

Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe

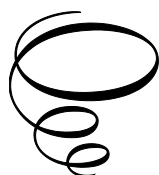
Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe:

Past and Present
Volume III

Edited by

Gerhard Besier and Katarzyna Stokłosa

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Steppe Camp (Steplag) near Kengir, Central Kazakhstan

Jehovah's Witnesses from the Dzhezkazgan Congregation, 1967

Branch Office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Kazakhstan

Illia Hovuchak and Onufriy Rilchuk in the Carpathians, 1942

Pavlo Ziatek

A group of Jehovah's Witnesses in Potma/Saransk, 1957

By courtesy of Jehovah's Witnesses (Estonia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine;
Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania)

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INTRODUCTION

Jehovah's Witnesses in Eastern Europe

Gerhard Besier & Katarzyna Stokłosa

Different from the development in the Baltic States that took the road to Western civilisation standards in other regions of Eastern Europe – after a short period of détente¹ –, the authoritarian rule has overcome reforms and anew is suppressing minor religious communities and even mainstream churches like the Roman Catholic Church, that do not belong to the “traditional” religions in these regions.² This is particularly true in some countries of the former USSR, now Russia and other CIS states: Some governments are amassing serious human rights violations, especially relating to freedom of religion.³

By far the most problematic situation we experience in Putin's Russia.⁴ In theory, every Russian citizen has the right to “profess, individually or jointly with others, any religion, or to profess no religion.” He or she may also “freely choose, possess, and disseminate religious or other beliefs, and act in conformity with them.” These rights are guaranteed by the Russian Constitution, which also forbids discrimination or abridgement of the rights of citizens on religious grounds. Yet, by law, officials may prohibit the activity of a religious association for violating public order or engaging in “extremist activity.” Russian law on religion defines Orthodox Christianity,

1. Cf. Peter Reddaway/Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism Against Democracy*, Washington, D. C. 2001.

2. Cf. Gerhard Besier, *Expanding Religious Borders? The New Influence of Some Old State Churches: The Russian Orthodoxy*, in: idem/Katarzyna Stokłosa (eds.), *Neighbourhood Perceptions of the Ukraine Crisis: From the Soviet Union into Eurasia?*, London-New York 2017, 223–242.

3. Cf. *Top Ten Violations of the Freedom of Religion in Russia*, <http://aclj.org/united-nations/top-ten-violations-of-the-freedom-of-religion-in-russia> (last accessed: 30 Jan. 2021).

4. Cf. Hubert Seipel, *Putin – Innenansichten der Macht [Putin: Insights of Power]*, Hamburg 2015.

Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as the country's four "traditional" religions, granting special status to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Although Judaism is specifically named as one of Russia's "traditional" religions, anti-Semitic rhetoric on the part of politicians and government officials, as well as increased anti-Semitic statements in government-controlled media have risen steadily over the past years. Vandalism of synagogues, cemeteries, and mosques has increased. Laws against extremism have been used to revoke the registration of minority religious groups, among them Jehovah's Witnesses, to refuse to register certain religious organisations, and to impose restrictions that infringe on the practices of minority religious groups. Such restrictions have hobbled their ability to purchase land and build places of worship.⁵

Also today, like in the tsarist era and the Soviet period, the ROC supports the foreign as well as the interior interests of the Russian people, as defined by the authorities, by religiously elevating, symbolically representing and historically substantiating these interests. However, they effectively do not differ in this respect from other religions in the region. In a similar way, Lutheranism in Estonia also represents spiritual values as being a fundamental part of cultural tradition in the Estonian nation, thus serving the purpose of differentiation from "the others," in this case, the Orthodox minority.⁶ Likewise, the ROC assumes a comparable position with respect

5. Cf. US Department, Russia 2014. International Religious Freedom Report, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/238638.pdf> (last accessed: 30 Jan. 2021); Russia – United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF_Tier2_Russia.pdf (last accessed: 30 Jan. 2021); Victoria Arnold, Russia: "Extremism" religious freedom survey, Sep. 2016, in: Forum 18 News Service, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215 (last accessed: 30 Jan. 2021); Katrina Lantos Swett, Russia's Failure to Protect Freedom of Religion, in: The Moscow Times, 31 Jul. 2012; Kate Shellnutt, Russia's Newest Law: No Evangelizing Outside of Church, in: Christianity Today, Jun. 2016; Fred Lucas, Putin Goes to War With Russia's Free Churches, in: Newsweek, 23 Jul. 2016; Clifford D. May/John Ruskay, The New "Anti-Terrorism" Package Builds on an Already Shameful Legacy, in: USA Today, 22 Nov. 2016.

6. Cf. Jerry G. Pankhurst/Alar Kilp, Religion, the Russian Nation and the State: Domestic and International Dimensions: Introduction, in: Religion, State & Society (RSS), 41/3 (2013), 226–243; here: 236; Faith Wigzell, The Orthodox Church and the Commercial Fortune-Telling and Magic in Russia, in: RSS 39/4 (2011), 420–442; Marianna Shahnovich, Religion in Contemporary Public Education in Russia, in: Jenny Berglund/Thomas Lundén/Peter Strandbrink (eds.), Crossings and Crosses. Borders, Educations, and Religions in Northern Europe, Boston-Berlin 2015, 123–137; here: 128; Davide Artico, Between Communitarism and Confessional State.

to the “ethnisation of religion.” It appeals to large parts of the population to see the ROC in the function of the defender of its “canonical territory” and the cultural traditions of this “Orthodox world.” There is no space for a multi-cultural and multi-religious atmosphere that also acknowledges religions of “foreign” traditions.

However, only a mere six percent actually take an active role in the religious life of the ROC. Furthermore, many Russians personally attach almost magical or miraculous associations to the church.⁷ In this respect, they do not differ all that much from the intuitive faith of many other world religions.⁸ As far as schools are concerned, the vast majority of Russians prefer the teaching of secular values and norms to religious instruction.⁹ In this respect, the ROC’s claim to civilise the Russian nation in an anti-pluralist manner with their religious-moral culture has gained very little resonance among the people. In this sense, there is an ideal missionary field for active “new religions,” mostly stemming from the Western hemisphere. These religions are not interested in national, let alone “ethnic” aspects, but in spreading the universal Word of God, likewise given to all human beings. Essentially, the ROC possesses no power that is anchored in the people, as is the case for an institution like the Roman Catholic Church in Poland;¹⁰ instead, it holds only a derived power, dependent on the good will of the political leaders. The Orthodox religion appears in the media but is barely noticed in people’s everyday life. Ultimately, it remains dependent on a “de-secularisation from above,” supported only by the conservative elite who are willing to promote the influence of orthodoxy because it serves their national-political purposes.

Nevertheless, this is still not where the principal difference lies between the ROC and other state-church relationships. Instead, the difference lies in the fact that the ROC effectively supports almost all the interior and foreign policy projects of the regime in Moscow, while churches in the Western hemisphere frequently assume the role of a public conscience and ethically-motivated opposition with regard to their parliaments’ and political

Poland as a Study Case, in: *Religion – Staat – Gesellschaft (RSG)*, 15/1–2 (2014), 195–208; Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism. The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left*, DeKalb 2011.

7. Cf. Wigzell, *The Orthodox Church* (note 6).

8. Cf. Gerhard Besier, *Religiöse Phänomene und ihre Geschichte als Gegenstand anthropologischer, psychologischer und biologischer Forschung [Religious Phenomena and Their History as a Topic in Anthropological, Psychological and Biological Research]*, in: *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte [Swiss Magazine of History of Religion and Culture (SZRKG)]*, 107 (2013), 115–142.

9. Cf. *Shahnovich, Religion* (note 6), 128.

10. Cf. for instance *Artico, Between Communitarism* (note 6).

leaders' decisions.¹¹ The reasons behind this are found not so much in the different political systems, as in the theological self-image of the traditional mainline churches with regard to the authorities. This traditional view of things does not exclude the reality that the ROC is “a multi-vocal institution in terms of its political preferences,”¹² but there are definitely both dominant and more recessive voices in this church. The focus has primarily concentrated on the former, because it is only these who actually possess current political relevance in foreign as well as interior affairs, including the policy of religions.¹³ Apart from that, Jukka Korpela justifiably criticises that the majority of sociological-political science analyses neglect “the ‘long durée’ structures of the Russian culture,” and that they allow their predominantly Western-oriented analysis categories to concentrate only on the time frame of the last 25 years.¹⁴

The moving, perilous and still largely unknown history of Jehovah's Witnesses justifies an in-depth examination – given here for the first time – of what has occurred in these countries and their predecessor states during the last 100 years. Although the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly stated that authorities in many of these lands have violated the right to religious freedom, the situation for Jehovah's Witnesses remains barely tolerable at best. In societies where democratic freedom and Western values are alien concepts, it is hard to comprehend what it means to be subjected to persecution and discrimination because of religious affiliation. Rather, visions of the unbroken power of “their” state and “their” state church, as well as of the close cooperation between the two institutions to maintain power, play a decisive, even triumphant role. Thus, in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, from a historical standpoint it is hardly surprising to find the Russian Orthodox Church openly and firmly taking its position on

11. Cf. for instance Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism* (note 6).

12. Cf. Irina Papkova, *The Contemporary Study of Religion, Society and Politics in Russia: A Scholar's Reflections*, in: *RSS* 41/3 (2013), 244–253; here: 247; Katja Richter, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church. Politics, Culture and Greater Russia*, London-New York 2013.

13. It might be that there is “a process of theological renewal” within the Russian Orthodoxy (cf. Kristina Stoeckl, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*, London-New York 2014, 128). But as long as this renewal does not change the church-state relations, it is not relevant for the society.

14. Jukka Korpela, *Holy Russia – The Image of a Thousand-Year-Old Russia as a Tool in Governance*, in: *RSG* 15/1–2 (2014), 209–234; here: 221.

the side of the motherland.¹⁵ While the Europe of the EU has already entered the postmodern era with all of its undeniable difficulties, in some Eastern European countries we are observing a psychological reversion to the tsarist era. This anachronism is a harbinger of further serious problems – and not only in the field of religious freedom.

It is particularly shameful that Western “anti-sect” movements have celebrated their greatest triumphs in authoritarian states, whereas established case law in most EU states has placed clear restrictions on these demagogues. Because of the validity of universal human rights that cannot be shaken in Western democracies, some old churches from the Western hemisphere are tempted to express their solidarity with Eastern churches like the ROC in the fight against “the common enemy,” that means some “non-traditional” churches from a “foreign” soil and with “wrong” messages. Jointly they have founded associations like the “Fédération européenne des centres de recherche et d’information sur le sectarisme” (FECRIS) to blacken the newcomers’ reputation. And in this way they are willing to place religious freedom at risk, a fundamental human right, in order to recover their exclusive and highly privileged position in their respective societies.¹⁶

Gerhard Besier
and Katarzyna Stokłosa

Berlin
in summer 2021

15. Cf. Margarete Zimmermann/Michael Melnikow, „Gott ist mit uns!“ Die Kirchen und der Euromajdan [“God is With Us!” The Churches and the Euromaidan], in: Osteuropa. Zerreißprobe. Ukraine: Konflikt, Krise, Krieg [Eastern Europe. Ordeal. Ukraine: Conflict, Crisis, War], 64/5–6 (2014), 259–276.

16. For more on this subject, cf. Freedom of Religion or Belief. Anti-Sect Movements and State Neutrality. A Case Study: FECRIS, in: RSG 13/2 (2012).

BALTIC STATES

Jehovah's Witnesses in the Baltic States – A Historical Overview¹

Ringo Ringvee

1. Introduction

This study is a brief historical overview of Jehovah's Witnesses in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The first missionaries of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (WTS) arrived in these countries in the 1920s. An earlier presence is recorded only in the Klaipėda region of Lithuania, where German Bible Students established themselves before World War I.

Church historians have largely neglected the history of Jehovah's Witnesses. The most competent research on Jehovah's Witnesses in Latvia until now has been compiled by Nikandrs Gills. Although several studies on Jehovah's Witnesses have been conducted in Lithuania and Estonia, these appear only in the native languages and/or have not yet been published. The aim of this article is to give an initial general overview of the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in these three countries.

2. Religious Diversity in the Baltic States

Common values in the Baltic States cannot be defined without bearing in mind the different religious identities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The three Baltic States as we know them today were under Russian rule at different times during the 18th century. All three states also share a common recent history, as they were under Soviet rule from 1940 to 1991. Yet they developed completely different cultural and religious perceptions. Estonia,

1. I am grateful for the substantial help of Solveiga Krumina-Konkova, Donatas Glodenis, and by the following Jehovah's Witnesses: Lembit Reile, Silver Silliksaar and Gytis Tereikis.

Latvia and Lithuania have remained religiously different from each other down to this day. They thus reflect the vast religious diversity that imbues Europe – extending from a Catholic South (Lithuania) to a mixed religious “buffer zone” in the middle (Latvia) and on to a Protestant North (Estonia).

In the south, Lithuania, with its population of 3.3 million, has close historical and cultural ties with Poland. Estonia, with its current population of 1.3 million, has cultural and religious ties with northern Germany, Sweden and Finland. Lutherans have been the religious majority in Estonia since the 16th century. In Latvia, which has a current population of 2.2 million, Germany was the dominant force behind the religious and cultural development of the country.

In these three states, the social role of religion has been different. In Lithuania religious and national identities were often interwoven. As in Ireland, Poland, Italy and other Catholic countries, the Roman Catholic Church stood at the centre of Lithuania’s collective identity. In the 19th century the Roman Catholic clergy had already held debates in Lithuania on whether the church should become part of the national identity.² As in Poland, the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy played an important role in the Lithuanian dissident movement during the Soviet era.

The period of Soviet atheistic campaigns was more successful in Protestant Estonia and Latvia. Both of these Soviet Republics suffered deportations, collectivisation, fast urbanisation, industrialisation and finally secularisation. This changed more than the ethnic composition of the population in Estonia and Latvia; the Soviet migration policy also stimulated the growth of Orthodox communities in both countries.

According to the 2005 Eurobarometer Poll, 86 % of the respondents in Latvia, 85 % in Lithuania and 70 % in Estonia identified themselves as “believers” (i.e. believing in the existence of a higher power or God). However, only 16 % of the respondents in Estonia professed a *belief in God*, thereby ranking on the lowest position in the poll. In Latvia and in Lithuania the number of respondents professing a belief in God was 37 % and 49 % respectively.³

2. Cf. for example, Vilma Žaltauskaite, Catholicism and Nationalism in the Views of the Younger Generation of Lithuanian Clergy in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, in: Lithuanian Historical Studies (LHS), 5 (2000), 113–130; Vytautas Merkys, Bishop Motiejus Valančius. Catholic Universalism and Nationalism, in: LHS, 6 (2001), 69–87.

3. Cf. Eurobarometer 2005. Special Eurobarometer 225, Social values, Science & Technology (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf [last accessed: 29 Aug. 2010]).

According to a national census conducted in Lithuania in 2001, 90 % of the Lithuanian population said they were religiously affiliated.⁴ In Estonia, on the other hand, the census in 2000 indicated that less than a third of the population was religiously affiliated.⁵ The differences between Lithuania and Estonia are even more striking when you look at their denominational affiliation. Whereas 79 % of the Lithuanian population professed Roman Catholicism (4.1 % adhered to the Orthodox Church, the second largest religious group), the largest religious group in Estonia was Lutheranism with 14 % of the population, followed by diverse Orthodox splinter groups that made up 13 % of the population.

The relations between the State and religious organisations are different in all three Baltic countries: Although Estonian legislation gives certain privileges to registered religious associations, registration requirements as well as the content and scope of the privileges are the same for all.⁶ In 2008, Latvian legislation re-established the pre-Soviet model, where some religious associations operate on the basis of special laws and others come under the general law on religious organisations. One of the Latvian particularities is the requirement for new religious associations in the country to re-register themselves annually for the first ten years.⁷ Lithuanian legislation specifically names nine “traditional” religions,⁸ the most influential of which is the Roman Catholic Church. Aside from this category of traditional religions in Lithuania there are also “recognised” religions and “registered” religions.⁹

4. Cf. Statistics Lithuania (<http://www.stat.gov.lt/en/pages/view/?id=1734> [last accessed: 1 Sep. 2010]).

5. Cf. Statistics Estonia (http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/I_Databas/Population_census/16Religious_affiliation/16Religious_affiliation.asp [last accessed: 1 Sep. 2010]).

6. For more on Estonian legislation concerning religion, cf. Merilin Kiviorg, *Religious Entities as Legal Persons – Estonia*, in: Lars Friedner (ed.), *Churches and Other Religious Organisations as Legal Persons*, Leuven 2007, 67–78; Ringo Ringvee, *State, Religion and the Legal Framework in Estonia*, in: *Religion, State & Society (RSS)*, 36/2 (2008), 181–196.

7. On Latvian legislation regarding religion, cf. Ringolds Balodis, *Religious Entities as Legal Persons – Latvia*, in: Friedner, *Churches* (note 6), 149–156.

8. The traditional religions were considered part of Lithuanian historical and cultural heritage; apart from the Roman Catholic Church, these included the Greek Catholic Church, Evangelical Lutheranism, the Evangelical Reformed Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Old Believers (Starover) and the traditional religious minorities of Lithuania – Jews, Muslims and Karaites.

9. On Lithuanian legislation regarding religion, cf. Jolanta Kuznecoviene, *Religious Entities as Legal Persons – Lithuania*, in: Friedner, *Churches* (note 6), 157–162.

Despite these differences all the Baltic States have a similar policy regarding religious communities, which do not have to be recognised as legal entities before operating in the country. Nevertheless, religious associations that request legal registration are accorded certain privileges and receive a measure of protection from State harassment. Such is not the case for religious communities with no legal status or community registration as non-profit organisations.¹⁰

3. From “Bible Students” to “Jehovah’s Witnesses”

The Biblical teachings of Charles Taze Russell reached the shores of the Baltic States in the early 20th century. In Lithuania one of the earliest Bible Student centres was the seaport town of Klaipėda, where the German “Bibelforscher” or Bible Students had established themselves since 1912.¹¹ The Klaipėda region (former German name: Memel) became a League of Nations’ mandate in 1920 under the Treaty of Versailles. The region remained under French rule until 1923, when it became part of Lithuania after a revolt supported by the Lithuanian government. Klaipėda and its surrounding Memel area enjoyed autonomy in Lithuania until the German occupation in 1939.

The first missionaries of Jehovah’s Witnesses started their work in all three countries in the early 1920s.¹² In 1925 the Witnesses established their Northern European Office to coordinate their activities in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Whereas in Estonia they used the name of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (hereafter: Watch Tower Society), in Latvia and Lithuania the organisation was known as the International Bible Students Association (IBSA). In 1925, the Lithuania Office was opened in Šiauliai.¹³ In 1926, the Watch Tower Society opened its offices both in Riga and in Tallinn, and the Society’s report for 1926

10. So, for example, in Jun. 2000 the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice warned the CARP (Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles; affiliated with the Unification Church) to discontinue its religious activities (proselytising) because it was registered according to the Law on Public Organisations and its statutes nowhere mentioned religious objectives.

11. Cf. Watch Tower Society (WTS), Jehovah’s Witnesses – Proclaimers of God’s Kingdom, Brooklyn 1993, 410.

12. Cf. Nikandrs Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki Latvijā* [Jehovah’s Witnesses in Latvia], *Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts* [Institute for Philosophy and Sociology], Riga 2008, 90; YB 1934, 119.

13. Cf. email from Gytis Tereikis, 27 Aug. 2010.



FIG. 1-1 Hugo (left) and Martin Kose were the first Estonian Bible Students; the photo was taken in the 1920s in New York (by courtesy of Jehovah's Witnesses, Estonia)

noted: "The work in Estonia is now really getting started."¹⁴ However, regular weekly meetings using "The Watchtower" were not established in Estonia until 1931.¹⁵

The religious association's report for 1926 from Latvia noted that one of the main obstacles to the Society's work in the country was the lack of manpower.¹⁶ The shortage of colporteurs (Witnesses who donated most of their time to the evangelising work; later called pioneers) remained a problem throughout the pre-Soviet period, and so foreign missionaries from England, Germany, Denmark and Finland had an important impact on the development of the organisation



FIG. 1-2 At the new branch office in Riga, September 1927; from left to right: Kaarlo Harteva (Finland), Rees Taylor (Latvia), William Dey (Northern European Office), Carl Lüttichau (Denmark), Charles A. Wise (by courtesy of Jehovah's Witnesses, Estonia)

14. Cf. YB 1927, 85.

15. Cf. YB 1932, 151.

16. Cf. YB 1927, 96.

in the Baltic States.¹⁷ In 1928, for example, nine of the eleven workers at the Bible Students' office in Latvia were foreign citizens.¹⁸

Foreign missionaries, however, stood before a considerable challenge – the language. At the time, three languages were used in Latvia and in Estonia. Aside from the native Latvian or Estonian, German and Russian were also used in both countries.¹⁹ In all three countries poor road conditions and difficulties finding lodgings made it hard for the missionaries to operate in the countryside. The representative in Lithuania mentions this in his report:



FIG. 1-3 The bicycle was the preferred mode of transport for Jehovah's Witnesses in their evangelising activity (Lembit Toom 1948/1949 shortly before his arrest; by courtesy of Jehovah's Witnesses, Estonia)

“Cycling, which can be a pleasure in countries like England, is usually hard labor in this land.”²⁰

The religious association faced problems in the different countries. On 17 December 1926 a coup d'état occurred in Lithuania. From then on until the Soviet occupation in 1940, Lithuania was ruled by the national-conservative president, Antanas Smetona (1874–1944). In Lithuania a state of emergency was enforced, and restrictions on public meetings were imposed. For each meeting, the Bible Students had to obtain permission from the authorities. In Lithuania the main enemy of the small religious association was the Roman Catholic Church. The “1939 Year Book of Jehovah's Witnesses” begins its report on the situation in Lithuania by referring to Isaiah 60:2:

17. Cf. WTS, Jehovah's Witnesses (note 11), 429. For “colporteurs” and “pioneers,” see also George D. Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of Jehovah's Witnesses*, Plymouth 2008, 30–31; 109.

18. Cf. Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki* (note 12), 94.

19. Cf. YB 1927, 96; YB 1929, 112.

20. YB 1933, 145.



FIG. 1-4 This caravan was used by John Herbert North from Britain in his missionary work in the Estonian countryside in the 1930s. It was nicknamed “pharaoh’s chariot” by the locals and the “prayer house on wheels” by the press (by courtesy of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Estonia)

“Wherever the Roman Catholic Hierarchy’s influence predominates, ‘darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the people.’”²¹

Jehovah’s Witnesses certainly did encounter greater difficulties in spreading their message in Roman Catholic areas than in Protestant areas. In 1936 the Witnesses in Lithuania reported:

“Lithuania is a Roman Catholic country, and that means, of course, that few people know anything at all of the Bible, so that Scriptural proof does not mean much to the average person.”²²

Although the Roman Catholic Church was viewed as the major conspirator against the Witnesses’ Biblical message and missionary efforts in all three Baltic States, governmental action against the Bible Students in Latvia was initiated by a different minority denomination: the Adventists.

In November 1928 the Latvian Minister of the Interior received a letter from the Seventh-Day Adventists informing officials that foreign missionaries calling themselves International Bible Students, or the Watch Tower

21. YB 1939, 180–181.

22. YB 1936, 161.

Society, were operating in Latvia without legal recognition. The letter explained that the Witnesses' message was subversive and offended the State as well as other religious denominations. Furthermore, their literature, which was not even printed in Latvia, was simplistic in its language and the missionaries did not even pay taxes on their sales.²³ The reason for the Adventists' complaints may be explained by the fact that they were using the same missionary methods (i.e. selling their religious literature) as the Bible Students did.²⁴

During the interrogation at the Riga police station, the representative of the IBSA in Latvia, Rees Taylor, explained to the officials that the Ministry of the Interior had not required registration of the association in Latvia, and that the association was registered in the United Kingdom as a religious association. The Religious Affairs Office at the Ministry of the Interior confirmed that a religious organisation had the right to operate in Latvia without formal registration.²⁵ However, permission was needed for selling religious books, and colporteurs with foreign citizenship required work permits.²⁶ From then on the Bible Students in Latvia were on the radar of governmental surveillance. The Latvian officials decided that the country did not need a new religious association, since there were about twenty smaller religious associations from which Latvians could choose.²⁷ In 1929 the Latvian government denied residence permits to two German colporteurs because the religious association was not officially registered and their presence in Latvia was considered undesirable. It was believed that the message and publications of the Bible Students were harmful to both the State and to the dominant churches.²⁸

In an attempt to avoid this kind of situation, the IBSA applied to register as a legal entity in 1929. Latvian officials, however, refused the application. The IBSA used political channels to increase the pressure on the Latvian decision-makers. The United States Embassy in Latvia stated that the denial of registration violated Article 13 of the 1928 treaty between Latvia and the

23. Cf. Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki* (note 12), 93.

24. Cf. Juris Pavlovičs, *Jehovas liecinieki Latvijā 1926.–1936. gada* [Jehovah's Witnesses in Latvia 1926–1936], in: *Latvian Vēstures Instituta Žurnāls* [Journal of the Institute of Latvian History], 1 (42), 2002, 98.

25. Cf. Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki* (note 12), 94.

26. Cf. Pavlovičs, *Jehovas liecinieki Latvijā* (note 24), 100.

27. Cf. *loc. cit.*, 101.

28. Cf. YB 1930, 120; Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki* (note 12), 97.

United States on Friendship, Commerce and Consular Rights.²⁹ Despite pressure from the United States Embassy, the Latvian officials did not budge in their decision not to register the IBSA.³⁰ In their answer the Latvian authorities referred to J. F. Rutherford's booklet "Freedom for the Peoples," which they considered to be a subversive publication.³¹ The Bible Students who had adopted the new name "Jehovah's Witnesses" in 1931 were finally registered as a legal entity on 14 March 1933 under the name "Internacionālās Bībeles pētnieku biedrības" (International Bible Students Association).

In Estonia, Jehovah's Witnesses registered as a legal entity under the name "Vahi-Torni Piibli ja Traktaatide Selts" (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society) on 15 June 1933. Although the initial intention seems to have been to obtain recognition as a religious association, the Society was registered in accordance with general regulations rather than with the special law regulating the registration of religious associations.³²

In 1922 Jehovah's Witnesses started to use the radio in their missionary activities. Two years later the Society's first radio station broadcast for the first time in New York.³³ For the first time in the Baltics, a talk by a Watch Tower representative was aired in 1927 on a commercial radio station.³⁴ In 1929 the representatives of the Watch Tower Society succeeded in obtaining

29. According to Article 13 of the Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Consular Rights: "Limited liability and other corporations and associations, whether or not for pecuniary profit, which have been or may hereafter be organised in accordance with and under the laws, National, State or Provincial, of either High Contracting Party and maintain a central office within the territories thereof, shall have their juridical status recognised by the other High Contracting Party provided that they pursue no aims within its territories contrary to its laws. They shall enjoy free access to the courts of law and equity, on conforming to the laws regulating the matter, as well for the prosecution as for the defense of rights in all the degrees of jurisdiction established by law. The right of such corporations and associations of either High Contracting Party so recognised by the other to establish themselves within its territories, establish branch offices and fulfill their functions therein shall depend upon, and be governed solely by, the consent of such Party as expressed in its National, State or Provincial laws and regulations." The full text of the treaty is available at: http://untreaty.un.org/unts/60001_120000/16/8/00030357.pdf (last accessed: 12 Aug. 2010).

30. Cf. Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki* (note 12), 99.

31. Cf. Pavlovičs, *Jehovas liecinieki Latvijā* (note 24), 101–102. The booklet, published in English and German in 1927 and Latvian in 1928, was based on a public talk given by J. F. Rutherford in Sep. 1927 (see also YB 2007, 179).

32. Cf. Estonian State Archive (ERA), 14.11.1342, Ühing "Vahitorni Piibli Traktaatide Selts" [Association "Watchtower Bible Tract Society"].

33. Cf. Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary* (note 17), 138.

34. Cf. YB 2011, 175.

radio broadcasting permission from the Estonian authorities. And broadcasting permission was renewed annually until 1934. In 1932 the Society opened a substation in southern Estonia. The station in Tartu covered southern Estonia and northern Latvia. The Witnesses' radio stations in Estonia broadcast in English, Estonian, Finnish, German, Russian and Swedish at prime times.³⁵ The programmes were heard also in Finland, Sweden and the Soviet Union.

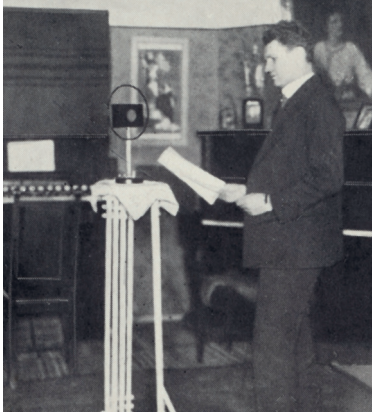


FIG. 1-5 Kaarlo Harteva (1882–1957), overseer of the Finland Branch Office, delivered discourses for radio broadcasts in Estonia (by courtesy of Jehovah's Witnesses, Estonia)

In the 1930s Jehovah's Witnesses were very interested in reaching Russian-speaking persons – in the hope of starting their evangelising activity in the Soviet Union. This meant increasing radio programmes in Russian, broadcast from Estonia, and more translation of correspondence into Russian under the supervision of the Latvia branch. In 1932 the English-to-Russian translator Aleksandrs Forstmanis in Latvia was mainly occupied with translating the Witnesses' publications into Russian.³⁶

Permission for radio broadcasting in Estonia was renewed annually until June 1934, three months after the change of political regime in Estonia. The Watch Tower Society viewed the Roman Catholic Church as the main force behind closing the station at the hands of the Estonian government.³⁷ The radio work was considered to be very important by the Witnesses. It could even be argued that their concentrating on Estonia and the radio station there had a negative impact on the work in Latvia.³⁸ At the same time, the Witnesses from Finland – where the Society had started its work in 1912 – were active pioneers in Estonia.

35. Cf. YB 1930, 101; YB 1931, 157; YB 1933, 114; YB 2008, 85.

36. Cf. *ibid.*

37. Cf. YB 1935, 110.

38. Cf. Pavlovičs, *Jehovas liecinieki Latvijā* (note 24), 106.



FIG. 1-6 William Dey, late 1920s (by courtesy of Jehovah's Witnesses, Estonia)

A coup d'état took place in Estonia on 12 March 1934. The acting head of state, Konstantin Päts (1874–1956), declared a state of emergency with the support of the chief of the Estonian armed forces, Johan Laidoner (1884–1953). According to the official version, this precautionary intervention prevented right wing radicals from coming to power. A mere two months later, a change in political regime took place in Latvia. On 15 May 1934 the acting prime minister, Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942), dissolved Parliament and established a new authoritarian rule with the help of the military, thus preventing right wing radicals from coming to power. The political parties and organisations were dissolved and the governments in both countries imposed restrictions on freedom of speech.

On 30 June 1934 the Latvian Minister of the Interior declared the legal registration of the IBSA to be invalid. The association was considered harmful to national and public interests and the Ministry of Interior formed a liquidation committee.³⁹ The Witnesses' representative in the Baltic region, William Dey, tried to reach the Latvian prime minister on this question. His attempts, however, remained unsuccessful. On 16 July 1934 the Witnesses in Estonia asked the Estonian Ministry of the Interior to send a letter to the Latvian authorities confirming that the Watch Tower Society operated in Estonia in accordance with the law, that the Society was not subject to restrictions based on the State of Emergency Act, and that the Society was apolitical. On 22 July the Ministry sent an answer confirming the first two points. But the letter did not say anything about the third point – the apolitical nature of Jehovah's Witnesses.⁴⁰

In November 1934 the president of the WTS, J. F. Rutherford, sent a letter to the Latvian president, Kārlis Ulmanis, asking why the registration was

39. Cf. Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki* (note 12), 105.

40. Cf. ERA 14.11.1342 (note 32).

withdrawn.⁴¹ The WTS's applications for a new registration were denied. The liquidation committee seized 42,975 copies of eight different books and booklets.⁴² From then on the Witnesses in Latvia carried out their missionary work without any legal status. The State confiscated their literature and restricted their public meetings, making the work more difficult.⁴³ As there was also a ban on imported literature, it was smuggled from Estonia and Lithuania to Latvia.⁴⁴

In the same year, the first three Russian Witnesses started their work in Estonia. In 1934 the trend in Estonia was towards growth, as the number of Witness evangelisers rose from ten to twenty-one. The following year the average number of pioneers was eleven, five of whom were foreigners with expired residence permits.⁴⁵

In December 1934 new laws on the registration of religious associations were passed in both Estonia and Latvia. The governments of both countries thus reached two goals: They tightened the relationship between the State and the major Churches, and this enabled them to better control religious organisations. Political parties and organisations were dissolved in Estonia and Latvia in 1934. Lithuania followed this trend a year later, by requiring these associations to re-register.

In 1935 the Watch Tower Society applied to register the Society's magazine in Estonia as an official publication. The application was denied.⁴⁶ In 1935 Watch Tower literature started being confiscated in Estonia. According to a decree of the Minister of the Interior on 30 January, the first publication to be confiscated was a booklet published in 1934 entitled "Righteous Ruler." In July 1935 the recently published booklets "Who Shall Rule the World?" and "Universal War Near" were the next to be confiscated. At the same time, moves to dissolve the legal corporation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Estonia were underway on the Island of Saaremaa. There a former colporteur started to speak against the religious association when it refused to take on his medical expenses. During a police interrogation in June 1935, he declared that the British pioneer John Herbert North, who was serving in Estonia, had ordered him to burn pictures of the head of State, the commander in chief, and the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Although North denied the accusations during his interrogation, the process to dissolve the religious

41. Cf. Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki* (note 12), 106.

42. Cf. *loc. cit.*, 110.

43. Cf. YB 1937, 185.

44. Cf. Gills, *Jehovas liecinieki* (note 12), 100–101.

45. Cf. YB 1935, 108; YB 1936, 136.

46. Cf. *loc. cit.*, 136–137.



FIG. 1-7 Literature of Jehovah's Witnesses being confiscated in Estonia, 1935 (by courtesy of Jehovah's Witnesses, Estonia)

association under the State of Emergency Act could not be halted.⁴⁷

On 18 July 1935 the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society was dissolved in Estonia by a decree of the Minister of the Interior.⁴⁸ The Watch Tower Society was accused of harmful political propaganda (including insulting heads of State, church leaders, and the League of Nations) and for disturbing the peace with predictions of world war. The managing committee of the religious association was accused of encouraging Witnesses to hide banned literature and the charge was made that a foreigner working for the association had insulted the head of State, the commander in chief, and the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church by ordering the burning of their pictures. These activities were seen as endangering national and public interests as well as public

order. However, it seems that the dissolving of the Society had little or no effect on the Witnesses in Estonia. Wallace Hendric Baxter, who had been the WTS's representative in Estonia until then, simply continued to oversee the work. Two days after the religious association had lost its official legal status, 75,900 literature items in Estonian, German, Russian, Finnish, French and Latvian were confiscated, and the Society's assets were seized, or frozen. The legal representative of Jehovah's Witnesses in Estonia protested the seizure, declaring that the confiscated literature and other assets were not owned by the Estonian association but belonged to the American association in Pennsylvania. Although this appeal was successful, the confiscation of Watchtower literature nevertheless became routine from then on.⁴⁹

47. Cf. ERA 852.1.2249, Vahi-Torni, Piibli ja Traktaatide Seltsi sulgemise, nende väljjaannete konfiskeerimise ja Wallace Baxteri karistamise asjas [On closing the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, confiscation of literature and punishment of Wallace Baxter].

48. Cf. ERA 14.11.1342 (note 32).

49. Cf. ERA 852.1.2249 (note 47).