Book Reviews

GARY BROWNING. *Russia and the Restored Gospel*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997. xxii, 377 pp. Index, chronology. $11.99.

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Many Americans that grew to maturity during the Cold War were conditioned to think of Russia as an implacable and eternal enemy. Few expected to see the collapse of the Communist system and the way opened for missionary labor in a such a short space of time. However, after interviewing a number of the early missionaries to Russia, I am impressed that many of them had nurtured a desire to serve there even when the chances of doing so were still remote. Even now, Russia seems to possess a mystique for Americans unlike any other country in the world. It is thus very satisfying that a chronicle of the first mission president in Russia should be published so soon after the unfolding of what, in future years, may well be ranked among the historic epics of the restored Church.

A professor of Russian language and literature at BYU for two decades and a lifelong observer of Russian life, Gary Browning was prepared to understand and work with Russians as well as anyone in the Church. *Russia and the Restored Gospel* is a careful and detailed account of the Brownings' mission experience, providing a balanced picture of the first mission in Russia that includes the embarrassing as well as the satisfying, the failures as well as the successes. This volume is not a glossy paean to unimpeded progress but a reflective and sober account of someone who loves Russia in spite of the difficulties encountered there.

During his first visit to Russia as mission president, Browning sat in a Sunday service in Vyborg "astonished at being in a meeting of the Church in Russia" (57). Twenty-seven years earlier, he had visited that same city never imagining that he would return in a missionary capacity. President Browning describes the tender and touching scene at that service: six Primary girls singing in Russian "I Am a Child of God." He concludes the book on a similar note, describing a gathering at Izmailovskii Park, when two hundred members met shivering in the wet grass on a soggy day to bid farewell to the Brownings. Suddenly, Browning recalls, the sun broke through the clouds and "everything appeared radiant, cleansed, and pure, just as I would like always to remember Russia and Russians" (336).

However, when Browning writes of a "thin, 'golden' layer" of people who are spiritually prepared to receive religious truth, he enunciates what is for me the theme of the book (18). Between his portrait of the Sunday service

at Vyborg and the farewell at Izmailovskii Park, Browning has gathered together personal narratives of Saints from Russia's golden layer, many describing in their own words their conversion and commitment to the gospel.

These personal accounts are tied into a running chronicle of mission events, usually corresponding to the time of each narrator's baptism. The accounts most often speak of simple joys that are, it would seem by many accounts of Russian history, experienced infrequently. One sister summarizes her feelings by writing, "Do you know how Russian Mormons differ from an ordinary Russian person? We have learned to smile. And this is simply wonderful" (95). Another sister writes, "The joy I had inside me was like a fountain. I smiled, not knowing what for. I laughed, not knowing why. And for the first time I really felt that these people around me were indeed my brothers and sisters" (205). Describing her first impressions of the Church, another woman states, "Do you know what struck me? The happy, joyful, and friendly smiles. The joy of associating with one another" (301).

The humility of these new converts is profoundly refreshing. On one occasion, while President Browning was interviewing a brother concerning his worthiness to hold the Melchizedek Priesthood, the man, without offering any excuses, confessed that he had not paid tithing for three months. Pursuing the inquiry further, the president learned that the man had received no wages for three months. It is hard not to be touched by the guileless purity of an innocent victim of a troubled society.

The overall result of these personal accounts is that the book focuses on the "restored gospel" in Russia rather than on the history of the Church in Russia. Indeed, the book may disappoint a reader looking for a well-conceived historical narrative emphasizing the salient aspects of the Church's entry into Russia. Browning includes some of this information, but it is shoehorned between the personal narratives. For example, mention of the fall of the Soviet Union, the crucial event that accelerated the opportunity to spread the gospel in Russia, is sandwiched between an account of a sister from the United States who sends welfare packages to Russia and a conversion story. Also, a significant Church reorganization in Moscow on the 150th anniversary of the first appointment of missionaries to Russia, during which President Browning felt the presence of the Prophet Joseph, is somewhat obscured—placed between the story of a woman whose nightmares cease after her baptism and the stories of two converts from the city of Saratov.

The book simply is not organized to emphasize what is historically significant and what is not. Instead, it is a month-by-month chronicle. What may seem significant or insignificant are juxtaposed with little or no transition to help the reader sort it out. This structure is awkward for another reason. On occasion, people who play a significant role in the Church are introduced at one place in the book but their contributions are related

elsewhere. For example, an account of the conversion of Grigorii Fomin is on page 186, while his contribution to the history of the Church is related on page 235. The casual reader may not readily make this connection.

There are other problems that lessen the effectiveness of the narrative. At times the account gets bogged down in excessive detail: the visit of Robert L. Backman as part of a Boy Scout delegation (119), a discussion of training topics at a leadership meeting (239), or the visit of a Church official to determine the effectiveness of the Missionary Training Center in preparing missionaries for Russia (254). Finally, there is one unavoidable problem. After a while, the similarity of conversion accounts tends to lessen their impact. In the latter half of the book, the accounts all begin to sound the same.

These weaknesses, however, are minor and pale in comparison to the book's many important contributions. For instance, Browning describes the first missionaries into Russia—not young, single men or women but Finnish couples who functioned much like stake missionaries. Their role was supremely important in the early days when the Church was not yet officially recognized and Church presence needed to be low-key (24).

The book also provides invaluable insight into President Browning's dealings with Russian officials when the Church's legal status was still tenuous (78, 85). In 1993 an outcry arose over what was described as "the avalanche of foreign churches entering Russia . . . 'to free the benighted natives from their atheism and ignorance.'" It seems that "many groups from abroad had behaved irresponsibly in Russia, raising unreasonable expectations at mass rallies, baptizing hundreds, and then leaving the newly 'saved' without ongoing church support or organization" (286). The result of the furor was proposed legislation that would have caused a near shutdown of religious freedom in Russia. The role the Church played in forestalling that restrictive legislation is documented in Browning's account.

The book also provides insights into the development of Russian Church leaders and Church organization in Russia. Viacheslav Efimov, the first president of the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission, was called as mission president only five years after his baptism. He and others who will undoubtedly play significant roles in the future of the Church in Russia are people the reader comes to know through the narratives. Browning also notes that "the philosophy of the Area presidency . . . [was] to build outward from centers of strength" (180). The Church has expanded slowly into new cities in Russia as well as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, first building a strong membership in the larger cities before spreading to smaller cities throughout the country.

Russia and the Restored Gospel corrects the historical record. Some stories of early missionary experiences in Russia have been inaccurately recounted, dramatized, and retold. The personal accounts of the actual

participants set the record straight. The story has been frequently told of a Russian woman who found a Russian Bible in a park in Helsinki and later met a Church member who gave her a Book of Mormon. Actually, the woman found the Bible in a Russian forest while picking mushrooms. Later, an LDS Finnish friend whom she had met the previous year in a park in Helsinki gave her a Book of Mormon, and she soon was baptized in Helsinki (41). The real story is just as touching but not quite so dramatic as the fabled version. In addition, many Church members have been told that the Russian government granted the Church official recognition during the Tabernacle Choir's 1991 visit to Russia. However, Browning makes it clear that even though recognition was announced publicly during the visit of the choir, official recognition had been granted the month prior to the choir's visit (156).

Just as Browning is not hesitant to dispel a few myths, neither does he shy away from sensitive issues. He includes an account of an unapproved missionary outing for which he was reprimanded (248), comments about the one-third inactivity rate among Russian converts (258), mentions the gunpoint robbery of two sister missionaries (268), and discusses the problems of distributing welfare (328–29). Consequently, the reader gets an honest picture not only of the triumphs, but also of the tribulations and setbacks of the first Russian mission.

Throughout the book, Browning also sprinkles fascinating insights into Russian life, including the description of a flea market in Izmailovskii Park where artistic treasures are set up on mats draped over the muddy ground. Browning comments on this stark contrast: "The two extremes seemed to symbolize the resplendent but frequently unkempt Russia we so earnestly love. Deep waters of authentic beauty flow from under surface grime and coarseness" (224). The reader is also surprised to learn that representatives of Soviet television came to President Browning in 1993 requesting permission to videotape a performance of BYU's Young Ambassadors to replace tapes of BYU performing groups they had been broadcasting since 1978 (166, 305). The cultural isolation through decades of communism was indeed profound. Throughout the book, the results of Russia's self-imposed isolation from the West and the country's ever-present hardships are poignantly evident.

Russia and the Restored Gospel is primarily a collation of sources loosely tied together in a chronological format. The book will be enjoyed by many, like myself, who have a long-term fascination with Russia and who, in seeing the Church established there, have witnessed an event we never expected to occur in our lifetimes. An honest and accurate account, the book is a treasure of information for present readers and future historians who will try to assess more fully the record of the Church in Russia.