died away), men and women in the Soviet Union held onto their faith and their determination to suffer for a cause which they held so dear.<sup>134</sup>

From S. Bulgakov and the other authors of the *Vekhi*'s eloquent condemnation of the atheism of the intelligentsia, through to the beginning of the 1960s, there was a common theme in the religious history of the Soviet Union. Despite all attempts to destroy the religious faith of the peoples of the Soviet Union, churches had survived. This clash of two diametrically opposed ideologies, the atheism of Communism and the faith of Christianity, certainly caused human suffering and pain, however, neither side had, as of yet, backed down.

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<sup>134</sup> Gerogi Vins, "Advocates in Adversity."

### Chapter Three: Doctrine That Dictated Action

Emerging as a central figure within the Reform Baptist movement in the early 1960s, Georgi Vins became another in a long list of those who, throughout Russian and Soviet history, provided a voice of dissent. Following in the tradition of those in Russia who struggled for an intellectual and spiritual purity according to a Christian definition, Vins laid out a doctrinal path which served as a road map for the political journey upon which he was forced to embark. “The honest road is a hard one,” his mother said in a letter written to him while in prison for his faith. “I am not talking about financial honesty, but spiritual honest, the ability to look directly, to keep the soul from being distorted, to act at no time for personal gain.”<sup>135</sup> Life, and the Soviet regime, forced Georgi Vins into activities and places not necessarily of his choosing and it was his ability to live honestly with his faith and conscience that provided him with the personal strength he needed to remain faithful, not just to himself or his family, but to his God.

In what follows, I will examine the Biblical traditions which formed Vins’s thinking and discuss specific statements of faith and belief that had a direct impact on the daily actions which brought him into conflict with the Soviet regime. Vins held a transcendent, Biblical world view. By this I mean that he believed that man operates under the understanding that there is something which exists in addition to the material world, namely there is a God to whom all men will one day give an account. As I will show, this view at times came into direct conflict with the cosmion of the Soviet system which was predicated on atheism and materialism and which denied any existence of a spiritual realm. In the end, for Vins, these two diametrically opposed world views could not co-exist peacefully. His mother’s call to honesty in action was not lost on the son – but did come with dire consequences.

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<sup>135</sup> Quoted in Georgi Vins, *Three Generations of Suffering*, p. 63.

### 3.1 *The Historical Roots of Vins's Theology*

The story of Georgi Vins and his journey of faith actually began with his grandfather, Jacob Jacovich Wiens (Vins) who was born into a German Mennonite family in Ukraine.<sup>136</sup> At the age of seventeen or eighteen he professed a faith in Jesus Christ and was baptized into the Mennonite Brethren church. He immediately felt the call to preach among Russian nationals. Around the turn of the century, he was able to acquire some theological training in Germany at a seminary associated with the Baptists and from 1905-1911 served as the pastor of a Russian Baptist church in Samara. In 1911, while attending a conference in Philadelphia, he was warned not to return to Russia and remained in North America, preaching among a variety of immigrant communities – Russian, Ukrainian, White Russian, Polish, and German-Mennonite in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan.<sup>137</sup>

In 1919 Jacob Wiens decided to return to his native land as a missionary and traveled to Vladivostok, Siberia. He eventually settled his family in nearby Blagoveschensk, and despite the political turmoil of the times, he was able to preach, witnessing a revival in the Far East.<sup>138</sup> Additionally, because of the influence of his years spent in North America, he introduced what were known in the region as “the Americansky methods.” He organized the Sunday schools<sup>139</sup> and youth groups, as well as introduced street evangelism, distribution of tracts, and the American style of collecting the offering in plates (which increased the church’s income). He also established parliamentary rules for business meetings and eventually helped to create the tradition of each church having one

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<sup>136</sup> For a more complete picture of the history of the Jacob Wiens and his son Peter, see Albert W. Warden, “Jacob J. Wiens: Mission Champion in Freedom and Repression” *Journal of Church and State* (Autumn 1986): 495-514.

<sup>137</sup> Georgi Vins, *Along the Path of Faithfulness*, 1997, no page numbers. This book was initially published in Russian in 1997, but, at this time it is not available in English. However, Vins’s daughter, Lisa Carter, is working on an English translation and his daughter Natasha is editing it, making it available for publication soon. Natasha provided me with a portion of chapter three of the English version, no page numbers are available.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> In an e-mail from Natasha Vins dated 30 May 2008 she indicates that Jacob Wiens introduced the Sunday Schools, the Warden article indicates that Wiens merely reorganized existing structures.

pastor and a board of deacons. We also know that he incorporated dispensationalism as a part of his theological teaching.<sup>140</sup>

Jacob's son, Peter, followed in his father's footsteps. After receiving his theological training at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, Peter returned to the Soviet Union as a missionary in 1926 and assumed the pastorate of the church in Blagoveshchensk while his father moved to nearby Khabarovsk, Siberia. These two men continued to serve together in the Far East until Jacob, because of the political situation, returned to North America in 1928. Since no mention is made of any theological rift between Jacob and his son Peter, and since Peter received his theological training in the United States, it is reasonable to assume that the theological positions and organizational changes made by Jacob are adopted by Peter.

Georgi Vins, though never able to receive seminary training, was the beneficiary of the influence of Godly men who in various ways trained him for the ministry. Although he never met his grandfather and spent very little time with his father, he said that his father's sermon outlines and notes had a great influence on his life.<sup>141</sup> According to his daughter Natasha, prior to the intensified persecution of the 1930s there were many Christian

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<sup>140</sup> While the purpose of this paper is not to present the arguments of dispensational teaching, it is important to understand its basic theological impact. Dispensational theology gained a tremendous following among fundamental, conservative Christians and especially Baptists after I. Scholfield produced what is known as the *Scholfield Reference Bible* which first appeared in 1909 and was later edited in 1917. The classic texts for defining the dispensational movement are Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism*, first published as *Dispensationalism Today* in 1965 and then edited and reissued in 1995, Lewis S. Chafer's *Systematic Theology*, and Alva J. McClain's *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. These texts were unavailable for use in this paper, but, an excellent, brief overview of the movement can be found online in Michael J. Vlach's article, "What is Dispensationalism?" <http://www.theologicalstudies.org/disp.html>. Ernst Reisinger in his article "A History of Dispensationalism in America" <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/journal/fj09/article1.html> provides an opposing view to the previous article and establishes a connection between dispensationalism and the Southern Baptists. A fundamental precept of dispensationalism is a literal interpretation of the Bible, especially as it concerns prophecy in the Old Testament and a belief in a pre-tribulational rapture which precedes the literal thousand year reign of Christ in what is referred to as the Millennium. These teachings, while not overtly mentioned in the documents studied for this thesis, are referred to, especially as it concerns the importance of the inerrancy of Scripture and the belief that those who believe in Jesus Christ will receive their rewards at a later date.

<sup>141</sup> Georgi Vins, "Comments From Georgi Vins," *Fundamentalist Journal*, July/August 1989, p. 38, and "Great Is the Lord's Faithfulness." (sermon preached at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina on 22 March 1989), JS Mack Library, Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina.

magazines in Russia that printed the sermons of Russian pastors and various articles regarding theology and Bible teaching which he was able to study. In addition, he had access to Russian translations of books by Charles Spurgeon, D.L. Moody, R.A. Torrey and other North American, British, or European theologians.<sup>142</sup> But, perhaps most importantly, his first pastor in Kiev took the teenage Vins under his tutelage and mentored him. This pastor had a well-stocked library and gave him much of his theological training.<sup>143</sup> The combination of these influences formed a doctrinal position which was based on fundamental, baptistic principles.<sup>144</sup>

### **3.2 Baptist By Conviction**

Vins is striking in the consistency of his message from the time he surfaced as a leader of the Reform Baptists until his death in 1998. Claiming to be a fundamental Baptist by conviction,<sup>145</sup> Vins spelled out exactly what that meant for himself and the Baptist Union known as the Council of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches (CCEBC). Their seven point statement of faith reads as follows:

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<sup>142</sup> E-mail conversation with Natasha Vins, 14 May 2008.

<sup>143</sup> Natasha Vins, phone interview by author, 31 May 2008, Budapest, Hungary.

<sup>144</sup> In a 1979 speech to the annual National Convention of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC), Vins declares that the Russian Baptists he was in association with were in complete agreement with the principles held by the GARBC, a fundamental loose organization of Baptist churches in the United States founded in 1932 because of the liberalism which had infiltrated the Northern Baptist Convention. Georgi Vins, "Christians in Russia." (speech given at the National Convention of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches in Dayton, Ohio on 25 June 1979), CDR Radio Network, Cedarville University, Cedarville, Ohio.

<sup>145</sup> The following information is taken from the a discussion held 28 May 1979 between Georgi Vins, Eldon H. Pals, the President of the American Council of Christian Churches and Rev. B. Rober Biscoe, Executive Secretary of the American Council of Christian Churches. Rev. Olexa Harbuziuk served as interpreter. The account of this is recorded in the B. Robert Briscoe, ed. *Fundamental News Service* Vol. II No. 4, 1979: 1-4. He later identifies these same seven principles as being the basis for "the brotherhood of Evangelical Baptist Churches since its formation in Russia in 1867" in the opening to "...And Ye Visited Me" A Prisoner Directory of the Evangelical Christian Baptists in the Soviet Union published by the International Representation for the Council of Evangelical Baptist Churches of the Soviet Union, Inc (Elkart, IN, 1984), titled "A Word From Georgi Vins". See also "An Interview with Georgi Vins: The Word of God is Not Bound" *Eternity*, August 1979, pp. 21-23, Daniel E. Gelatt, "Persecuted But Not Forsaken: An Interview with Georgi Vins." *Baptist Bulletin*, March 1981, pp. 11-13, Georgi Vins, "Advocates in Adversity," "Christians in Russia," "Obey God, Don't Count the Cost." *Christianity Today*, 8 October 1982, pp. 48-49, and Merle R. Hull, "Valiant for the Truth." *Baptist Bulletin*, July/August 1979, pp. 8-10. These articles, all based in interviews given by Vins in the months just after his exile, are consistent in their discussion of the theological position of Vins and the fundamental Baptist movement in the Soviet Union. They provide a clear picture of the religious beliefs that became the source of so much conflict, not just within the Baptist community, but also as he struggled with the Soviet government.

1. The absolute authority of the Bible in all aspects of Christian life and belief.
2. The absolute and full freedom of conscience.
3. Separation of church and state.
4. Spiritual birth of all members of the church.
5. Baptism of adult believers only.
6. The priesthood of all believers.
7. The complete autonomy of the local church.<sup>146</sup>

These ideas, sometimes referred to as Baptist distinctives served as his guide in all areas of life.

Point number one, an axiom for fundamentalism and Bible-believing Christians, is the complete authority of Scripture – all of the other Baptist distinctives flow from this conviction. For Vins, the Bible was completely without error and to be trusted as a guide in every area of life. In each case where he mentioned specific Scripture verses, he assumed them to be true and developed a pattern of behavior based on that particular teaching. Using I Corinthians 4: 2, “Moreover it is required of stewards, that a man be found faithful,” as a pattern for living, Vins believed that in every action, whether it was political or not, he must remain true to God’s Word.<sup>147</sup> If the Scriptures were true, then proselytizing, or evangelizing, as Vins preferred to say, was a vital component of his outlook. For the Reform Baptist of the Soviet Union, Biblical authority “reflects in their very warm love for Jesus Christ and their desire to dedicate themselves to serving people and taking the gospel light to those who are perishing.”<sup>148</sup>

Not only did Vins believe the Bible to be the sole authority on all issues of life, but, the Word of God maintained a central feature in his conversations and work. He was an

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<sup>146</sup> These seven items are in fact traditional Baptist distinctives, not just for Russian or Eastern European Baptists, but for the movement worldwide. For a more detailed discussion of history of Baptist belief in general see H. Leon McBeth *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987) and Ernest Pickering *Biblical Separation* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1979). For a brief overview of the historical Baptist position see “Distinctive Baptist Principles” written by B. H. Carroll in 1913, [http://www.geocities.com/baptist\\_documents/carroll.bapt.distinctives.html](http://www.geocities.com/baptist_documents/carroll.bapt.distinctives.html). For a more detailed discussion of the history of the Stundist and their relationship to the Baptist movement in Russia and the Soviet Union see Hans Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty*.

<sup>147</sup> Vins, “Christians in Russia.”

<sup>148</sup> Gelatt, p. 12.

active participant in the illegal printing and distribution of Bibles.<sup>149</sup> Often in his exile in the West, he recounted stories of just how important the Bible was to him. In one story, he told of his final days in prison in 1979. Placed into a cell with twenty murderers, the men questioned Vins's claim that his only crime was that of being a Christian. So, the prisoners challenged him to produce a Bible. To their astonishment, Vins was able to show them a copy of the Gospel of Mark that he had been able to hide from the authorities for the last five years. Vins, exhausted from the events of the previous few days slept while his cellmates sat on the floor and read the Gospel of Mark all night long. None of them had ever seen a copy of the Bible before. They were fascinated by its contents and in the morning had many questions for him.

After a week with these men, Vins was being transferred again to where he thought he would finish his prison sentence in Siberia, but the men begged him to leave his copy of the Scripture with them. Not wanting to lose the only copy he had, he struggled with the request before finally giving in and leaving the Gospel of Mark with the prisoners. He did not know it at the time, but ten days later, rather than being back in Siberia, he found himself in the United States where even in his hotel room, he was able to find a copy of the Bible. However, he needed a Russian Bible, so one was brought to him in the middle of the night and in the press conference the next morning, he stood before the press and announced that he was the most fortunate of all men – he had his own Bible.<sup>150</sup>

Points two, three, and seven in this doctrinal statement can be handled together because they ultimately stem from the same ideas. According to Vins, Christ is the head of the Church and no one has the authority to “dictate or interfere with the function of the

<sup>149</sup> Les Strobbe, “A Conversation With Pastor Georgi Vins.” *Christian Herald*, July/August 1980, p. 19.

<sup>150</sup> A description of his prison experience is recounted by Georgi Vins in “Chapel Message” (sermon preached at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina on 13 October 1981) and “The Exceeding Greatness of His Power” (sermon preached at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina on 21 February 1986), JS Mack Library, Bob Jones University, Greenville South Carolina. The astonishment at finding a Bible in his hotel room upon his arrival in the United States is recounted in “Georgi Vins: ‘My Way is a Special One.’” p. 18.

church.”<sup>151</sup> Just as the state has no right to dictate to the church, it also has no authority over a man’s personal beliefs – there is no need for an intermediary of any kind between God and the individual. Therefore, when individuals agree to join together in worship, the state has no right to impose standards that are a matter of faith on a local congregation.

At his trial in 1966 he was given the chance to defend himself, and in the process provided a very clear and practical understanding of what separation of church and state, freedom of conscience and the autonomy of the local church meant for him. He says:

We believers have a great love and respect for freedom. We respect the freedom of local churches and of individual members. The Council of Churches [CCECB] has no power to command or give orders... I consider it wrong for the “experts” to intervene in the sphere of theology. These matters are not subject to court jurisdiction and the prosecutor is right in saying that he doesn’t want to interfere in the realm of our faith. I don’t claim that he hasn’t been doing just this, but it’s correct to say that there should be no interference in matters of belief. We say that the church should be subordinate only to Christ, and that is why we are being blamed... The local congregations are a different matter. They may be registered and their executive body, being in charge of economic problems (property and building), may be controlled by the State. The congregation itself, however, as a Church, must be subordinate to Christ alone...<sup>152</sup>

Twenty three years after the statements, Vins again addressed the issues of separation of church and state and freedom of conscience. At a speech given to a group of college students, he summarized Christ’s instructions on paying taxes<sup>153</sup> by saying that man must give to Caesar ONLY what belongs to Caesar, the rest belongs to God.<sup>154</sup> This, Vins added, was the principle by which believers in the Soviet Union lived.<sup>155</sup> The question then became how to make a clear distinction between what belonged to Caesar and what belonged to God.

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<sup>151</sup> “An Interview with Georgi Vins” p. 22, Georgi Vins, “Christians in Russia,” and “Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost.” p. 48.

<sup>152</sup> Quoted in Bourdeaux, *Faith on Trial in Russia*, pp. 119-121.

<sup>153</sup> Matthew 22: 18-21.

<sup>154</sup> The word “only” does not appear in the original text. Vins used the word for emphasis; it did not change the meaning of Christ’s words. The principle of being obedient to the government remained intact. In his article, “Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost,” p. 49, he again quotes this verse leaving out the word “only.”

<sup>155</sup> Georgi Vins, “Great Is the Lord’s Faithfulness.”

The classic Scripture passage relating to issues of the believers relationship to the state is found in Romans 13. In this chapter, the Apostle Paul instructed the believers in Rome to be obedient to the God-ordained government. The problem for believers in the Soviet Union was one of interpretation of this passage. The chapter opens with these instructions, “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.”<sup>156</sup> How the words, “every soul” should be defined is at the heart of the problem. Was Paul referring to the individual in his civic life, or, could this also mean the corporate body of a local assembly of believers?

Vins answered this question with the following words:

We [Reform Baptists] believe that this instruction to the soul, or person, is not referring to the church. So as citizens we are to obey civil government so long as its laws do not conflict with God’s laws. But in spiritual matters, only Jesus Christ is Lord of the church. The government has no right to instruct the church in spiritual matters, and the Bible-believing Christian has no responsibility to obey it in these areas.<sup>157</sup>

His view that the individual, and not the church, was subject to temporal authority was at the heart of his disagreement with the AUCECB, who according to him, saw all government authority, even the KGB, as divinely appointed and, therefore, to be obeyed. Vins argued that this should not be the case, that government, including the KGB, had no place in church affairs. He did admit that God had allowed the Soviet regime to exist and he clearly stated that he, and the Reform Baptists, did not preach or teach anything against the government. However, they desired that the two inhabit clearly separate realms of existence.<sup>158</sup>

If a literal interpretation of the Bible is followed, something which Vins and all Baptists in the Soviet Union adhered to, then his interpretation of this passage of Scripture is correct. Despite the fact that the book of Romans was written to a church, the context of

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<sup>156</sup> Romans 13: 1 (NKJV).

<sup>157</sup> Georgi Vins, “Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost,” pp. 48-49.

<sup>158</sup> Georgi Vins, “Advocates in Adversity,” “Great is the Lord’s Faithfulness,” and “Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost,” p. 49.

Romans 13 is a discussion of the individual's responsibilities. In the preceding chapter Paul is teaching on both the use of spiritual gifts by each person and the individual's behavior towards one another. It follows logically then, that when Paul said "Let every soul," he was continuing on with the same discussion of individual behavior. There is no evidence in the text that this passage applied to the corporate church body.

This controversy highlights an important distinctive for Vins and the Reform Baptists; freedom of conscience. According to this principle, no individual, organization or government has the right to tell another what to believe, or to compel someone to follow a church hierarchy's extra-Biblical edicts. The Gospels are full of examples where Christ implored an individual or group to follow him, Matthew 16: 24-25 being just one example, but at no time did Jesus ever use force to emphasize His message. Additionally, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the individual is entrusted with the right to go to the Scriptures and determine for himself its meaning,<sup>159</sup> keeping in mind that every one will give an account of himself to God.<sup>160</sup> As Vins said in his trial statements quoted earlier, neither the CCECB nor the courts had the right to interfere in someone's understanding of theology. The Bible, then, remains the sole authority in one's life; however, each individual must remain free to choose their own interpretation without fear of reprisal by temporal authority. This is what Vins and the CCECB fought for.

Two of the final three elements in the Baptist statement of faith, a saved church membership and priesthood of the believer did not appear to run into conflict with Soviet authorities and therefore do not require further examination. However, the final position, believer's baptism, did at times create difficulty for Vins and the Reform Baptists. Historically, believer's baptism referred to the total immersion of the individual after a

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<sup>159</sup> See John 16: 12-15 and I Corinthians 2: 10-12. In these passages Christ and the Apostle Paul respectively are instructing the believers on the Holy Spirit's role of instruction.

<sup>160</sup> Romans 14: 12.

conversion experience.<sup>161</sup> Stating that “Baptism is very significant for us,” Vins discussed the process each candidate had to go through before being baptized. “The young man or girl stands in front of the congregation and any church member can ask questions about their faith and about their walk with God.<sup>162</sup> The entire church must be satisfied that this person is really saved and understands what it means to follow Christ.”<sup>163</sup>

Among the Reform Baptists, a conversion experience was never encouraged in a young child. The decision to follow Christ came with potentially grave consequences in the Soviet Union and therefore, in many cases involving young people, the usual pattern was for a person in their mid-teens, once they came to an age where they could understand the implications of their choice, to accept Christ and then after a time of examination, an individual was baptized. Vins, after coming to the United States, had a hard time understanding the American willingness to accept a conversion experience and subsequent baptism of a child often as young as four or five. His feeling was that the child did not have a true understanding of the implications of his actions.<sup>164</sup>

This willingness in the Reform Baptist churches to allow a young person to think about the cost of becoming a Christian before making a commitment to Christ must have had a direct impact on the vibrancy of these churches. Fifty percent of the membership of the CCECB was comprised of people between the ages of eighteen and thirty whereas, according to Vins, the registered churches were made up of mostly old women.<sup>165</sup> This had to have caused great concern for governmental authorities as well; religion in the unregistered churches was not dying out despite the prison sentences, beatings, and

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<sup>161</sup> McBeth, p. 2.

<sup>162</sup> This term “walk with God” is commonly used in Christian circles to refer to an individual’s commitment to continually aligning their actions and attitudes to Christ’s teachings, a process known as sanctification.

<sup>163</sup> “It Came to the Soviet Union – Revival: Can it Come to the United States? An Interview with Georgi Vins.” *Prisoner Bulletin*, Autumn 1989, p 12.

<sup>164</sup> Natasha Vins, phone interview.

<sup>165</sup> Georgi Vins, “Obey God, Don’t Count the Costs,” p. 49.

disruption of services. Rather, a new generation was rising up and proving that they were willing to follow Christ despite the costs.

### 3.3 *The Centrality of Christ*

Also central to the theological position of Georgi Vins was his understanding of the role that Christ plays in the life of a believer. In the speeches and interviews he gave after being exiled to the United States, he makes constant reference either to his love and service to Jesus Christ or his belief in the deity of Christ.<sup>166</sup> However, it was in his autobiographical work, *Testament From Prison*, that he clearly delineated the centrality of Christ. “Man needs Christ” are the opening words in the introduction to several brief biographies of Russian Christians contained within the book. He went on to say that “only Christ grants real meaning to our present life and the unshakable foundation for our future eternal life, the beginning of which is here on earth through faith in the Son of God.”<sup>167</sup> The essay titled “Jesus Christ, The Center of All Existence” which is reprinted in this section of his book clearly spells out not only the role that Christ should play in the life of a believer, but, also serves to showcase why Vins and those who were of like faith had to come into conflict with the atheism of the Soviet regime and, therefore, deserves closer examination.<sup>168</sup>

In this essay, the role of Christ is divided into three categories: moral, historical, and cosmological. The importance of Christ as a moral figure is rooted in His relationship with the Father; everything Christ did centered around this, “The moral union of Christ with God the Father at every moment of His life was so firm, so unshakable and complete, that He truly realized in His own person the idea of religion, whose purpose is precisely this –

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<sup>166</sup> Gelett, p. 12, “Georgi Vins: Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost.” p. 49, “It Came to the Soviet Union – Revival: Can it Come to the United States?,” p. 11, and Strobbe, p. 19.

<sup>167</sup> Georgi Vins, *Testament From Prison*, trans. Jane Ellis, ed. Michael Bourdeaux (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook, 1975), p. 123.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 184-196. This essay is a paper written by Pavel Datsko and read to a group of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Leningrad in 1926. Even though Vins did not author this document, his inclusion of it in this section of his autobiography certainly underscores his agreement with its ideas and sentiments.

complete union with God.”<sup>169</sup> Christ is holy, and since He is in complete union with God, when man is confronted with His character, it demands that the individual bow his knee in submission, wonderment, and awe. As perfection, Christ then, by His example, has inspired mankind to follow Him, for “He remains an inexhaustible source of example, and object for the highest aspirations of the human spirit.”<sup>170</sup> Since man can trust Christ as the ultimate source for imitation, they are exhorted to turn from the enticements of the world and follow Christ.

Christ serves not just as the ultimate guide for man’s moral behavior; He is the fulfillment of history. The birth of Christ came in the midst of a Roman world which was struggling to establish a single government that could unite people worldwide. Christ came at the end of the Roman republic, at time when men such as Pompey, Antony, and Julius Caesar had struggled to solidify their power – but in reality acted as “the heralds and the forerunners of Him who was to establish His power in the future and make it a lasting possession of His house.”<sup>171</sup> In other words, Christ came and established Himself as the future ruler, the One who was capable of fulfilling the ancient prophecies of Daniel, the coming of the Kingdom of God. Entering into a world full of depravity, when freedom had given way to despotism, Christ came to show the world a better way. And in doing so, He married Himself to human history, placing Himself in the center. “Christ in his spiritual greatness towers above all human leaders, teachers and founders of religion... He is the center of world history.”<sup>172</sup>

The author of this essay closes with Christ as the center of creation. Relying on a quotation by the Apostle Paul found in Colossians 1: 15-17 which describes Christ not only as the author of all creation, but the One who continues to hold the universe together, Christ

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* p. 187.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p. 189.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* p. 190.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.* p. 193.

is clearly made the central figure not just for mankind's existence, but for the continued sustainability of the universe:

The grandeur of creation speaks to us of a great, eternal power, and the rule of law throughout the universe bears witness to a mighty intellect, beyond our understanding, from whom all proceeded, by whom all is preserved, and for whom all things exist. It would be futile to look for some unmoving material center of a boundless and infinite universe, going out toward a shoreless ocean of eternity... But without a center which would regulate the equilibrium of these worlds, the existence of a universe is unthinkable... such a center truly exists: its name is the Word of God, which is Christ. He is the center of all existence!<sup>173</sup>

Man, then, when confronted with the greatness of the majesty of Creation is forced to once again stand in reverence and awe of this figure who so completely dominates every aspect of mankind's finite existence.

The focus of this essay, a transcendent Creator who deserves man's trust and worship is the complete antithesis of the communist ideal that S. Bulgakov somewhat sarcastically referred to as the "God-manhood" or the "New Man" which Stalin hoped to create. In explaining the role of Christ by dividing his work into these three categories the author struck at the heart communist ideology. The morality of Christ inspires the individual's personal conscience to respond with holiness, but the key here is that it is an individual response. In communist ideology, the individual is subordinate to the collective, to class consciousness.<sup>174</sup> In proclaiming Christ to be the "Center of world history," there is an attack on the historical materialism that was such a part of Marxist-Leninism. And finally, if Christ is the Creator and sustainer of all things, then science and the process of evolution which is at the heart of atheism must be false.

Did the writer of this essay intend to, in a veiled way, make a clear attack on the ideology which had overtaken his much of his country's leadership in the 1920s? That is difficult to say, however, as Shatz observed, Russia had a long history of using literature to

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.* p. 195.

<sup>174</sup> As discussed in chapter one, the concept of class was central to the idea of Soviet citizenship. The individual citizen, by the time Stalin had developed the ideas of the "New Man" became subordinate to the group.

express opinions which would have been otherwise unacceptable to the censors and the various regimes.<sup>175</sup> Regardless of motivation, the fact remains that the essay established a clear contrast between the ideology of the regime and a Christian world view. It is difficult to see a way in which these two fundamentally different outlooks could ever be reconciled.

### ***3.4 Suffering Saint or Martyr?***

One of the main criticisms leveled against Pastor Vins was his tendency to paint himself as a martyr for the cause of Christ. The Soviet press picked up on this theme and used it to accuse members of the *Initsiativniki*<sup>176</sup> of self-serving motives. Even Aleksei Bichkov, former Baptist General Secretary of the AUCECB accused Vins of having a martyr complex.<sup>177</sup> The use of this term martyr, a designation which implies a willingness, even the seeking out of the opportunity to suffer and/or die, often times for political gain, was a highly charged word designed, it seemed, to imply a less than righteous motivation on the part of Vins and those who agreed with him.

Vins himself painted a far different picture. In the introduction to his autobiography which was initially published under the title *Three Generations of Suffering*, he made the following statement, “This is an ordinary chronicle of a normal Christian family, one of the many thousands in our country. Persecution, prison, and exile for their faith have become a way of life for the Christians of Russia.”<sup>178</sup> Indeed, Georgi’s father died at the hands of the Stalin purges in the 1930s, Vins’s mother, age 63 at the time of her arrest, was imprisoned for three years for her role with the Council for Prisoners Relatives in the early 1970s.<sup>179</sup> And even Georgi’s seven year old son, when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up

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<sup>175</sup> Shatz, p. 114.

<sup>176</sup> Bourdeaux in *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 157 lists several examples from the Soviet press where the Reform Baptists were accused of looking to become martyrs and in the Appendix to his book *Faith on Trial in Russia* he reprints a portion of an article written by I. Brazhnik and published in *Science and Religion* December 1969, pp. 54-57 in which Brazhnik accuses the *Initsiativniki* of “striving for martyrdom,” p. 185.

<sup>177</sup> “A Prophet in Peril,” *Time Magazine*, 27 January 1975,  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,912783-1,00.html>.

<sup>178</sup> Georgi Vins, *Testament From Prison*, p. 32.

<sup>179</sup> Barbara Hitching, “Valiant in Life and Death,” *Moody*, November 1985, p. 63,

responded, “I’m going to be a prisoner.”<sup>180</sup> It did seem as though the Vins family was destined to suffer for their faith.

As with everything else in his life, Pastor Vins had a Biblical response to the call of the Christian to suffer for the cause of Christ. Remember, to Vins, every action was predicated on an unalterable belief in the truth of the Bible. If the New Testament recognized that believers would suffer in this world, so be it; it was not for him to challenge the Word of God. In discussing specific cases of persecution, Vins used the case of Galina Vilchinskaya as an example of Biblical suffering. Galina was imprisoned at the age of twenty-two for three years for, according to Vins, teaching a Sunday School class. At her trial she said, “God is our defender! Jesus Christ said, ‘Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you’ .... ‘If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you...’ I will remain a Christian, faithful to the Lord and His people!”<sup>181</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, Vins even recounted with an almost fondness the years in prison, claiming that those years were the best years of his life spiritually because he was forced to trust Christ more.<sup>182</sup>

The suffering saint, as he saw himself, or the political martyr, as his detractors implied – which best reflected the life of Georgi Vins? While I can certainly understand the justification Vins’s critics use for their accusation of martyrdom, especially when a young child declares himself prepared to be a prisoner if need be, I do not believe that Vins actively sought this type of recognition. Ultimately though, I believe the criticism to be unfair because it deflected blame away from where it belonged. Soviet laws, by denying the rights guaranteed under the 1918 Constitution, and the long-term government harassment of

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<sup>180</sup> John Kenyon, “We Welcome our Brothers Freed From Soviet Prisons,” *Christian Herald*, July/August 1979, p. 7.

<sup>181</sup> Quoted in Gelatt, p. 12. In this excerpt she quotes Christ’s words as found in Matt. 5: 10, the Sermon on the Mount, and Jn. 15: 20, the last set of instructions Christ gives to His disciples before His arrest and crucifixion.

<sup>182</sup> “It Came to the Soviet Union – Revival: Can it Come to the United States?,” p. 11.

the Vins family and the Reform Baptists who only sought the right to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience, created the environment where generations of Vins family saw no other alternative but to suffer for Christ.

This mindset presented an acute problem for the Soviet government. How do you deal with citizens who are willing to go to prison and even die for a cause they believe to be true? As has been shown, in the ebb and flow of Soviet leadership and policy regarding religion, there was not a consistently enforced policy in regards to religion. Yet, as Emil Yaroslavsky, former head of the League of Militant Atheists said, “Religion is like a nail – the harder you hit it on the head, the deeper it goes into the wood.”<sup>183</sup> Even G.Z. Anashkin, former President of the Criminal Division of the USSR Supreme Court recognized that the religious persecution served only to “reinforce religious fanaticism” and only furthered the resolve of those who had suffered persecution.<sup>184</sup>

The regime was faced with a great dilemma, especially as has been shown, during the Khrushchev years. There was an intense determination to stamp out religion in the Soviet Union, yet, in these efforts they found themselves up against an immovable force – a doctrine which promised heavenly rewards for earthly faithfulness. Two very different world views came into conflict and neither side proved willing to compromise.

### ***3.5 Biblical Separation and the Implications for Citizenship***

One final element of Pastor Vins’s doctrinal position relevant to this discussion was his position on the issue of separation. In fundamental Baptist circles, there are two forms of separation, ecclesiastical and personal.<sup>185</sup> Ecclesiastical separation refers to the idea that local congregations must not have fellowship with other churches that are not of like faith

<sup>183</sup> Quoted in Berman, *Russians in Focus*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>184</sup> Quoted in Berman, *Reconciliation of Law and Religion*, p. 363.

<sup>185</sup> For an excellent discussion of the fundamental Baptist position on this see Ernest Pickering’s book *Biblical Separation*.

and conviction. This became part of the basis for Vins and the *Initiativniki* splitting from the AUCECB and forming the CCECB.

Claiming that the AUCECB had become too closely tied to the atheistic Soviet government, and especially the KGB, Vins and those who believed as he did, decided to form their own union in 1965, the CCECB, therefore breaking fellowship with the major Baptist organization in the Soviet Union.<sup>186</sup> Acknowledging that most of the believers in the AUCECB were fundamental, believed the Bible to be God's Word and held to a belief in the deity of Christ, he stated that the real reason for their separation was an opposing view on the principle of separation of church and state.<sup>187</sup> An article printed in *Bratsky Listok* (Fraternal Leaflet) celebrating the four year anniversary of the split with the AUCECB made the following statement:

The Lord himself raised up this movement [Reform Baptists] for the unity, purity and sanctity of his church. This blessed movement does not strive to establish new doctrine or to accomplish a reformation. Its aim is to purify, sanctify and unite all God's people on the basis of gospel teachings.<sup>188</sup>

Not only did Vins and the *Initiativniki* see the need to break fellowship with the established Baptist churches, but Vins was a supporter of the idea of personal separation as well. Finding its roots in the call of the Apostle Peter to be holy,<sup>189</sup> a term meaning to be separate from sin, as well as the teaching of the Apostle Paul which states that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit<sup>190</sup> the early church saw the need to distance themselves from

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<sup>186</sup> "Georgi Vins: Obey God, Don't Count the Cost," p. 48.

<sup>187</sup> Gelatt, p. 12.

<sup>188</sup> "Rejoice All Who Stand True in the Lord!" *Bratsky Listok* (Fraternal Leaflet) 7 July 1965. Quoted in Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 150. This article was not written by Georgi Vins, however, *Bratsky Listok* was a publication of the underground printing press which was operated by the Reform Baptists and certainly reflected the views of Vins. Further proof of Vins's approval of the contents of *Bratsky Listok* can be found in the fact that he quotes from this publication while giving testimony before the United States Congress in 1979. "Testimony of G.P. Vins to the Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe." 7 June 1979. Missionswerk Friedenstimme der Vereinigung Heimgekehrter Evangelischer Baptisten Brüdergemeinden e.V, Köln.

<sup>189</sup> I Peter 1: 16.

<sup>190</sup> I Corinthians 3: 16.

much of the Roman culture that was considered ungodly. This idea was summed up by the Apostle John and his instruction to “love not the world or the things in the world.”<sup>191</sup>

While a few behaviors, like immorality and adultery were expressly forbidden in Scripture, other actions, especially those which due to new inventions and changes in technology, could not be dealt with in the New Testament. However, fundamental Christians have tended to identify several popular activities as worldly and contrary to Christ-like behavior based on the above mentioned New Testament principles. Divorce and remarriage when both individuals were Christians was not allowed in the Russian Baptist churches, and on the rare occasion where this happened, the members were disciplined and removed from the church fellowship.<sup>192</sup> In addition, Vins was clear about the high moral standards expected among the church members. Smoking, drinking of alcohol, attending movies, and modern dancing were all seen to be contrary to New Testament teaching and therefore not to be a part of the life of a believer.<sup>193</sup>

The consequences of this belief in personal separation were noted in the Soviet press. Speaking of the Reform Baptists, one writer assessed the potential danger of these ideas:

Active participation in the building of communism, in social life, the striving to acquire culture and knowledge which lead a significant proportion of believers away from religion, are all assessed in different ways in these movements [groups which have left the AUCECB] within the sect. Some consider these things to be merely a natural process which cannot be avoided. Others, however, demand that stricter rules be introduced which would, in their view, weaken the influence of Soviet conditions on believers. They demand that no one should be allowed to go to the cinema or theatre, listen to the radio or watch television, and that they should not read soviet literature, and so on...<sup>194</sup>

<sup>191</sup> I John 2: 15 (NKJV)

<sup>192</sup> “It Came to the Soviet Union – Revival: Can it Come to the United States?,” p. 11.

<sup>193</sup> Hull, p. 9. It should be noted here that Vins is not unique in his convictions. These same activities were commonly frowned upon in fundamental Baptist circles in the United States in the same era, especially in churches in the Mid-West and the South. My own grandfather, a Baptist preacher for over sixty years and a friend of Merle Hull, the man who conducted this interview with Georgi Vins, preached the same ideas throughout his life.

<sup>194</sup> Fedorenko, *Sekty, ikh vera I dela*, p. 167. Quoted in Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, p. 140.

To some, this refusal to allow participation in a variety of activities deemed necessary for the continued indoctrination of communistic ideas, or as Vins often said, atheistic principles, was in effect destroying the state's ability to uphold the ideals of Soviet citizenship. This conflict between communist ideology and the convictions of Vins serves as one clear example of the problem posed at the outset of this thesis; could a Christian be a good citizen of the Soviet Union? I do not believe that in every case the answer is in the negative. However, in this area of personal separation the believer often found it impossible to enthusiastically participate in actions which he interpreted as contrary to Biblical teaching.

### **3.6 No Condemnation**

Despite Fletcher's discussion of the Russian Baptists tendency towards apocalyptic thinking<sup>195</sup> and I. Brazhnik's recognition of the Reform Baptists as having an "extreme eschatological outlook [and] delirious expectations of the near end of the world and the Last Judgment,"<sup>196</sup> discussions of eschatology are lacking in the material surveyed for this thesis. What is interesting is that not once was there any direct reference made to anything regarding what many call the Great Tribulation period, the anti-Christ, or any Divine judgment that God will bring down upon the earth.<sup>197</sup> In discussions regarding the deity of Christ, Vins was clear that he believed in Christ's imminent return,<sup>198</sup> in fundamental, dispensational circles this is known as the pre-tribulational rapture. However, at no time did

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<sup>195</sup> Fletcher, "Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen" pp. 78-79.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted in Bourdeaux, *Faith on Trial in Russia*, p. 185.

<sup>197</sup> Here the term is used to refer to a literal seven year period in which God will bring judgment on the earth. In the tradition of dispensational theology the order of events goes as follows: the Rapture of the Church (the removal of all those who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior) will take place. Then, in the ensuing days the Tribulation will begin, signaled by the revealing of the anti-Christ. According to the book of Revelation this is a period of extreme judgment for the sins of the world. Following this time of judgment, Christ returns to the earth, defeats Satan and the anti-Christ at the battle of Armageddon and ushers in the literal 1,000 year Millennium. It is this Millennium which is referred to as the Kingdom of God in the essay, "Jesus Christ, the Center of All Existence."

<sup>198</sup> "It Came to the Soviet Union – Revival: Can it Come to the United States?" p. 11.

Vins mention a coming judgment in which Christ rights the wrongs done to those suffering under the militant atheism of the Soviet Union.<sup>199</sup>

After taking a broader look at the doctrinal statements of Georgi Vins, a clear picture of how he viewed the world can be seen. He was a man whose affections were set towards a reality unseen by the Soviet authorities. Believing the Bible to be his sole guide in all matters, he did at times find himself in conflict with a regime which set itself up as the arbiter of mankind's happiness. Not needing to find comfort and safety in this world because of the reality of the next, Vins proved willing, if needed, to endure persecution and hardship while on his journey of faithfulness to Christ. In the end, his desire to remain true to his convictions did force him into acts of disobedience to the state, not in an effort to make a political statement, but to live honestly according to his beliefs.

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<sup>199</sup> In chapter four, in a discussion on atheism, I mention that Vins does describe the Soviet regime as the “throne of godlessness and atheism.” This could be interpreted by some as a veiled reference to the anti-Christ, or Satan as the ruler of this world. However, in the speech where this statement is made, Vins does not elaborate further and therefore, any political undertones are unclear.

## Chapter Four: A World View That Required Civil Disobedience

At first glance, it is easy to question Vins on his assertion that he was a man of peace and not politics. How could a man who spent eight years in prison and another seven in hiding, played a role in what at the time was one of the biggest demonstrations in Soviet history,<sup>200</sup> co-authored petitions sent to Soviet leaders<sup>201</sup> and was a part of a ministry which could be considered one of the first human rights organizations in the Soviet Union<sup>202</sup> not be considered politically active? Convinced that the Bible provided all the answers needed for successful Christian living, Vins was articulate and consistent in his ability to justify exactly when and where the Christian ought to become involved in politics and when a believer must make the decision to obey God rather than government regulations. As I will show, for Vins, his political activities were justified by his Biblical convictions. When it came to matters involving the freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state, Biblical directives dictated confrontation with temporal authority.

In the American press, Georgi Vins was often referred to as a Russian dissident<sup>203</sup> because his actions brought him into conflict with the Soviet regime.<sup>204</sup> In many ways, it does seem as if the term fit him. In the tradition of so many others in the Soviet Union who

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<sup>200</sup> On 16 May 1966, 500 Reformed Baptists delegates from 130 areas in the Soviet Union gather in Moscow to present a petition addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party requesting that they be allowed to hold a congress of representatives, legal recognition of the CCECB, an end to religious persecution, and end to state interference in church matters, and the release of all Christians presently in prison because of their faith. Soviet authorities broke up the demonstration and jailed the demonstrators. On 19 May, Vins, despite being blacklisted by the Soviet authorities, and another man walked into the Central Committee building to determine what had happened to the demonstrators, some of whom had come from his church in Kiev. This act led to his arrest and first prison term. For a full recounting of these events, see Bourdeaux, *Faith on Trial in Russia*, pp. 9-16.

<sup>201</sup> Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, pp. 105-113. In this excerpt the letter to L. I. Brezhnev is reprinted in its entirety.

<sup>202</sup> Georgi Vins, "Christians in Russia." Bourdeaux in *Faith on Trial in Russia*, p. 97 asserts that the All-Union Conference of Baptist Prisoners' Relatives, and the subsequent organization of which Vins's mother Lydia headed, was the first of its kind in the Soviet Union and paved the way for the human rights movement which emerged later in the decade.

<sup>203</sup> Philip Boobbyer in *Conscience, Dissent and Reform in Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), p. 75 makes the point that the term dissident is problematical and does not adequately reflect all the activities of those who found themselves in opposition to the Soviet government in the 1960s and 1970s. However, for lack of a better term, I will briefly use it here.

<sup>204</sup> Gelatt, p. 11, "Georgi Vins: My Way Is a Special One," p. 18, Hull, p. 8, Kenyon, p. 6, and Stobbe, p. 19.

were labeled in the same way, Vins was deeply concerned with morality, truth and honesty – constant themes among the “dissident culture” in the Soviet Union. The fight for true freedom of conscience, so important to other dissidents, also played a central role in Vins’s struggles with the Soviet regime, although he attached a more specifically Biblically-based meaning to the term. This, coupled with Vins’s appeals for the rule of law to be maintained in religious matters, situated him squarely within the broader dissident movement.<sup>205</sup>

But, Vins never called himself a dissident and appeared to have thought of himself only as an individual who must remain faithful to Christ. Somehow, to refer to him using this label implies motives far more temporal than those to which he aspired. Yet, whichever term best applied to this man – pastor, prisoner, or advocate, one thing remains clear; due to his conscience, he did find himself in opposition to the Soviet government.

#### ***4.1 Identifying the Ideological Enemy***

As has already been shown, when Khrushchev assumed power, he instituted a renewed campaign against religion. *Pravada* on 2 March 1964 made the following statements regarding this campaign which are extremely helpful for understanding Georgi Vins’s position:

Now that the building of communism has been broadly undertaken... the Party has put into its programme the task of fully and completely overcoming religious prejudices...

The resolution of this problem, as set out by N.S. Khrushchev at the XXII Congress of the CPSU, envisages the elaboration of concrete measures to establish a system of atheist education and in every way to strengthen the programme of scientific atheism.

The ideological commission of the Central Committee of the CPSU has devoted an augmented session to the questions of forming a scientific world outlook for Soviet people, giving them an atheist education and creating a scientific system of atheist

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<sup>205</sup> Boobbyer, pp. 76-77. The letter to Brezhnev, at that time president of the commission on the Constitution, Vins co-authored with Kryuchkov in April 1965. These men implored the committee to secure religious freedom in the drafting of a new constitution and show a mastery of the legal history of religious matters in both Russian and Soviet history. Vins and Kryuchkov make a solid case for a true understanding of separation of church and state as it existed in the Soviet Union under the laws established in 1918. A complete translation of this appeal can be found in Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, pp. 105-113. Portions of the letter were quoted in chapter one of this thesis.

activity. L.F. Ilichov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, in his speech, and the participants at this meeting discussed the question of atheist education from all angles. The practical recommendations worked out by the ideological commission have been approved by a decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU, "Measures to strengthen the atheist education of the people."

Party organizations, ideological institutes, *Soviets*, trade unions, the *Komsomol* and creative organizations now have a concrete plan of action which, when operated, will allow religious survivals to be very successfully overcome.<sup>206</sup>

The picture of atheism provided here is one of an active ideology which was still struggling to overcome the religious nature of the people. There can be little doubt that the Soviet government in the 1960s had embarked on an active campaign designed to strike at the heart of those who still held religious inclinations.

Vins had no qualms about defining his struggles as a fight against atheism, or as he often said, militant atheism,<sup>207</sup> reflecting the fact that he identified this ongoing battle as a conflict of ideologies, not personalities or institutions. Although, as I will show, when speaking to American audiences it did, on occasion, prove difficult for him to separate the ideology from the individual. Writing in his memoirs just days before his trial in November 1966, Vins reflected on the fact that he knew his trial would not be a fair one; "Atheism," he wrote, "invested with power, creates tyranny."<sup>208</sup> In a portion of the transcript of his 1974 trial, Vins, described why he was rejecting the composition of the court which was putting him on trial. He asserted that the court was one-sided and that in reality, atheism which held all the judicial power, was in fact judging the Bible and Christianity.<sup>209</sup>

However, it was in the interviews and speeches given upon his arrival in the United States that Vins was able to clearly articulate his position. In a brief conversation printed in the July/August 1979 edition of the *Christian Herald*, Vins made the following simple,

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<sup>206</sup> Quoted in Minority Rights Group, *Religious Minorities in the Soviet Union (1960-1970)* (United Kingdom: Minority Rights Group) pp. 4-5.

<sup>207</sup> Richard Greene, "Vins Criticizes Billy Graham." *Chattanooga New-Free Press* (Tennessee), 27 September 1982.

<sup>208</sup> Georgi Vins, *Testament From Prison*, p. 66.

<sup>209</sup> "The Trial of Georgi Vins," p. 43. This article is actually a reprint of a transcript of the trial created by Vins's mother, Lydia. She was able to tape-record her comments of the five day trial and deliver them to a correspondent working for *Christianity Today*.

concise statement which, I believe, summarized his position, “All believers in the Soviet Union belong to one family. We only have one enemy, and that is atheism.”<sup>210</sup> This assertion was repeated in a similar fashion in the August 1979 issue of *Eternity*, which was a published interview, where Vins, when asked about the current difficulties for believers in Russia, responded that the persecution believers faced was due to the fact that they lived “in a country that doesn’t acknowledge God.”<sup>211</sup>

On 7 June 1979, Georgi Vins testified before the US Congress. In his opening, he made statements asserting the following regarding atheism:

For sixty-two years state power in the USSR has belonged to the party of the Communists, who profess atheism. According to the atheist doctrine, religion in the USSR should have died out long ago. However, life shows that something else is happening. Faith in God in our country is not only failing to die out, it is growing. This is happening under conditions where living faith in Christ has the whole machinery of the state thrown against it by atheism: the press, radio, television, the militia, the procuracy, the courts, prisons, concentration camps and the committee for state security (the KGB).<sup>212</sup>

Not only is this statement instructive in helping to explain, at least in part, why the Reform Baptists were so strict in areas of personal separation, it highlights what, for Vins, was the heart of the problem in all areas of government, atheistic ideology. This connection with the KGB was especially important as it spoke directly to why Vins felt he could not longer have fellowship with Baptists in the AUCECB; he saw them as having come under the control of the KGB.<sup>213</sup>

It is in his speech given on the opening night of the national convention of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC) in June, 1979, where his statements on atheism are most provocative. On this night, Vins was speaking to a group of people who were of like faith and who were familiar with his story, and he used the occasion to educate those in attendance about the reality of the conditions in the Soviet

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<sup>210</sup> Kenyon, p. 7.

<sup>211</sup> “An Interview with Georgi Vins: The Word of God is Not Bound” p. 22.

<sup>212</sup> “Testimony of G.P. Vins to the Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe.”

<sup>213</sup> Briscoe, p. 2 and “Testimony of G.P. Vins to the Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe.”

Union. At this point he claimed that the root cause of all the persecution and suffering for believers in the Soviet Union was “Godless atheism,” identifying the regime as the “throne of godlessness and atheism.”<sup>214</sup>

By 1981-82, Vins seemed to have become much more comfortable with his role as a representative of the believers he was forced to leave behind in the Soviet Union.<sup>215</sup> His interviews reflected a man with a clear purpose, educating Americans about the persecuted church and outlining exactly what Christians in the United States could do to help their brethren in the Soviet Union. His statements on atheism and the government remained consistent with his earlier comments. Again identifying the enemy as a system of beliefs, not a government, he said in 1981, that he recognized the Soviet Union as the world-wide center of atheism and godlessness and that only the church in the Soviet Union had the courage to stand up and say “No” to this ideology.<sup>216</sup> In a 1982 article written by Vins for *Christianity Today* and titled, “Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost,” he provided what has to be the clearest summary of his position on atheism and his relationship with government:

We [Reform Baptists in the Soviet Union] don’t comment or have any type of official statement about government, whether it be communism, socialism, or capitalism: that’s our principle. We believe there should not be any attempt to tie Christianity to some type of economic theory. Christians living in a totalitarian state would never raise issues or questions such as that. We *will* (emphasis added by Vins) speak out against atheism. The government won’t even allow us to do that, but we do.<sup>217</sup>

#### **4.2 Personalizing the Fight**

However, despite this claim, I have found a few examples where Vins did speak out against individuals who represented the Soviet system; both cases are post-exile when Vins was no longer a citizen of the Soviet Union and need to be examined in light of this claim.

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<sup>214</sup> Georgi Vins, “Christians in Russia.”

<sup>215</sup> Vins was elected by the CCECB to act as their representative in the United States. To this end, the council passed a resolution which authorized Vins to open a Representation Office. This new organization, the International Representation for the Council of Evangelical Baptist Churches in the USSR, was established in Elkart, Indiana and remained the focus of Vins’s activities in the United States until his death.

<sup>216</sup> Gelatt, p. 12.

<sup>217</sup> Georgi Vins, “Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost,” p. 49.

The first of these statements came in a 1983 interview where he was asked what he thought about the new Soviet leader, Andropov. In response to this specific question, Vins identified this man, the former leader of the KGB, as the “most cruel of all the leaders that have come to power,” and continued on to say he was not to be trusted by the West.<sup>218</sup> At first glance, this may seem to be a contraction to his previous 1982 assertion that he would not make statements about types of governments, and thereby their leadership. However, in that same 1982 article, “Obey God, Don’t Count the Costs,” Vins implied that he believed the most active weapon the Soviet government possessed in its fight to establish atheism was the KGB and their persecution of believers.<sup>219</sup> Therefore, his statements about Andropov, former head of the KGB, could be considered part of his promise to speak out against the ideology of atheism.

A possibly more problematic situation came with the rise of Gorbachev and the impact *perestroika* had on religious freedom in the Soviet Union. In a series of newspaper articles from 1989 Vins discussed the changes that took place in the Soviet Union. “Speaking of Mr. Gorbachev as a person,” he said, “I don’t think we should trust him... He doesn’t believe in God.”<sup>220</sup> He went on to add that atheistic leaders were still in control of the country and that any reforms in the Soviet Union were brought about by economic necessity, not a change in religious beliefs.

In comments made in the July/August 1989 edition of the *Fundamentalist Journal* Vins again mentioned Gorbachev by name and cautioned the West about Soviet “Openness.” He said:

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<sup>218</sup> “David Fuller Talks With Georgi Vins,” *Convention Herald*, September 1983, p. 7.

<sup>219</sup> Georgi Vins, “Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost,” p. 49.

<sup>220</sup> David Winfrey, “Recent Soviet Reforms give Christians Greater Freedoms,” *Greenville Piedmont* (South Carolina) 19 September 1989, p. 2C, “Russian Exile Speaks at Bob Jones University,” *Greenville News* (South Carolina) 27 September 1989, pp. 1, 4, and Sean Sachon, “Exiled Russian Preacher Speaks on Condition of Soviet Christians,” *The Collegian* (Greenville, South Carolina) 28 September 1989, pp. 1, 3. The quotation comes from the Winfrey article, however the other reports echo similar sentiments.

The changes we see today – Mr. Gorbachev meeting with some church leaders and things like that happening – have not actually changed the structure, the system, or the direction that they are going.

You see, the Soviet constitution guarantees freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, but none of that actually exists.

There might be a little bit of freedom right now, but it is only temporary. That is because the Soviet system is built on deceit and lies...

Therefore, the Soviet constitution is just a sheet of paper, and there are unwritten laws that reflect what is in the interests of the Soviet government for today. And tomorrow, the unwritten laws change because the Communists' needs change... Mr. Gorbachev tries to portray religious freedom. He meets with people in the hierarchy of the Orthodox church for the television cameras. But those people are appointed by the government, and then the government uses them to do their work in the West. They speak for the church. But in reality they speak for the government.<sup>221</sup>

Should these statements about the changes brought to the Soviet Union under Gorbachev be considered a violation of his own principle of not speaking out against a type of governmental system? In his 1982 statement in "Obey God, Don't Count the Cost," Vins made it clear that he was referring to governments as economic systems. In the *Fundamentalist Journal* article, Vins was clearly referring to the religious implications for *perestroika*.

This is not to say that Vins did not recognize the changes that were occurring under Gorbachev. He was grateful for the release of all Christians from the prisons, labor camps, and psychiatric hospitals and recognized that the house searches and seizures of Bibles and literature had stopped. And, he was thankful that the postal restrictions which had forbidden Christian literature to be mail into the country had been removed.<sup>222</sup> However, it appears that he was concerned about whether these changes would remain permanent. In a 1989 interview he notes that the laws which had been used to, as he said, "persecute

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<sup>221</sup> Georgi Vins, "Comments From Georgi Vins," p. 38.

<sup>222</sup> Georgi Vins, "The Hidden Side of *Perestroika*," (unpublished manuscript) 1990-91. JS Mack Library, Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina, p. 1.

believers” had not changed, they were just not being enforced at that time.<sup>223</sup> If Vins’s words towards Gorbachev seemed a little less than loving it is certainly somewhat understandable. He had lived his life under a system and leadership which had never consistently upheld its own laws and he had seen nothing at that point to make him believe this leader would be any different.

Vins’s most basic political stand, therefore, was not against governments or economic systems per se; rather, he was in opposition to an ideology which came into direct conflict with his transcendent world view. But, sometimes in the fight against atheism, the men who served as the face of the ideology, Andropov and Gorbachev, did become the targets of his opposition. Adding to the problem of conflict with his personal religious views, atheism created a culture of dishonesty where individual citizens were not permitted to live their lives in truth and honesty because the stated Soviet right of freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state as outlined in the 1918 were not respected.

Similar in tone to Solzhenitsyn’s essay “Live Not by Lies,” *Bratsky Listok* (Fraternal Leaflet) No. 4, 1977, a publication of the Reform Baptists and an edition which Vins quoted from in his testimony before the United States Congress, identified the problem with atheism in that it did not allow the individual Soviet citizen to live honestly. It said that the atheistic judge always convicted the believer, the psychiatrist had condemned the believer to a psychiatric hospital, the teacher made life for a Christian young person unbearable, the head of a college refused admission to a Christian, and on it goes.<sup>224</sup> The conflict created by these two world-views was not, for Vins, relegated to the religious sphere, it permeated deeply into the civil life of the individual as well.

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<sup>223</sup> “Russian Exile speaks at Bob Jones University,” *Greenville News* (South Carolina) 27 September 1989, p. 1. Similar sentiments are echoed in Vins, “Great is the Lord’s Faithfulness.”

<sup>224</sup> “Testimony of G.P. Vins to the Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe,” Appendix 1.

### ***4.3 Faith Forced Into Action***

In discussions with the leadership of the American Council of Christian Churches that were held just a few weeks after his expulsion from the Soviet Union, Vins outlined three basic areas where he felt compelled by his conscience to resist governmental authority. First, he and the membership of the CCECB were going to carry on their work in unregistered, and therefore, illegal churches. Second, he believed that continued work with among the youth was a vital part of the ministry of the church. And, third, he thought it necessary to continue with an illegal printing ministry.<sup>225</sup> Vins understood that his involvement in these areas required sacrifice. When he was arrested in 1974, he was accused of, among other things, his involvement with the Christian Publishing House, distribution of Bibles, organizing of Bible classes for children, and organizing open air meetings<sup>226</sup> – all activities which he believed to be right according to God’s law, regardless of man’s opinion.

Before looking at these activities in more detail to determine just exactly what this civil disobedience entailed, it is worth noting that in all the material surveyed for this thesis, not once did I find that, upon his arrival in the United States did Vins make any mention of his personal political activities in the 1960s.<sup>227</sup> By the time he reached the United States and was free to discuss a variety of political issues, he chose to focus on what the Reform Baptists, of whom he was their elected representative, had decided to do. When he spoke of theology and political action, it was never in personal terms; rather he always used language which reflected a collective agreement among the Reform Baptists.

There may be a variety of reasons for this, but I think the most likely explanation is that he did not consider himself to be the focus of attention. As the international

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<sup>225</sup> Briscoe, p, 3.

<sup>226</sup> “An Interview With Georgi Vins,” p. 2.

<sup>227</sup> Bourdeaux, in *Religious Ferment in Russia and Faith on Trial in Russia*, recounted in detail Vins’s personal involvement in the split with the AUCECB and the subsequent political fight to gain governmental recognition for the splinter group, the CCECB.

representative for the CCECB, his interviews and speeches reflected a desire to inform the American public of the conditions in the Soviet Union, or, after 1989, the needs facing the church once the official persecution had formally ended. It is also possible that he wished to emphasize the common doctrinal position between Baptists in the Soviet Union and the United States in an effort to encourage American believers to continue to pray for, and support those who were in Soviet prisons because of their faith. This emphasis would not have required a rehearsing of his personal activities. Therefore, always beginning with statements like “We believe...,” what I find in post-1979 discussions of his political activities are collective statements made on behalf of the Reform Baptists in the Soviet Union.

#### 4.3.1 *The Question of Registration*

The first area in which Vins felt compelled to disregard Soviet law was regarding the issue of the right of local congregations of believers to gather together in worship. The 1929 Soviet laws on religion required that churches be registered with the government. However, Baptists found this a very difficult process, as Bourdeaux in a 1970 report for the Minority Rights Group noted; they had been unable to register with the authorities.<sup>228</sup>

This desire for legality seems contradictory to the Reform Baptist movement’s purposes for the schism within the AUCECB.<sup>229</sup> The AUCECB interpreted the Romans 13 passage on obedience to government to mean that not only the individual, but the church as well, must obey the laws of the God-ordained governmental system. As such, in 1960, they issued two new documents, the *Letter of Instructions* and the *New Statutes*, in an effort to remain in compliance with Soviet religious laws. The impact of these new sets of

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<sup>228</sup> Bourdeaux, *in Religious Minorities in the Soviet Union*, p. 22. Fletcher, in “Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen,” p. 65 also mentions that the Baptist had tried to register their churches, but were often unsuccessful, however his comments are a little unclear in determining whether he was referring to the Reform Baptists, or the Baptist movement as a whole.

<sup>229</sup> For a full discussion of the events surrounding the schism within the AUCECB see Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia*, and *Faith on Trial in Russia* as well as Fletcher, “Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen,” pp. 62-82.

instructions was that all youth work was to be halted, children were excluded from churches the baptism of people ages eighteen to thirty must come to an end, and evangelism was discouraged. In addition, the control over local congregations was no longer in the hands of the individual churches, as had historically been the case with Baptists, but now AUCECB regulations stood as the ultimate authority.<sup>230</sup>

Those individuals who remained loyal to the AUCECB showed a deep concern over the Reform Baptists willingness to voice their displeasure over these new regulations and what they perceived as an overall discrimination against Baptists. In a statement made in *Bratsky Vestnik* (Brotherly Herald), the publication of the AUCECB, the following plea is made:

We caution all our brothers and sisters against various sorts of letters, which representing attempts to place our brotherhood in an aggravated position with the rulership and government of our country, are dangerous and threatening for the entire work of the Lord in our country. This not only is threatening for our entire brotherhood, it also contradicts the whole sprit of the Gospel and the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>231</sup>

After unsuccessful attempts were made by the *Initsiativnaya* to bring about a congress which would, in Vins's words, "Go back to their foundation,"<sup>232</sup> the AUCECB split and the CCECB was formed. As has already been noted, Vins indicated that the reason for the split was not a doctrinal disagreement, rather a conflicting view on the separation of church and state. If that was the case, why would these CCECB churches have sought registration in the first place?

Vins's earliest statement after his arrival in the States on the issue of registration was somewhat vague. In 1979, when asked whether or not the process of registration itself was a violation of the separation of church and state, Vins responded, "We recognize the legitimacy of government. We are not opposed to the government existing. We are

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<sup>230</sup> Bourdeaux, *Faith On Trial in Russia*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>231</sup> *Bratsky Vestnik*, No. 6, 1963, p. 52 as quoted in Fletcher, "Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen," p. 69.

<sup>232</sup> Georgi Vins, "Obey God, Don't Count the Cost," p. 48.

strongly against the government interfering in church affairs.”<sup>233</sup> This does not seem to be a direct answer to a specific question. More than a decade later however, in a 1990-91 unpublished essay titled, “The Hidden Side of *Perestroika*,” Vins clearly denounced the registered churches of the AUCECB and their ministers saying, “A church that agreed to register had already agreed to compromise the Scriptures by allowing itself to be controlled by an atheistic government.”<sup>234</sup>

In an interview with his daughter Natasha, I had the chance to ask her about this issue. According to her, Vins had no problem with church registrations from 1918, when the initial laws on religion were established until 1929, when the religious laws changed. However the 1929 laws imposed restrictions which in his view were contradictory to Biblical teaching and, therefore, could not be followed.<sup>235</sup>

Yet, in all the materials surveyed for this thesis, Vins was silent about Bourdeaux’s 1970 claim that some Reform Baptist churches did attempt to register. What was clear is that for him, registration meant compromise with atheism and collaboration with the KGB, and as such was unacceptable.<sup>236</sup> If Bourdeaux’s statement was true, given Vins’s feelings on this issue, he would not have wanted to discuss something so controversial, and probably personally disappointing, with an American audience.

From a secular viewpoint, the impact of his endorsement of unregistered churches had interesting long-term consequences. A person who joined in fellowship, especially one who became actively involved either as a pastor or teacher, with a CCECB church had to think about the potentially grave consequences of their actions. These believers were subjected to imprisonment in concentration camps, psychiatric hospitals and prisons as well

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<sup>233</sup> Briscoe, p. 2.

<sup>234</sup> Georgi Vins, “The Hidden Side of *Perestroika*.”

<sup>235</sup> Natasha Vins, phone interview.

<sup>236</sup> “An Interview with Georgi Vins: The Word of God is Not Bound,” p. 22, Gelatt, p. 12, Georgi Vins, “Comments from Georgi Vins,” p. 38, “Obey God, Don’t Count the Costs,” p. 48, and “The Hidden Side of *Perestroika*,” pp. 1-3.

as house searches by the KGB, and confiscation of items like Bibles, tape recorders, books letter, and photographs.<sup>237</sup> In 1984, Vins claimed that since 1945, 20,000 Baptist ministers had been arrested<sup>238</sup> and Bourdeaux, in his report for the Minority Rights Group issued in 1970, indicated that from about 500 members of the Reform Baptist communities had been imprisoned, with the number never falling below 150 at any one point in time.<sup>239</sup> These numbers continued into the 1980s and in 1983, Vins indicated that there were, at that point, 183 Christians in the Soviet prison system.<sup>240</sup> While I don't think it is fair to accuse Vins of setting the only example for these individuals, his leadership role within the CCECB did put him at the forefront of the movement and even though one of the most basic doctrinal positions, freedom of conscience, dictated that individuals were free to make their own choices in this area, his actions were sure to encourage others of like faith to remain strong in the face of adversity.

Once reaching the United States, Vins worked to encourage the Reform Baptists communities to persevere in the midst of persecution. His ministry, the International Representation, Inc., had as a part of its stated purpose to not only distribute current information concerning the Christians in the Soviet Union to audiences in the West, but to organize aid, continue to send Gospel messages into the Soviet Union through the use of radio programs which were beamed into the country, and to encourage believers in the West to unite in prayer, defense, and support for Christians in the Soviet Union.<sup>241</sup> This organization began publishing a prisoner directory,<sup>242</sup> and newsletters like the *Prisoner Bulletin* which educated Western audiences about the conditions faced by Christians in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>237</sup> "An Interview With Georgi Vins," p. 2.

<sup>238</sup> "... And Ye Visited Me," p. 4.

<sup>239</sup> Minority Rights Group, *Religious Minorities in the Soviet Union*, p. 23.

<sup>240</sup> "An Interview With Georgi Vins," pg. 2.

<sup>241</sup> "... And Ye Visited Me," p. 4.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

In the 1984 Prisoner Directory, Vins outlined exactly how someone could encourage a believer who was in jail in the Soviet Union or petition government officials in the Soviet Union, United States, Canada, and Australia, letting them know that many around the world were concerned about the fate of these Christians.<sup>243</sup> Providing step-by-step instructions on what to write to prisoners – including an emphasis on not writing about politics or criticizing the Soviet government – he asks his audience to send cards or brief notes of encouragement to those in Soviet prisons and provided a few, short phrases in Russian that could be used if desired (he also indicated that writing only in English was just fine, someone would be able to translate). He gave similar instructions on how to write to government officials. Then provided the necessary addresses, even encouraging people to make sure they had the correct postage.

While certainly motivated by a love for the community of believers he had left behind, Vins's plea to Western audiences for a show of solidarity with Christians in the Soviet Union must have had a political impact. The knowledge that people around the world were concerned about their struggles had to provide some encouragement for these men and women in the Soviet Union to continue their involvement in the unregistered churches. A prolonged struggle against a powerful foe, as the Soviet regime was, is always made easier when you feel you are not alone. In this way, I do believe that, while unintentional, Vins moved into the realm of political actor.

#### 4.3.2 *Youth Work*

A second area of illegal activity which Vins justified was the work among children. The AUCECB had acquiesced to Soviet law (Article 124 of the Constitution) which prohibited any type of religious work among young people, even going so far as to state that no person under the age of thirty was to be baptized. However, Vins felt that this was

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<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

unacceptable according to Biblical teaching. So, he sanctioned various types of youth work, whether it be Sunday school ministries run out of individual homes (and unlike in the West, not on Sunday), youth camps, or as has already been discussed, baptizing young people. With half of the Reform Baptist church membership between the ages of fifteen and thirty, there was obviously a heavy emphasis on this youth ministry.<sup>244</sup>

This growth in the popularity of religion among young people did not go unnoticed by the Soviet authorities. In January 1964, Ilichov wrote an article for the *Kommunist* (The Communist) in which he addressed the issue of children directly. He said, “We cannot and must not remain indifferent to the fate of children, upon whom fanatical religious parents are carrying out what is virtually spiritual rape.”<sup>245</sup> Bourdeaux, in his report on religious minorities in the Soviet Union, asserted that the desire for religious education among the Baptist youth is probably the reason for a strengthening of article 142 of the Penal Code in March 1966.<sup>246</sup> In addition, it became Soviet policy to remove children from their homes if parents were found guilty of educating their children in religious principles.<sup>247</sup> Vins himself faced this threat when school authorities became concerned because his oldest daughter, Natasha, refused to renounce her belief in Christianity. He and many of his fellow Christians petitioned the government, threatened to demonstrate in Moscow, and asked that the harassment of his family be stopped. The case against him was dropped, and his children were not removed from the home.<sup>248</sup>

When Abraham Lincoln stated that the philosophy of the classroom will become the philosophy of the government, he spoke to the heart of the problem of educating children in the Soviet Union. In October 1962, when Natasha Vins was just nine years old, she was

<sup>244</sup> Georgi Vins, “Advocates in Adversity” and “Obey God, Don’t Count the Cost,” p. 49.

<sup>245</sup> Quoted in “Religious Minorities in the Soviet Union (1960-1970),” p. 5.

<sup>246</sup> Bourdeaux, “Religious Minorities in the Soviet Union (1960-1970),” pp. 8, 22.

<sup>247</sup> Fletcher, “Protestant Influences on the Soviet Citizen,” p. 65.

<sup>248</sup> Georgi Vins, “Comments from Georgi Vins,” p. 38 and Natasha Vins, *Children of the Storm* (Greenville, SC: Journey Forth, 2002), pp. 11-15.

elected by her classmates to be their representative in the Young Pioneers. An article in the *Evening Kiev* had just identified her father as a Christian and young Natasha was now being pressured to renounce the faith of her parents and adopt the scientific atheism being taught in school. She refused, as she said, not because her parents told her to, but because she did not want to deny the existence of God.<sup>249</sup>

Vins understood, as did the Soviet government, that in a very real sense, this was struggle for citizenship. Soviet officials, as the *Pravada* article clearly stated, fought to establish a world view which was compatible with the communistic system. The involvement of young people in groups like the Young Pioneers was an important part of that plan. However, for Vins, a believer's citizenship was ultimately to be found in heaven, and the Biblical command to "train up a child in the way he should go"<sup>250</sup> was not to be ignored or taken lightly.

#### 4.3.3 *The Publishing Ministry*

The third area of illegal activity which Vins became involved in was a publishing ministry. Having once claimed that this illegal press did not even get a screw from the Soviet government, Vins upon his arrival in the West, was for the first time able to give the world a description how the operation worked. Using a printing press made from washing machine motors and drive chains from bicycles and which could be dismantled into five or six different pieces and packed into suitcases, the publishing ministry published Bibles, Bible study aides, hymn books, and a magazine called *Herald of Truth*. Members of local congregations then bought paper in small quantities, hid it under their beds, and waited for someone to come after dark to collect it. Then, following in the tradition of *samizdat* distribution, the materials were distributed by hand, and were free of charge for anyone who wanted it, not just Reform Baptists. On two occasions, 1974 and 1977, the Soviet

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<sup>249</sup> Natasha Vins, *Children of the Storm*, pp. 7-10, 12.

<sup>250</sup> Proverbs 22: 6 (NKJV).

authorities had discovered the secret presses, which interestingly enough are operated by young people, including at one point, his own daughter, Natasha.<sup>251</sup>

Vins justified this work by claiming that the people of the Soviet Union were anxious to be able to read a Bible. He cited an example from Moldova where a Bible would turn up in an antique shop every once in a while. He claimed that there was a waiting list of 300 people who were willing to pay between 300 and 500 rubbles for each Bible. Or, another example where his son, Peter, and friends were giving out Bibles to scientists and writers, only to find that they also did not have enough copies to distribute and people had to be put on a waiting list.<sup>252</sup> The need for Bibles and Christian literature was further highlighted by events after the fall of the Soviet Union when Vins was able to return to Ukraine. He discovered that the people, adults included, were asking for illustrated children's Bibles because they were much easier to understand. Years of atheism and a lack of access to Christian materials had left the people unable to grasp the more weighty elements of Biblical teaching.<sup>253</sup>

Do these areas of illegal activity match with Vins's doctrinal position as laid out in the previous chapter? Although not the focus of this study, Vins and Kryuchkov's appeal to Brezhnev in 1965, some of which I've quoted from in this thesis, showed a real desire to live legally under the Soviet system, if only the system would recognize its own legislation. When that appeal went unheard, Vins and those who formed the CCECB felt they were left with no other recourse, except to choose this path of illegality in the areas of unregistered churches, youth work, and a publishing ministry. Therefore, continuing the theme of

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<sup>251</sup>Briscoe, pp. 3-4, Hull, p. 9, and Georgi Vins, "Comments from Georgi Vins," p. 38. For a description of what life was like for the young people living underground while working for the secret publishing house, see Natasha Vins, *Children of the Storm*, pp. 117-120.

<sup>252</sup>Stobbe, p. 20.

<sup>253</sup>"Home From Exile! Georgi Vins Returns to the Soviet Union," *Russian Gospel Ministries*, January/February 1991, p. 3.

Biblical supremacy, the command to, “Obey God rather than men,”<sup>254</sup> Vins realized that according to the system as it existed in the Soviet Union, he had no choice but to take this path.

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<sup>254</sup> Acts 5: 29 (NKJV).

## Conclusions

Eric Voegelin's cosmion, or, as he defined it, "a little world of order" does serve as a useful explanation for the tenuous relationship between the government of the Soviet Union and the Reform Baptist community. There was a basic world view under communism which was predicated on atheism and designed to provide meaning for the individual. However, as I have shown, while the basic ideology of atheism which created deity out of man was axiomatic, the individuals charged with upholding the ideology, were often, well, all too finite in their inconsistent interpretation or enforcement. Therefore, when tracing the fortunes of religion in the Soviet era it is easy to feel like you are sitting on a pendulum, swinging back and forth between limited toleration and extreme oppression.

As Voegelin predicted, this Soviet cosmion produced dissent. One of the central themes of this paper has been a discussion of whether or not a fundamental, Baptist believer living in the Soviet Union could remain a loyal, faithful member of society while at the same time remaining true to individual personal convictions. Did the Soviet concept of citizenship require wholehearted acceptance of its basic tenets, or was simple conformity to the system all that was needed? The answer is neither simple, nor consistent. Vins was careful to obey the laws of the Soviet Union whenever possible and there were attempts to be an active citizen, participating in the processes of government. He never criticized the economic values of communism or praised capitalism for its success. His desire to be a part of a legal organization, the CCECB, led him to petition the government, asking for the rights of all Soviet citizens to be respected according to the 1918 Constitution. Unfortunately for him and the Reform Baptists, this request went unheard and resulted in Vins finding himself in a Soviet prison.

Just what was it that made Vins, or his thinking so dangerous? What was it in his doctrinal position that set him against the state? It can be argued that the central issue

wasn't religious conviction, after all, other faiths, like the Russian Orthodox Church, survived under communism, rather, that the real problem was Vins's and the Reform Baptist's proclivity for proselytizing. The combination of Khrushchev's speeches on religion, Ilichov's views, and the Soviet press's reporting paints a picture of a regime which, by the 1960s, had become frustrated with the persistence of religious inclinations among the peoples of the Soviet Union. Atheistic ideology, buttressed by the various governmental institutions, was once again going on the offensive in an effort to combat, and hopefully destroy, the Christian world and life view. So, in the sense that men like Vins were attempting to covert people, yes proselytizing was an issue. But, proselytizing only made the ultimate goal more difficult to achieve. The greater fear was that too many converts by Vins or the Reform Baptists would not allow the atheistic ideology to win the battle to wipe out religion in the Soviet Union.

I don't believe that Vins, a man who was living under this system and had a front row seat to the events in the Soviet Union, saw the issue in terms of evangelization. He didn't fight for the right to evangelize, per say, he fought for the right to have the government stay out of his theology. He fought for the right to stand before his congregation and preach a message from the Word of God without the fear of the KGB breaking up their meeting and sending Christians off to jail. He fought for the right of Reform Baptist churches to legally exist as the 1918 Constitution had promised. To him, this fight was not about one group's desire to draw people into their faith, but necessitated by the atheistic system he lived under which could not tolerate his brand of Christianity.

Could Vins have found some way in which it was possible to develop a dialogue with the Soviet regime? Certainly others had. The AUCECB decided to work out a compromise which allowed them to keep their churches legal and open. Yet, Vins and so many others in the Reform Baptist movement, found themselves in prison, often on more

than one occasion. Ultimately, a dialogue on issues of faith and conviction, specifically the belief in freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state, proved impossible because of his and the Soviet government's inability to compromise on these issues. For him, in these areas, citizenship in the Soviet Union was incompatible with his heavenly citizenship. In the end, there was never any real discussion on which he would chose, heavenly rewards awaited him. He would have to endure earthly suffering.

Another central feature in this thesis was the use of new sources to further our knowledge about the man and the movement he was so closely tied to. What, if anything, new has been learned about Georgi Vins? When looking at his doctrinal position, I have uncovered no new or surprising information. He was, and remained until his death, a fundamental, Bible-believing Baptist, just like his father and grandfather before him. His statements regarding the areas in which he felt compelled to disobey the Soviet government were also not new insight. Doing his best to obey the commands of Scripture, he identified the only area where he felt compelled to obey God first; when the government infringed his freedom of conscience. Seeing Christ as the head of the church, he was determined to keep the government out of matters of faith.

What is new in all of this is that for the first time his personal doctrinal position has been presented in a fairly systematic way. Far greater attention has been given to the elements which he felt to be most important; the authority of Scripture and the centrality of Christ. To that end, I believe historians also have a clearer picture of why the Vins and Reform Baptist were willing to endure the suffering forced upon them by the Soviet regime.

When speaking about Georgi Vins the man, possibly what is even more important than turning up new information is the fact that there is no new information. When he was able to freely express himself, when he was able to enjoy the benefits of a far more comfortable existence than the prison cell from which he had just come, when his family

was once again by his side and he no longer feared for their safety, it would have been so tempting to either forget all of the trials he had endured in the Soviet Union and enjoy his fifteen minutes of fame or to speak out against the regime in bitterness. But, Vins did neither of these. Throughout the rest of his life he worked on behalf of the men and women he had left behind in the Soviet Union.

What I also found when examining the statements he made in the years following the loss of his citizenship was a man who seemed to have found a different calling. When reaching American shores, he embarked on a campaign to educate American audiences. He was concerned not just to describe the trials of what he called the “persecuted church,” but also to emphasize to largely sympathetic Christian audiences the common bonds of faith they shared with believers in the Soviet Union, despite their vastly different cultural, political, and historical experiences.

The long term effects of Vins’s message on the American audience have never been researched, but needs to be explored. Fundamental Christianity in the 1980s, as groups like the Moral Majority and later, the Christian Coalition proved, was politically active. What role, if any did Vins’s stories of persecution, as well as his plea for solidarity with the believers in the Soviet Union, play as Americans went to the voting booths in that decade? Additionally, what was Vins’s impact on the believers in the Soviet Union and their determination to continue to work through the unregistered churches? I do not believe, nor have I read anywhere that Vins was encouraging a particular course of action for the American voters other than the legal means of petitioning their government, rather, I think his political impact was one of unintended consequences. As he struggled to keep the needs of Christians in prison before a world-wide audience, a ministry which he saw as spiritual, not political, I do believe that he became a political actor, motivating people in the West to push for change in the Soviet Union.

In a thesis that started out as an attempt to define just how and when Georgi Vins made the decision to obey his conscience rather than his temporal authority, I discovered a man who, while having clearly defined convictions on this issue, quite possibly did become political, even if it was unintentional. As I noted in the introduction, Vins never wanted to be a political figure, yet when an individual had such a clearly defined world view, an action plan for life if you will, that is consistently acted upon, and lived in a system that was contrary, even at times hostile to his world view, political actions or involvement seemed to naturally follow.

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