

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

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Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia

Jehovah's Witnesses first arrived in significant numbers in Eastern Europe after World War One.¹ The vast majority of Witnesses were located in the eastern portions of Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. As a result of Soviet annexation of these territories following World War Two, several thousand Witnesses became Soviet citizens. These religious communities were harshly persecuted throughout the Soviet period. In 1949 and 1951, the state rounded up nearly all Jehovah's Witnesses in its western borderlands and deported them to remote areas of Siberia. This included men, women, and children. While these families were freed from exile in the 1960s, their property and homes were never returned to them, and the state never admitted wrongdoing. For the remainder of the Soviet period, Witnesses faced arrests, harassment, job discrimination, heavy fines, and loss of custody of their children.

In the final year of the Soviet Union, the state registered the organization and granted it legal standing, but never acknowledged the decades of persecution and virulent propaganda

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all referenced information comes from my direct research on this topic, much of which is available in the published monograph, Emily B. Baran, *Dissent on the Margins: How Soviet Jehovah's Witnesses Defied Communism and Lived to Preach About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

against this religious community. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jehovah's Witnesses have enjoyed strong growth in Russia and most Witnesses today joined the faith in the post-Soviet period. There are currently over 175,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia out of a total population of roughly 144 million. Thus, Jehovah's Witnesses are a tiny minority who make up just over one percent of the total population of Russia.² Most Russian citizens identify as Orthodox or as belonging to no faith in particular.³

Jehovah's Witnesses Background

Jehovah's Witnesses are Christians. Their worldwide organization, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, has over eight and a half million active members and is headquartered in New York.⁴ Witnesses believe that a true Christian must remain "neutral" in political affairs. This means that Witnesses do not vote, run for elected office, or serve in the military. They also believe that their faith requires them to uphold certain standards of behavior. For example, they must attend regular services in their local Kingdom Hall (the official term for their meeting places). Second, they must evangelize their faith to others. Evangelism is a requirement for all active Witnesses. Witnesses distribute their organization's official publications, the *Watchtower* and *Awake!*, during this evangelism.

² Current membership figures for the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia were confirmed directly with the Office of Public Information at the World Headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses (September 2020). This figure only includes active members who are engaged in regular evangelism, and not all individuals who attend meetings or Bible studies, or the unbaptized children of members. Nearly 300,000 attended meetings of the Jehovah's Witnesses as of 2017 when the organization was dissolved.

³ This is according to a 2008 analysis by the International Social Survey Programme, in which 72 percent of Russian citizens identified themselves as Orthodox, and 18 percent as not affiliated with any religion. "Russian Return to Religion, But Not to Church." *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*. February 10, 2014.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2014/02/10/russians-return-to-religion-but-not-to-church/>

⁴ "How Many of Jehovah's Witnesses Are There Worldwide?," *2019 Service Year Report, JW.org*, <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/how-many-jw/>

Widespread Animosity toward Jehovah's Witnesses

Official propaganda against the Witnesses existed for decades during the Soviet period. Local newspapers published steady attacks on Witnesses, accusing them of theft, adultery, anti-state behavior, corruption, greed, sexual violence, murder, and collaboration with the Nazis. This had an enormous impact on the local population given that such accounts were never challenged in any official context. My research has concluded that the Soviet state considered the Witnesses to be among the most dangerous and anti-Soviet of all religious communities, and effectively translated this message to its citizens. This made Witnesses into local pariahs who were systematically denied decent-paying jobs and admission to institutions of higher education. They were subject to steady harassment by police and local authorities. They were also subject to more serious persecution in the form of detainment, arrest, and loss of custody of their children.

This Soviet legacy is relevant today because overwhelming popular animosity toward Witnesses, sanctioned in the Soviet period, remains a fact of life in Russia today. Russian newspapers have not acknowledged the falsity of decades of anti-Witness propaganda, leading citizens to assume this information was accurate. Moreover, an anticult movement in the 1990s imported western rhetoric about the alleged dangers of minority religions, while suggesting that awarding such faiths legal status would threaten Russia's fragile democracy and undermine its Orthodox heritage. National and local media (including both television programming and print journalism) frequently turned to anticult experts for commentary on minority faiths, and employed tropes from anticult rhetoric in their reporting. Thus, Russian media have regularly described the Jehovah's Witnesses as a "sect" whose leaders "brainwash" and "zombify" their members for monetary gain and personal power. "Sectarians" are alternately described as

gullible fools and dangerous fanatics, requiring the intervention of professionals and authorities to “deprogram” them and bring them back into mainstream society.⁵

In 2010, religious scholar Konstantin Berezhko published a study of press coverage of Witnesses in Ukraine, but his conclusions could just as accurately apply to Russia as well. This is how he described the press portrayal of Witnesses in the post-Soviet period: “Jehovah’s Witnesses are a totalitarian sect; their organization is banned in Russia and in some European countries; the believers are mentally ill; they are criminals; they use illegal missionary methods; parents let their children die by refusing blood transfusions; the Witnesses disrupt families, and so on.”⁶ This rhetoric is widespread and rarely contested (except by Witnesses themselves).

Legal Barriers to Freedom of Worship

The Russian legal system uses its significant regulatory power over religious life to restrict the Witness faith. In this regard, it bears strong similarities to the Soviet-era regulatory system in place prior to 1991. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia enjoyed a relatively open religious environment that allowed western religious organizations and minority faiths to operate with little hindrance. This provoked a strong backlash from the Russian Orthodox Church, and resulted in the passage of a new, more restrictive religious law, “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations,” in 1997. The goal of the law was to reestablish a regulatory system over religious organizations and protect “traditional” religions, in particular Russian Orthodoxy. Under the 1997 law, all religious organizations at the local and

⁵ Emily B. Baran, “Negotiating the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Post-Soviet Russia: The Anticult Movement in the Russian Orthodox Church, 1990-2004,” *Russian Review* 65, no. 4 (2006): 637-56.

⁶ Konstantin Berezhko, “Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Mass Media in the Ukraine in the Communistic and Post-Soviet Period,” in Gerhard Besier and Hubert Seiwert, eds., *On Religious Liberty in a Democratic Society: Aspects of Law, Religion and Philosophy in Constitutional Theory*. Vol. 2, *Journal for the Study of Beliefs and Worldviews* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010): 175-76.

national level are required to register in order to be able to legally operate (run charitable programs, hold religious services, rent or purchase property, etc.). Any city or region can decide not to register a religious community, making the faith illegal at the local level. This is what happened in Moscow, where the city denied the Witnesses' registration in the early 2000s.⁷

Since then, the Russian government has used the threat of terrorism to further restrict minority faiths, especially the Witnesses. The 2002 Law on "On Combatting Extremist Activity" has been critical in denying Witnesses the ability to practice their faith. The law includes a long and vague list of activities that it considers "extremism." Most problematically, it prohibits the promotion of the exclusivity, superiority, or inferiority of citizens on the basis of their social class, race, nationality, religion, or language. Likewise, it prohibits the incitement of social discord based on these categories of identity.⁸ The law gives Russian courts the power to declare publications in violation of this law to be "extremist" and criminalize their circulation.⁹ Second, the law allows for the government to dissolve any organization under the same set of guidelines, and to seize their assets. Third, the law allows the government to prosecute any individual under the same set of guidelines for practicing extremism.¹⁰

Based on this law, Russian courts declared numerous publications of the Jehovah's Witnesses "extremist." A number of localities then revoked the Witnesses' registration,

⁷ The 1997 law recognized the "special role" of Orthodoxy in Russia, while identifying Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism as central to the "historical heritage" of Russia. The full text of the law is available online on the Russian Presidency's official website <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/11523>

⁸ The full text of the law is available online on the Russian Presidency's official website: <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/18939>

⁹ The full list of banned publications is available online on the Ministry of Justice's official website: http://minjust.ru/extremist-materials?field_extremist_content_value=&page=18

¹⁰ Article 282 in the Russian Criminal Code establishes penalties for violation of this law. The statute makes it a crime to carry out activities of an organization that has been dissolved due to extremist activity (Article 282.2). In December 2018, this statute was modified to allow for civil penalties rather than criminal charges for first-time offenders. "Kak menialas' stat'ia 282 Ugolovnogo kodeksa RF," *TASS*. December 19, 2018. <https://tass.ru/info/5930296>

designating the organization itself as “extremist.” Finally, in April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court ruled that the organization of the Jehovah’s Witnesses was itself “extremist” under this law, and ordered its immediate dissolution. As a result of this ruling, all organized activity by Jehovah’s Witnesses was declared illegal. This included religious worship services and door-to-door evangelism. The state seized the Witnesses’ administrative offices outside of St. Petersburg, and took control of all of its assets and property.¹¹ Later in 2017, a separate court ruling declared the Witnesses’ New World Translation of the Bible to be an extremist text, and included it on the list of banned publications.¹²

The dissolution of the Jehovah’s Witnesses as a legally registered organization in Russia has had dire consequences for the ability of individual Witnesses to practice their faith. In theory, the dissolution is not a “ban” on Jehovah’s Witnesses as individuals, nor their individual religious beliefs or worship. In reality, however, it is much more complicated. Witnesses consider evangelism or what they term “publishing”—their door to door ministry—as a requirement of their faith. Not surprisingly, then, the most conflict with the state has occurred as Witnesses continue to gather in small groups and to speak about their faith to others in their community. Witnesses engaging in such actions have been charged under Article 282 as engaging in extremist activity. As of September 2020, over 1,000 homes have been searched,

¹¹ For an overview of the April 2017 decision and its consequences, see Zoe Knox, “Jehovah’s Witnesses as Extremists: The Russian State, Religious Pluralism, and Human Rights,” *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 46, 2 (2019): 128-57.

¹² This ruling required the court to find that the New World Translation was, in fact, not a Bible because Russian law specifically protects the Bible and other scriptures from being subject to anti-extremist legislation. See Tom Balmforth, “Russia Bans Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Translation of Bible,” *RadioFreeEurope / RadioLiberty*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-jehovahs-witnesses-bible-translation-banned/28684384.html>

nearly 400 Witnesses have faced charges for extremist activity (many of these cases are still pending), and 10 are serving time.¹³ These numbers will almost certainly continue to grow.

In December 2018, President Vladimir Putin made brief remarks about the current situation. When asked directly about the Witnesses, Putin expressed the desire for a “more liberal” policy toward religious minorities, and claimed to share concerns that extremist laws were being applied to them in error.¹⁴ Despite these professed misgivings, the continued actions of the Russian federal government strongly indicate that it intends to enforce its designation of the Witnesses as an extremist organization, and to prosecute individual Witnesses as extremists. Moreover, President Putin himself has taken no actions to mitigate harm to Jehovah’s Witnesses or prevent further persecution of Witnesses.

To conclude, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia today do not have freedom of worship. They are subject to prosecution for practicing their faith, despite claims to the contrary by Russian state officials. In the wake of the April 2017 decision, the US State Department issued a statement calling on Russia to reverse the liquidation.¹⁵ In doing so, it joined numerous governments and non-governmental entities who have denounced Russia’s violations of its citizens’ religious freedom.¹⁶ Russia cannot be said to have full religious freedom, a cornerstone

¹³ These statistics are from the Witnesses’ Office of Public Information, which maintains a detailed website on the legal situation in Russia, and releases regular updates on the exact numbers of Witnesses who have been impacted by the 2017 decision. <https://jw-russia.org/>

¹⁴ In other remarks at the same event, Putin also acknowledged that Witnesses are Christians and professed ignorance of why they were being persecuted. Transcript of remarks at the Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights. Moscow, Russia. December 11, 2018. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59374>

¹⁵ “Respecting Religious Freedom in Russia.” Press Statement from Heather Nauert, Spokesperson for US Department of State. Washington, DC. July 19, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/respecting-religious-freedom-in-russia/>

¹⁶ The Jehovah’s Witnesses have compiled a lengthy list of official statements on the April 2017 court decision. This list is available at, “How Does the International Community Consider the Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia?,” *Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia*, May 15, 2020 <https://jw-russia.org/news/about/faq/6.html>

of a democratic society, as long as Jehovah's Witnesses cannot practice their faith within its borders.