THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SOUTH, MISSION TO RUSSIANS IN MANCHURIA, 1920–1927

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In May of 1920, the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, authorized the opening of a new mission in Siberia and Manchuria. The elderly missionary bishop, Walter Russell Lambuth, pioneer of Methodist work in China and Japan, called the entry into Siberia “the greatest missionary opportunity of this generation.” Lambuth’s words proved to be prophetic. Within a few years, the mission boasted thousands of members among the Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Russian people. By 1925, the Korean section of the mission had 3600 adherents gathered into twenty-six churches, thirty-five Sunday Schools, two youth leagues, and twelve Women’s Missionary Societies. Near Harbin, Manchuria, Methodists had founded six Russian churches by 1927. The Russian Methodists in Harbin ran a high school, a business institute, an elementary school, a medical clinic, a women’s social center, a child protection league, and a theological seminary that trained men and women for ministry. Methodist work in Siberia and Manchuria seemed to deserve the confidence placed in it by Bishop Lambuth.

Yet at their May, 1927 meeting, the Methodist Board of Missions under Bishop Ainsworth voted to close the Russian work in Siberia and Manchuria. Before the summer was out, the missionaries had sold the property, transferred the money, and shipped lock, stock, and barrel out of Harbin. The most vivid memory of missionary George Erwin was that of pulling from the station on the Chinese Eastern Railway as dozens of Russians stood sad and bitter on the platform until his train was out of sight. A young Russian preacher pled for many when in the Board of Missions journal he begged that the mission be reopened:

Suddenly and unexpectedly our wings were cut, our hearts wounded by the telegram from Bishop Ainsworth. Close the mission! Why? How? We do not

1Elmer T. Clark, The Church and the World Parish (Nashville: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Board of Missions, 1929), 85.
3Elmer T. Clark, ed., Missionary Yearbook of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1927 (Nashville: board of Missions, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1927), 259–261.
4Interview with the Reverend George F. Erwin, Hiawassee, Georgia, 30 December 1978.
know. What could we do, what could we say? We wept and prayed. We hoped it was not so. Our hope was in vain. Schools disposed of children, children were cut off from cheap and religious education. Clinic lost for the Methodists, part of the churches closed, and missionaries were withdrawn. Our spiritual leaders are withdrawn. We are left alone. We are like children without parents.5

Today, the Siberia-Manchuria Mission rates no more than a line in histories of Methodism. Yet, historically, the mission is important for the portrait it paints of a little-studied refugee community—that of exiled Russians who fled the Bolshevik Revolution. The story of the mission shows how Russian refugees used the church to help them cope with hopelessness, starvation, persecution, and massive unemployment. The personal and printed documents from the mission, most of which are in Russian, represent a hitherto unexplored source of information, not only for refugee history, but for the history of Protestantism among slavic peoples in Asia.6 Sadly, the closing of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission also illustrates how the southern Methodist bishops of the early twentieth century exercised arbitrary power over Methodists in other parts of the world.

Origin Of The Mission

The Siberia-Manchuria Mission began as an effort to reach an estimated 1,400,000 Koreans who had migrated to Siberia for economic and political reasons. During the famine of 1870, Koreans began slipping over the border to find new farmland. Initially, those who were caught by the Korean government were beheaded, but whole villages of farmers continued to defy the law in the effort to secure the rich and unpopulated fields and forests of Siberia. After the Japanese occu-

6Unfortunately, much missionary correspondence and other sources of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, have been missing for a number of years. The Methodist Archives at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, contain printed Minutes of the annual meetings of the Russian Department of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission (1922–1925). The major mission sources are in the possession of Mrs. Eunice Erwin Brown of Macon, Georgia. Mrs. Brown is the daughter of two of the original missionaries appointed to the field, George and Vada Erwin. Mrs. Brown owns scrapbooks and correspondence related to the mission. She also holds copies of the Russian version of the Methodist Christian Advocate Metodistski Chrestanski Pobornik and of the Metodist: Byulletin Sib.-Manch. Misii Met. Ep. Tserkvi, Yug. (The Methodist, the Bulletin published by the Siberia-Manchuria Mission).

Dr. Gregory Yasinitsky of San Francisco, California, one of the first Russian pastors related to the mission, owns scrapbooks and ephemeral material such as songbooks. He holds several copies of his publication, Myech Gidiona (The Sword of Gideon) which was distributed to Russian Protestants in twenty-two countries in the late 1920’s and 1930’s.

The Methodist and The Sword of Gideon contain information not only about Methodists in Manchuria, but about other Protestant groups as well.
pation of Korea in 1910, more farmers fled the country. Enterprising Koreans transformed swampy areas of Siberia and Manchuria into rice fields.

An estimated 5000 of the migrating Koreans were Methodists, and their brothers and sisters back in Korea were eager to send them missionaries to help them establish their own churches and to train their children. Bishop Lambuth and the Korean Annual Conference sent several missionaries, both Koreans and Americans, to explore the possibilities of Methodist work among the unchurched Koreans of Siberia and Manchuria. The first mission church was planted in Kirin, Manchuria, in November of 1920. Methodist work spread rapidly among the emigrants: within nine months, there were 1261 Korean members gathered into thirty churches with thirty-one Koreans licensed to preach.

In addition to Korean work, Bishop Lambuth had long desired to reach Russians. Following World War I, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had undertaken relief work among European refugees in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. The Woman's Missionary Society established soup kitchens in Warsaw and sent millions of dollars worth of soap, shoes, and clothing to refugees. Many of the needy in northern Poland and Czechoslovakia were ethnic Byelorussians (White Russians), one of Poland's largest minorities. Although the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had originally entered Poland to do only relief work, the positive response to Methodist assistance among some Byelorussians led Bishop Lambuth and others to hope that the church could enter Russia proper for evangelistic work.

During the Russian Revolution and civil war that began in 1917, the Bolsheviks soon gained control over western Russia, but it took them a few years to extend their grip over Siberia and the eastern

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2 Ibid, Cannon, 172. Bishop Lambuth appointed the Reverend J.S. Ryang as a missionary to the Manchurian Koreans. Ryang became supervisor of the mission to Koreans in Manchuria and years later became the first Korean bishop of the Methodist Church.
3 Ethnic Byelorussians, or “White Russians,” were a different group from the political “White Russians” who fought against the Bolsheviks, or “Red Russians.”
4 In a comity agreement over post-World War I Europe reached with the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1919, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, received Southern Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Belgium. The Northern Methodist church maintained work in Estonia, Finland, and Northern Russia. For background to how the comity agreement evolved, see W.W. Pinson, *Walter Russell Lambuth: Prophet and Pioneer* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1924), pp. 181-186. For a brief history of Methodist Episcopal Church efforts in Russia during the revolutionary period, see Donald Carl Malone, “A Methodist Venture in Bolshevik Russia,” *Methodist History* 18 (July 1980): 239-261.
provinces. From the beginning, as avowed atheists, the Bolsheviks persecuted the Orthodox Church and accused it of being a pawn of the tsars. Even though in the early years they were more tolerant of Protestantism than of Russian Orthodoxy, Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not let the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, begin evangelistic work in Russia. The Methodists had to remain content with relief work on Russia’s western border and with hopes that a few converted refugees might be able to sneak back into the Soviet Union where they could evangelize secretly.

Siberia, however, was not yet under communist control. Bishop Lambuth believed that in the aftermath of the Revolution, Russia hung like a ripe plum waiting to be plucked by the Methodists. He believed that the Orthodox Church had been discredited by its association with the tsars, by its seemingly unintelligible liturgy, and by its “superstitious” customs. Lambuth felt that the disillusioned Orthodox Russians, suffering under the Bolshevik yoke, were ready for the Protestant gospel. Perhaps by entering Siberia, Methodist missionaries could gain access to Russia. In describing Lambuth’s dream of Russian penetration, his biographer wrote:

The political and social conditions made mission work impossible in Russia proper; but Siberia was then withstanding the spread of Bolshevism, and it was possible to reach Russians from that quarter. It was a strategic move on his part to drive a wedge from the east at the same time we were approaching Russia from Poland on the west as far as conditions would permit.\footnote{Jbid, Pinson, 190.}

Lambuth’s scheme in 1921, then, was a grand Methodist pincer movement to drive Protestantism into Russia from both sides. His underlying assumption was that Orthodoxy was a dying religion and that Russians, now freed from its grasp by the Revolution, would eagerly embrace Methodism as a replacement.

The needs of Korean and Russian refugees would have been inadequate to draw the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, into Siberia had it not been for the Centenary, a fund-raising drive that increased the budget of the Board of Missions by four million dollars from 1918 to 1921.\footnote{Robert Watson Sledge, \textit{Hands on the Ark, The Struggle for Change in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1914–1939} (Lake Junaluska, North Carolina: Commission on Archives and History, The United Methodist Church, 1975), 77.} 1918 was the centennial year of Methodist missions, and the General Conference of that year voted that $35 million be raised for missions over the next five years. Southern Methodists were in an optimistic and aggressive mood after the successful fund drives of World War I, and the Centenary fund was oversubscribed. By 1924, 281 new missionaries had been sent overseas, nearly doubling the mission force.\footnote{Ibid.} As part of the Centenary, the Methodist Episcopal
Church, South, set a goal of one million converts and one hundred thousand family altars. The slogan of the Centenary summed up its appeal: “When two million Methodists go from their knees to any task, it shall be done.”

The result of the Centenary was significant overseas growth. The first new mission to be opened under Centenary pledges included the aforementioned work in Poland. The second centennial thrust was the Siberia-Manchuria Mission. Even the international branches of southern Methodism caught the centennial spirit. Every Korean Annual Conference had a Centenary chairman who collected funds and backed mission work to the Koreans of Siberia-Manchuria. In 1924, the China Conference opened a mission to the Chinese in Manchuria. Though it initially was a part of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission, the Chinese mission soon became completely supported by the China Annual Conference. In all, the Centenary years represented a major outpouring by American, Korean, and Chinese Methodists into the new Siberia-Manchuria Mission.

The Work Of The Russian Mission

The Russian section of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission opened its doors in Harbin, Manchuria, the provincial capital of the northernmost province of China. In 1921, Harbin was the center of one of the largest European populations in Asia. At least 100,000 Russians and Poles shared the city with Chinese, Korean, and Japanese immigrants. Manchuria itself was caught in a Japanese-Chinese-Russian struggle for sovereignty. At stake was the Chinese eastern railway, the vital link in the Trans-Siberian Railway between Vladivostok, Russia’s major Pacific port, and western Russia. Also at stake were the rich farmlands in central Asia. Though the Chinese eastern railway cut across Manchuria, which was nominally controlled by China, practical control of the railway lay in Russian hands until 1905 when Japan won the Russo-Japanese War. Many Russians had migrated to Manchuria to work on the railroad and on the new industrial concerns that sprang up along its path. The number of Russians had swelled after the Revolution of 1917 when refugees from Bolshevism crowded into Harbin, the largest city along the railway. In the city of Harbin itself, Red and White factions were constantly struggling against each other. Simultaneously, the Japanese began to militarize the railway zone in their preparation for war against China. Into this situation arrived the H.W. Jenkins, a Methodist Episcopal Church, South, family from the South Georgia Conference.

Cannon, Southern Methodist Missions, 70.
The second center for Russian Methodist work was an equally dangerous location. During World War I, when access to Russia had been cut off by the German front to the west, Vladivostok became a strategic center for shipment of war materials to Russia. The Bolsheviks first gained control of Vladivostok in March of 1918. But by June, an uprising of Czech soldiers with Allied backing managed to retake the city from the Soviets. Japanese, British, and American troops landed to aid the Czechs, ostensibly to protect their interests against German prisoners-of-war whom the Allies feared would try to seize Siberia. President Wilson aided the citizens of Vladivostok through the YMCA, the Red Cross, and with agricultural and labor advisors. An American warship lay anchored in the Vladivostok harbor much of the time in case the American consul needed to make a quick getaway.

The missionary J.O.J. Taylor arrived in Vladivostok to minister to Koreans. Soon he had recruited a fellow Georgian from his home circuit. The Reverend George Erwin was one of the last missionaries appointed by Bishop Lambuth before he died in 1921. The Erwin family arrived in Vladivostok on May 15, 1922. All the original American missionaries assigned to the Siberia-Manchuria Mission, Taylor, Jenkins, Erwin, and their families, were supported by the Centenary funds of the South Georgia Conference. George Erwin traveled north of Vladivostok to supervise the Korean work at Nikolsk, but he soon became interested in the plight of the Russian refugees and began to minister to them also.

The situation of the Russian refugees tore the hearts of the missionaries. Beggars filled the streets of Vladivostok, and thousands huddled in refugee camps fed by the American Red Cross. Homeless Russians lived in railroad boxcars along sidetracks. Tuberculosis, malnutrition, and curvature of the spine affected the children. Many of the refugees were Russians from prosperous homes who had fled east to escape the Bolshevik terrors. Though the Methodists had arrived

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17See the small but interesting collection of J.O.J. Taylor letters to his mother and sister (1918–1922) held by the Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia. Although Taylor stayed only briefly in Vladivostok, he opened the mission and his correspondence reflects his work among the Koreans. See also his letters in *The Missionary Voice*, e.g. "Siberia and Manchuria," *Missionary Voice*, January 1922, 8.


to bring spiritual food to the Russians, they soon realized that the great physical needs of the people had to be met as well.

Late in 1922, Vladivostok fell to the Bolsheviks. Americans, Russians, and Japanese crowded into the harbor ships and left the city to the Reds. George Erwin recalled being the only American he knew on the streets of Vladivostok when the Bolsheviks marched in. First came the cavalry on horses that were skin and bones. Then shuffled in the barefooted soldiers, most in rags. Within three days, Erwin recalled, the Bolsheviks were well-dressed with shiny new boots plundered from the city.20 Although the Bolsheviks confiscated the Methodist property in Vladivostok, they permitted worshippers to hold church services. Sunday school and other meetings had to be held in private homes. Of the three young Russians who had volunteered to become Methodist ministers, the Bolsheviks imprisoned one.21

Within a few months of the Bolshevik conquest, it became obvious that the position of the American missionaries was untenable. The Erwin family left for Harbin in February of 1923, and the Taylors were forced to depart soon afterward. With them went some of the Russian Methodists. The Methodists that remained in Vladivostok, mostly Koreans with a few Russians, experienced persecution over the next few years, including the imprisonment of pastors and leading Christians, the closing of churches, and the forcible organizing of young children into atheistic clubs.22

By the spring of 1923, all Russian Methodist work had been concentrated in Harbin, at least temporarily safe across the Chinese border from Bolshevik control. The first Methodist missionary in Harbin, H.W. Jenkins, was able to engage the Russians quickly by meeting needs for education and employment. Many of the Russian refugees in Harbin were people desperate for practical training that would help them find jobs. The economy of Harbin was severely strained by overcrowding and a concomitant lack of employment possibilities, and many educated Russians were eager for teaching or tutoring jobs, even at low salaries. Refugees also needed language instruction to qualify them for admission to the United States or to other countries. They did not know when the civil war might spill over into Manchuria and force them to emigrate to some other part of the world. They were people on the move who desired nothing more than a safe home and a secure job, both of which were scarce in Harbin in the 1920's.

By the time the Erwin family arrived from Vladivostok in early 1923, Jenkins had built a missionary compound on Tilenskaya Street which contained missionary apartments, classroom space, and educa-

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20 George Erwin Interview.
21 A.J. Weeks, ed., 78th Annual Report, Board of Missions, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1924 (Nashville: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1924), 170.
tional equipment. Soon the Methodist Institute opened in the compound with seventy pupils. 23 Most of the adults who attended the night school studied English. In its business department, the Institute offered bookkeeping, English typing, and Russian typing. By 1925, the annual enrollment in the Methodist Institute was 744. 24 Graduates of the vocational school quickly found jobs that enabled them to migrate to such places as Australia, Canada, or the United States. In the Methodist Institute, the mission was filling perhaps the greatest need of those it had come to serve—that of helping them to gain the skills to be able to leave war-torn Asia as quickly as possible. Through the Institute, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, became a conduit for Russian emigration all over the world. One convert of the mission, Gregory Yasinitsky, called it a "channel of hope" for the Russian people. 25

Other educational enterprises included a high school of ten grades and an elementary school. The American consul considered the Methodist high school to be one of the finest in the city. 26 The Methodist schools were popular among Russian parents, but their children had to endure dingy store-front rooms and the scant Methodist supplies in order to gain a Christian education. Letters home from the missionaries stressed the sub-standard nature of the educational facilities and the need for more money to improve light and ventilation in the classrooms. The schools were nevertheless free for the needy and thus helped to educate children who otherwise would have received no education.

One of the most appreciated Methodist works for children was the Child Protection League, founded by Russian Methodists to rescue the estimated 8000 Russian children in Harbin. Many children of Harbin were homeless war orphans, or even if they had families, were subsisting on water and black bread. Members of the Child Protection League donated a fixed sum of money per month to help house, feed, and educate orphans. By 1925, 110 Russians had joined the Child Protection League and gave monthly out of their poverty to help those less fortu-

25 Interview with Dr. Gregory Yasinitsky, San Francisco, California, June 3, 1985.
26 Missionary Yearbook, 1927, 260. Interview with Ludmilla Skaredoff, Leningrad, USSR, 24 July 1986. Mrs. Skaredoff graduated from the Methodist High School in Harbin. Even though her parents were not religious, they enrolled her in the Methodist school because of its high academic standards. After the mission withdrew in 1927, the high school was taken over by Russians and continued as a non-Methodist school. Mrs. Skaredoff reported that the best two high schools in Harbin in the 1930's were the former Methodist school and the one run by the YMCA.
nate, both Chinese and Russian children, in Harbin.\textsuperscript{27} The mission ran soup lines for the poor and also fed children in the winter.\textsuperscript{28} A medical clinic with four doctors, four dentists, and three pharmacists was treating seven thousand patients a year by 1926.\textsuperscript{29}

By 1927, the evangelistic wing of the mission had opened six churches in Harbin and along the railway. The evangelistic goal of the mission was to found churches as close as possible to the Soviet border so that Russian Methodists, some of whom were Soviet citizens working on the railway, could make forays into Soviet territory. The Methodists wanted to be in a good position to evangelize the Soviet Union if the political situation permitted.

The success of each church depended on the pastor who had to rent a building before he could organize a congregation. Often the establishment of a Sunday school was the first step toward gathering a congregation.\textsuperscript{30} Since the Russian Orthodox Church had no activities for children, the Methodist evangelists could reach nominal Orthodox parents through children’s work. The odds against collecting a successful congregation were high in the face of frontier drunkenness and immorality, the hostility of pro-Bolshevik Soviets, and the disdain poured on the Methodists by Orthodox Christians who considered them to be sectarians. Only great sacrifice by the Russian Methodist preachers made the churches possible. Though they received only a fraction of the salary paid to the missionaries, the Russian preachers gave their energy, their health, and in one case their lives for the goal of evangelizing Russia.\textsuperscript{31}

The young Russian preachers, supervised by the missionary George Erwin, received their theological education at a Bible Institute run by the missionaries and by visiting professors from Methodist schools in Korea and China. In the 1925 school year, the Bible Institute

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\item \textsuperscript{27}"Zaboti o Dyetak," \textit{Byulletin}, Sentyabr 1925, 10. ("Concern for Children," \textit{Bulletin}, September 1925, 10); A.J. Weeks, ed., \textit{80th Annual Report, Board of Missions, Methodist Episcopal Church, South}, 1926 (Nashville: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1926), 151.
\item \textsuperscript{28}A.J. Weeks, ed., \textit{79th Annual Report, Board of Missions, Methodist Episcopal Church, South}, 1925 (Nashville: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1925), 184; B.N. Bradovitch, "Liga Zaschity Dyete," \textit{Metodist (Byulletin ...)}, Fevral 1926, 14. (B.N. Bradovitch, "League for the Protection of Children," \textit{Methodist Bulletin}, February 1926, 14.)
\item \textsuperscript{29}79th Annual Report, 184. 80th Annual Report, 149.
\item \textsuperscript{30}Sunday Schools were a prominent part of the Methodist work. Frequent articles on them appeared in the \textit{Metodist Byulletin (Methodist Bulletin.)} Sunday Schools were a major responsibility of the missionaries from the Woman’s Board.
\item \textsuperscript{31}One of the first Russian workers, Mr. B. Venogradoff, died while in Methodist service. Born in Leningrad of Orthodox parents, Venogradoff had moved to Vladivostok where he attended the university and began to work for the YMCA. He fled to Harbin, entered the Methodist theological school, and gave his life to Methodist work.
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enrolled fourteen persons—nine men and five women. The Institute offered courses in church history, English, systematic theology, Old Testament, New Testament, homiletics, Methodist policy and history, and the study of Russian literature. Those who attended the Institute did so on top of carrying a full pastoral load of teaching Bible classes, running Sunday schools and choirs, and preaching sermons. The women who attended the Bible Institute did youth and women's work.

The first Bible Institute graduate ordained by the mission was Gregory Yasinitsky, who had fought for Russia during World War I and then was imprisoned by the Bolshevists for refusing to join them. Though sentenced to death, Yasinitsky was freed by Czech forces who revolted in Siberia. Yasinitsky joined the White Army under Admiral Kolchak. After being deceived by the Bolshevists into a fake truce, 126 officers of Yasinitsky's regiment were bayoneted and thrown into the Hoy River. One of the few survivors of the massacre, Yasinitsky fled to Harbin and became an early convert of the mission. Raised in the Ukraine as a "shtunde," or Moravian, Yasinitsky was already a Protestant and so was put in charge of teaching the Bible in the Methodist schools. Yasinitsky's refugee background was typical for the twelve men who eventually became Methodist preachers.

The vast majority of the converts came to the church from a Russian Orthodox background, but a few were already Protestants. Person-to-person evangelism and Bible teaching brought most members in by profession of faith. Frequent revivals by missionary evangelists kept the fires of conversion stoked hot.

In the context of Harbin in the 1920's, many curious young Russians visited Methodist services out of boredom. Some of them stayed to join one of the Epworth Leagues sponsored by the various Methodist churches. The Epworth leagues were the forerunner of the Methodist Youth Fellowship, and in them, teenagers found social identity and a sense of Christian purpose for their lives. On February 14, 1926, there occurred probably the most interesting Epworth League meeting in Methodist history. The five Epworth leagues of Harbin—one Chinese, one Japanese, one Korean, and two Russian—held a union service at the Central Methodist Church of Harbin. Each Epworth League president gave a speech in his own tongue which was then translated into English and from English into the three other languages. The missionary George Erwin summed up the significance of the intercultural gathering when he reported in The Missionary Voice. "The program impressed

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33Ibid., Yasinitsky letter.
34Telephone interview with Dr. Alexis Shelekoff, 11 November 1985.
me with the universality of the religion of Christ more forcibly than
I have seen ever it demonstrated before."^{35}

Women's work in the churches was supervised by two missionaries
from the Woman's Department of the Board of Missions of the
Methodist Episcopal Church, South, Sallie Browne and Constance
Rumbough.^{36} They organized missionary societies, Bible classes, Sun-
day schools, Girl Scout units, and other work for women and girls.
Through the missionary societies, Russian women helped the poor of
Harbin and helped to evangelize their neighbors. They paid half the
salary of a Chinese Bible woman for the Chinese Methodists in Harbin.
Several of their number decided to train for formal mission service.
In the summers, the women held month-long church camps so that
children of Harbin could get fresh air, exercise, and intensive gospel
training.\(^{37}\) In 1927, a laywoman from Virginia endowed the Jane Brown
Evangelistic Center. This gave young women a safe place to live and
to go for music lessons and other wholesome entertainment.

News of the varied mission activities spread by word of mouth
and through the sale of the mission paper. From 1923 to 1925, the
mission published a Russian version of the Nashville-based *Methodist
Christian Advocate*. The paper had a local section that reported on
the progress of the mission, but it was largely a translation of articles from
English. The popularity of the *Advocate* encouraged the mission to
publish its own paper. In August of 1925, it began the *Methodist*,
the *Bulletin of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission of the Methodist Episcopal
Church, South*, as a replacement for the Russian *Advocate*. The
*Methodist* contained photographs and news of Russian Methodists and
missionaries. Church, educational, and charitable activities were re-
ported in its pages. Bible studies, sermons, and testimonies by mission
members made the bulletin a significant evangelistic organ throughout
Manchuria and Siberia.

**Close Of The Mission**

By 1927, the Russian branch of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission
seemed well-established. Members and adherents numbered in the hun-
dreds. Twelve Russian pastors administered the religious work, and

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^{36}Originally, Lillian Wahl of Paris, Arkansas, accompanied Constance Rumbough to
Manchuria, but Wahl died of spinal meningitis in 1926. Sallie Browne replaced her.
Constance Rumbough, of the Virginia Annual Conference, had been trained at Scarritt
Bible and Training College.
^{37}On Woman's Work at the mission, see the *Missionary Voice*, May 1923, 151; 79th
Annual Report, 186–187; Minutes of the Third Annual Meeting of the Siberia-Manchuria
Mission (Russian Department) of the MECS, Held in Harbin, China, September 27,
1924, 33–34; Minutes of the Fourth Annual Session of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission
(Russian Department) of the MECS, Harbin, China, September 17, 1925, 23–29.
the mission employed numerous Russians as doctors, nurses, and teachers. The mission was like a home to many of the displaced emigres. The Reverend George Erwin supervised the evangelistic work and his wife Vada kept the books for the mission and taught school. The Reverend H.C. Ritter, former professor at Nanking Theological Seminary, had replaced H.W. Jenkins as coordinator of the educational enterprises.

In 1927, the mission seemed on the edge of a breakthrough: the first convert had volunteered to evangelize inside the Soviet Union. Bishop Lambuth's dream continued to inspire missionaries and converts, both of whom wanted, for different reasons perhaps, to enter the Soviet Union to evangelize the Russians. The dream of converting the Russian people to Christ, and perhaps in the process undercutting Bolshevik atheism, animated the pages of the mission *Methodist*. Copies of the *Methodist* mysteriously crossed the Soviet borders. Manchurian Methodists hopefully read reports of Methodism in Moscow and Leningrad and of other Protestant groups in Siberia. And now in 1927 a Bolshevik soldier was ready to defy the authorities and preach the word in the Soviet Union. Mr. Zaharedsky had been a nominal Roman Catholic who had fought with "the Red Army from Petrograd to Vladivostok and was wounded ten times."38 He settled in a small railroad town where he became a barber and the president of the local Bolshevik Union. Meeting the Methodist group in Tsitsikar, Mr. and Mrs. Zaharedsky were converted and decided, despite persecution by local Bolsheviks, to enter Russia. Zaharedsky represented the first Soviet citizen able and willing to cross the borders to attempt to capture the Soviet people for Methodism. All that was needed was to raise money for his support. The ideological raison d'etre of the mission seemed on the verge of fulfillment.

Then in May of 1927, Bishop Ainsworth, newly in charge of the Siberia-Manchuria Mission, recommended that it be liquidated.39 The Board of Missions voted for closure at the annual meeting and telegrammed the missionaries, instructing them to sell the mission compound and to return to the United States. The Woman's Board transferred Rumbough and Browne to Poland. It was left to George and Vada Erwin to shut down the work. After turning over some of the Methodist work to other charitable organizations, George Erwin left for a tour of Methodist missions en route to Georgia. Mrs. Erwin spent three more weeks closing out the mission. She put the mission money and papers into a money belt and wore them out of the country. Mrs. Erwin led an entourage of her three children and about a dozen Russians

39*Missionary Yearbook*, 1927, 98.
across Manchuria to Korea, across the Pacific and to the United States. She traveled by rail from British Columbia to Minnesota and on to Georgia, dropping off emigres as she went. Because of the anti-Russian bias of American immigration officers, most of whom were former military men, Mrs. Erwin had an extremely difficult time getting the Russians into the country.40

The Russian Methodists petitioned to continue the mission, but to no avail. They stood by helpless and angry at all their sacrifices for the work, as the missionaries pulled up stakes and left Manchuria, never to return. Those who could take advantage of the missionaries’ departure used them as a one-way ticket out of Harbin. But most of the converts had to remain to face an uncertain future without Methodist support.

The reason given the Russian Methodists for the close of their mission was lack of funds. Several missionaries accepted this explanation at face value.41 It was true that the Board had not received all the Centenary funds that had been pledged and had suffered a forty percent budget cut from 1924 to 1926. But decisions about where to cut the budget were made according to other than financial criteria. As the newest mission field of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Siberia-Manchuria Mission was vulnerable. Newness, however, still does not explain why the entire operation was shut down instead of budget cuts being felt more evenly across the board.

Elmer T. Clark, in his 1929 mission history of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, argued that Bolshevik persecution had necessitated the closing of the mission. Although the Bolsheviks harassed mission converts, they did not control Harbin in 1927, and Clark’s reasoning seems faulty.42

Another possible reason for the closing stems from the fact that the mission accounts were transferred to work among ethnic Byelorussians in Wilno, Poland. During the 1920’s, the Methodists conducted relief work in Poland, and by 1927 it seemed that Byelorussians living near Wilno might respond to the Methodist gospel. Esther Case, Administrative Secretary for Foreign Fields, argued in the November 1928 issue of The Missionary Voice that the funds were transferred from Harbin to Wilno under the mistaken impression that the Byelorussians

40Interview with Mrs. Vada Erwin, Hiawassee, Georgia, 30 December 1978.
41"After many experiences and much suffering, the first fruits of Methodism were beginning to show when the news came that the Board of Missions would have to close the Mission because of a lack of funds. This order came upon us like a storm. The blow was too hard." A.F. Gavrelovchuk in Elmer T. Clark, ed. Missionary Yearbook of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1928 (Nashville: Board of Missions, MECS, 1928), 333. George and Vada Erwin believed that the reason the mission was closed was because the Board of Missions went broke.
42Clark, Church and the World Parish, 85.
of Poland were the same group as the “white” Russians of Manchuria. Methodists in America believed they were merely consolidating two missions for the same people into one. In fact, however, the mission board eliminated work among political “White Russians” in Manchuria, and then transferred the resources to ethnic Byelorussians (also known as “White Russians”) who lived in Poland. When Browne and Rumbough of the Woman’s Board arrived from Harbin, they were forced to learn an entirely new language and culture because the Byelorussians were ethnically different from the Manchurian refugees.43

The mistake was perhaps costly in terms of Methodist expansion. The Board terminated a successful mission to work among Byelorussians who were so attached to the Orthodox Church that they uniformly opposed the Methodists. By 1933, the Woman’s Board of Missions had to transfer its Byelorussians work to Poles. In the words of historian Noreen Tatum, “When Methodist work was changed over to the Polish group, it was due to a lack of response of the White Russians and a growing response of the Poles.”44

In the 81st Annual Report of the Board of Missions, May 1927, the refugee status of the Manchurian Russians was suggested as a reason to terminate the mission and to transfer its resources to Little White Russia in Poland. It was reported that,

*When the Russian Mission was opened, our object was to make a gateway into Siberia. There are now legal difficulties in the way of doing this. The fact that the large Russian population here is migratory raises the question as to whether we should continue our work there or direct our money and interest to Little White Russia as a more favorable approach to the Russian people.*45

The Board argued, then, that permanent Methodist church-planting was impossible among people whose major goal was to leave Harbin as soon as possible. The Board’s decision to shut down the mission was made in the interest of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, as an institution rather than in the interests of the Russian refugees for whom the Siberia-Manchuria Mission had become a community and a source of hope. The decision to liquidate the mission was a top-down decision made without consulting either the group of missionaries or the Russian Methodists.

The primary mover behind the decision to terminate was Bishop William N. Ainsworth who succeeded Bishop Boaz as missionary bishop over the Far East. Both converts and missionaries recalled that in contrast to Bishops Lambuth and Boaz, Bishop Ainsworth was hostile to the mission from the beginning. Gregory Yasinitsky believed that Bishop Ainsworth was not a mission-minded man and that he failed

to realize that Methodist converts witnessed for Christ and organized believers wherever they migrated. Yasinitsky believes that Ainsworth favored the Orthodox Church and felt Methodist work to be unnecessary. Missionary Vada Erwin also had negative memories of Bishop Ainsworth—that he refused to visit Harbin because of his fear of cholera and that he was responsible for funds being diverted away from Harbin. Regardless of whether these negative impressions of Bishop Ainsworth were accurate, it is a fact that he proposed before the Board that the mission must be terminated. Considering the monopoly of power held by Methodist bishops, it is unlikely that anyone on the Board of Missions would have opposed him. A strange twist of the situation was that as a member of the South Georgia Conference, Bishop Ainsworth eliminated the mission of his own parishioners and friends.

In retrospect, the decisions to close the Siberia-Manchuria Mission and to transfer its funds to Little White Russia were tragic. First of all, the bureaucratic manner in which the decision to terminate was made is a typical example of American chauvinism. The original missionaries to Manchuria were meeting the needs of Russian refugees by assisting them to construct schools, social centers, charitable facilities and to plant churches. Then out of bureaucratic concern for institutional longevity rather than human need, the Bishop back home closed the mission without even consulting the Russian Methodists under its care. The failure to take into consideration the opinions of indigenous Christians was all too frequently a common attitude among American church personnel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An irony of the situation was that the transfer of funds to Little White Russia was made in belief that Methodist work in Poland would be more permanent than among Manchuria refugees. Yet not only did the Byelorussians of Poland reject Methodism, but World War II destroyed mission work in Poland as well. Between Hitler, Stalin, and Polish Catholic resurgence, American Methodism in Poland had a difficult future.

46"Bishop Ainsworth did not realize the potential of our mission. He did not know that when our converts leave Manchuria they carry on with them a witness of Christ. Mr. Ponkin who left for the Soviet Union wrote: 'In a short time I am able to organize a group of believers more than a hundred in number ...' This kind of report was coming to us from Poland, Australia, Canada, and even from New Zealand." Gregory Yasinitsky letter to Dana Robert, July 15, 1985.

47Vada Erwin Interview; Eunice Erwin Brown letter to Dana Robert, August 1, 1985, 4.

48Ainsworth was elected bishop from the South Georgia Conference in 1918. (Daily Christian Advocate, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, General Conference of 1918, Atlanta, Georgia, 94.) Historian Albert Outler, who grew up in the South Georgia Conference, believes that Ainsworth was a highly authoritarian, "imperial bishop." Conversation with Albert Outler, Forth Worth, Texas, 3 April 1986.
The major reason that the Siberia-Manchuria Mission should not have been closed was the tenacity with which converts clung to the Methodist church after the missionaries withdrew in 1927. In March of 1928, the Woman's Missionary Council received a letter from four members of the Ladies' Missionary Societies in Harbin. In the letter, the women told how there were four ladies' missionary societies with one hundred members who had raised $2,500 over five years to help needy children. Three Russian women had trained for full-time Christian work at the now defunct Bible Institute. The letter closed with the words, "Will you accept us among your midst, our dear Sisters, will you teach us what we do not know yet, will you take interest in the worn out soul of a Russian woman, in her sufferings in the recent past and in her joys in the present new life?"\(^49\)

Despite the withdrawal of American support, the Russian preachers continued their evangelistic work—even after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931.\(^50\) Several converts left all they had and crossed the border into the Soviet Union to preach the gospel and to plant evangelical churches. One can only surmise that the brave evangelists eventually lost their lives in one of Stalin's prisons. Fellow Russian Methodists continued to beg for the support of Bishop Lambuth's dream, but to no avail.

A few missionaries managed to keep contact with Methodists in Harbin until Soviet communists invaded Manchuria in 1945. The women missionaries who had been transferred to Poland sent packages to children in Harbin. Though the Methodist Church did not substantially assist its struggling Russian members, on occasion individual missionaries helped various Russians to escape from Manchuria. As

\(^49\)Tatum, *Crown of Service*, 217.

\(^50\)See, for example, the scrapbook of Constantin Egoroff, now in the possession of Dana Robert. Egoroff and his wife continued their church work in Manchuria through the 1930's, despite the fact that they had no support from the Methodists and that Egoroff was blinded by glaucoma. Finally, in 1959 the Methodist Committee on Relief brought the Egoroffs to San Francisco. For the Egoroff story, see "The Long Dark Road," *Inasmuch (25 Years of Service Through MCOR)*, clipping in the Eunice Erwin Brown collection, Macon, Georgia.

Gregory and Irene Yasinitsky also continued their church work after the withdrawal of the Methodists. Yasinitsky published the evangelistic magazine *The Sword of Gideon* to support his Bible-distribution and youth work: After arrest by the Japanese as a possible American spy, Yasinitsky and his family escaped to San Francisco in December of 1940. See Yasinitsky correspondence to Dana Robert; Susan Lyon, "Gregory Yasinitsky: Profile of an Alumnus," clipping from the alumni magazine of the Pacific School of Religion.

Alex and Panya Gavrelovchuk traveled with Vada Erwin in 1927 to the United States, where they received college educations. The Gavrelovchuks then returned to Harbin. During World War II, they assisted Methodist missionaries who were interned in Shanghai by the Japanese. Eunice Erwin Brown letter to Dana Robert, August 1, 1985.
late as 1957, the Reverend and Mrs. George Erwin assisted a destitute couple in their eighties to leave Harbin for a room in a World Refugee Home in Ireland.  

Today there are an estimated thirty-seven Russians left in Harbin, down from a population of 100,000. Under the Japanese occupation, many Russians used Japanese passports to flee Manchuria. After Soviet troops marched in, half of the Russian population was forcibly deported to remote Central Asia. During the Cultural Revolution in China, the few Russians that remained were persecuted by the Chinese. The Chinese destroyed the Russian burial ground, Nikolayevsky Cathedral, and Russian homes. There are few signs left of what once was the largest European community in Asia.  

Perhaps the Mission Board was technically correct when in 1927 it closed down the Methodist mission to Manchuria; it is true that no Russian Methodist churches remain there today. There are, nevertheless, an unknown number of Protestants in the Soviet Union, some of whom are the fruit of Methodist evangelists who crossed the borders in the face of death. The undaunted spirit of Russian Methodism also continues to live in emigrant communities in the United States, Canada, Australia, continental Europe, and Latin America.

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51 See Vless Halaimov materials, Eunice Erwin Brown collection, Macon, Georgia.