

Suffering and Persecution

Growth Amidst Persecution: A Comparison of the Evangelical Church in Communist China and the Soviet Union

by *John E. White*

In the former Soviet Union one can overhear ministers claim that the Evangelical Church in China grew ten fold under communism, while the Evangelical Church in the Soviet Union shrank ten fold.¹ While these statistics can be disputed to some extent, this stark contrast seems to beg for further investigation. Just what are the factors that have made the difference? How can it be that the Soviet Union gained religious freedom yet it was China that experienced Christian revival? What factors are important for growth when persecution hits the church? This article will begin to explore by way of comparison the various factors underlying evangelical church growth in communist China and the Soviet Union. I would hope that churches and missionaries ministering in places where the government persecutes Christians, or where persecution is anticipated, would find this exploration valuable.

For this study, “evangelical” refers to the denominations of evangelical Christians, Baptists, and Pentecostals within the Soviet Union and to the Three Self Patriotic Movement and Protestant House Church movement in China. I want to compare evangelical growth in these two regions from four perspectives, since it’s my conviction that any fruitful comparison cannot be one dimensional. Those four perspectives (what I will call dimensions) can help us begin to configure the many different factors we might see in any comparison of persecution. They would be (1) culture; (2) the state of the evangelical church before communism; (3) the way the communist government related to the evangelical church; and, (4) the evangelical church’s practices and beliefs during communism. I would hope that sorting the different factors of this particular comparison will provide a grid for discerning how the church might grow under persecution.

Russian and Chinese Culture

In addressing the range of cultural matters that might impact the ability of any church to flourish under persecution I can only be suggestive. While I

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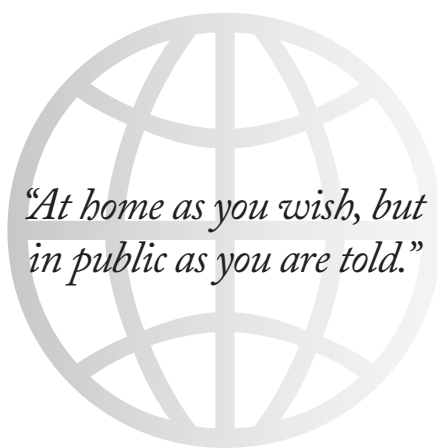
admit to only broad strokes, hopefully these strokes will illustrate how important it is to factor in cultural variables. As two of the largest nations in the world in both population and area, Russia (or the Soviet Union) and China have a number of cultural characteristics in common. Both cultures have been primarily rural² and have had a long-established faith—Russian Orthodoxy and Confucianism, respectively.³ With national self-images of “Messiah” and “The Middle Kingdom,” it is clear that both cultures think well of themselves. Both are suspicious of outsiders (like missionaries) who offer help of any kind.

Yet, any understanding of a church’s growth amidst persecution must discern the differences between these cultures. For instance, Geert Hofstede’s cultural study of “uncertainty avoidance” establishes the Russian preference for stability, scoring them seventh among 74 countries. In contrast, China ranked 68th, indicating that any need to “be in control” is not as vital.⁴ Traditionally the Chinese have viewed life as cyclical, with a tendency to “look forward to the past,”⁵ making the future less worrisome (it’s behind them!). Russians, on the other hand, tend to be pessimistic about life, yet they take pride in their ability to endure.⁶

This cultural comparison of “uncertainty avoidance” indicates the need for historical or socio-economic aspects of cultural life. Russians come from a European feudal system in which “a family permanently retained its status in the social order.”⁷ This stability contrasts with a system in China that was more based on achievement. Positions in the Chinese bureaucracy were gained by successfully passing exams⁸ and merchants were able to accumulate wealth that led to influence.⁹ Much of farmers’ success was based on their own work in the rice fields, due primarily to the collection of fixed rents by landlords in central and southern China since the fifteenth

century.¹⁰ This combination of success through intellect, work, and the use of wealth is a salient comparison with Russia. The Chinese people are quite entrepreneurial as opposed to Russians who value caution and stability.¹¹ One captures this cultural comparison in proverbs: Russians say, “If God does not bring it, the earth will not give it,” while the Chinese say, “If a man works hard, the land will not be lazy.”¹²

We would also have to explore the Russian tendency to compartmentalize their private and public lives, which seems to contrast with the Chinese who are more holistic. One Russian proverb suggests, “At home as you wish, but in public as you are told.”¹³ This compartmentalization



includes religion as well, and could have a dramatic impact of how Russians handle faith publically under fire. (Only the Americans rival Russians in the minimal social function of religion in everyday life.¹⁴)

And the Chinese seem to put greater emphasis on practicality; even ancient Chinese religions focus more on ethics than on spirituality. One wonders if this would make Chinese culture more open and tolerant to spiritual ideas. One author suggests, “Chinese culture is tolerant because it does not know what is the ultimate reality beyond life, nature and the universe.”¹⁵ In my experience Russians tend to perceive themselves to be sufficiently

spiritual, and with their value on religious stability, it’s difficult to convince them to believe the gospel as opposed to just following Russian culture. Russians usually see religion as being communal (from their Russian Orthodoxy¹⁶) and value individual spirituality far less. If a church doesn’t have a large beautiful building (like the Orthodox), it’s not a real church. This was a grave disadvantage to unregistered evangelical churches in Russia during communism.

So it appears that the Chinese had cultural advantages. The tendency of Russians to compartmentalize their faith under the horrors of persecution seems to have inoculated them against spiritual pursuit, whereas persecution led many Chinese to seek new spiritual answers. The Russian understanding of spirituality as communal and associated with a building made them less prepared for underground church life. Russians tended to prefer stability, whereas Chinese practicality and entrepreneurialism equipped them well to develop an unregistered church.

The Evangelical Church before Communism

In discerning the potential response to persecution, one must also consider the status of the church. In China the evangelical church had already existed for 100 years when Communists took over in 1949. A key event was the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, which led to the death of several hundred missionaries and thousands of Chinese Christians. Many Christians’ witness during this terrible event powerfully affected the Chinese people,¹⁷ and the evangelical church grew consistently until communism was declared (see table 1). In 1925 there were over 8000 missionaries, although this was reduced radically in 1949 with the change of government.¹⁸ These missionaries helped prepare thousands of national ministers, so that “in terms of Chinese leadership, only a small number

of churches were actually not staffed adequately by well-trained Chinese.”¹⁹

The evangelical church had existed for almost as long in Russia as in China when communism took over that government in 1917. Evangelicals had moved from Germany to Ukraine in the 1820s, a movement of Baptists had grown in the Caucasus, and evangelical Christians had emerged among the elite in St. Petersburg.²⁰ This growth happened despite the fact that there was significantly less mission work in Russia than in China. After full religious liberty was granted by Tsar Nicholas II in 1905,²¹ the evangelical church experienced consistent growth until communism came (see table 1).

What factors contributed to this growth? In Russia, the church seized upon this more open era.

The evangelicals were quick to capitalize on the new situation and organized systematic expansion. At a Congress of the Evangelical Christians in 1910, (Ivan) Prokhanov set as a goal the organization of one congregation in each of 70 regions of the empire. From this one congregation five more were to be started.²⁴

Yet, despite official religious liberty, the government and Russian Orthodox Church interfered. Some evangelical worship services and denominational congresses were banned, the evangelical Christians’ Bible school was closed, and some pastors were exiled.²⁵ In contrast, Chinese Evangelical Churches actually received some praise and help from the government.²⁶

There were other negative aspects that the Russian Evangelical Church faced which the Chinese Evangelical Church did not. In Russia, many Baptists were German, so that at the onset of World War I many Russians associated Baptists with the enemy. Furthermore, most Baptists were pacifists, and thus unwilling to fight the Germans.

We should not underestimate the impact of the centuries-old traditional

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Orthodox Church on the Russian mentality. There were numerous conversions to evangelicalism that happened, not for the sake of the gospel, but from dissatisfaction with the Orthodox Church and/or the government to which it had long been tied.²⁷ The Chinese Evangelical Church also was negatively associated with a foreigner missionary force, but the horrors of the Boxer Rebellion seem to have shaken off much of the previous negativity.

During this entire period, both churches in these two regions had significant evangelistic ministries. In Russia, evangelicals used many methods of witness, including literature, music concerts, and Bible studies for soldiers and factory workers.²⁸ In addition to the outreach work of foreign missionaries in China, evangelists John Sung, Wang Mingdao, and Watchman Nee had very successful ministries.²⁹ Churches in both countries reached out to youth, in Russia under the leadership of Prokhanov,³⁰ and in China through the YMCA and YWCA.³¹

The focus on Christian education in China (a natural extension from Confucianism) was much greater than in Russia. There were 58,000 Christian schools in China in 1906. Many of these schools baptized the majority of their children by graduation.³² In Russia, only a handful of cases of Christian education can be found.³³

Both Russian and Chinese churches produced Christian literature, but it was the demand for Bibles in China that increased significantly in the years before communism.

In the fore part of the 1930’s a decline was noted in the demand for discrete portions of the Scriptures, but sales of entire Bibles and especially of New Testaments markedly rose. This trend seemed to indicate a serious reading of the Bible which was not content with single books.³⁴

This increased Bible reading was certainly a blessed preparation for days to come when the church would be denied Bibles.

A final important difference was the development of decentralized churches

Table 1: Evangelicals before Communism (All figures are approximate)

Year	# of Evangelicals in Russia ²²	# of Evangelicals in China ²³
1902		100,000
1905	106,000	
1910		200,000
1912	144,000	
1914		257,000
1917	150,000-200,000 (communism begins)	
1936	_____	567,000
1949	_____	927,000 (communism begins)

in China. The best example of this was Watchman Nee's "Little Flock" ministry. They stressed the importance of close fellowship in small group meetings, Bible study, and freedom from foreign control. Thus, they were ready to survive under communism.³⁵ Considering the Russian cultural trait of associating the church with a building, this sort of group would be very unnatural for Russians. However, it was exactly the sort of ministry needed for the coming of communism.

So, before the crackdown of communism the Chinese Evangelical Church was healthier and more flexible than the Russian Evangelical Church. In addition to having greater numbers, Chinese Christians had learned many important lessons from foreign missionaries, not the least of which was to minister through suffering. They had benefited from a good system of Christian education, the availability of and interest in Bible reading, and the development of some decentralized churches.

How the Communist Government Related to the Evangelical Church

Christopher Marsh points out that, "the area of religion policy appears to be the one area where the Chinese *did not* draw many parallels between their experience and that of their Soviet comrades."³⁶ When communism came to China, all Western imperialists (including foreign missionaries) were asked to leave. The Chinese government established the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) in 1951,³⁷ and over the next decade churches and ministries were shut down or brought under control of the TSPM.³⁸

In contrast, the Evangelical church in the Soviet Union was given freedom and experienced revival during the first decade of communism. Because the Communists considered the Russian Orthodox Church to be their biggest threat, they gave evangelicals greater freedom in order to draw converts

away from the Orthodox.³⁹ A parallel might be drawn between the 1920s in the Soviet Union and the first half of the 20th century in China (before communism) in terms of religious freedom and evangelical growth.

However, the Soviet government's kind treatment in the 1920s gave the evangelical church a false sense of security and allowed some government agents to gain influence over the church. According to Christopher Marsh, "we can see the Soviet tactic of projecting an image of toleration publicly, while agitating for the church's destruction to insiders."⁴⁰ It was discovered after the fall of communism that nearly a third of those in the church in Communist Eastern Europe had collaborated as informants.⁴¹ Even



evangelical Christian church leader Ivan Prokhanov had cooperated with the communist government.⁴²

Furthermore, the Soviet Union effectively combated faith with atheist propaganda. In contrast,

China's paltry efforts in promoting atheism...left the Chinese people more open to religious belief than if they had been indoctrinated in scientific atheism for decades.⁴³

Both the Soviet and Chinese governments conducted periods of intense persecution against the evangelical church.⁴⁴ Each of these periods of persecution reduced the size of the evangelical church, although it is unknown to what extent in China (see table 2, facing page).

It's important to recognize that the way the churches were persecuted varied significantly. In 1929, Stalin made a five-year plan to convert the Soviet Union into a communist state. This included church registration (which could be denied), making it virtually impossible to print religious materials, confining ministers to certain geographical areas (which limited mission work), and forbidding meetings for children, youth, or women.⁴⁷ The week was made six days long between 1929 and 1940, with 1/6 of the work force off each day.⁴⁸ This made attending "Sunday" worship difficult, if not impossible. Also, many evangelicals were arrested and put in labor camps (an estimated 22,000 were sent to Siberia⁴⁹). When pastors were arrested, the government often closed their churches, sometimes turning church buildings into movie theaters or museums.⁵⁰

The evangelical Christians, Baptists, and Pentecostals in the Soviet Union joined to form one denomination over the course of 1944-1945, and became the Evangelical Christian Baptists. Although this seemed to be done freely, the government actually "guided" the decision.⁵¹ A centralized system of religion could be more easily and effectively infiltrated by the government.⁵²

Later, persecution under Khrushchev made a significant impact as he promised to "show the last Christian on TV."⁵³ Children were sometimes taken away from "unfit" Christian parents and put into orphanages for the government to raise.⁵⁴ Youth organizations indoctrinated children and youth into communist atheism.⁵⁵ China's policies were nowhere near as effective at influencing children through these same years.⁵⁶

But in China, persecution during the Cultural Revolution became more direct and severe. All churches—even the TSPM churches—were shut down in 1966. No evangelism, public worship or even singing of hymns was allowed. Bibles and hymnbooks were burned. The last seminary was closed. At that time, "Christians dared not

show recognition of each other in public...Whispered prayer in secret with one or two others became the only Christian fellowship still possible.”⁵⁷

Yet, the unregistered “house church” movement survived and grew. In 1982, the Chinese government officially started

allowing home Bible studies, worship and prayer.⁵⁸ Later, the massacre of students at Tiananmen Square in 1989 led to a great growth of interest in the Christian faith, especially among young people. As one person said, “When that happened, I knew the government had lied to me.”⁵⁹

In addition, Communists did several things which unintentionally helped the Chinese evangelical church. The government standardized the language of Mandarin, improved literacy and transportation.⁶⁰ Although native Chinese religions were not eradicated,⁶¹

Table 2: Evangelicals during Communism (All figures are approximate)

Year	# of Evangelicals in the Soviet Union ⁴⁵	Government Persecutions	# of Evangelicals in China ⁴⁶
1917	150,000-200,000 total		_____
1922	100,000 Baptists, 250,000 evangelical Christians		_____
1929	400,000 Baptists, 400,000 evangelical Christians, 80,000 Pentecostals	< Stalin: 1929-1939	_____
1935	250,000 Total		_____
1947	350,000 Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB), including 25,000 Pentecostals		_____
1949			927,000 total
1958	530,000 ECB	Mao: Anti-Rightist Campaign & Great Leap Forward 1957-1960 >	
1959		< Khrushchev: 1959-1964	
1966	250,000 ECB, 155,000 unregistered	Mao: Cultural Revolution 1966-1976 >	0 registered (unregistered?)
1980	350,000 ECB, 100,000 unregistered		
1983-1984		Deng: “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign” >	
1986			3,300,000 registered
1989	237,000 ECB, 140,000 Pentecostals (unregistered?)	Tiananmen Square >	
1991	End of communism		
1994	_____		7,000,000 registered
1996	_____		10,000,000 registered
2004	_____		21,000,000 registered, 40,000,000 house church (unregistered)

communism weakened these religions and left people feeling a spiritual vacuum. Furthermore, the Cultural Revolution forced people to renounce their failures and change their lives, creating a “culture of confession” that may have made an evangelical confession of sins much easier for the Chinese people.⁶²

Of course, the Soviet Union did similar things in standardizing Russian, improving literacy, transportation, and weakening the Russian Orthodox Church. Horrors like the Cultural Revolution also occurred under Stalin. Yet, here again, one wonders whether the Russian tendency to compartmentalize might have caused the non-Christian population to continue to reject God.

In review, the communist government’s attacks on the Chinese Evangelical Church were less successful than those on her counterpart in the Soviet Union. By forming the Chinese government-sponsored TSPM right away, many Chinese Christians were immediately driven underground, making them more difficult to control. By allowing the evangelical church to grow during the first decade of communism, the Soviet government more successfully infiltrated the registered church. Although the Chinese

government shut down all churches during the Cultural Revolution, the Soviet government’s manipulation and propaganda were more effective in the long run.

Practices and Beliefs of the Evangelical Church during Communism

Soviet and Chinese Evangelical Churches both had Bible-based beliefs and valued individual repentance. Both churches believed that God would provide for them through suffering.⁶³ Both churches sought greater unity, but ended up with registered and unregistered churches that disagreed over the question of submission to the government.⁶⁴

Both Soviet and Chinese Evangelical Churches conducted evangelism under communism. In the 1920s, the Soviet Evangelical Church had great success using many forms of public evangelism.⁶⁵ After the 1920s, the Soviet churches limited their evangelism to personal outreach and evangelizing during weddings, funerals, and other holidays.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, a “subculture” was also formed, teaching that survival and personal holiness were more important than outreach.⁶⁷

Chinese house churches, however, continued to do public preaching, even during the Cultural Revolution. For example, the Fangcheng Church Network trained young evangelists to go out in pairs all over China. They were sometimes arrested and tortured, but they continued to spread the gospel.⁶⁸

Chinese Evangelical Churches placed a great emphasis on Christian education. As of 2004, the TSPM had 12 seminaries and 12 Bible schools⁶⁹ and there were over a hundred underground seminaries across China.⁷⁰ In contrast, there was very little training and Christian education in the Soviet Evangelical Church. The 1920s saw the most training, a continuation of what had been done before communism.⁷¹ Yet even this failed to produce well-trained leadership, which, according to Walter Sawatsky, is one reason churches lost ground during the persecution of the 1930s. Interestingly, the Soviet Union’s evangelicals were the only ones in Eastern Europe not permitted to have a seminary.⁷²

The Chinese church had more access to Bibles than the Soviet church. Bible smuggling into the Soviet Union had some impact, but nothing like the one million Bibles that Brother David smuggled into China in 1981. This led

Table 3: Comparison of Evangelical Churches under Communism

	China	Soviet Union	Both
Culture	Entrepreneurialism, holism	Stability, compartmentalism	Dislike of foreigners
Church	More foreign missionary support, decentralization, underground church established immediately	Communal, connected to a building, underground church established much later	National leadership
Conditions	Government persecution more direct: shutting down all churches	Government persecution more indirect: church infiltration, propaganda	One language, improved literacy, good transportation, weakened traditional religion
Christian Ministry	Christian education, more access to Bibles, more direct evangelism and mission work	“Survival” subculture, indirect evangelism during weddings, funerals, etc.	Bible-based, belief in God’s provision amidst suffering, personal evangelism

to the Chinese government allowing Bibles to be printed in China, with more than 30 million Bibles printed from 1987 to 2003.⁷³ This greater availability of Bibles in the last 30 years has coincided with incredible Chinese church growth.

Another key difference between the Soviet and Chinese Evangelical Churches was their mission work. Whereas Soviet churches' main outreach to minority groups within the Soviet Union was confined to the 1920s⁷⁴ and the last years of Glasnost from 1989-1991,⁷⁵ "...virtually every house church Christian in China... has a passion for mission work outside of China."⁷⁶ The "Back to Jerusalem" movement aims to send 100,000 Chinese missionaries to evangelize the 10/40 window from China back to Jerusalem. Only a few hundred such missionaries have been trained so far, but there are already many Chinese missionaries working in minority areas within China.⁷⁷

It's apparent that the Chinese Evangelical Church had more growth than the Soviet Evangelical Church due to its evangelistic boldness. Even during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese Christians found ways to evangelize, disciple, and train people for ministry. The Chinese also had more access to Bibles. In contrast to the Soviet Christian subculture that focused more on survival and personal holiness, the Chinese Evangelical Church dreamed, planned and developed initial outreach into the 10/40 window.

Conclusion: Critical Dimensions for Discerning Growth

Considering the above analysis, how can we explain the church growth that occurred under communist persecution? I believe we need a grid of discernment to capture the answer. So I have introduced what I believe are four critical dimensions to frame a multitude of factors in this comparison of China and the Soviet Union (see table 3). We must consider

Yet even this failed to produced well-trained leadership, which is one reason churches lost ground during the persecution of the 1930s.

the *culture*, the status of the *church*, the exact *conditions* of persecution, and the forms of *Christian ministry* for a proportionate assessment of evangelical growth. More thorough and comprehensive research on these dimensions, whether digging into government records or gaining better information on the church under communism, may balance the tendency to romanticize the apparent successes of the Chinese Evangelical Church.

So, this study is more than an historical assessment of these communist contexts, but offers a tool, a grid, which may assist the mission worker who is presently witnessing or might anticipate persecution in their context of ministry. I believe we need to see beyond our tactical responses to the four contextual dimensions that I have outlined. Culture makes a difference, as does the nature of the church at the onset of persecution. And we can't be naïve about the nature and intensity of the persecution itself. The differences in governmental strategies make a difference. Ultimately, however, the church's response can be determinative. Developing decentralized churches, having a good Christian education system, and having access to Bibles are vital factors. Boldness in evangelism and a missionary vision in the face of suffering can help spur church growth as well. But we must not focus too quickly on the character and method of ministry if we wish to gain a full appreciation of how any church might grow under persecution.

Endnotes

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- ⁶⁹ Lambert, 2004.
- ⁷⁰ Aikman, 2003.
- ⁷¹ Nikolskaya, 2009.
- ⁷² Sawatsky, 1981.
- ⁷³ Aikman, 2003.
- ⁷⁴ Savinskii, 2001.
- ⁷⁵ Rowe, 1994.
- ⁷⁶ Aikman, 2003, p. 111.
- ⁷⁷ Lambert, 2004.

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