

TO DIE FOR A LIE

The Watchtower and Its Victims in the Soviet Union

by Paul Carden

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*The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers,
so that they cannot see the light of the glory of Christ,
who is the image of God.*
2 Corinthians 4:4

Question: Who would willingly suffer for a lie?

Answer: Countless sincere and dedicated Jehovah's Witnesses, persecuted by the atheistic Soviet empire while sacrificing themselves for a counterfeit hope.

On my desk are the latest editions of the Jehovah's Witness magazines *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* Each features the life story of a man who endured long years of misery for his obedience to the Watchtower Society; each story represents those of many, many others.

Lembit Toom, raised in a Lutheran home, became a JW in 1944 and was sent from Estonia to a slave-labor camp above the Arctic Circle. Mikhail Savitskii, perplexed by the seeming cruelty of a Greek Catholic priest in his Ukrainian village, became a Witness, too; he was shipped with thousands of other JWs in cattle cars to a prison 7,000 miles away in Russia's Far East as punishment for refusing military service. And though these two survived, not a few of their companions paid with their lives for obeying "Judge" J.F. Rutherford and his Watchtower cronies in Brooklyn, NY. Toom, Savitskii, and their families suffered decades of deprivation and abuse in order to smuggle and study scarce Watchtower "Bible literature," always seeking new opportunities to spread the cult's Christ-denying message among those whom the Watchtower approvingly calls "sheeplike people." Ironically, the Soviets' policy of relocating Witnesses actually helped spread the movement across vast regions, planting the seeds for the cult's future expansion.

In 1946, there were barely 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the Soviet Union under Stalin; a full quarter-century later, that number had only risen to 10,000. But anxiety over the anticipated end of the world, stoked by Watchtower literature, caused that number to leap to 22,633 between 1972 and 1975 — a figure which remained nearly stagnant for ten years after the "end" didn't come. Yet the cult's tenacity in the face of repression won it admirers — and converts — and once the Soviet empire collapsed, Witness growth skyrocketed:

Between 1991 and 1997, Jehovah's Witnesses in the former Soviet Union grew at the amazing rate of about 30% per year, tripling in size. If they continue at this pace for the next six years, there will be half a million active Witnesses there, spending 150 million hours per year spreading the Watchtower message.

The Watchtower Society already boasts of being the “fifth-largest Christian group in Russia,” where it grew by 17% last year (and by 15% in neighboring Ukraine). And the damage from the Watchtower’s growth in the former Soviet Union extends well beyond its own membership: Jehovah’s Witnesses distribute nearly 5,000 tons a year of literature in Russia alone — literature which insidiously undermines trust in the Trinity, the biblical Jesus, and a host of core Christian doctrines, thus inoculating untold numbers of people against the gospel, even if they don’t become JW’s themselves.

Barring an unlikely government clampdown, prospects for continued Witness expansion appear fantastic. Historically, the cult thrives on fear of the future, and few open societies have as much to fear as Russia and its neighbors. In Russia, serious crime rose nearly 18% in the first nine months of 1998; roughly half of the country’s children are underdeveloped mentally and physically due to malnourishment; huge numbers of government workers have gone for months without wages; and last year the number of Russians living in poverty rose to 30% of the population. In this climate of despair, people freed from communist tyranny are being tempted by tyranny of another kind — through Watchtower promises of a future life of plenty “in paradise on earth.” As he now openly serves the Watchtower Society, Lembit Toom exults: “Surely, as we consider the marvelous growth in the numbers of those worshiping Jehovah, we are convinced that the suffering we have experienced has not been in vain.” What a cruel tragedy!

Question: What can we do? Is the solution to legally ban the Watchtower organization, as an angry association of cultists’ parents is clumsily attempting to do in Moscow? Is it to spread fear and hatred of Jehovah’s Witnesses through mockery and slander, as the Soviet authorities did?

Answer: We must boldly speak the truth — in love (Eph. 4:14–15) — in order to equip the church of Jesus Christ and to reach out to the growing numbers of precious men, women, and children who have been taken captive by the lies of the Watchtower Society!

Those who oppose...[we] must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”
2 Timothy 2:25–26

It is the cry of my heart that this year, more people will leave the Watchtower cult than ever before. We must reach out to Witnesses in confidence and compassion “so that by all possible means [we] might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22), trusting in the power of Christ to break the chains of deception. Too many have lived — and died — for a lie. 🌐



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