

Christians Abused Under Albanian Rule

Albania is a small state in South East Europe on the Balkan Peninsula, between Yugoslavia and Greece. It is a rugged mountain country, except for the fertile coastal strip.

Albania was under Turkish rule and did not gain its independence until 1913, at the eve of World War One. The country has been a real battleground during both World Wars. It has seen many invaders come and go. After 1944, the anti-fascist guerilla leader Enver Hoxha seized control and in 1946 set up a communist dictatorship.

Albania is predominantly Moslem with a Christian minority. In the 1950's out of a population of about 1,400,000 the Moslems numbered 70 percent, the Orthodox 20 percent and the Roman Catholics 10 percent. From this tiny and relatively unknown country came the news that a Roman Catholic priest was executed because he had baptized a child at the mother's request. The execution of this priest was confirmed by the Albanian government.

In Albania, the warfare against the freedom of thought and the soul is going on in full force. As with every communist regime, the Albanian government considers the fight against religion as one of the most essential features of its program. It uses every cruel and harsh means to wipe out religion.

An old priest who was imprisoned in a camp gave some bread to a sick fellow prisoner above his own rationing and was executed. Many clergy and laity have been killed. In 1949, the archbishop was deposed and arrested and two other bishops were placed under arrest.

The communist regime deals much more harshly with the Roman Catholics than with the Orthodox. By the 1950's, the ties with Rome had been compulsively severed, the Papal Nuncio had been expelled, the Roman Catholic press had been suppressed and all religious youth organizations banned.

In 1967, a wave of anti-religious youth demonstrations broke loose. This was to be a contribution to the cultural revolution. At that time, Albania was called the first atheistic state in the world. This was also stated by radio Tirana in October 1967. Christians have been forced to burn their Bibles.

But the communist party paper reported last year that some people still listened in secret to Vatican Radio and met together in small groups for worship in homes. The Albanian church is suffering and bleeding.

Why do I write about this small country that with its few remaining Christians' we hear so much about the spirit of détente. The Helsinki conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe is supposed to be a real and brave step towards world peace. Who does not want peace?

But let optimism not push aside the hard realities of life. A word of caution is certainly not out of place. The Marxists still believe and practice the words of Lenin: "Treaties are only for getting breath for a -new effort. They exist to be broken as soon as expedient. Peace propaganda is to camouflage war preparations.

Nato's Secretary-General, Joseph Luns, said bluntly: "The Russians are trying to eventually completely end it, by this conference. The late Lester B. Pearson remarked:

In my view, communist leaders have not abandoned their ideological desire to establish communism throughout the world.

The spirit of détente should be more than the expansion of trade relations between east and west. The needs of the oppressed minorities should not be forgotten. The invasion of Czechoslovakia is certainly not ancient history, and neither is the Russian takeover of Hungary.

The plight of Christians should be brought to the attention of the government, and in particular the department of eternal affairs. Political pressure has brought relief to the Jewish minority in Russia. Perhaps, political pressure can be exerted on behalf of the persecuted minorities in Albania and other communist countries.

In the meantime, the church in the West should not cease to pray for her persecuted fellow believers.

Johan D. Tangelder
August, 1973