

Reviews

History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union 1917-1938

*(Geschichte der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Gemeinden
in der Sowjetunion 1917-1938)*

by Wilhelm Kahle, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1974, 625 pp. No price.

At the time of the October 1917 Revolution, the number of Lutheran believers in Russia was around one million, most of them living in the German settlement area along the Volga, others in German colonies in the Ukraine, the Caucasus and Siberia. A considerable proportion of this total number was made up of Latvians, Estonians and Finns domiciled in Russia. In spite of the difficulties of communication, they had preserved a sense of organic unity as Lutherans, with administrative centres in Moscow and Petrograd (later Leningrad). By 1938, when Wilhelm Kahle's story ends, the Lutheran Church in Russia had almost totally disappeared as an organized unit.

Wilhelm Kahle's book is a remarkable piece of research. It includes extensive documentation and bibliography, and one can only regret that the story has not been taken further through the war years to include the deportations of the ethnic Germans to Soviet Central Asia. But perhaps this is an impossible task under the present circumstances since there is so little reliable information.

When a General Synod was convened in 1924 for the first time in the history of the Lutheran Church in Russia, the delegates were not yet aware of the trials which they were about to face. A message was sent to the Soviet government, expressing the assembly's gratitude that the Synod could be held. The Synod promised complete loyalty to the authorities, declaring that the confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church requires that each citizen respect the authorities and the existing legislation, and obey the orders of the government. The mood was one

of cautious optimism and hope. A theological seminary – officially described as “Courses of Biblical Study” – was established in Leningrad in 1925 to offset the loss of the theological faculty at the University of Tartu in Estonia which became inaccessible after Estonia had declared its independence.

Then years later, the situation had changed out of all recognition. Ideological and financial pressures, an almost total loss of communication between the Church Council in Moscow and the provincial churches, internal quarrels and splits within the Church itself, increasingly frequent closures of churches and arrests of the clergy – all this led the sole surviving Bishop Malmgren to express the opinion in 1934 that the Lutheran Church in Russia had practically ceased to exist as an organized Church. In 1934 the Leningrad seminary was closed down. By 1936 there were only eight active Lutheran pastors in the whole country. Bishop Malmgren himself left the Soviet Union for Germany also in 1936. In 1938 the last remaining Lutheran church in Moscow was closed down. The collapse was unexpectedly swift. It did not mean the end of all religious life for Evangelical Lutherans in Russia, but it forced them to seek new ways of preserving their faith. Often they did this by establishing closer links with other communities of Evangelical Christians. Dr. Paul Hansen, European Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, who visited the Soviet Union in 1976, reported that hundreds of Protestant congregations in Soviet Central Asia and Siberia – German-speaking Lutherans, Reformed, Brethren and Mennonites – lead an active church life without “explicit dogmatic theology, definite church order, clergy and outward organization”. To read Wilhelm Kahle’s story without this postscript is a profoundly depressing experience.

JANIS SAPIETS

Prisoners of Conscience in the USSR: Their Treatment and Conditions

Amnesty International Report, A. I. Publications (53 Theobald’s Road, London, W.C.1) 1975, 154 pp., £1.00

This report is a pioneering attempt to study the fate of political and religious prisoners in the USSR by splicing together evidence from official and unofficial sources. The result is convincing. When carefully analyzed, the official sources reveal precisely the same laws, regulations, and official attitudes which appear and re-appear so regularly in the voluminous materials of *samizdat*.