

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte = Revue suisse d'histoire religieuse et culturelle = Rivista svizzera di storia religiosa e culturale

**Herausgeber:** Vereinigung für Schweizerische Kirchengeschichte

**Band:** 118 (2024)

**Artikel:** Missionary enthusiasm an human rights activism : a study of the religion-political world of the Swedish Slavic Mission, 1965-1985

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1075877>

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# Missionary Enthusiasm and Human Rights Activism – A Study of the Religion-Political World of the Swedish Slavic Mission, 1965–1985

Erik Sidenvall

In what ways did Protestant missionary agencies become involved in human rights activism in Cold War Europe? How was their commitment expressed? In what ways was their activism shaped by their overall missionary concerns? Whereas the ways in which human rights issues became entangled in the «high politics» of ecumenical organisations and the Roman Catholic peace initiative *Pax Christi* have received considerable scholarly attention,<sup>1</sup> the support for human rights channelled through Protestant mission organisations has so far been little considered. In fact, the operational modes of these bodies are little known beyond the narrow confines of, an often self-congratulatory, denominational historiography.<sup>2</sup> As Danish historian Bent Boel has remarked, the lack of scholarly inter-

<sup>1</sup> For a research survey, see Dianne Kirby, *The Religious Cold War*, in: Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, Oxford 2013, 540–564. See also Lauren F. Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations*, Ithaca/London 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Available academic studies include Bent Boel, *Bible Smuggling and Human Rights in the Cold War*, in: Luc van Dongen/Stéphanie Roulin/Giles Scott-Smith (eds.), *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War. Agents, Activities, and Networks*, Houndmills 2014, 263–275; Joe Gouverneur, *Underground Evangelism: Missions during the Cold War*, in: *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*, 24 (2007), 80–86; Johannes Grossmann, «Ein Europa der Hintergründe». Antikommunistische christliche Organisationen, konservative Elitenzirkel und private Aussenpolitik in Westeuropa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg, in: Johannes Wienand/Christiane Wienand (eds.), *Die kulturelle Integration Europas*, Wiesbaden 2010, 303–340. See also David W. Bebbington, *The Gospel and Religious Freedom. Historical Studies in Evangelicalism and Political Engagement*, Waco (Texas) 2023; Beatrice de Graaf, *Über die Mauer. Die DDR, die niederländischen Kirchen und die Friedensbewegung*, Münster 2004, 85–87; Markku Ruotsila, *Transnational Fundamentalist Anti-Communism: The International Council of Christian Churches*, in: van Dongen et al. (eds.), *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War* (see note 2), 235–250.

est in this cluster of Protestant activists «seems to come down to an implicit dismissal of its significance and impact.»<sup>3</sup> Yet if we are to understand the ways in which Cold War Western civil society became involved in human rights issues these bodies are far from inconsequential. In particular, this goes for the period of détente during which their transnational networks became hubs of support of co-religionists in Eastern Europe. These networks, mostly supported by conservative American evangelicals, involved like-minded groups in Scandinavia and the rest of north-western Europe. The *Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism* (founded in 1969 and later renamed *Keston College*), based in the UK, were to provide essential information and some co-ordination.

As Samuel Moyn has noted, in the 1970s a dominant Western «progressive Christianity» lost its «clear connection to human rights.»<sup>4</sup> Even though Moyn's statement needs to be qualified, it is undeniable that the process of decolonialization and the growing influence of a Christian «left» in the late 1960s led influential Christian organisations, most notably the *World Council of Churches*, to search for alternative ways to deal with the East-West divide.<sup>5</sup> Protestant missionary agencies targeting the countries behind the Iron Curtain, most of which espoused a «fundamentalist» Evangelicalism, were, to say the least, dissatisfied at such a development. They were rooted in a Manichean world in which Communism stood against «the free world», and in which all attempts at diplomacy and at finding a «third way» seemed naïve and futile. It is this overarching framework that provided the contours to their human rights activism and their support for what they understood to be the «first freedom» – freedom of religion.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, I am going to shed some light on the questions mentioned above by taking a closer look at the human rights activism of one of the more notable, and sometimes most controversial, Protestant missionary agency active during the Cold War, the Stockholm-based *Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among Slavic People* (Sw. Sällskapet för evangeliutbredande bland slaviska folk), in 1974 renamed the *Slavic Mission* (Sw. Slaviska missionen) – a name that, for

<sup>3</sup> Boel, *Bible Smuggling and Human Rights in the Cold War* (see note 2), 263.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia. Human Rights in History*, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 2010, 186.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Christian Albers, *Der ÖRK und die Menschenrechte im Kontext von Kaltem Krieg und Dekolonisierung*, in: Katharina Kunter/Annegreth Schilling (eds.), *Globalisierung der Kirchen. Der Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen und die Entdeckung der Dritten Welt in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*, Göttingen 2014, 189–215; Bastiaan Bouwman, *Between Dialogue and Denunciation: The World Council of Churches, Religious Freedom, and Human Rights during the Cold War*, in: *Contemporary European History*, 31/1 (2022), 15–30; Bastiaan Bouwman, *From religious freedom to social justice: the human rights engagement of the ecumenical movement from the 1940s to the 1970s*, in: *Journal of Global History*, 13 (2018), 252–273.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*, Philadelphia 2015, 156–157.

reasons of convenience, will be used in this study. Unlike many similar organisations in Western Europe and the U.S., the *Slavic Mission* kept a meticulously organised archive (now deposited at the Swedish National Archives) which make it into an ideal candidate for anyone interested in the ways in which a faith-based NGO of a similar persuasion engaged in human rights activism.<sup>7</sup>

### *A brief background*

The *Slavic Mission* was founded in the early twentieth century with an aim of supporting protestant groups in eastern Europe, above all in today's Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. After the first pioneer phase, the *Slavic Mission* appears to have done little direct work in eastern European countries in the decades following the Great War.<sup>8</sup> Following the revolution of 1917 and the intensification of religious persecution during the Stalin era, leading proponents of this organisation began to see Communism as a foe that needed to be resisted in every possible way in the inter-War years.<sup>9</sup>

Support for this missionary agency was found among all the Swedish evangelical free churches, but also within a conservative-minded low-church phalanx of the national church. The *Slavic Mission* was organised as a charity (Sw. stiftelse) depending on the regular donations of supporters, but, in the strict sense of the word, it was not possible to join the Mission as a member. A board of trustees directed the operation, and a small-scale office in Stockholm was in charge of the day-to-day operations. The monthly dispatch of the *Slavic Mission*, *Ljus i öster*, was widely read and some of its articles portraying the life of Christians in the European east were reprinted in above all the free church press.<sup>10</sup> To be sure, readers were not kept in the dark as to the profoundly anti-Communist attitude of this journal. Direct political remarks, however, were few and far in between. Regardless of its fundamental belief that Communism meant the abandonment of all human liberty, the *Slavic Mission* identified itself as «a-political» (a term which signalled an unwillingness to engage in any issues that could be related to current

<sup>7</sup> In preparation to this article, I have been granted generous access to the archival collection of the Slavic Mission now housed at the Swedish National Archives (Riksarkivet) by the current mission secretary of *Ljus i öster* (successor of the Slavic Mission). Some documents still housed at the office of *Ljus i öster* have also been accessed. I owe thanks to Lars Narin for his generosity and the gift of his time. I have also been able to consult the archive of the Pentecostal congregation in Jönköping. I am deeply indebted to the trustees of both these organisations.

<sup>8</sup> Klas Lundström/Kajsa Ahlstrand/Jan-Åke Alvarsson/Göran Janzon (eds.), *Svensk mission och kyrkorna som växte fram*, Skellefteå 2021, 163–164.

<sup>9</sup> Lars I. Andersson, *Mellan Katyn och Auschwitz. Rysslandsmissionen, bolsjevismen och nationalsocialismen 1919–1945*, Malmö 2006, 75–124.

<sup>10</sup> See for example *Evangelii härold* (1980/9), 30; (1980/11), 30; (1983/15), 30.

Swedish party politics);<sup>11</sup> its aim was to support evangelical Christians in the European East, not to engage in what it understood to be political debates and campaigns. Consequently, offers to collaborate with missionary agencies that openly drifted towards the far right in the late 1960s and early 1970s were declined and *Ljus i öster* consistently abstained from commenting on one of the era's main concerns, the Vietnam war.<sup>12</sup>

Until the late 1960s, Swedish evangelicals may have been concerned with what happened to Christians behind the Iron Curtain, but they did not, as a general rule, understand missionary work in Eastern Europe to be a paramount concern. Their principal 'mission fields' were still found in Africa, and to some extent in South America.<sup>13</sup> From the perspective of the evangelical mainstream the *Slavic Mission* definitely represented a side-interest (yearly donations to this organisation amounted to little more than € 400,000 in today's monetary value during the early 1960s).<sup>14</sup>

Many of the articles published in *Ljus i öster* dealing with the situation of Christians in the east were based on translated abstracts taken from letters sent by individual believers. The archive of the *Slavic Mission* still contains a host of handwritten documents of this type, many of which are still untranslated.<sup>15</sup> Most of these comments were rather vague effusions conveying a message of Christian faithfulness and devotion in a harsh and testing environment.<sup>16</sup> Such glimpses of the life of Protestant Christians behind the Iron Curtain often included petitions for continued support (material as well as spiritual) from co-religionists in the West. In other words, these messages enforced a sense of transnational Christian fellowship, but also rehearsed patron-client roles frequently to be found among evangelicals with a taste for direct missionary work.

### *Contours of an activist mood*

The humdrum ways, in most respects similar to all other similar small-scale missionary ventures brought to life by nineteenth-century popular revivalism, was radically changed by a series of events occurring in the mid-1960s. In August

<sup>11</sup> The Swedish term is *opolitisk*. See Arninge, Riksarkivet [Swedish National Archives], Slaviska missionens arkiv [hereafter SMA], A1:18, styrelseprotokoll, 16 March 1974, styrelseprotokoll, 30 May 1978.

<sup>12</sup> See for example SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll, 30 May 1978.

<sup>13</sup> Klas Lundström et al. (eds.), *Svensk mission: och kyrkorna som växt fram* (see note 8), 181–370, 527–92.

<sup>14</sup> E. Düring and others, *Ryska röster. Från nödlidande kristna under sovjettiden*, Stockholm 1958, 88. See also Ann-Charlotte Fritzson, *Framåt ändå. 100 år med Ljus i Öster*, Solna 2003, 259.

<sup>15</sup> Stockholm, Central office of Ljus i öster, Case files in archive cabinets.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Ljus i öster, 42/1 (1959), 2–3; 44/5 (1961), 72–73.

1964, Elis Düring (1998–1964) who had served as mission secretary for twenty-four years retired and was replaced by the young and entrepreneurial Ingemar Martinson (1932–2006). Martinson was to be the driving force behind many of the pioneering initiatives of the *Slavic Mission* until the early 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Further pushes towards a greater militancy came from the outside. A few months after Martinson had assumed his new position, Romanian Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand (Nicolai Ionescu, 1909–2001) was released from his long-term incarceration. Following the intervention of various missionary agencies, he left Romania in 1965 and eventually ended up in the U.S. where his dealings with the communist authorities in his native land were widely publicised following a Senate hearing in May 1966.<sup>18</sup> During the autumn of that year, he made a first of several inflammatory appearances in Stockholm. The speech he delivered on that occasion was translated and given in full in *Ljus i öster*.<sup>19</sup> In April 1967, Wurmbrand and his wife formed the pan-denominational Jesus to the Communist world, later renamed Voice of the Martyrs (this organisation appears to have had a limited following in Sweden, especially since it, step by step, drifted towards the far right). Nevertheless, the charismatic Wurmbrand, his engaging literary production and his concern for what he labelled ‘the underground church’ in the east had a profound impact on the evangelical milieu in Sweden. All of his books were translated into Swedish, the most famous *Tortured for Christ*, appearing in no less than five editions between 1968 and 1995.<sup>20</sup>

Already during the autumn of 1966, we can see that the editorial policy of *Ljus i öster* was beginning to take a new direction. Caution and taciturnity were step by step cast aside; the wrongdoings committed against Christians behind the Iron Curtain were from now on to be revealed.<sup>21</sup> Above all, there was a marked surge in interest for unregistered, underground, Christian groups in the east, in particular the Baptist ‘Reform Group’ (*Iniitsiativniki*), later the *Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists* (commonly abbreviated CCECB) formed in the

<sup>17</sup> Fritzson, *Framåt ändå* (see note 14), 123–38, 177–99.

<sup>18</sup> Published in Communist exploitation of religion: Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Eighty-ninth Congress, second session, Portland (Oregon) 1966.

<sup>19</sup> *Ljus i öster*, 50/11 (1966), 12–13.

<sup>20</sup> The first edition appearing as, Richard Wurmbrand, *Torterad för Kristi skull. Vår tids martyrkyrka. Ett vittnesbörd om den underjordiska kyrkan bakom järnridån och dess lidanden*, Örebro 1968.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that about this time other ventures devoted to spreading news about the conditions of Christians in the East, such as Keston College and the Glaube in der 2. Welt, were founded.



Soviet Union in 1965.<sup>22</sup> From the mid-1960s and onwards, numerous translated letters, reports of maltreatment and the news of public trials of Christians appeared in the pages of this periodical.<sup>23</sup> *Ljus i öster* became a voice that mediated present-day martyrdom to its readers; therein lay parts of its attraction to its evangelical audience.<sup>24</sup> The *Slavic Mission* was now well on its way towards becoming a firebrand (but not extremist) organisation.

In 1968, in the midst of these events, Brother Andrew's (Andrew van der Bijl, 1928–2022) immensely popular *God's smuggler* (1967) appeared in a first Swedish translation.<sup>25</sup> This engaging, adventure-like, tale contributed to directing the attention of the Swedish evangelicals towards what could be done to improve the situation of Christians living behind the Iron Curtain. Even though the distribution of Bibles had been a central concern of evangelicals long before Brother Andrew's volume, *God's Smuggler* gave publicity to new ways of Bible distribution, but, above all, instilled them with a sense of adventure, audacity and peril especially appealing to a younger generation. Already in 1969, one of the sub-committees of the *Slavic Mission* arranged the first of several youth instruction courses with an aim to recruit new people willing to follow in the footsteps of Brother Andrew.<sup>26</sup> It should of course be mentioned that this occurred at a time when Western youth culture in general was on the move, searching for meaning and ways to contribute to the world at large.<sup>27</sup> Bible smuggling and an intrepid campaigning for the rights of Christians behind the Iron Curtain fitted well into the activist climate of the late 1960s. However, and somewhat surprisingly, it should be remarked that to the governing board of the *Slavic Mission*, Bible smuggling was an activity that was tolerated, not endorsed. The official policy of this mission was not to engage in Bible smuggling, but to offer support to people who

<sup>22</sup> First mentioned in *Ljus i öster*, 50/9 (1967), 124. See also Michael Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia. Protestant Opposition to Soviet Religious Policy*, London 1968, 105–113. It should be noted that the *Slavic Mission*, just like its close affiliate the Danish European Mission, not only supported the cause of likeminded groups found behind the Iron Curtain; it regularly publicised reports of persecuted Orthodox, Jews, Catholics and more secular-minded intellectuals. See for example *Ljus i öster*, 54/3 (1971), 36; 59/1 (1976), 14; 60/3 (1977), 4–5; 64/5 (1981), 5–6; 67/2 (1984), 7. See also Boel, *Bible Smuggling and Human Rights in the Cold War* (see note 2), 270–271.

<sup>23</sup> I can here only provide references to a few representative examples, *Ljus i öster*, 53/10 (1970), 130–3; 55/1 (1972), 14–15; the themed issue on Baptists in Romania, 57/2 (1974).

<sup>24</sup> Compare Omri Elisha, *Saved by a Martyr: Evangelical Mediation, Sanctification, and the «Persecuted Church»*, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 84/4 (2016), 1056–1080.

<sup>25</sup> The first edition appearing as *Guds smugglare, av Broder Andreus i samarbete med John och Elisabeth Sherrill*, trans. Alf Ahlberg, Stockholm 1968.

<sup>26</sup> Fritzson, *Framåt ändå* (see note 14), 135, 185–187.

<sup>27</sup> Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68. Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956–1976*, Oxford 2007, 23–27.

on their own initiative decided to go to Eastern European countries with stacks of Bibles hidden in their luggage. In reality, the mission trod a fine line; it was hard to distinguish assistance and promotion from direct and active involvement, at least in the eyes of the general public (but this was a part of the Cold War plot of these organisations).<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps even more importantly, at least if we are to consider long-term effects, was the fact that the missionary ventures and commitments of past generations of evangelicals were by now running out of steam due to the de-colonization process. Africa was no longer seen as the default first choice to the missionary enthusiast. Yet the theologically driven urge to engage in missionary work remained. This meant that grassroot church members now had the time and financial resources to turn to other fields of action; Eastern Europe suddenly seemed to present itself as a convincing alternative. There is, in other words, an unnoticed correlation between de-colonization, the rise of independent churches in the Global South and the ways in which Western evangelicals engaged with the Protestant churches of Eastern Europe.

### *Early human rights advocacy*

Even though far from a novelty in this journal, references to unalienable human rights, largely owing to the activities of the Soviet Reform Group mentioned above, multiplied from the late 1960s. The concept of human rights fitted neatly into its overall concern for the conditions of co-religionists in Eastern Europe. It served also as an effective communicative tool. To make references to a politically viable concept, widely accepted in Swedish society at large, provided editors with a platform they could use to both galvanise committed supporters and to attain at least a degree of backing from groups of people not belonging to the Protestant revivalist camp.

When we reach the 1970s, readers of *Ljus i öster* were regularly summoned to pray for and to get in touch with the families of imprisoned Christian brothers and sisters (addresses were sometimes even published in this periodical). If possible, they were also advised to send words of protest to Soviet authorities.<sup>29</sup> In addition to these activities the *Slavic Mission* campaigned for persecuted Christians in the Soviet Union during the 1968 General Assembly of the *World Council of Churches*; in 1971, it organised the first in a series of annual public demonstration

<sup>28</sup> For the decision to adopt this course of action, see SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll 16 March 1974. See also SMA, E102:1, PM från Slaviska missionen, 16 November 1977.

<sup>29</sup> See for example *Ljus i öster*, 54/10 (1971), 136–137; 57/12 (1974), 10–11; 61/3 (1978), 14; 61/4 (1978), 8–10.



trying to raise public awareness of the plight of Christians behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>30</sup> Such measures demonstrate that the *Slavic Mission* was adopting practices that had already been successfully employed by, for example, *Amnesty International* (the work of this NGO was regularly endorsed in *Ljus i öster*).<sup>31</sup> This is an early testimony to the fact that there was a steady exchange of strategies and procedures between NGOs with a shared human rights concern, regardless of their religious orientation.

It should also be noted that new kinds of knowledge were made available by the activist position the *Slavic Mission* now assumed. Not only did enthusiasts in Sweden become more keenly aware of the actual conditions of Christians in Eastern Europe (above all in the Soviet Union), but also gained glimpses of their traditions, localities, and internal conflicts. At a time when trustworthy reports on the conditions of the churches in the European East were sparse, this was to be of inestimable importance. It should be noted, however, that the central office of the *Slavic Mission* appears to have had only a fragmentary knowledge of Protestant communities in Eastern Europe. Until the 1980s (see below), when direct contacts were made possible, they depended solely on the pieces of intelligence they had access to. But in comparison to the rest of Swedish society, this was a privileged position.

As Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink have noted in their by now classic volume of activist networks: «Nongovernmental actors depend on their access to information to help them legitimate players. Contact with like-minded groups at home and abroad provides information necessary to their work, broadens their legitimacy, and helps to mobilize information around particular policy targets.»<sup>32</sup> Step by step, the *Slavic Mission* started to gain a reputation for being an agency with a considerable «capital» of information. This once marginalised missionary venture could no longer be passed over as a religious crank, neither by the Swedish government nor by mainstream media.<sup>33</sup> To some extent, this mission agency became part of the loosely knit network of «instituts à prétention scientifique endossent ainsi le rôle d'agences d'information et d'ONG religieuses pour relayer

<sup>30</sup> Fritzon, Framåt ändå (see note 14), 179–80. See also SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll 13 October 1973; SMA, E1:102, undated invitation; *Ljus i öster*, 57/1–2 (1974), 8–10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ljus i öster*, 59/2 (1976), 3; 59/4 (1976), 12–3; 60/6–7 (1977), 7; 62/2 (1979), 7. See also exchanges with Amnesty activists, SMA, E1:102, Pål-Erik Plaum to Slaviska missionen, 17 January 1977; Anita Wingfors to Slaviska missionen, 16 & 21 January 1977.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders. Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca/London 1998, 21–22.

<sup>33</sup> See for example reports published in *Dagens nyheter*, 12 April 1968, 25; 14 May 1969, 15; 25 April 1970, 15; 12 December 1977, 8; 25 September 1980, 18; 27 June 1981, 18; 20 August 1982, 17; 18 March 1984, 12; 24 October 1985, 14. See also SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll 21 October 1975; E1:102, Katrin Bjuhr to Anders Thunberg, 12 December 1977 (Thunberg was working as a journalist at the Swedish broadcasting agency, Sveriges Radio).

la «voix des martyrs» auprès d'instances internationales.»<sup>34</sup> This change of scene appears to have altered the self-perception of this agency. Step by step this organisation begun to understand itself as a harbinger of knowledge.<sup>35</sup> It was in this capacity that it came to find a place within the nebulous world of human rights activists.

In order to educate and further mobilise members of above all free church congregations, conferences and study courses on the conditions of the Christians in the Eastern Europe were arranged with some frequency from the early years of the 1970s and onwards. Representatives of the *Slavic Mission* took a part in most of these gatherings sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm with attentive crowds.<sup>36</sup> Several of these courses included lectures or presentations devoted to issues related to human rights.<sup>37</sup> At least if we look at the low-level politics that were performed among Swedish evangelicals, East and West were beginning to draw closer and closer in spite of the fact that the hostility to Communist regimes remained intact.

### *Following the Helsinki Final Act*

As is demonstrated above, when the supporters of the *Slavic Mission* received the news of the Helsinki Final Act their concern for fellow believers had been gaining momentum for some time. However, this agreement was initially met with some scepticism by official Sweden. According to the leading Swedish daily, *Dagens nyheter*: «Nevertheless, something may come out of the CSCE effort. A name on a paper implies a moral obligation, however vaguely formulated and of little legal consequence this document may be.»<sup>38</sup> In the Swedish Christian press the events in Helsinki did (at first) not even get a mentioning (it should however be noted that these publications, as a general rule, were rather reluctant to comment on matters of foreign and national security policy). This was soon about to change. The ways in which Christians in the European East resorted to the Helsinki Final Act to further their claims to religious liberty and to protest against the treatment they from time to time received from the authorities did not pass unnoticed. Be-

<sup>34</sup> Stéphanie Roulin, Lobbying et expertise durant le processus d'Helsinki – L'institut suisse Glaube in der 2. Welt et la défense des libertés religieuses dans le bloc de l'Est, in: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte, 115 (2021), 119–135, 127.

<sup>35</sup> SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll 28 March 1978.

<sup>36</sup> Ljus i öster, 54/5 (1971), 69–71; 58/6–7 (1975), 12; 67/11 (1984), 10.

<sup>37</sup> See the preserved teaching material in SMA, E9:9. See also Ljus i öster, 60/11 (1977), 19.

<sup>38</sup> «Något litet kan ändå komma ut av ESSK-arbetet. Ett namn på ett papper innebär trots allt en moralisk förpliktelse, hur vagt formulerat och hur litet rättsligt bindande dokumentet än är.» Dagens nyheter, 30 Jul. 1975, 2. All translations mine.

ginning in March 1976, *Ljus i öster* was to publish a series of translated documents revealing how groups of Soviet Protestants resorted to the Helsinki Final Act in petitions to the authorities.<sup>39</sup> Most of these documents were brought to Sweden by Bible smugglers on their return journeys.<sup>40</sup> As a direct consequence of the vocal support the *Slavic Mission* lent to Protestants in the Soviet Union, the mission secretary of the *Slavic Mission* was invited to take part in the first of the so-called Sacharov hearing committees in the autumn of 1975.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, public protest activities appear to have been picking up speed in the period immediately before the 1977 follow-up conference in Belgrade.<sup>42</sup> A more direct involvement in support of, at the time much talked of, Russian Baptist pastor Georgi Petrovich Vins (1928–1998) was discussed in a series of board meetings.<sup>43</sup>

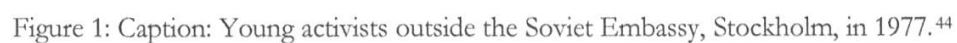
<sup>39</sup> *Ljus i öster*, 59/3 (1976), 10; 59/8 (1976), 11; 59/9 (1976), 11; 59/10 (1976), 13; 60/1 (1977), 12; 60/2 (1977), 9; 60/3 (1977), 10–12.

<sup>40</sup> Frikyrkopodden, «Bibelsmugglarna som åkte fast», <<https://poddtoppen.se/podcast/1537368521/frikyrkopodden-historien-bakom-rubrikerna/bibelsmugglarna-som-akte-fast>> (16 May 2023)

<sup>41</sup> SMA, E1:102, letter from the organising committee to Ingemar Martinsson, 10 May 1975. Contact between the Slavic Mission and the, at this time, loosely formed organizing committee was likely brought about by another mission activist, the Danish Europe Mission's secretary Hans Kristian Neerskov (1932–2017). I have not been able to establish that the Slavic Mission contributed to the funding of the Copenhagen hearing. For these tribunals, see Bent Boel, *The International Sakharov Hearings and Transnational Human Rights Activism, 1975–1985*, in: *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 23/3 (2021), 81–137.

<sup>42</sup> See for example SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll 26 April 1977, 3 October 1978. *Dagens nyheter* 24 April 1980.

<sup>43</sup> SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll 10 November and 16 December 1975, 26 April and 17 May 1977. See also SMA, A:6 supplement five, «Förslag till Georgij Vins-kommittee», 16 December 1975.



SZRKG/RSHRC/RSSRC, 118 (2024), 211–227, DOI: 10.24894/2673-3641.00173

*Negotiating with Soviet authorities*

Even though the aftermath of the Helsinki Final Act seems to have strengthened the human rights NGO-character of the *Slavic Mission*, the late 1970s also witnessed the birth of new initiatives among Swedish evangelicals that, at least in some cases, dampened the activist ethos of the preceding years.

Bible smuggling was not without its dangers (therein lay parts of its attraction). In June 1977 two men loosely affiliated with the *Slavic Mission* were arrested in Brest in today's Belarus. They remained in the custody of the KGB for more than five months. They were not physically maltreated, but endless interrogations finally broke them. Their methods of operating and their contacts in the Soviet Union were exposed. In the wake of their arrest, complete pandemonium broke out in the governing board of the *Slavic Mission*. Old tensions turned into open accusations among the trustees and between the trustees and the employed staff. The state of the mission was now 'at a low'.<sup>45</sup> In the Swedish evangelical milieu, that valued concord and compromise, this was a rare thing. In reality, the aftermath of this highly publicised event was massively advantageous for the *Slavic Mission*. Its repute for being a courageous Christian organisation was enhanced and donations increased greatly. In the end, the annual report could celebrate a year of success.<sup>46</sup>

Upon the return of the arrested smugglers, Ingemar Martinson took the opportunity to launch the idea of forming direct links between congregations in Sweden and the Soviet Union (an idea that first seems to have been conceived by Brother Andrew in the early 1970s);<sup>47</sup> with a bit of remorse (perhaps the recent clashes among the trustees were fresh to his mind) he effused: «this method [Bible smuggling] may not be the best. In the future, different congregations in Sweden will have a 'link congregation' in the Soviet Union and we will court Embassies and other authorities requesting to be able to send the Bibles directly.»<sup>48</sup> In an interview published in *Dagens nyheter* he clearly stated his ambitions: «[T]his endeavour needs to be of significant proportions if we are to put pressure on the Soviet

<sup>45</sup> «Bottenläget nu». See SMA, A1:18, condensed account of board discussion «Synpunkter, tankar och förslag från Slaviska Missionens styrelsesammanträde den 13 september 1977 angående expansion, målsättning och styrning»; SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll 11 October 1977.

<sup>46</sup> SMA, A1:18, «Rekordår med Slaviska missionen. Årsberättelse 1978».

<sup>47</sup> Ljus i öster, 53/12 (1970), 175. See also Evangelii häröld (1980/17), 2–3, 20.

<sup>48</sup> «Men den här metoden är kanske inte den bästa. I fortsättningen skall olika församlingar i Sverige ha en vänförsamling i Sovjet och vi skall uppvakta ambassader och andra myndigheter och begära att få skicka biblarna direkt.» *Dagens nyheter*, 17 November 1977, 8.



authorities. It should be spread to many countries.»<sup>49</sup> Even though Martinson emphasises that the long-term objective remained the same, he nevertheless expresses a similar kind of optimism vis-à-vis the possibilities of negotiating with the representatives of Eastern European regimes as was at this time found among church leaders across the Swedish denominational landscape. It should be noted that both the national Church of Sweden, as well as the leading free church denomination, the Swedish Covenant Church (Sw. Svenska missionsförbundet), had begun to engage in various kinds of exchanges and formalised relations with Eastern European churches at about this time. These newly formed links depended on close contacts with church officials acknowledged by the Eastern European states.<sup>50</sup> For the *Slavic Mission*, there was however not a definitive break. Martinson and his associates did not abstain from endorsing un-authorised methods of contact and support while simultaneously working for the concept of link congregations.<sup>51</sup>

One cannot say that the idea of link congregations spread like wildfire across the Swedish evangelical landscape, but there were a few, mostly urban, free church congregations that went along this route. Nonetheless, this method of working with evangelical Christians in the Soviet Union could produce some unforeseen (and from the perspective of the *Slavic Mission*, unwanted) results. Just to give one, and perhaps surprising, example. Since the latter half of the 1960s, the Pentecostal congregation in the south Swedish city of Jönköping (the most important Pentecostal congregation outside the metropolitan area) had offered material support to persecuted Christians in the Soviet Union. In the mid-1970s, the head pastor of the congregation, Bo Hörnberg (1920–2006), at this time an elevated figure within the labyrinthine hierarchy of Swedish Pentecostalism, moved for a change of course. His published writings reveal a growing dissatisfaction at only working through illicit channels and private initiatives. Already in 1974, he had publicly expressed his belief that Bible smuggling did more harm than good. In his opinion, so much more could be done if Protestant missions

<sup>49</sup> «Det måste ske i stor skala för att Sovjetmyndigheterna skall känna en press på sig. Idén bör spridas till många länder.» Dagens nyheter, 21 November 1977, 18. See also SMA, A1:18, styrelseprotokoll 13 September 1977.

<sup>50</sup> Erik Sidenvall, Local Contexts of Interpreting a Cold War Relationship. Pommersche Landeskirche and Växjö Diocese, 1975–1989, in: Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte, 33/2 (2020), 371–80.

<sup>51</sup> See Fritzon, Framåt ändå (see note 14), 199–202. The archive of the Slavic Mission contains a dossier of documents related to the link parish project. Among the papers can be found detailed, and many times critical, reports on many Protestant congregations in the Soviet Union. The board of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists is dismissed as totally corrupt. See SMA, F11:2.

instead worked by utilising direct links with registered Protestant (above all Baptist) groups.<sup>52</sup> Step by step he seems to have arrived at the conclusion that future endeavours depended on personal contacts with Eastern European church representatives. In 1979, he and his wife went for a first scouting trip to the Soviet Union with an aim of exploring link-parish possibilities. During this stay, he was guided by people from the officially recognised *All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists* (hereafter AUCECB) and taken to select Baptist congregations. At this time the AUCECB had begun utilising its network of international contacts as a means to prove its loyalty to the Soviet authorities. Hörnberg, and likeminded people in the West, became metaphorical hostages in a struggle to gain at least a degree of acceptance.<sup>53</sup> Upon his return to Sweden, Hörnberg did what was expected of him. Publicly he declared that he was now sufficiently convinced that Soviet Baptists and Pentecostals enjoyed a considerable religious liberty and freedom of worship.<sup>54</sup> In the following year, he began planning for a second expedition in which representatives of the main Protestant free churches were also, somewhat reluctantly, to take an active part.<sup>55</sup> When seeking visas for this group, Hörnberg was evidently prepared to denounce the previous activities of the *Slavic Mission* to the Soviet Embassy personnel in order to recommend this group: «We have had big problems with the «slavic missions» working illegal with contacts with the Christians in the Sovjet Union. All eight persons that will participate in this journey are completely against this way of working.»<sup>56</sup> (He evidently did not only have the Bible-smuggler incident of 1977 in mind, but also the ways in which the *Slavic Mission* campaigned for the rights of, above all, groups of dissenting Soviet Baptists). In the end, the AUCECB offered to cover all costs for travel and accommodation during their stay in the Soviet Union.<sup>57</sup> For a few years, Hörnberg stayed in contact with some of the officials of

<sup>52</sup> Dagen, 4 September 1974; Svenska journalen (1977/4), 12–14. Hörnberg's article in Dagen occasioned a later communiqué from the Slavic Mission to their associates in the Soviet Union, see SMA, E1:102, Ingemar Martinson to the leadership of the Pentecostals in the Soviet Union, 16 June 1976.

<sup>53</sup> Nadezhda A. Beljakova, Anti-communism and Soviet Evangelicals – Metamorphoses during the Cold War, in: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte, 115 (2021), 57–80. For the early history of AUCECB and the involvement of the Soviet security services, see Oleksandr Korotaiev, All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists as a Product of Work of Soviet Special Services, in: Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, 41/6 (2021), 70–90. Available at: <<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol41/iss6/3>> (16 May 2023)

<sup>54</sup> Dagen, 11 July 1981.

<sup>55</sup> Jönköping, Jönköpings läns folkrörelsearkiv, Sarumförsamlingens arkiv (hereafter SfA), FI:17, Gösta Hedberg to Bo Hörnberg, 10 April 1981.

<sup>56</sup> SfA, FI:17, Bo Hörnberg to the Embassy of the Soviet Union, 23 April 1981. Quote verbatim from the English original.

<sup>57</sup> SfA, FI:17, A. E. Klimenko & A. M. Bytkov to Bo Hörnberg, 12 March 1980.

AUCECB. A few of them were even to appear at the series of local 'East-West conferences' that was organised in Jönköping in the early 1980s.<sup>58</sup>

Hörnberg showed himself a willing tool to agencies that wanted to promote a contrasting vision of the religious life found in the Soviet Union. Understandably, his altered approach was met with some, above all local, opposition; the conflicts that ensued were however hidden from the public eye and diligently swept under the rug (as was the tradition of Swedish Pentecostalism).<sup>59</sup> Hörnberg displayed a great deal of naivety in his contacts with Soviet authorities, but he appears to have been sincere in his conviction that less confrontational methods could be efficient. To him, human rights activism and public declarations of support seemed to jeopardise a fragile *modus vivendi*; forthright measures only threatened to make things worse for co-religionists in Eastern Europe.

### Conclusion

With its exclusive focus on religious liberty the *Slavic Mission* can best be described as a niche human rights NGO. It rose to a degree of celebrity due to the quality of the information it was able to provide to a larger Swedish audience in the 1970s. This demonstrates the value of its transnational network of contacts which extended to the other side of the East-West divide. Human rights advocacy was integrated into an overall framework enforcing the value of missionary activities, thereby a level of grassroots' mobilisation and support was ensured. Yet as the case of the Pentecostal congregation in Jönköping demonstrates, an overarching emphasis on the need for what was understood as missionary work could also result in a different approach in which human rights issues were massively downplayed. Mission and human rights can sometimes be uneasy bedfellows.

One may be critical of the ways in which the *Slavic Mission* engaged in human rights issues from the 1960s and onwards. It can rightly be accused of focussing only on the ills perpetrated by Communist regimes while ignoring the victims of right-wing dictatorships. Moreover, it valued a confrontational public style and it lacked in diplomatic refinery at a time in which the values associated with *détente* were held in high esteem. Maybe human rights advocacy fitted only a little bit too neatly into its overall Cold Warrior-like appearance? Promotion of human rights became just another way to enforce the message: Communism is a menace to humanity. But, then again, can we always expect an NGO (not even a faith-based one) to be polite and respectful? Within a larger political framework, is it not the

<sup>58</sup> See preserved documentation in SfA, FII:20, öst-väst-konferens 1981; FII:23, öst-väst konferensen 1983–1984.

<sup>59</sup> The unsorted correspondence is found in SfA, EII:34, korrespondens östmissionen 1981.

«function» of the NGO to go against the grain and to be, from time to time, uncompromising in its support for the causes it had vowed to promote? The legacy of such NGOs is still controversial, but they were far from insignificant as Cold War opinion-makers.

*Missionary Enthusiasm and Human Rights Activism – A Study of the Religion-Political World of the Swedish Slavic Mission, 1965–1985*

This article analyses the ways in which the Swedish Slavic Mission (*Slaviska missionen*) became involved in human rights activism from the mid-1960s until 1989. It argues that human rights advocacy, primarily focusing on the position of Protestants in the Soviet Union, resulted in a redefinition of the mission's public appearance. As a harbinger of knowledge, it became a partner in a loosely organised network of human rights NGOs.

Human rights – Cold War – Protestantism – Christian Mission – Religion – Soviet Union – Slavic Mission.

*Missionarischer Enthusiasmus und Menschenrechtsaktivismus – Eine Studie über die religionspolitische Welt der schwedischen Slawischen Mission, 1965–1985*

In diesem Beitrag wird analysiert, in welcher Art und Weise sich die schwedische Slawische Mission (*Slaviska missionen*) von Mitte der 1960er-Jahre bis 1989 für Menschenrechte engagierte. Er legt dar, dass die Menschenrechtsarbeit, die sich in erster Linie auf die Lage der Protestanten in der Sowjetunion konzentrierte, zu einer Neudefinition ihres Öffentlichkeitsauftritts führte. In ihrer Eigenschaft und Rolle als Vorboten des Wissens wurde sie zur Partnerin in einem lose organisierten Netzwerk von NGOs, die sich für die Förderung der Menschenrechte einsetzten.

Menschenrechte – Kalter Krieg – Protestantismus – Christliche Mission – Religion – Sowjetunion – Slawische Mission.

*Enthousiasme missionnaire et activisme en matière de droits de l'homme – Une étude du monde politico-religieux de la Mission Slave suédoise, 1965–1985*

Cet article analyse la manière dont la Mission slave suédoise (*Slaviska missionen*) s'est impliquée dans l'activisme en faveur des droits de l'homme entre le milieu des années 1960 et 1989. Il affirme que la défense des droits de l'homme, principalement axée sur la situation des protestants en Union soviétique, a entraîné une redéfinition de l'image publique de la mission. En tant que précurseur, elle est devenue partenaire d'un réseau peu structuré d'ONG de défense des droits de l'homme.

Droits de l'homme – Guerre froide – Protestantisme – Mission chrétienne – religion – Union soviétique – Mission Slave.

*Entusiasmo missionario e attivismo per i diritti umani – Uno studio del mondo religioso-politico della Missione Svedese Slava, 1965–1985*

Questo articolo analizza i modi in cui la Missione Slava Svedese (Slaviska missionen) è stata coinvolta nell'attivismo per i diritti umani dalla metà degli anni Sessanta al 1989. Sostiene che la difesa dei diritti umani, incentrata principalmente sulla posizione dei protestanti in Unione Sovietica, ha portato a una ridefinizione dell'aspetto pubblico della missione. In quanto foriera di conoscenza, divenne partner di una rete poco organizzata di ONG per i diritti umani.

Diritti umani – guerra fredda – protestantismo – missioni cristiane – religione – Unione Sovietica – Missione Slava.

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