

The Restoration Movement in Russia

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In the last decades of the 19th century, a movement to restore New Testament Christianity began to sweep across Russia. At its height in the late 1920's the movement numbered as many as 4 million adherents.

I recently came across the biography of Ivan S. Prokhanoff, one of the pioneer preachers of this Russian Restoration Movement. The book is entitled: *In The Cauldron of Russia*. It is a fascinating and remarkable story. Ivan Prokhanoff was born in 1869 in Vladikavkas, Russia. He was raised in the Sect of Molokans (Milk People), so-called because they drank milk and ate milk foods during fasting periods prescribed by the Orthodox Church. This sect believed in the Bible as their only guide and rejected the rituals and icons of the Orthodox Church. They did not practice baptism or observe the Lord's Supper.

At the age of 17, Prokhanoff was converted to New Testament Christianity and immersed in the Terek River in Vladikavkas.

The Restoration Movement in Russia developed from three separate streams. 1) The work of Colonel W.A. Pashkoff among the nobility, especially through printed tracts and literature, 2) A movement among the peasants called "Stundism" fed by the translation of the Bible into modern Russian, and 3) The re-study of scripture by leaders among the Molokans with the conclusion that their practice did not conform to Biblical teaching in all points.

A conference was held in 1884 in St. Petersburg in an attempt to unite these three different streams. The conference was broken up by the government and its leaders were arrested. Colonel Pashkoff and others were sent into exile, but the movement for New Testament Christianity could not be quenched.

Prokhanoff, a Mechanical Engineer who worked for the Westinghouse Company in St. Petersburg, became the most dynamic leader of the burgeoning movement. He was an eloquent preacher, a talented song writer, and became the editor of the first Protestant Christian Journal in Russia. He wrote hundreds of hymns and published several hymn books as well as other Christian literature. His work was carried on in spite of violent persecution, first from the Tsarist government and later from the Communists. He was twice imprisoned for the faith. Of special interest is that his first imprisonment in 1921 occurred in Tver. Prokhanoff, and a group of young Christians from all over Russia had met there for a youth conference. On the second day of their assembly the session was interrupted by a mob of soldiers, policemen and officials of the Cheka, the secret police. 47 participants in the conference were arrested including seven young women. They were first incarcerated in the Cheka headquarters on Sovietskaya Street. Eventually, 12 of the leaders of this group were sentenced to hard labor in a prison camp which had been created on the grounds of the ancient Ostrosky Monastery in Tver.

After his release from prison, Prokhanoff continued to preach and teach. Following a second imprisonment, he was forced into exile in 1923. He died in Berlin, Germany, in 1933 from complication of diabetes "which were undoubtedly intensified by the privations and sufferings he experienced." The movement for which he sacrificed so much was shattered by savage Stalinist oppression.

Prokhanoff's conclusions regarding the future hope of Russia are as timely at the close of the 20th century as they were in the beginning of it. He wrote: "The hope for Russia is that she will accept Christ and His gospel as the basis of life and will realize the Restoration of primitive apostolic Christianity.... Only the restoration of a church which had its origin in spirit of primitive Christianity, with its all-embracing and creative religious power, will be able to overcome the spirit of unbelief as manifested in atheism, materialism and free-thinking, and to prevent its further growth among the people of the world."

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