

Adventists and Military Service in the Soviet Union

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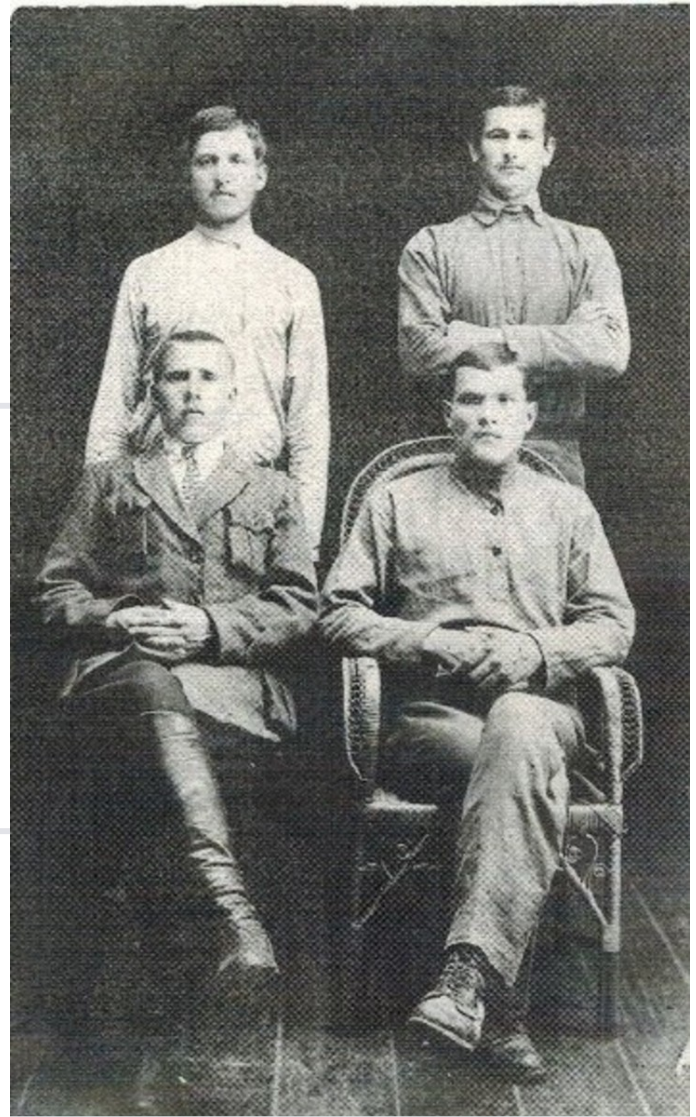
Dmitry O. Yunak graduated in Finance and Economics from a Soviet secular educational institution and completed a six-year course of Theology at an underground SDA Theological Institute (Moldova, USSR). In the Soviet times, he served as a pastor, administrator, and bible/history professor in the underground Theological Institute. In 1990, he was appointed as Treasurer and Publishing Ministries Director for the USSR Division. After the Euro-Asia Division was organized in 1991, Dmitry O. Yunak served as ESD auditor and under treasurer. He was the author of a dozen of SDA history books and scores of other publications. He owns a major SDA history archive.

The October Revolution in 1917, which overthrew the Russian Provisional Government, made new adjustments to the activities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Russia.¹ In July 1918, the Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was adopted. Article XIII of that Constitution stated that “every citizen has the right to freedom of both religious and anti-religious activities.”²

On August 24, 1918, the People’s Commissariat for Justice issued an Instruction stating that all religious societies and denominations - Orthodox, Old Believers, Catholics, Armenian Gregorians, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, and Lamaists - should come within the purview of the Decree on Separation of Church from State and School from Church.³

On October 22, 1918, the Revolutionary Military Council of the RSFSR issued an order that read:

Voted, to be guided by the following resolution of the Revolutionary Military Council of the RSFSR as of October 10, 1918, on calling up the citizens for military service: “The Soviet Government, when putting into practice the total separation of church from state, cannot ignore the sincere and honest religious views of individuals unless



Adventist young people convicted for their objection to military service, 1923.

Photo courtesy of D.O. Yunak.

their views are contradicting the principles of labor legislation and the interests of the working class. Therefore, a person liable for military service, who made it clear that he could not do his military service due to his religious beliefs, shall be obliged to prove to the appropriate judicial or investigative agency that his religious beliefs are not merely a cover for his cowardice and dishonesty. Should it be proved, a person liable for military service may be relieved of direct combat duties, so as to be, however, enlisted in the ambulance party to fulfill the duty in the army without contradicting his religious views, but without evading the dangers of service to be done by the overwhelming majority of workers and peasants of military age.

Chair of the Revolutionary Military Council of the RSFSR – Lev Trotsky; Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the RSFSR – Jukums Vācietis.⁴

The United Council of Religious Communities and Groups was formed in Moscow in November 1918 to facilitate the recruits who wanted to substitute alternative service for military service. The Council members were from the following religious organizations: *True Freedom – L.N. Tolstoy Society* (V.G. Chertkov, K.S. Shokhor-Trotsky, Kl. Platonova, and N. N. Gusev), *Sober Life Labor Commune* (I.N. Koloskov, and A.P. Sergeenko), Mennonites (G.G. Frese, and P.F. Frese), Evangelical Protestants (V.I. Dolgoplov, and V.I. Chirikov), Baptists (P.V. Pavlov, and M.D. Timoshenko), and Seventh-day Adventists (I.A. Lvov, and V.M. Teppone; after a while, Heinrich J. Löbsack was included and served until 1922). The primary purpose of the said Council was to maintain the principles of the freedom of conscience in all its manifestations, including the protection of those who refuse military service for religious reasons.

On January 4, 1919, the Council of People's Commissars issued the "Decree on the Exemption from Military Service Due to Religious Beliefs" that read as follows:

1. Persons who cannot do military service because of their religious beliefs shall have the right, on the basis of a court ruling, to replace it, for a term of induction, with the sanitary service, mainly in infective hospitals, or with other appropriate socially useful work at the choice of the recruit.
2. The People's Court, when passing a judgement on replacing military service with another civic duty, shall cause an expert examination to be made by the Moscow United Council of Religious Communities and Groups for each individual case. Such an examination should verify a fact that a specific religious belief excludes the recruit's participation in the military service and that this person acts sincerely and with clear conscience.
3. The United Council of Religious Communities and Groups shall have the right, by way of exception, to solicit the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee for a full exemption of a recruit from the military service without any replacement with another civic duty. This shall be done if it is proved that such a replacement is inadmissible from the point of view of not only religious belief in general, but also from the standpoint of sectarian literature and the personal life of the individual concerned.

Note: The commencement and conduct of the case for the exemption of a certain person from military service shall be left to the discretion of both the recruit himself and the United Council of Religious Communities and Groups, the latter is entitled to solicit the Moscow People's Court for the case hearing.

Chair of the Council of People's Commissars – V.I. Ulyanov (Lenin); People's Commissar for Justice – Kursky; Executive Officer of the Council of People's Commissars – V. Bonch-Bruyevich; Secretary – L. Fotiyeva.

Moscow, Kremlin January 4, 1919.⁵

An explanatory statement to the above Decree was published to the effect that believers called out for military service, who consider it morally impossible for them to participate in any military affairs aimed, directly or indirectly, at killing people, may use the published Decree to be exempted from military service for their religious beliefs. With that in mind, they had to file a petition in the People's Court requesting to exempt them from military service and replace it with another alternative duty.

In 1986, S.K. Stepanov told the writer of these words that in 1923 he had taken advantage of this Decree and served in infirmaries. During that time, he had acquired a medical profession that later saved him from death in prison.

When the doors of prisons were opened after the publication of the first Decrees of the Soviet Government, the public knew that “some 70 SDA's... had been sentenced to hard labor, with the terms ranging from 2 to 16 years, for their noncombatant stand.”⁶

However, the Soviet power, godless and atheistic from its inception, could not put up for a long time with the constitutional interpretation proposed by V.I. Lenin and accepted by the 5th All-Russian Congress of Soviets on July 10, 1918, regarding the equal opportunities for both religious and antireligious propaganda (literally “agitation”). Neither could an atheistic state tolerate the constitutional right to alternative military service for believers.

After V.I. Lenin's death, the freedom of conscience immediately became limited. According to a new Constitution of the USSR adopted in 1924, any religious activity in the USSR had to be strictly supervised. An article about the freedom of conscience read that believers could have the right only to “religious confessions” that implied only the passive confession of faith without any religious advertising and much less the dissemination of religious views. On the other hand, anti-religionists acquired special rights and privileges and had the freedom of “anti-religious propaganda.” The anti-religious propaganda was an instrument of power and financed by the government and favored in every way.

In 1925, the “League of Militant Atheists” was organized, and the authorities launched a newspaper, “Bezbozhnik” (“The Godless”). It should be noted that even the above liberties got clipped in the 1936 Soviet Constitution, under which believers had only the “freedom of worship.” However, the freedom of “anti-religious propaganda” was granted to “all citizens” and, practically, to the state at large.

The Soviet authorities established a goal of forcing believers to recognize, on equal terms with all Soviet citizens, the binding character of military service.

Moreover, on September 18, 1925, compulsory military service was introduced according to the law passed by the All-Union Central Executive Committee of the USSR. Article 216 prescribed that “exemption from military service should occur on the basis of a court decision and apply basically to those who were born and brought up in families whose religious views had forbidden to bear arms. This provision will not apply to those born into non-believing families or those who had unbelieving educators.”⁷

On December 21, 1926, the session of the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists raised the question of military service in the Red Army and voted the following document: “The Board of the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists has received, in the past few months, the reports from various unions that the local authorities are demanding a quite definite explanation of words they do not understand in the statement of the Fifth All-Union Session of Seventh-day Adventists on the military question. In particular, the Ukrainian NKVD demanded, through its Kiev Administration Department (Letter No. 26779/203 as of October 9, 1926), that the All-Ukrainian Union of Seventh-day Adventists should provide a specific answer to this question, otherwise any SDA sessions would not be allowed” The prayer house in the city of Dnepropetrovsk was closed and the available equipment and supplies were confiscated because of the ambiguous statement on the above question. The authorities “definitely demanded that Adventists should serve in the Red Army on equal terms with other citizens.” The similar reports were received from the Samara congregation and the Central Siberian Conference. Ultimately, it was decided that “amendments should be made to the statement on the military question at the next All-Ukrainian and All-Russian Sessions of Seventh-day Adventists, by adding the phrase: “... on equal terms with other citizens. Should any church member elect not to serve in the army, the SDA organization will not be responsible for such a person.”⁸

In April 1927, the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists appointed an ad hoc commission to prepare a draft resolution on military service for the SDA members that had to be presented at the union sessions and the All-Union Session. The commission members were I. I. Wilson, P. A. Sviridov and K. S. Shamkov.⁹

Consequently, the Sixth All-Union Session of Seventh-day Adventists adopted a new resolution on military service as follows: “Based on the teachings of the Old and New Testaments (1 Samuel 8:10-12, 10:25; Luke 20:25; Romans 13:1-8; Titus 3: 1), according to which the government is a divine institution to punish the evil and reward the good, as well as taking into account the Statement of the Fifth All-Union Session of Seventh-day Adventists on our attitude to the Soviet power, the Sixth All-Union Session of Seventh-day Adventists hereby clarifies and holds that the Seventh-day Adventists should “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s,” doing state or military service in all its forms on legal grounds and on the same basis as everyone else. Anyone who will teach otherwise and encourage avoidance of people’s obligations to the state, shall be considered a false teacher who goes against the teaching of the Holy Scripture, disrupts the unity of God’s

Church and places himself above the church organization."¹⁰

Today, it is obvious and reliably known that such a text was imposed from outside by authorities who granted their permission to the Session. Moreover, the sessions of local conferences and mission fields had been already held with the same agenda.

The church leaders, who realized the approaching threat to the existence of the Church, tried to appease the authorities in some way. In addition, before their trip to the session the delegates were thoroughly "lobbied" by the NKVD. The purpose was to move the delegates to vote for the said resolution.

How much pain and trials for the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was brought by the resolution on military service (especially the phrase "on the same basis as everyone else") adopted by the delegates to the Sixth All-Union Session of Seventh-day Adventists! Immediately after the re-registration of Adventist congregations in the early 1930s, each church member had to fill out a questionnaire, in which item No. 7 was framed as follows: "Your attitude to the resolution of the Sixth All-Union Session of Seventh-day Adventists on military service on the same basis as everyone else..."¹¹

A famous legal scholar Yu.A. Rosenbaum wrote in this connection:

By ensuring the equality of citizens, regardless of their attitude to religion, the legal regime of the separation of church and state provides that all citizens, both believers, and non-believers, shall perform the same duties imposed on them by the Constitution of the USSR and other Soviet laws.

In practice, there are often issues related to the work of citizens who, according to their religious beliefs, do not want to use the generally established rest days but rest on different days of the week (e.g., Saturday [Adventists], Friday [Muslims], or other days marking their religious holidays). To begin with, we must point out that the very issue of granting privileges or making exceptions from general rules for citizens in connection with their religion is unlawful...

General military duty is a law, and military service in the ranks of the armed forces is an honorable obligation of the citizens of the USSR (Article 62 of the Constitution of the USSR)... In the first years of Soviet power, when there were many believers in the country, the people's cultural level was still low. For this reason, the Soviet legislation admitted the possibility of exempting citizens, on grounds of their religious beliefs, from the fulfillment of certain civil obligations, subject to one obligation replaced with another... In particular, in line with this provision, the exemption of citizens from the military service for religious beliefs was in common practice...

In 1939, when the Supreme Soviet of the USSR was debating the draft law on general liability for military service, it was noted that there were very few people exempted from the military service for religious beliefs in the Soviet Union. In light of this, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR considered it inadvisable to incorporate in the new law the provision on the exemption from military service for religious beliefs. The current law on general liability for military service also doesn't allow exempting individuals from military duties because of their religious

beliefs.¹²

As it turned out, the provision on the exemption from military service for religious beliefs and on the alternative service was not repealed in the Soviet Union until 1939. In the ensuing years, many Adventists, despite all the statutory bans, remained faithful to God's Commandments. When conscripted in wartime, they were ready to sacrifice their freedom and even life for the sake of loyalty to God. Many Adventists drafted into the army during World War II, refused to violate the fourth and sixth commandments of the Decalogue. For this reason, they were convicted, some of them being publicly executed by shooting.

In the peaceful postwar period, the army conscripts asserted their beliefs as well. Some of them were convicted and served time in penal battalions. Sometimes there were commanders who showed sympathy and indulgence towards Adventist soldiers and gave them an opportunity to serve in a place where they could not violate the Sabbath. When construction battalions were organized, Adventist recruits asked the military commissariats to send them to serve in the construction battalions where they could serve without weapons and assert their beliefs including the Sabbath rest.

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NOTES

1. This article was translated from Russian by Vladimir Ivenko.

2. D.O. Yunak, *Istoriya Tserkvi Adventistov Sed'mogo Dnia v Rossii (1886-2000) (v dvukh tomakh)* (Zaokskiy: Istochnik Zhizni, 2002), vol. 1, 157-159.

3. Ibidem.

4. Ibidem.
5. <https://антисистемы.рф/nkjust.html>.
6. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976), vol. 10, 1527.
7. *Baptist Ukrainy*, no. 2, 1926, 56.
8. D.O. Yunak, *Istoriya Tserkvi Adventistov Sed'mogo Dnia v Rossii (1886-2000) (v dvukh tomakh)* (Zaokskiy: Istochnik Zhizni, 2002), vol. 1, 227-228.
9. Ibidem, 228.
10. Proceedings of the Sixth All-Union Session of Seventh-day Adventists (Moscow, May 12-19, 1928). Session 7, par. 14.2. (Kiev: All-Ukrainian Council of Seventh-day Adventists, 1928), 11-12.
11. Archives of the Moscow Adventist congregation. 1920-1930.
12. Yu.A. Rosenbaum, *Sovetskoye gosudarstvo i tserkov'* (Moscow: Nauka, 1985), 82-87.

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