



# Christians under surveillance during communism

Describes the Estonian experience of life under surveillance and the ethical and religious trials Christians faced during communist rule.



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There is a temptation to deal with this topic exclusively in a heroic key. In this article I try to avoid this approach. A closer look into history reveals that the story of Christians under surveillance, even under persecution by government authorities, includes both gains and losses. This is a story of strength in the lives of those who seem to be weak, and sometimes a story of weakness in those whom we suppose to be strong. The topics related to the situation of Christians under a persecuting state need to be remembered and analysed both with thankfulness and with repentance. This is especially true in this part of the world (Eastern Europe), which was recently under communist regimes.

In the following treatment of the subject, I have chosen a narrative method. I focus on my own country, Estonia, the northernmost of the three Baltic countries, which was a part of the Soviet Union from 1940 to 1941, and then 1945 to 1991. However, the Estonian experience helps to throw light on the wider picture of Soviet evangelicals and the ethical and religious trials they met during the Soviet years.

### God or Caesar?

Soviet propaganda described believers as a diminishing group in the society; often atheistic literature depicted Christians as illiterate or culturally and socially 'handicapped'. According to this picture, believers were marginal. However, at the same time the Soviet system kept extensive files and wrote detailed reports on Christians, on leaders and pastors, and on active church members. Why was much energy and money spent

on keeping an eye on Christians? Why did totalitarian government see Christians as potential criminals? It seems that Soviet system did not 'believe' its own propaganda. Instead of waiting until Christianity died out in the society, as Khrushchov once declared it would, administrative and repressive measures were often used against Christians.

It is obvious that the Soviet atheistic system felt threatened by the fact that believers as citizens did not give to the temporal powers their absolute obedience. They usually followed the apostle Paul's suggestion that 'everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities' (Rom 13.1), but in situations of ethical conflict or a clash of beliefs they tended to follow the guidance of Acts 5.29, 'We must obey God rather than men.'

More severely persecuted groups, such as 'underground believers' – who formed illegal groups and had unregistered churches – tended to see atheistic government in much darker colours. According to this view, worldly atheistic powers were seen as a beast that had a 'throne and great authority', and this was given by a dragon, a symbol of evil and destructive force (Rev 13.2).

For Christians in the Soviet context, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness served as a metanarrative (Mt 4.1–11). Bowing down to the atheistic powers might seemingly give individuals some more chances – for example, to pursue a career, or to acquire a key position in the society. A temptation was to think that then – after an act of 'bowing down' – a person could act according to his or her inner ethical values and do some good from within the anti-religious system. This

is how many people – though not many Christians – have explained why they joined the Communist Party. However, the system tended to swallow those who thought they could join it and play their own game.

The surveillance of Christians was not designed only for collecting information about any breaking of atheistic restrictive laws, or about acts of disobedience. Information was power. And in the hands of KGB and Communist Party officials detailed information about individual Christians was a tool for putting pressure on them, even manipulating and forcing believers into cooperation. Knowing believers' personal life, their interests and passion, their human relationships, their virtues and vices – this was data which helped the KGB or other state power structures to choose their tactics.

At the beginning of the 1980s, during an interview, the KGB officers warned me that I would never be able to study theology abroad – they knew very well my interest in theological studies. This 'anti-prophecy' did not come true, since soon the political realities changed. I was able to start studying theology in Finland in autumn 1989, when Estonia was still part of the Soviet Union, and the same year – at the age of 26 – I made my first trip abroad. However, the pattern of pressure, the method of using information, was evident – it was based on the fact that the secret service officers knew my hopes and interests.

### Ethical dilemmas

Living a life under surveillance adds serious tensions, affecting an individual's psyche as well as the environment of the church community. For Christians it was not just about keeping a psychological balance, but also how to maintain integrity, how to be faithful to God, and how not to hurt other people. Information that the secret service collected could be used not only against one particular person, but also against his or her friends and fellow believers. I would point out some aspects of these ethical dilemmas, though, the whole story no doubt is more nuanced.

First, the challenge for Christians in situations like this was how to maintain personal integrity. Oskar Olvik, a pastor in Tallinn, describes in his memoirs how he was interrogated by the KGB, because one of his church members, who worked in an archive, was accused of having destroyed some documents. Olvik did not want to lie to the KGB officer, but he could not tell what the church member had entrusted to him in a pastoral conversation. The story takes an astonishing turn, when later the details of the case became publicly known. Pastor Olvik apologised to the KGB officers for his reluctance to tell them what he knew. He writes, 'Whether the officer understood the problem of my pure heart – I do not know.'

Another pastor, Robert Vösu, was a little more realistic. He said that when a believer is in complicated situations, where there is a painful choice between 'truth' and 'love'

– it is always better to choose behaviour that does not hurt or damage other people, often fellow believers. He emphasised that the value of a human being should be placed above the value of dogmatic principles – even if this involves an ethical dilemma: 'If there is no way to avoid it, then a Christian should choose love. The mistake is then smaller and [more easily] forgivable.'

Second, there was a challenge to maintain trust in the believers' community. As the KGB used spies who were supposed to infiltrate Christian communities, it was very difficult to maintain an atmosphere of trust and openness. There was always an awareness of a 'big brother' keeping an eye on you! Trust was a risk that consciously had to be taken. To a certain extent it was wise not to tell everything to everybody. But only to an extent. Today, one can say that spirit of mistrust could have been even more dangerous and devastating to the churches and youth groups than direct pressure from the KGB. In Soviet realities this was not so clear. It is no

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secret that believers could not always avoid lapsing into the spirit of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.

There were other issues which Christians in the communist context had to face. For example, how the Bible helped them to understand and interpret their situation. Often the biblical images were used as tools that offered guidance in spiritually, psychologically and ethically difficult situations. Jesus said to his disciples, 'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves' (Mt 10.16). This text was believed to say, be wise and flexible in what you say, do not seek trouble, be ready to suffer, but stand firm when your faith in God is tested. This was the interpretation of Estonian Baptists, who tended to seek a moderate approach in church–state relations. There were more radical Baptists in the wider Soviet Union, who found support from other biblical passages: from the books of the prophets or (as noted above) from Revelation.

There was another Bible passage that was used in Estonia to interpret how a Christian under atheistic pressures should behave. This passage, that offered illumination and guidance, was the parable of the persistent widow (Lk 18.1–5). To combine respectful application and persistence in one's goals was the advice some Estonian church leaders gave to their church members.<sup>1</sup>

### Simple methods of survival under surveillance

KGB read private letters, used informants and spies, interrogated friends, employers and family members of the person under surveillance, used technical equipment

to listen to conversations and phone calls, and made use of archive materials. I remember receiving a letter from a member of my home Baptist church. Together with her personal letter there was a printed form that the KGB used for collecting information; the document was addressed to the local KGB officer. Somebody had opened this personal letter, read it and filled in the form. But instead of forwarding it to the KGB officer, the person had – probably by a mistake – put this form back into the envelope together with the letter, and the envelope with its content was mailed to me.

Christians worked out some simple methods to protect themselves and their loved ones. These methods did not always work, but sometimes these helped to alleviate the tension of the situation. One guideline was, 'The less a person knows – the better!' Recently, I interviewed an elderly lady whose husband, Arpad Arder, used to be a well-known evangelical preacher and pastor in Estonia during Soviet years. Veronica Arder often repeated

opinions should be practiced. However, without a self-limiting attitude, which Soviet pressures tried to teach believers, this approach often led to conflicts with government officials. However, this deliberate refusal to apply atheistic 'self-censure filters' was a means of peaceful resistance and protest.

Another method – more extensively used in the wider Soviet Union than in Estonia – was to stick to spiritual language and refuse to talk on an 'earthly level'. This might have occurred in most unexpected situations, especially among 'underground or unregistered believers'. For example, if in a courtroom the judge asked what was the believer's name, he or she would reply, 'My name is written in the Book of Life in heaven.' – 'What is your citizenship?' – 'I am a citizen of the Kingdom of God.' This type of behaviour and language was a sign of protest, but it also reminded the officials about an 'otherness' that is above the political mundane reality. This was a prophetic method of stubbornly refusing to play the games of temporal powers.

Surveillance conveyed a clear message that Christians were second-class citizens, that the government was 'almighty' and that believers could not make any decisions which would change anything. This Orwellian atmosphere was used as psychological manipulation: spreading feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness. Veronica Arder told me that a KGB officer once came to visit their home. And before the officer left he said, 'Your husband may go as far as to Africa, but we know everything about him!' Nevertheless, many Christians learned that despite such intimidations and feelings of helplessness, God revealed his help in difficulties. 'But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us' (2. Cor. 4.7).

Sometimes believers broke under KGB pressure, and cooperated with the secret service. There are records which show that there were KGB agents among evangelical free church members. One should, however, remember that the levels of this kind of cooperation also varied. Some signed an agreement to cooperate, but did it reluctantly, trying to give as little information as possible. Others thought they could win the game of cat and mouse. Usually, they were wrong. Others worked actively and tried to please the secret service.

However, the topic of Christians in totalitarian regimes under surveillance raises not only typical questions of church-state relations. This is also an area where questions of guilt and forgiveness need to be thought through once again. It is clear that the experience in communist countries for Christians was often confusion, and feelings of guilt were included. One could not avoid painful questions: Could I have done something differently? Did my words or behaviour betray somebody? There are painful memories which need to be recalled even if we would prefer to forget these. And there are things which Christians need to forgive in themselves and others, in order to be able to forget – or at least to be reconciled with these episodes and feelings.<sup>2</sup>

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### Notes

1. For more detailed discussion on the issue of ethical dilemmas for Christians under surveillance and persecution see: Toivo Pilli, 'Christians as Citizens of a Persecuting State', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 1 (Sept 2006), pp. 5–22, and on Estonian Baptists under Communism, see Toivo Pilli, *Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity under Communism* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

2. For issues of remembering, forgetting, guilt, forgiveness in and after experiences of persecution, see Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006).

during this interview that her husband did not tell her about these critical situations. 'The less a person knows – the better!' If they were interrogated by the KGB family members could say with pure heart and mind, 'I do not know about this!'

In East Germany some people would openly tell everybody or at least to a closer circle of family and friends and church, that they had been interrogated and what the interrogation included. By this the person made himself or herself useless as a spy. The secret police would not use such people as informants. This openness destroyed the context for manipulation: the secret police wanted to create an atmosphere of secrecy and wanted people to deny any contacts with secret police. In this way, the informants were at the 'mercy' of the secret police. I do not know how much this method was used.

A form of this 'protesting openness' was used in Estonia. I know a woman who was not an active church member and whom the KGB wanted to use as an informant, spying on a Christian girl. They were both university students, and shared a room in a dormitory. The interrogated student went home and told her Christian friend, her room-mate: do not tell me anything - where you go or what you do - then I can say honestly that I do not know about your life and activities. This method seemed to work: the KGB realised soon they could not use this student against her friend.

There were also some believers who took Soviet laws at face value – for example, they continued to demand that if Soviet laws say there is freedom of conscience in the country, then Christian children's work, public evangelism and freedom to express your views and