

ESTONIAN METHODISM DURING THE FIRST YEAR UNDER THE PLAGUE OF THE RED COMMISSARS

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"Immediately before the outbreak of World War II, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia signed the Non-Aggression Pact of August 23, 1939, generally referred to as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This treaty contained secret provisions for dividing Eastern Europe into spheres of influence."¹ This pact is considered by many as one of the reasons for the onset of World War II. For Estonia, the Pact had terrible results. On June 17, 1940, Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union. The Soviet secret police began to imprison and execute the population.

The first mass deportation from Estonia to Soviet slave camps started on the night of June 13, 1941. Overnight, more than 10,000 people, including children and the elderly (or almost 1 percent of the population), were herded into overloaded box cars and taken away to remote areas in northern Russia and Siberia. These journeys often lasted several weeks under inhuman conditions, during which time a large number of deportees perished. Additionally, 1,741 people were later found in mass graves in Estonia. After the start of the Russian-German war on June 21, 1941, some 30,000 more Estonians were deported by the Soviets under the guise of conscription or were forced to leave Estonia to do slave labor. All told, some 60,000 Estonians were arrested, murdered or deported during the first Soviet occupation 1940-1941.²

It is clear that under such circumstances, the Methodist Church in Estonia, which was founded by the missionary activities of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, suffered very much. There were 21 Methodist congregations with 1,600 full members in Estonia in 1940 when the Soviets came.³ Among the first victims of the Soviet mass terror in the Methodist clergy was Martin Prikask (b. 1877), the Superintendent of the Methodist Church in Estonia. He became the first Methodist martyr in Estonia.⁴

¹Aarand Roos, ed., *Estonia, A Nation Unconquered*. (Baltimore: Estonian World Council, Inc., 1985), 37.

²Roos, 41.

³Heigo Ritsbek, *Seitsekummend viis aastat Eesti Metodisti Kirikut 1907-1982* [Seventy-five years of the Methodist Church in Estonia]. (Tallinn, 1982), 3. (Unpublished manuscript).

⁴On June 18, 1990 Mr. Arvi Lindmae, the Chairman of the Board of Kuressaare United Methodist Church (this was the first Methodist congregation in Estonia and the place from where the Rev. Martin Prikask led the Methodist activities in Estonia) very boldly visited the local KGB office and asked for information concerning the death of Martin Prikask. He was told that the file of Martin Prikask was in Tallinn and that they will try to locate it. After some time Arvi Lindmae returned to the Kuressaare office of the KGB, and he was

The Reverend Martin Prikask was arrested on July 1, 1941 at the parsonage of Kuressaare Methodist Church on the island of Saaremaa.⁵ He was taken by boat to Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. The first interrogation protocol in the KGB file is dated July 19, 1941 and this is “the only interrogation protocol which is in [the] Estonian language” in his KGB file.⁶

The first interrogation was conducted by an Estonian, the Parnu county KGB chief Kikkas.⁷ His first questions pertained to family-name, time and place of birth, education, etc. Then the question was asked: “You had a house at Kuressaare; what income did you get from this?” The answer from Prikask is recorded in the file:⁸ “About 10–12 ‘kroons’ (Estonian currency) a month.” The next question was—“Was this house nationalized?”⁹ Answer: “No, but it was taken away by the army.” Then the KGB officer asked the data concerning Prikask’s wife and asked—“Tell about your life!” Prikask’s answer was recorded in the protocol as follows:

“In 1900 I went to serve to the tsarist army. I was in the ‘musical company’ in Petersburg. Later I was sent to Vassili Island (a part of Sankt Petersburg). I finished this school with a degree of “fourth level cadett master.” In 1906 I left the army. Then I settled at Kuressaare, got “6 bushel land” from the nobleman and this was my income. Four years I owned a grocery store, during my free-time I was a preacher.”

allowed to see Martin Prikask’s file (!!!). Arvi Lindmae asked for permission to take the photo of Martin Prikask from the file and to make some copies of it. The KGB officer then made a phone call to Tallinn and asked what to do. After some explanations the KGB chief at Kuressaare, Valeri Tootsman, gave this photo of the Rev. Martin Prikask to Arvi Lindmae so he could make some copies of it. When Arvi Lindmae later asked permission to take the whole file home and copy it, he was refused (“this time may come in future”), but at the same time the KGB officers allowed him to copy the text from the file on the spot. He managed to copy some parts of it. There were according to him “some 28–30 sheets” in the file. (Arvi Lindmae to the author, May 15, 1991), 1–2.

⁵The exact time of the arrest of the Rev. Martin Prikask is not very clear from the file. As it happened on the night to July 1st, 1941, then in some places it is mentioned July 1st, 1941, in some other places June 30, 1941. Also it is not known exactly, when his wife was freed, because we know that “prikas was arrested with his wife” (Lindmae to the author, December 18, 1990, 1). We know that his wife was not imprisoned nor taken to Gulag. We know that Rev. Martin Prikask was advised to hide himself, but he refused (Rev. Tiit Henno to the author, July 12, 1988).

⁶Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 2.

⁷Lindmae once spelled his name “Kikas” (Lindmae to the author, December 18, 1990).

⁸Of course, we do not know the actual testimony of Martin Prikask during these interrogations. As the torture and the fabrications of KGB are well-known, all these “documented” interrogations do not represent the actual happenings.

⁹This term “nationalized” meant actually that the Soviets robbed the best apartments and houses for themselves, in many cases the families who lived in these places were simply thrown to the street. I know personally several people who had to suffer such kind of sufferings. Officially they were told that some “representatives of the working class” (read: Soviet murderers and robbers) “needed” these places much more than the real working people who lived there.

Question: "Where did you preach?" Answer: "In private homes, community houses and in the country-side. Later I joined the Methodist Church." Question: "Did you get salary?" Answer: "I was supported voluntarily, later I worked as a book keeper." Question: "To which political organizations did you belong?" Answer: "I did not participate in any of them, not in the National Guard, not in the Political Organization of Estonia, not in the national-socialist union, only in the Red Cross."¹⁰

This protocol as well as the following information is known to us because of the efforts of the chairman of the Board of Kuressaare United Methodist Church, Mr. Arvi Lindmae. Lindmae copied a protocol of a "witness" by somebody, called Mr. Nellis Vladimir. We know that Nellis Vladimir worked at this time as the chief of the KGB jail at Kuressaare, and so he had to be a KGB worker himself. During the Nazi occupation he was executed.¹¹ The protocol is dated August 2, 1941. He said that he knew Martin Prikask for more than 20 years. Nellis Vladimir said that Martin Prikask "served as a pastor in the so-called Methodist sect. He collected money from them, to whom he promised the heavenly kingdom. Sometimes he preached and continued to collect the money to the bank. He (Martin Prikask) organized reactionary movements and mobilized members to the National Guard."¹²

There are several other "witnesses" in this file, that Lindmae indicated were mostly absurd and fallacious.¹³ However, to the amazement of

¹⁰Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 3.

¹¹It is interesting to mention that this person had two brothers—one of them was in the Nazi Army, and later shot to death by the Soviets, the third brother was not involved in politics at all and "still lives at Kuressaare" (Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 4).

¹²It is interesting to see the basic accusation model from this "testimony": Methodists are called "sectarians," the only motivation for pastoral activities is money, clergy is always connected with "reactionary" or "against-the-people" movements. The only detail what is missing here are accusations in sexual immorality.

¹³For example, there is a protocol from January 5, 1942. Someone, by the name of B. Osikin, a tractorist from Russia witnessed, that Martin Prikask "showed his anti-Soviet attitude [during their trip to the concentration camp] and had said that they would never reach Siberia, because the Germans are so strong." (Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 5-6).

The protocol dated March 14, 1942: Q. "When did you begin to do anti-Soviet propaganda?" A. "I began to do the anti-Soviet propaganda immediately after the Soviets took the power. I do not remember all, but I told to my neighbour Markus Kodar, that the food products will be taken out from Estonia and Estonia will suffer the hunger. During the elections to the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic I told that there is a need to tell to the people that none of Estonians will vote for the candidates to the Supreme Soviet. Also during our trip to Irkutsk, I stated in the wagon that the German army is non-defeatable and they will conquer the whole Europe and the Soviet Union will loose the war. At the end of August, when we reached one railway station and the German airplanes came to bomb, then I said that they cannot take us to the place they want, because the German government will require us all back soon. I do not remember that I had done the anti-Soviet propaganda more." Q. "Have you been at the National Guard?" A. "No." Interrogator: "Now you have totally exposed yourself that you are hostile to the Soviet power and in the midst of your acquaintances you did the anti-Soviet agitation, discriminated the Soviet activities and glorified the German technic. Do you consider yourself guilty in this?" Prikask: "Yes I consider myself guilty in all of this." (Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 7-8).

Lindmae, on every sheet of these confessions, there was the genuine signature of the Reverend Martin Prikask. Lindmae asked from the chief of the KGB at Kuressaare how it was possible that Martin Prikask signed such absurd "confessions." The answer from the KGB officer was that these were times when there were lots of possibilities to press a person to sign such "documents."¹⁴ We do not have documented or some other evidences of torture regarding the Reverend Martin Prikask, but it is quite possible that he was tortured, at least mentally, until he signed the so-called confessions.

There are some witnesses to the fact that Martin Prikask preached the gospel during his imprisonment to the people who were in the same prison cell with him.¹⁵

In the secret file there is the sentence of the "court," signed by a first-lieutenant Tihhomirov, dated March 19, 1942. There are three points:

1. In the beginning of December 1940, during a conversation with his neighbour, citizen Prikask was not satisfied with the Soviet power because of the lack of food.

2. Before the elections to the Supreme Soviet Prikask did anti-Soviet agitation to citizen Kodar and was not satisfied with the Communist power.

3. At the end of August 1941 on a train Prikask glorified German technology and disparaged the Soviet army. Being a Methodist preacher he owned a personal church, organized a Christian political party and had three private homes. During the years 1940-1941 he did systematically anti-Soviet agitation against the Soviet Union using the religious background, etc. He is extremely dangerous to the Soviet power. I suggest he receive the highest punishment—to execute him by shooting and to confiscate all his property.

March 19, 1942

First-lieutenant
Tihhomirov."¹⁶

Then we have another sentence to death:

"August 12, 1942—sentenced to death.

Special Commission of the Peoples Commissariat of the Interior Ministry of the Soviet Union.

Prikask, Martin, father's name Rits—to execute by shooting."

¹⁴Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 4.

¹⁵We have such kind of testimonies from the brother of the Rev. Konstantin Magi, who was together with Martin Prikask in Siberia (Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 5). But at the same time we have several stories, which are more like legends, from the people who were able to come back from the Soviet concentration camps. The officials of the Estonian Methodism tried to control some of these stories, and they were not true (people were not actually in the same concentration camp, as Martin Prikask; in the midst of torture someone who preached the gospel seemed to them as Martin Prikask etc.). So we need to do some more research to find these people who actually were together with Martin Prikask in the concentration camps or in the prisons.

¹⁶Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 8.

This is signed by the name Ivanov. And then there is another line: "September 9, 1942 the sentence was fulfilled."¹⁷ We know that the Rev. Martin Prikask was executed September 9, 1942 at Aleksandrovka village in the Irkutsk oblast.¹⁸

At the same time that Pastor Martin Prikask was arrested two other Methodist ministers from Saaremaa, the Reverend Peeter Hang from Torgu Methodist Church and the Reverend Vassili Prii from Korkvere Methodist Church, were also arrested. They did not come back from the Soviet Gulag as did their Superintendent.¹⁹ As mentioned above, Superintendent Martin Prikask did not want to escape, but as he foresaw the possibility of his arrest, he appointed a young man, Mr. Orest Aavik, as his successor as pastor of the Kuressaare Methodist Church.²⁰ Several times the Soviet authorities wanted to confiscate this church building. Once they almost succeeded in doing this, but because of the bold action by Mr. Orest Aavik, the church remained the house of prayer.²¹ It serves to the present as the Kuressaare United Methodist Church.

The fourth minister of Estonian Methodism who became a martyr during the first year of the Soviet occupation is the Reverend Jaan Jaagupsoo. From 1933 he served the Haapsalu Methodist Church, which has probably the most beautiful Estonian Methodist church building. When in July, 1941 the Soviets illegally announced the conscription of Estonians to the Red Army, following their occupation of Estonia, the Reverend Jaan Jaagupsoo was among those hiding in the forests. This was the time when the Soviets officially organized the so-called "destroying battalions" that burned down the villages, killed the people, raped the women, and in several documented cases nailed the children to trees, causing other acts of horror.

In July, 1941, when the Reverend Jaan Jaagupsoo was captured by some Soviet soldiers from one of these "destroying battalions," his eyes were kicked out and he was dropped into a dry well. All this torture was observed by the wife of Pastor Jaagupsoo who found her husband dead when she reached him. One only can imagine the terrifying situation the next Sunday morning at Haapsalu Methodist Church when they realized what had happened to their pastor.²²

So from 13 active ordained Methodist ministers in Estonia in 1940, 4 lost their lives during the first year of the Soviet occupation. When we

¹⁷Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 9.

¹⁸Lindmae, December 18, 1990, 1.

¹⁹Lindmae, May 15, 1991, 10.

²⁰Henno, 1.

²¹Henno, 1.

²²Rev. Evald Leps interviewed by the author, August 8, 1991. During the killing of the Rev. Jaagupsoo he was a Moravian lay-preacher near Haapsalu, Estonia. In 1944 he escaped to the West, becoming an UM minister in the United States. He died January 3, 1992.

see the other Christian churches and denominations in Estonia, then these losses were even smaller, for example, than the Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church had to suffer. In these two denominations nearly 90% of pastors and priests were killed or deported.²³

When Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were incorporated into the Soviet Union in August, 1940, the Soviet authorities had formulated plans concerning the religious organizations. They accepted the existence of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Baptist Church and in the Baltic settings the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches. The Seventh-Day Adventists, quite unlike mainline Protestantism, were somehow tolerated. No other denominations were to be allowed to exist. The Salvation Army, the Moravians and some other religious organizations were closed. The Methodist churches in Latvia and Lithuania were liquidated. How did the Methodist Church in Estonia survive?

When the Superintendent of the Methodist Church in Estonia, Martin Prikask, was arrested and deported to Siberia, the remaining pastors elected the Reverend Martin Kuigre, who had been pastoring the Rakvere Methodist Church since 1932, as the Superintendent. It is not known, where this meeting occurred nor whether there were other candidates considered for the post of the Superintendent.

When the Soviets began to implement their religious laws, the Reverend Martin Kuigre was invited to a meeting with the Minister of Religious Affairs in Estonia. It is not known whether anyone else, besides the Reverend Jaan Puskay, the pastor of Tapa Methodist Church, was present.

“The minister made a suggestion to Superintendent Kuigre for the Methodists in Estonia to join the Lutheran Church, mentioning that these two denominations [both] have infant baptism. Superintendent Kuigre answered that although both [Lutheran and Methodist] churches have infant baptism, there is a great difference in the substance of this and it is impossible to merge. Then the minister of Religious Affairs said: “If you will not join the Lutheran Church, then the Methodist Church will be closed.” After this statement Superintendent M. Kuigre said with great seriousness: “If the Methodist Church will be closed, we will continue to function secretly.” After a long pause the minister of Religious Affairs answered: “Okay, but give me some kind of constitution.” Superintendent M. Kuigre answered: “We have a written book – ‘The Discipline’ and we will continue to function based on it.” Then Pastor Puskay mentioned that he gave his personal copy of the “Discipline of the Methodist Church” to the minister of Religious Affairs.”²⁴

Aleksander Kuum, the Reverend Hugo Oengo, and others testify that the KGB and other Soviet organizations tried their best to liquidate

²³Vello Salo, *Riik ja kirikud, 1940–1974*. [State and the churches 1940–1974]. (Rooma: Maarjamaa, 1974), 14. It is one of the best surveys of the church life in Estonia after the World War II. The author is an Estonian Roman Catholic priest.

²⁴The report by the Reverend Jaan Puskay to the Board of the Methodist Church in Estonia. The manuscript is in the possession of the author.

Methodism in Estonia as they did in Lithuania and in Latvia. Quite interesting is a KGB interrogation of the Rev. Aleksander Kuum, one of the pastors of Tallinn Methodist Church. He was asked what difference it would make if the authorities were to close the Methodist Church or the Methodist ministers were to do it themselves, whereupon they would become Baptist ministers. The Reverend Kuum answered that there was a great difference: "When you will give me a rope and ask me to hang myself up, I will be responsible before the Lord. But if you hang me up, you will be responsible to the Lord." The question still remains how Methodism remained in Estonia as an institution. There can be several answers, but I think that the most important consideration is the boldness of the Estonian Methodist clergy. They refused to compromise and for some reason the Soviets did not use force.

During the first year of the Soviet occupation in Estonia (1940-1941) no Methodist churches were confiscated, despite the evidence that attempts were made, as in the case of the Kuressaare Methodist Church.

We do not know exactly what was the loss in membership in the Estonian Methodist Church during the first year of the Soviet occupation. However, it is clear, that it lost more than one third of its clergy. It lost numerous laypersons also. This was only the first incidence of suffering under the Red Commissars. After relatively relaxed German occupation (1941-1944) the Soviets came back and the persecution resumed.