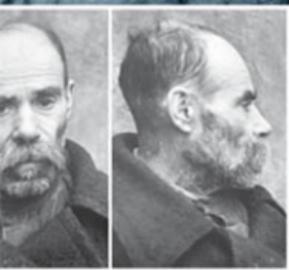




THE FATE OF
FOURTEEN
PACIFISTS
IN STALIN'S
UKRAINE,
1952-1953

CONSCIENCE ON TRIAL



Hiroaki Kuromiya

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The Fate of Fourteen Pacifists in Stalin's Ukraine,
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HIROAKI KUROMIYA

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CONSCIENCE ON TRIAL

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1952–1953

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Prologue

Cuius regio, eius religio¹

WHAT the Soviet people thought under Stalin is a difficult question to answer. They could not speak freely. Nor were there free elections, free opinion polls, or a free press. To make matters worse, dissidence was artificially created by the police as a justification for terror. Innocent people were thus portrayed as ‘enemies of the people,’ and silence and dissimulation were a way of life.

Some years ago when I was thinking hard about ways to fathom the minds of the Soviet citizens living under Stalin’s rule, I chanced upon a criminal case of what then appeared to be a particularly compelling example of popular dissent. In December 1952, a mere few weeks before Stalin’s death in March 1953, fourteen Christian believers whom the police labelled ‘Reformed Adventists’ (or ‘Reformist Adventists’ [*adventisty-reformisty*]), a splinter group from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, were tried secretly in Bila Tserkva, Ukraine. The charge was openly defying Soviet law, more specifically, taking and advocating a pacifist stance against universal military service. These Adventists were not famous people, in fact, to a man (or woman) they were poor, barely literate, and living on the margin of Soviet society without steady jobs and with few personal possessions. They belonged to the underclass of a supposedly classless socialist society. And yet their apparent willingness to risk their freedom in order to stand up for their beliefs called to mind Vladimir Shelkov, the highly influential advocate of human rights in the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death and the leader of Reformist Adventists. Shelkov commanded the respect of Soviet dissidents and human rights activists such as Andrei Sakharov.² Perhaps here, in the case file of these unknown fourteen men and women lay the answer to my question. I decided to pursue it.

¹He who rules determines the religion of the ruled (The Peace of Augsburg, 1555).

²See Andrei Sakharov, *Memoirs* (New York, 1990), 493.



Figure 0.1: Kiev and Bila Tserkva

After much enquiry, I finally traced the file to the archive of the SBU (Sluzhba bezpeky Ukrainy, the Security Service of Ukraine), the successor to the KGB of the Soviet era, in Kiev, where I was granted access. The case file consists of two volumes with 852 leaves (folios) of all sizes, both sides of which were used in most cases. As is true of other similar files, this file, with few exceptions, is written almost entirely in longhand, and is tightly bound (which makes it difficult to read the bound edge of some pages). Many pages contain notations (mainly underlinings) marked by readers



Figure 0.2: The cover of the case file (volume one)

(most likely judges and prosecutors). Here and there, handwritten phrases and words turn out to be almost indecipherable. In the end, it required three summers to read every word of the file and complete the research.

The two-volume case file constitutes a unique set of nearly complete trial records from preliminary investigations to trial proceedings, to sentencing, to appeals, and ultimately to the exoneration of the accused. Such complete records are a rare find, in spite of the fact that similar political trials took place all over the country.³ Moreover, as I came to realize, the records of the case afford rare and invaluable insights into the minds of those swept up in Stalin's terror machine and into the workings of the Soviet system of justice in the last year of Stalin's rule.

Through a close analysis of the case file (Haluzevyi derzhavnyi arkhiv Sluzhby bezpeky Ukrainy, spr. 58859fp), this book addresses the original question I sought to answer: what was going on in the minds of the people. In this sense, the present book follows the example set by Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (first published in Italian in 1976), which analyses the court records of a trial of a heretic in order to understand the mental world ('cosmos') of a man in sixteenth century Italy. The people I examine here were almost certainly *not* representative of 'ordinary' Soviet citizens under Stalin. So little is known, and often so much is simply unknowable, about the minds of 'ordinary' Soviet citizens ('the silent majority') under Stalin that unless one knows much more, it is difficult to speak of 'representativeness.' In this regard, even the admittedly unrepresentative cases like the Adventists examined here afford valuable insight. At the same time, the book uncovers the mechanism of political repression, intrigue, and provocation by the secret police and the roles played by prosecutors, defence lawyers, and judges in Stalin's last days. Together, these two elements reveal the complex relations between an atheist regime and a group of religious believers under Stalin.

In the twentieth century, Arthur Koestler explored the mind of a revolutionary in his 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon*. According to Koestler, the revolutionary (modelled on the Old Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin, who was tried at the famous Moscow show trial in 1938 and executed) incriminated himself in crimes he had not committed as a last service to the revolution. By contrast, the Adventists examined here appear unaffected

³One exception is Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, eds, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven, CT, 2001). Yet even this volume is far from complete, lacking many relevant documents such as interrogation records.

by the revolution carried out by the atheist Marxists. This case reveals instead the persistence of a moral universe deeply private and separate from the official, atheist and revolutionary regime.

The 1952 trial of the fourteen Adventists was unknown to the world. The Soviet government arrested and accused them of belonging to an illegal sect and of spreading illegal faith. They confessed to their crimes, were tried *in camera*, declared guilty, and despatched to the Gulag. In fact, however, it was not proved that such a clandestine organization existed. Nor was it proved that the accused refused to perform military duties or that they had even the slightest missionary interest.

A careful reading of the case files suggests that the accused were inclined to pacifism, yes, but were not intransigent opponents of military service. They appeared to have negotiated a middle ground between their faith and the Soviet, atheist regime. Their attitude towards the Soviet government was ambivalent and ambiguous. In general, the case file suggests that they kept their faith to themselves under conditions of relentless attack, quietly observing the Saturday Sabbath in contradiction to the Soviet practice of a six-day work week, Saturdays included.⁴ To use Albert O. Hirschman's categories of 'loyalty,' 'voice,' and 'exit,'⁵ the fourteen Adventists clearly sought 'exit.' Unable to physically exit the Soviet regime, they sought an ontological exit in their private religious universe. Even there they were forced to find a middle ground with the atheist regime. All the same, the Soviet police could not tolerate private lives of faith and planted provocateurs among the accused. The chief defendant, the alleged leader of the 'sect' who refused to speak throughout pretrial investigation and the trial itself, appears to have been an agent provocateur.

In 1952, those accused of crimes against the state were tried in court, unlike the time of Stalin's Great Terror (1937–8), when no evidence was needed to convict and execute people extrajudicially. Even so, actual evidence did not matter very much; prima-facie evidence sufficed. Readers eager to find brave and heroic resistance fighters in cases of alleged crimes against the state can be easily duped by such evidence. Such was exactly what the police and the Soviet government wanted. They were past mas-

⁴The beliefs of Adventists are described in more detail in Chapter 2.

⁵Albert H. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA, 1970).

ters of deception. Unwary readers are likely to find themselves in the trap set by the police.⁶

The present book is a critical study of Stalinist trial records, and serves at the same time as a warning against a facile reading. After a discussion of the arrests of the fourteen defendants in late 1952 against the background of the Soviet religious policy of the time, the book analyses in turn the records of pre-trial interrogations and testimonies, the trial itself, and post-trial appeals and eventual exonerations. This book thereby seeks to elucidate both the private lives of Soviet citizens and the everyday working of Stalinist political repression into which they were sucked. Although religious practise is an excellent example of private life under the atheist regime of Stalin, oddly this important subject is often left out in the study of the ‘private sphere.’⁷ The present book addresses this lacuna.

The accused Adventists lived quiet, private lives of faith on the margins of society, not lives of defiance but, rather, ones of silent nonconformity. They certainly did not think of their lives as heroic. They lived as far away from the official world as imaginable. The private universe of the Adventists did not constitute a direct political challenge to the official Soviet universe. Its existence did mean, however, that the official, Stalinist universe had failed to conquer the hearts and minds of Soviet individuals, young and old, and this proved a threat to the socialist harmony of the regime. The state was compelled to remove this threat and purify the Soviet regime of non-Sovietized human elements.⁸ Although the Adventists committed no crime, the atheist state insisted that they were political criminals. Such was the logic of Stalinist political repression.

Religious subcultures were no stranger to Ukraine and Russia. In spite of persecution and discrimination, the Old Believers (splinters from

⁶See the discussion of this trap in the late-Stalin period: Hiroaki Kuromiya, ‘“Political Youth Opposition in Late Stalinism”: Evidence and Conjecture,’ *Europe-Asia Studies* 55:4 (June 2003), 631–8.

⁷See, for example, Lewis H. Siegelbaum, ed., *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York, 2006). Note, however, Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practises* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), which does not focus on religion but explores the private in Soviet history in depth.

⁸On this point, see Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2001) and Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework* (Stanford, CA, 2003).

the official Orthodox Church), Roman and Greek Catholics, Protestants, and many other sects thrived underground in Imperial Russia.⁹ In 1917 Orthodoxy was replaced by a secular faith, Marxism. Yet even Stalin's savage terror failed to eradicate religious subcultures.

If at least some people were able to sustain quiet private lives of non-conformity, albeit in a rather remote part of Ukraine, how many others lived similar lives in the Soviet Union as a whole in the last days of Stalin? No doubt many, but even the Soviet secret police could not have known the extent because few people showed their true colours under Stalin. The police did not always trust even private diaries, suspecting them of being a means of dissimulation and self-protection.¹⁰ For this very reason the secret police used every means available to extract the hidden, private thoughts of the Soviet people. Surveillance was ubiquitous, police agents, informants, provocateurs were afoot everywhere, and, once in custody, people were routinely tortured in an attempt to pry into the hidden, private realms of their minds. Obviously it is patently wrong to assert either that every Soviet citizen was opposed to Stalin's regime or, contrarily, that everyone was wholeheartedly in support of it.¹¹ Clearly, people could not openly challenge the regime, and the vast majority outwardly supported it.

What this case shows is that there were people under Stalin who lived a life of nonconformity without openly or outrightly rejecting Stalin's Soviet Union. Their numbers were likely not small. Some groups of Evangelicals (Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, and others), Catholics, Old Believers, and even Orthodox Christians lived similar lives.¹² The present book is merely a first step towards the study of such

⁹For the Old Believers, see Irina Paert, *Old Believers: Religious Dissent and Gender in Russia, 1760–1850* (Manchester/New York, 2003) and Leonid Heretz, *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars* (Cambridge, 2008), chap. 2. For others, see Chapter 2.

¹⁰This complex issue has yet to be examined carefully. For the assessment of Stalin-era diaries, see the contrasting views by Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA, 2006) and Nina Lugovskaia, *Khochu zhit': iz dnevnika shkol'nitsy 1932–1937* (Moscow, 2003).

¹¹See the discussion of the division of historians into these two extreme views: Hiroaki Kuromiya, 'How Do We Know What the Soviet People Thought under Stalin?' in Timo Vihavainen, ed., *Sovetskaia vlast' – narodnaia vlast'?* (St. Petersburg, 2003).

¹²Aleksei Beglov has uncovered the underground life of Orthodox believers under Stalin: *V poiskakh 'bezgreshnykh katakomb': Tserkovnoe podpol'e v SSSR* (Moscow, 2008).