

Christian Outlaws: Bible Smuggling across Cold War Europe

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Bible smuggling, the illicit transportation of religious contraband into the Communist countries of the Eastern bloc, was a marked Cold War phenomenon. At first a peripheral, amateurish pursuit, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s Bible smuggling developed into a transnational network of training camps and safe houses, which used recruitment practices and specially doctored objects and vehicles resembling those of state intelligence agencies. Bible smuggling also became a mode of perception. Professional Bible smugglers, reliant on student volunteers, preached a distinctive world-view. They developed their own literature, theology, moral codes, trade routes and criminal methods. Bestselling books, comics, advertisements and personal testimonies gradually came to shape how millions of conservative Christians, mainly evangelicals, viewed Communist Europe. Bible smuggling became a multi-million-dollar business and a televangelist staple which influenced US foreign policy. This article uncovers, for the first time, the scale, methods and significance of Cold War Bible-smuggling and argues for its enduring influence on conservative Christian thinking.

Whatever mental images the phrases ‘born-again Christian’, ‘charismatic Protestant’ and ‘evangelical’ may conjure up in most people’s minds, they are unlikely to include a smuggler, a secret agent or a spy handler. Nevertheless, from the late 1960s, a distinct form of Cold War

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My grateful thanks to the six anonymous Bible smugglers, of various nationalities, who were willing to share memories, photographs and documents with me and to be extensively interviewed for this project; to the Keston Trustees for awarding me a scholarship to consult the Keston Archives, Baylor College, Waco, Texas, *in situ* 7–11 November 2022; to Iulia Cindrea Nagy for helping me to locate relevant materials in the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS) in Bucharest, Romania; Gabija Strumylaite for assistance with the Lithuanian national security archive; and to Éva Mártonffyné Petrás for

Studies in Church History 61 (2025), 609–637 © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Ecclesiastical History Society. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/stc.2024.54

missionary work began to capture the imagination of evangelical pastors, low church congregations and Bible students across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, West Germany and Austria. This was Bible smuggling to the Communist world: the illicit transportation of Bibles and Christian literature, including pamphlets, hymnals and Sunday school missals, through the Iron Curtain to scattered Protestant communities in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Yugoslavia, Albania and the Soviet Union.¹

Bible smuggling across Europe is a topic which has yet to be systematically researched, let alone incorporated into our understanding of East-West relations during the Cold War.² This is a serious omission, because Bible smuggling, although it only occasionally hit the headlines, came to frame how millions of evangelicals in the West –

help with the Hungarian State Protection Authority (Államvédelmi Hatóság, ÁVH). I am equally grateful to Esko Mäki-Soini for sharing Finnish sources, including his 'Rekkamiehen muistoja matkan verreltä' ('Memoirs of a Trucker along the Way'); and to staff at the Security Services Archive (Archív bezpečnostních složek) in Prague. An earlier version of this article was read to the annual meeting of the Keston trustees in November 2023 and printed in Keston Newsletter no. 39 (2024). I am grateful to David Brimage, Thom Loyd, Angela Muir and Michael Novotný, and to the anonymous reviewers for SCH, for helpful comments.

¹ Most smuggled religious materials were intended for Protestant pastors, ministers or churches, but some went to Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses and other non-Protestant groups. Jewish organizations also smuggled religious literature into the Soviet Union and other Communist countries: see Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (New York and Boston, MA, 2010); Zoe Knox, *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Secular World* (London, 2018).

² There is, as yet, not a single scholarly monograph on the topic, and just one postgraduate (MA) dissertation. A handful of published articles exist, most of which were written by former Cold War Bible smugglers. See Joe Gouverneur, 'Underground Evangelism: Missions during the Cold War', *Transformation* 24 (2007), 80–6; Bent Boel, 'Bible Smuggling and Human Rights in the Cold War', in Luc van Dongen, Stéphanie Roulin and Giles Scott-Smith, eds, *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War* (Basingstoke, 2014), 263–75; Francis Raška, 'Bibles for Communist Europe – A Cold War Story, Part 1', *Hungarian Review* 6/3 (May 2015), 40–62. Joseph Schneider, *Through the Seams of the Iron Curtain: Clandestine NGO Support to Christian Religious Minorities in Communist-Controlled Eastern Europe, Central Europe and Russia, 1960–1989* (MA thesis, Postgraduate Naval School, Monterey, CA, 2018), was written by a man who grew up in an American Bible-smuggling family stationed in West Germany. At least two private museums containing collections of artefacts from Cold War Bible smuggling across Europe exist, one in the Czech Republic and one in Sweden, but these are run by Bible-smuggling organizations and not open to the general public. For photographs, see also James Kapáló and Tatiana Vagramenko, eds, *Hidden Galleries: Material Religion in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon, 2021).

especially in the English-speaking world – viewed the Communist regimes of the East.³ Even after 1989 and the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe, some Bible-smuggling organizations survived, shifting the focus of their operations to China or North Korea, or reframing the enemy as Islam rather than Communism.⁴ A number continue to recruit, raise money and smuggle internationally to the present day. Through their promotional materials, recruitment drives, published memoirs, sermons and online appearances, Bible smugglers perpetuate a view of the world in which Christians are understood to be a persecuted minority, itself a distinct strand in right-wing populism and Christian nationalism which is widely present across Europe and North America today.

From modest beginnings in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, Bible smuggling developed, over the course of the 1970s, into an international network of organizations which merit serious study in their own right. Some of the most prominent Cold War Bible-smuggling organizations operating during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were: Underground Evangelism, Open Doors, Jesus to the Communist World (later renamed Voice of the Martyrs), Eastern European Mission, *Dansk Europamission* ('Danish Mission to Europe'), *Licht im Osten* ('Light in the East'), Slavic Mission, The Team, and the organization which informs much of the present study, Operation Mobilisation (hereafter referred to as OM).⁵ As OM's founder, an American

³ The term 'evangelical', as used in the English-speaking world, is rather loose and malleable. It can refer to a specific church or union of churches or pressure group, as in the case of the National Association of Evangelicals; or to a theological tendency among members within a denomination, usually Protestant, who place particular emphasis on the importance of conversion, atoning grace through the crucifixion, the need to live by and spread the Good News, and the primacy of the Bible. The best working definition of 'evangelicalism' (sometimes referred to as 'Bebbington's Quadrilateral') can be found in David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), 2–17. See also David Bebbington and George Marsden, eds, *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2019). In Central and Eastern Europe, 'Evangel', or *evangelisch*, often misleadingly translated into English as 'evangelical', simply means a Christian in the reformed (usually Lutheran) tradition.

⁴ On the crisis presented to Bible-smuggling organizations by the 1989 anti-Communist revolutions, see Gouverneur, 'Underground Evangelism', 80–6; on the shift to demonizing Islam, especially after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, see *ibid.* 85.

⁵ Eleven in-depth interviews by the present author with four former Bible smugglers, based in Finland, Canada, the USA and the former Czechoslovakia, were conducted (and recorded via Zoom) between 3 February 2022 and 28 February 2023. Two further interviews with a husband-and-wife team of Bible smugglers, one of whom had also worked

evangelical named George Verwer, later recalled, it was in Austria in 1961 (the same year in which the Peace Corps was founded), that ‘God gave me a name – the name that has stuck Operation Mobilisation – OM’ and ‘showed me how to mobilize the church – bringing people together for a summer, for two years and to send them on outreaches. Then sending them back to their home churches or to another mission agency to energize, revitalize the church and spread the vision.’⁶ The method which Verwer and his team perfected, of drawing on an ever-changing pool of volunteers from the West, recruited and managed by a small core of permanent staff based mainly in Western Europe, enabled an organization like OM to punch above its weight.

Bible smuggling became big business from the 1970s, attracting substantial donations and thousands of volunteers, mainly from North America, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. Volunteers for short-term missions included Justin Welby, the future archbishop of Canterbury, who smuggled Bibles into Czechoslovakia in 1980 and into Romania in 1981 for Eastern European Mission.⁷ By the 1980s, evangelical lobbyists and televangelists, whose most colourful claims about Christianity under Communist regimes came from Bible-smuggling testimonies and literature, had the ear of both US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.⁸ Today, the notion that much of the world remains ‘starved’ of Bibles,

on the ship *Logos* and was the only woman willing to be interviewed, were conducted in person in the UK on 10 August 2022.

⁶ George Verwer, *Drops from a Leaking Tap*, rev. edn (Milton Keynes, 2009; repr. Croydon, 2012), 19–20.

⁷ Andrew Atherstone, *Archbishop Justin Welby: The Road to Canterbury* (London, 2013), 25. See also the archbishop’s Facebook tribute to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Open Doors, online at: <<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10153800972067502>>, accessed 20 October 2024. Eastern European Mission, originally a Dutch Bible-smuggling organization set up by Hank Paulson (a pseudonym), was associated with Brother Andrew’s Open Doors: see Hank Paulson and Don Richardson, *Beyond the Wall: The People Communism Can’t Conquer* (Ventura, CA, 1982); and <<https://www.eem.org>>, accessed 21 October 2024.

⁸ On evangelical influence in foreign affairs, see especially Angela Lahr, *Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism* (Oxford, 2007); Lauren Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (London and Ithaca, NY, 2020); Melani McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals* (Oxford, 2018). On scholarly interpretations of the end of the Cold War which focus on the role of Christianity as a force for opposition, see especially Michael Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford, 2003); John Burgess, *The East German Church and the End of Communism* (Oxford, 1997).

which need to be shipped or smuggled abroad, often at great personal risk, remains a common rallying cry at US televangelist campaigns, for example during 'Bible-thon' fundraisers organized through Jimmy Swaggart's SonLife broadcasting network, which aim to get tens of thousands of 'Expositor's Study Bibles' into Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uruguay, Venezuela and elsewhere.⁹

The publication, in 1967, of two important English-language Bible-smuggling memoirs helps to explain the timing of the boom years in Bible smuggling, which was most intensive in the 1970s and 1980s. These memoirs were *God's Smuggler* by 'Brother Andrew' (the Dutch founder of Open Doors, whose real name was Anne van der Bijl, but whose code-name as a smuggler was 'Andrew');¹⁰ and *Tortured for Christ* by Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand, the founder of Jesus to the Communist World (later renamed Voice of the Martyrs).¹¹ *God's Smuggler* describes how, in 1957, in what was to become the first of many crossings into Communist territory, Brother Andrew had driven his blue Volkswagon Beetle, 'literally bulging with tracts, Bibles, and portions of Bibles', to the border with Yugoslavia.¹² Waiting anxiously for the Communist border guards to inspect his documents, for 'the first of many times' he said what became known as 'the Prayer of God's Smuggler'. 'Lord,' prayed Brother Andrew, 'in my luggage I have Scriptures that I want to take to Your children across this border. When You were on earth, You made blind eyes see. Now, I pray, make seeing eyes blind. Do not let the guards see those things You do not want them to see.'¹³ The guards failed to find Brother Andrew's stash and let him through. So began his long 'career for God', first as a smuggler, and subsequently as the director of the Bible-smuggling organization Open Doors.

⁹ 'The November Bible-Thon is Live Today!' claims once such post (2 November 2024), which publishes a toll-free telephone number and online site for cash donations; see online at: <<https://www.facebook.com/sonlifebroadcastingnetwork>> and <www.shopism.org>, accessed 5 November 2024.

¹⁰ In Dutch, the name 'Anne' can be male or female.

¹¹ The first editions of these works were Brother Andrew [van der Bijl], with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *God's Smuggler* (London and New York, 1967) and Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ (Today's Martyr Church)*, foreword by the Rev. W. Stuart Harris (London, 1967).

¹² Brother Andrew [van der Bijl], with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *God's Smuggler*, 1st British edn (London, 1968; first publ. 1967), 101.

¹³ Ibid.

God's Smuggler by Brother Andrew was a runaway success. It was brought out in hardback, paperback, anniversary, illustrated, junior, and other editions. Within a generation, the book had sold over ten million copies and been translated into thirty-five languages.¹⁴ This exceptional commercial success was helped by the publication, in 1972, of a comic book version, drawn by Al Hartley (a former Marvel comic book illustrator and the creator of Archie comics), as one of the first in a new 'Spire Christian Comic' series which sought to present the Christian message in accessible, teen-friendly vernacular.¹⁵ The very phrase 'God's Smuggler' came to be used rather like a franchise, for example in *God's Smuggler to China*, the bestselling paperback first published by another member of Open Doors International, 'Brother David', in 1981.¹⁶ Bible smuggling, or at least a romanticized version of it, was being actively advertised and promoted.

As the author of *God's Smuggler*, van der Bijl became a legend in his own lifetime. He appeared on television talk shows; as a guest preacher during evangelical tours and missions around the world; and, latterly, in Facebook, YouTube and Vimeo videos.¹⁷ He was presented not only as *God's Smuggler* but also as *God's Agent* or *Secret Agent* in libraries of Christian books with series titles such as 'Christian heroes' or 'Heroes of the Cross'.¹⁸ Profits from the sales of these works were used to support not only missionary organizations, such as Youth With A Mission (YWAM), but even Keston College, originally set up in London in 1969 (as the 'Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism')

¹⁴ To contextualize, Joy Adamson's *Born Free*, which was first published in 1960, sold five million copies and was translated into twenty-five languages.

¹⁵ The other title which launched the Spire Christian Comic series, *The Cross and the Switchblade*, similarly sought to make Christianity seem exciting, modern and relevant to teenagers and pre-teens. Al Hartley went on to create an entire run of Christian 'Archie' comics, ubiquitous in evangelical circles in the 1970s, in which 'the Gang' dealt with Christian themes. See also Jason Sacks et al., *American Comic Book Chronicles: the 1970s* (Raleigh, NC, 2014).

¹⁶ Brother David, with Dan Wooding and Sara Bruce (Open Doors International), *God's Smuggler to China: A Cry to the Chinese to Let Us Love Them* (London, 1981).

¹⁷ For a Facebook video about Brother Andrew, the Bible Smuggler, see online at: <<https://www.facebook.com/opendoorsfans/videos/brother-andrew-the-bible-smuggler/1731386523708530/>>, accessed 19 July 2023. A 'family-friendly' cartoon video about Brother Andrew's life, entitled 'Secret Smuggler: the story of Brother Andrew', can be found on Vimeo, online at: <<https://vimeo.com/401393042>>, accessed 19 July 2023.

¹⁸ Brother Andrew, with Dan Wooding, *Brother Andrew God's Agent (Heroes of the Cross)* (Basingstoke, 1983); Janet and Geoff Benge, *Christian Heroes Now and Then: Brother Andrew God's Secret Agent* (Seattle, WA, 2005).

to monitor religious persecution in 'Communist Lands', which took pride in its accuracy in reporting and avoidance of sensationalism.¹⁹ By the time of van der Bijl's death in 2022, Open Doors, which recruits young people from the USA and around the world, claimed to be helping Christians in 'more than 60 countries', and to be distributing '300,000 Bibles and 1.5 million Christian books, training materials, and discipleship manuals' per year.²⁰ The organization's annual turnover, as published in 2015, was an impressive \$116.3 million. In 2023, the Open Doors official website described itself as 'a global membership organisation with 25 national bases', including in the USA, Canada, Austria, Poland, Denmark, Finland and France. The website includes such features as 'Prayer Alerts', a 'prayer generator to pray for a specific country or person' and a 'World Watch List 2023 Interactive Map' which comes with 'a series of engaging prayer ideas' to 'help you pray for Christians who are risking it all for Jesus.'²¹

The other major Bible-smuggling blockbuster, also first published in 1967, was *Tortured for Christ* by Richard Wurmbrand (also known as Nicolai Ionescu). *Tortured for Christ* gives a gruesome account of the fourteen years its author, an evangelical convert from Judaism, spent in a Romanian prison, in which he describes being beaten, tortured and otherwise abused, but nonetheless full of the joy of God. After being brought out of Romania by the Norwegian Mission to the Jews and the Hebrew Christian Alliance in 1964, Wurmbrand was granted asylum in the United States where, in 1966, he testified to the US Congress on

¹⁹ The Centre, renamed Keston College, relocated to Oxford and subsequently became the Keston Institute. In 2007, the Keston Institute's archive and library were moved to the Keston Center for Religion, Politics and Society at Baylor College in Waco, Texas. Michael Bourdeaux, who founded the Keston Centre, judged Wurmbrand's 'Voice of the Martyrs' and Joe Bass's 'Underground Evangelism' to be 'prone to the wildest exaggeration and generalisation'; Keston was nevertheless dependent on their financial support. See Michael Bourdeaux, *One Word of Truth: The Cold War Memoir of Michael Bourdeaux and Keston College* (London, 2019), 103, 214–16. See also Julie de Graffenried and Zoe Knox, eds, *Voices of the Voiceless: Religion, Communism and the Keston Archive* (Waco, TX, 2019). Further information about Keston's funding and development was drawn from a conversation by the author on 4 November 2023 with Xenia Dennen, now director of the Keston Institute, who worked with the late Michael Bourdeaux at Keston.

²⁰ Daniel Silliman, 'Died: Brother Andrew, Who Smuggled Bibles into Communist Countries', *Christianity Today*, 27 September 2022, 10.

²¹ See the Open Doors Youth page, online at: <<https://www.opendoors.org>>, accessed 11 January 2022.

the ‘Communist Exploitation of Religion’.²² His testimony, which consisted largely of a plea to Americans patriotically to help Christians behind the Iron Curtain, together with the promotion of his own organizations and forthcoming book, included a dramatic gesture which was captured for the *New York Times*.²³ Before the Senate subcommittee and the press, Wurmbrand took off his shirt to show, in evidence, the knife-wound scars on his own neck, chest and back. Stripped to the waist, he declared: ‘I show you the tortured body of my country, of my fatherland, and of my church.’²⁴ As Melani McAlister has noted, Wurmbrand ‘reprised his famous shirt removal’ a year later, in the film version of *Tortured for Christ*, in which he repeated and amplified his warnings about the persecution of Christians around the world.²⁵

The central message of Wurmbrand’s memoir is that real saints, true believers, genuine followers of Christ, were not to be found in the compromised, liberal and affluent Western denominations, but rather in the so-called ‘underground church’ in the Eastern bloc whose members were risking all for Christ.²⁶ The Bible-smuggling organization which he set up, and which retains his emphasis on physical suffering, continues to report large profits. In its report of 31 December 2022 to the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA), Voice of the Martyrs disclosed \$103,714,450 in annual revenue, mainly from donations.²⁷ It advertises aggressively on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube; and a range of merchandise can be bought through its website, including study packs, the film version

²² *Communist Exploitation of Religion: Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate Eighty-Ninth Congress. Testimony of Rev. Richard Wurmbrand, May 6, 1966* ([Washington, DC], 1982).

²³ The photograph, from the *New York Times* (7 May 1966), is reproduced in McAlister, *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders*, 106.

²⁴ *Communist Exploitation of Religion*, 99. See also the very interesting discussion of this episode in McAlister, *The Kingdom of God*, 105–7.

²⁵ McAlister, *The Kingdom of God*, 105.

²⁶ Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, paperback edn (Orpington, 2009; first publ. 1967), 144–6. This theme became increasingly pronounced in Wurmbrand’s pamphlets, interviews and sermons during the 1980s.

²⁷ See ‘The Voice of the Martyrs: Data for the year ended December 31, 2022, ECFA’, online at: <<https://www.ecfa.org/MemberProfile.aspx?ID=12238>>, accessed 20 January 2022.

of *Tortured for Christ*, tapes, books and 'Bible bags', with the legend: 'This book is illegal in 52 countries'.²⁸

'With the arrival in the West of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand and the publication of Brother Andrew's *God's Smuggler*', recalled Michael Bourdeaux, the Anglican priest who founded Keston College in 1969, 'Bible smuggling became a headline issue in the Christian press.'²⁹ The appeal of joining what was presented as a worldwide crusade, in which the principal weapon was nothing more than the gospel, captured the essence of the missionary impulse in which so many evangelical Christians had been raised. The notion, especially shocking to Protestant sensibilities, that people living in traditionally Christian countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia or East Germany were 'starved' of Bibles, which therefore needed to be supplied to them like so many Red Cross or care packages, carried a simple, electrifying message. The gospel taught that the Good News should be spread to all nations (Mark 13: 10; Mark 16: 15; Matthew 28: 19–20). There were also specifically theological and historical resonances in the English-speaking world where, even today, stirring tales of William Tyndale, Reformation Bible smuggling and Protestant martyrdoms are aimed at young evangelicals.³⁰ The timing was also fortuitous: in the second half of the twentieth century, Eastern Europe was being looked at with fresh eyes, as a new missionary field, at just the time that traditional European missionary and colonial endeavours in Africa and Asia were being compromised by a string of independence and anti-colonial movements which often included anti-Western and anti-missionary feeling. To work on the margins, operating across Cold War borders, was also to recapture the centre ground, to recover traditional missionary endeavour at a time when the secularizing West seemed to evangelical Christians to be losing its way.

²⁸ See the following websites and social media: <<https://www.persecution.com/>>; Facebook: <<https://www.facebook.com/vomusa/>>; Twitter or X: <https://twitter.com/vom_usa>; Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/vom_usa/>; YouTube: <<https://www.youtube.com/user/voiceofthemartyrsusa>>, all accessed 4 June 2022.

²⁹ Bourdeaux, *One Word of Truth*, 214.

³⁰ See, for example, Lori Rich, *William Tyndale: The Smuggler's Flame* (Tain, 2004), part of the Torch Blazers series, online at: <<https://www.christianfocus.com>>, accessed 5 November 2024; 'William Tyndale: Life and Death of the Father of the English Bible' (updated 23 August 2023), Bible Study Tools, online at: <<https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/translator-william-tyndale-strangled-and-burned-11629961.html>>, accessed 5 November 2024; the Reformation Graphic Novel Set, online at: <<https://www.cph.org/reformation-graphic-novel-set>>, accessed 5 November 2024.

Bible smugglers, like CIA operatives, were acutely aware of the effect which the dissemination of works like Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973) could have on public opinion in the West. They did their best to promote their own perceptions of the Eastern bloc as missionary territory ripe for Christian conversion, for example through such blockbusters as Danish Bible smuggler Hans Neerskov's *Mission: Possible* (first published in English translation in 1975) and Sergei Kourdakov's *Forgive me, Natasha* (1973), the conversion story of a KGB officer who relished persecuting Christians until he 'found' God through the heroic example of the young Christian girl he tortured to death.³¹ Books initially brought out by Bible-smuggling organizations, in this case Underground Evangelism, were taken up by evangelical publishers, such as Revell and Lakeland, and turned into bestsellers. The most popular were further exploited in film, study packs and other media suitable for classrooms, prayer-groups and Bible-study camps. To become a smuggler for God was to pursue a path which was, in its own way, as exciting for a young Christian as becoming a hippie, experimenting with drugs or joining in consciousness-raising could be to a non-Christian. As David Babcock, a Wesleyan from Colorado who ended up working for OM in Germany and Austria, later remembered, in 1970, a 'time of radical student movements', he had been 'nineteen – eager, resolved, committed, and young.' Although he was 'not involved in political movements', his life 'would soon be filled with equally radical commitment to Christ and to missions', leading to 'adventure, heartache and an ocean between "home" and my new "home"', and what turned out to be forty-six years of living abroad and working undercover for OM.³² Thanks to the ubiquity of Bible-smuggling memoirs and comic books, which included information about how to contact Bible-smuggling organizations like Open Doors, Voice of the Martyrs, Underground Evangelism or OM, by the 1980s, a stint abroad with a missionary and Bible-smuggling organization was becoming as natural an opportunity for a young Christian from a Bible college or an evangelical church as a

³¹ Sergei Kourdakov, *Forgive Me, Natasha* (Basingstoke, 1973; first paperback edn 1975). On the Danish European Mission, see Boel, 'Bible Smuggling and Human Rights in the Cold War', 263–75.

³² David and Brenda Babcock, *Stones of Remembrance: Mapping God's Faithfulness through 46 Years* (Mosbach, 2015), 13, 71.

gap year with Outward Bound, VSO or the Peace Corps might seem to a student from a Liberal Arts college.

EVANGELICAL ESPIONAGE

Those who took part in the 'secret work' of illegally transporting Christian literature across the Iron Curtain and distributing it to safe houses in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, knew that to leave a paper trail could put both themselves and their contacts at risk. Smugglers were warned by their handlers against bringing any potentially incriminating piece of paper with them on a trip: pockets and vehicles were scoured for receipts, alibis were concocted and rehearsed, maps and lists of contacts' names and addresses committed to memory. The very qualities that made for a successful drop – those which got Bibles and Christian literature to the right contacts without arousing the notice or suspicion of border guards or the secret police – are the same qualities which should have left little or no trail for the historian.

Bible smuggling did leave traces in the historical record, however. When Bible smugglers were caught, they left traces in Communist Ministry of Interior (secret police) files, which characteristically included 'crime scene' photographs, prison mug shots, lists of confiscated materials, photographs and detailed descriptions of hiding places, reports of police interrogations, witness testimony and formal trial proceedings.³³ Sometimes, Bible smugglers were filmed, together with their captured loads of contraband literature, for newsreels and propaganda films trumpeting the work of the Communist authorities in protecting the Socialist commonwealth from the perfidious methods of the West.

Occasionally, high-profile cases hit the press. One of the most celebrated cases of a Western Bible smuggler being caught and tried by the Communist authorities in the East was that of David Hathaway, an evangelical pastor from Yorkshire who became involved with

³³ The present study draws on unpublished materials from Czechoslovak, Romanian, Hungarian and Lithuanian Ministry of Interior archives, and from the Keston archives held at Baylor College in Waco, Texas. For those without easy access to secret police archives, sample photographs of Bible-smuggling busts can also be seen online, as part of the 'Hidden Galleries' project, at: <<http://hiddengalleries.eu>>, accessed 27 May 2022. Another helpful resource is de Graffenried and Knox, eds, *Voices of the Voiceless*.

Joe Bass's Underground Evangelism in the early 1960s and worked as a Bible smuggler from 1961 to 1972, during which time he claims to have delivered some 150,000 copies. Hathaway used his Crusader Tours company, which advertised trips to the Holy Land, as a cover for a Bible-smuggling operation into Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. On 21 June 1972, he was caught at the Czechoslovak border with Germany at Rozvadov with nearly 3,000 concealed Bibles, together with religious literature deemed by the authorities to be seditious.³⁴ His autobiographical memoir *Czech-Mate* (1974) describes his arrest, trial and imprisonment in Czechoslovakia, together with the campaign mounted by his wife, evangelical circles, the British press and, finally, Parliament, to press for his early release from a five-year prison sentence.³⁵ Hathaway, whose case came to the attention of the British Cabinet, was brought home in 1973, after serving less than a year of his sentence, through the intervention of the then opposition leader and former prime minister, Harold Wilson. The affair was noted with interest by the US Embassy in Prague and thoroughly monitored by the Czechoslovak secret police, the StB, whose main file runs to over 300 pages and includes photographs, lists, interrogation reports and witness statements from each of the passengers on his tour bus.³⁶

Other cases were kept out of the public eye, but can be reconstructed through secret police archives, unpublished documents and the memories of former Bible smugglers, six of whom have been interviewed, repeatedly and at length, for the present study.³⁷

³⁴ David Hathaway, *Czech-Mate* (London, 1974), 8–9.

³⁵ See also 'Czechoslovakia (Rev David Hathaway)', HC Deb., 29 January 1973 (vol. 849, cols 938–9) online at: <<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1973-01-29>>, accessed 6 December 2021.

³⁶ Plzeň, Czech Republic, Archiv bezpečnostních složek [Ministry of Interior Archive], Fond V-Plzeň, sig. V-8558, folder entitled 'Plzeň David Gordon Hathaway'. Hathaway was charged, convicted and sentenced under Czechoslovak Law 140 (29 November 1961). See 140 trestní zákon (29. listopadu 1961) [Criminal Law 140 (29 November 1961)], *Sbírka zákonů Československé socialistické republiky* [Collection of Laws of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic] 65 (8 December 1961), 485–508. Compare also the collection of newspaper clippings about the case in Waco, TX, Baylor College, The Keston Archive, Czechoslovak Subject Files 1946–1989, Box 1, Folder 5 (Individuals: Hathaway, David); Kew, TNA, FCO 28/1765, 'Detention of British Subjects in Czechoslovakia: Reverend David Hathaway (1 January 1972–31 December 1972); and FCO 28/2226 'Detention and Release of British Subject, Reverend David Hathaway, in Czechoslovakia' (1 January 1973–31 December 1973).

³⁷ The Bible smugglers interviewed, five men and one woman, were of various nationalities (American, Canadian, Czech, English, Finnish) and included volunteers, team leaders,

These interviews with Bible smugglers, which were undertaken by the present author in 2022, constitute the first, and to date only, such interviews to have been conducted by any scholar. The resulting collection of interviews, which were recorded, covers the recollections of workers, at all levels, with responsibility for different aspects of OM. Most had never before discussed their involvement in this secret work, and spoke on the understanding that their identities would not be revealed. The interview technique was to begin with open-ended, standardized questions (such as to ask for a brief biography, including nationality, schooling, parents' occupation, religious upbringing, political outlook, conversion experience, first involvement with Bible smuggling), and to follow up, in subsequent interviews, with more targeted, and sometimes probing, questions about smuggling techniques, institutional conventions, theological rationale, motivations, expectations, and other aspects of the work. Cross-checking, with written records, was undertaken wherever possible. Some interviewees provided additional proof, such as photographs, documents and videos.

In early 1987, according to Czechoslovak secret police reports, guards at the Czechoslovak-West German border control station at Strážný in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic began to notice a pattern: a spate of Ford camper-vans, in which people of various citizenships travelled, always in twos or in threes.³⁸ The vehicles, they observed, had Swiss, British or Dutch registration plates and were claimed to be borrowed from friends rather than owned by those who drove them. There were other common features. Drivers and passengers had their visas issued in Vienna. They gave as their temporary address in Czechoslovakia a campsite or a private residence, but never a hotel. They usually left the territory of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic within forty-eight hours, thus avoiding the need to register with the police.

mechanics, long-distance lorry drivers and pastors working for OM. Some were married and some unmarried; most were in their 70s at the time of interview. All interviews were conducted by the present author and were recorded, in person or via Zoom, between 2 February 2022 and 28 February 2023.

³⁸ Adolf Sebera, 'Brief Summary of the Findings: Discovery of a Dead Space (Compartment) in a Vehicle which traveled [*sic*] Canadian Citizen Edward BUKOWSKI and American Citizen Hans KOEBELE, across the Strážný Department of Passport Control (DPC) – Report', unpublished translation of unpublished report, dated 24 February 1987. Interviewee's private collection.

On 2 February 1987, a beige camper-van, driven by a Canadian citizen who was accompanied by an American, pulled into Strážný station for the customary customs declaration, passport check and compulsory currency exchange. The fact that it fitted the observed pattern – an international crew of two or three, the vehicle not owned by either the driver or the passenger, the Czechoslovak visas issued in Vienna – raised the alarm. Using the excuse of customs regulations, the border guards asked the two foreigners to unload their luggage for inspection. When nothing was found, it was decided to move the van to the back of the station, away from West German view, for a more thorough search.

The vehicle inspection started with the engine, which was clear. Next, the ceiling was unscrewed, and the upholstery removed. The dashboard and areas around the driver's and passengers' seats were searched. Finally, the living area, with its fridge, gas cooker with a pressurized gas bottle, folding table, two benches and cabinets with drawers, was examined.³⁹ The drawers in the cabinets could not be completely removed because they had a stop inside. When the officers got out their tape measures, they found that there was discrepancy of between 15 and 20 cm between the side of the vehicle and the end of the inserted drawers. This suggested that there must be a double wall, concealing what they referred to as a 'dead space'. Guards and police officers applied themselves to the pillars of the door frame, at the bottom of which they found a vent hole. Shining a torch into the vent hole showed the area, which was about 20 cm deep, to be empty. One of the officers noticed further vent holes at the top which appeared to be blocked: when these were poked with a screwdriver, polystyrene pieces fell out. Since it seemed odd that vent holes should be blocked, the officer unscrewed the door jam on the driver's side, revealing three more screw holes. Shining a light into these holes, the spines and sheets of thin booklets wrapped in plastic could plainly be seen.⁴⁰

'Within a few minutes', the driver afterwards reported to his superiors at OM, 'each of the seven guards were looking down the shaft with a flashlight, and they were very excited with the discovery of some literature.'⁴¹ The foreigners were ordered into the building,

³⁹ Sebera, 'Brief Summary of the Findings', fol. 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid., fol. 4.

⁴¹ Hans Koebele, 'Trip #287H- Strážný, ČSSR' (27 February 1987), unpublished typescript report, fol. 2. Author's private collection.

where they were taken separately for questioning. As one of the guards took notes, a different guard – one who spoke English – asked questions such as: “What kind of books are they?” “Where did you meet this man?” “Who is the owner of the vehicle?”. ‘I gave him a 45-second Gospel presentation’, the American passenger explained in his written report for the OM leadership, ‘and then two other guards came in. He told the guards what I had just said, and they simply laughed.’⁴²

Next, the combined expertise of border and passport control was brought to bear on the Canadian driver, by now under armed guard, who was asked several times whether he knew how to open the hidden space in the camper-van. The police report states that he replied that he ‘wouldn’t open it: let the guards figure it out for themselves’. In the end, the secret compartment was forced open, damaging the opening mechanism and revealing a cache of Christian literature, calendars and cassette tapes. The smugglers were handcuffed and taken into custody. The camper-van, with its contraband, was sent to a specialist unit in České Budějovice, where the prisoners were also sent for interrogation by the secret police.⁴³ Full details of the case, including a series of photographs showing the stages of opening the hidden compartment, were reported to state security, the Ministry of Interior, the intelligence services, border patrol, terrain border patrol, state border surveillance, České Budějovice headquarters and the Sušice border guard station.⁴⁴ A preliminary police report suggested that the van was part of a smuggling ring, run from Vienna, involving ‘the organized transportation of objectionable literature to the ČSSR [Czechoslovak Socialist Republic]’ and ‘other socialist countries’, mainly using paid students as mules.⁴⁵ This information, it judged, was of interest to the rest of the Warsaw Pact.

At the same time that the Communist authorities in Czechoslovakia were building up a picture of OM’s smuggling ring based in Vienna, the team members at OM, whose European centre was indeed

⁴² Ibid., fol. 2.

⁴³ Sebera, ‘Brief Summary of the Findings’, fol. 5.

⁴⁴ Samples of this sort of classic police coverage can be viewed via the ‘Hidden Galleries’ project, online at: <<http://hiddengalleries.co>>, accessed 27 May 2022. See also the book arising from this project: James Kapaló and Tatiana Vagramenko, eds, *Hidden Galleries: Material Religion in the Secret Police Archives in Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon, 2021).

⁴⁵ Sebera, ‘Brief Summary of the Findings’, fol. 5.

based in Vienna (but with specialist camps, garages and workshops dotted across Austria, West Germany, the UK and Scandinavia), were gathering intelligence of their own. Its handbook for new recruits, known simply as 'The Rules', explained, in the section entitled 'What to do when you return to Wien if you have been caught': 'We do NEED to have accurate information about what happened in order to assess the situation'.⁴⁶ Having returned from a drop, and only once they were certain of not being followed, smugglers were to report either to a team leader or the travel coordinator. Next, they would be given a 'verbal debriefing', which might be taped. The recruit would be told which details could not be shared, even within the organization, for security reasons. The returnee would then be isolated from the rest of the team until he or she had written a full report of the trip, including details of exactly what had happened at the border, during the arrest and interrogation, and what the cell conditions were like in the prisons where they had been held.⁴⁷ It was deemed especially important for the team leadership to glean information about 'any special tools [or] equipment' which had been used by the authorities to detect or open secret hiding-places; to find out 'what information' they knew about OM; and to bring to light 'any mistakes in the planning'. Only by receiving this constant stream of intelligence, and updating its methods accordingly, could OM expect to continue to outwit the Communist authorities and transport Bibles and religious literature to their intended recipients behind the Iron Curtain.

Working for a Bible-smuggling organization in the 1970s and 1980s in many ways resembled working for the intelligence services. Those who were recruited to smuggle contraband religious literature from West to East, in what were euphemistically known as 'trips across the bridge', were trained never to carry a name, address, or anything which would incriminate themselves, local believers, or the OM leadership. All addresses and information about safe houses and dead-letter drops were to be encoded and memorized. If too difficult to remember, they were written on little slips of paper which could be easily swallowed. 'Trippers', as smugglers were known within the organization, were never to leave a country between 21:00 and 08:00 hours, since this could arouse suspicion, and

⁴⁶ 'Introduction: What to do when you return to Wien if you have been caught', *The Rules*, fol. 1. This typed document is unpublished, unpaginated and undated, and was made available to the author by a former member of OM who wishes to remain anonymous.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, fols 1–2.

never to enter a Communist country after 21:00 hours local time. They were to refer to vehicles by code-names, and to themselves and others in the team by pseudonyms.⁴⁸ When seeking to communicate across the many different languages which might be used in a single trip – for example, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Ukrainian and Russian – the Bible, which was conveniently available in all languages, was sometimes used as a key to encrypt and decipher coded messages.⁴⁹

Addresses for illicit Bible and literature drops were normally learned by heart. Target countries were referred to only by code-names. ‘When you go to Paul’, read the relevant instructions, ‘you are to stay at least 48 hours. In Steve, stay at least 3 nights. In Mannfred, stay at least 4 nights (or 5 days). When you go to Eric, stay at least 2 nights. Staying this long in Eric means that you will need to register with the police’.⁵⁰ Host contacts were not told the details of the trippers’ plans, or even the month or year in which to expect a cache of Christian literature mysteriously to appear in a barn, field or vacant lot. In general, everyone was given ‘as little information as possible, to allow them plausible deniability, and to protect the network and operations’; information was to be given out on a strictly ‘need to know’ basis.⁵¹

Cover stories were concocted, memorized and rehearsed in Vienna before ‘crossing the bridge’. ‘Trippers’ were drilled to ‘know the name of two or three major cities’ and ‘specific places, such as a mountain area or a popular lake’ so that, if ‘asked at the bridge’ (that is, the border), they could ‘name one quickly without fumbling around’. Twenty-five kilometres before arriving at a border, trippers were required to ‘sanitize’ the vehicle, which meant ‘removing and destroying any receipts that could link them to their home base location, or to the location of their travel and contacts.’⁵² The Rules also required that, upon arrival in the target country, no vehicle be parked within 500 metres of a contact

⁴⁸ Schneider, ‘Through the Seams of the Iron Curtain’, fols 46–7.

⁴⁹ Unpublished interviews by the author with a former Team Member of OM (3 February 2022; 10 February 2022; 15 March 2022).

⁵⁰ Point 19, ‘Crossing the Bridge’, *The Rules*.

⁵¹ Interviews by the author with a former Team Member of OM (3 February 2022; 10 February 2022; 15 March 2022). See also Schneider, ‘Through the Seams of the Iron Curtain’, 39; Thomas Henderson, *Tripping: A True Story of Bible Smugglers and How the East German Stasi Tried to Stop Them*, 3rd edn (n.pl. [USA], 2020; first publ. 2016), 36, 62; Genovieva Sfatcu Beattie, with Stephen Beattie, *Caught with Bibles: A True Story from Communist Romania* (Sisters, OR, 2009), 62–3. See also Babcock and Babcock, *Stones of Remembrance*, 192.

⁵² Henderson, *Tripping*, 13; Schneider, ‘Through the Seams of the Iron Curtain’, 44.

address. On the return trip, the vehicle was not to stop again for any reason until it was at least 50 kilometres away from the drop point.⁵³ On exiting the country, driver and passengers were to be 'ready with an excuse, if asked' as to why they had not gone to whichever 'particular place' they had said, on entry, that they intended to visit.⁵⁴

Like intelligence officers, Bible students and pastors who signed up for the Bible-smuggling way of life were taught not to attract attention to themselves. Drivers and passengers whose mission was to deliver Bibles were instructed to dress 'neatly' and to look 'clean-cut and unobjectionable', with short hair and unmemorable clothes. 'It might be good,' suggested the Rules, 'if one person is seated in the back making sandwiches, sewing or involved in some other activity while at the bridge. This may distract from the vehicle'.⁵⁵ Other calculated distractions included having a pretty young woman as a passenger, changing a baby's nappy, or creating a chaotic family scene just as the border was reached.

To turn a law-abiding Christian into a smuggler, intelligence operative or secret agent was not straightforward. One of the first hurdles to be overcome was the natural reticence of believers to lie, dissemble or break the law. 'Before you go', advised the leadership, 'make sure you have all spiritual doubts settled.' A small doubt, they cautioned, 'will mushroom in the hours of waiting that you will have to do' if arrested or imprisoned.⁵⁶ Long-distance drives, across multiple border checks, could be hard on a tripper's nerves: groups were picked partly for their ability to keep calm under pressure. Training on how to handle interrogations included the advice: 'Give the appearance that you are naïve and that you want to be as co-operative as you can'; but also: 'be determined in your own mind that you are not going to tell them anything they cannot obtain from your passport and visa'.⁵⁷ Special care had to be taken to train students from Bible colleges, raised to tell the truth, to throw border guards and secret police off the scent. If asked

⁵³ Henderson, *Tripping*, 147; Schneider, 'Through the Seams of the Iron Curtain', 44; Lloyd Sparks, *Detour: My Brief but Amusing Career as a Bible Smuggler* (Bloomington, IN, 2011), 140–4, 146–7.

⁵⁴ Point 16, 'Crossing the Bridge', *The Rules*.

⁵⁵ Point 11, 'Crossing the Bridge', *The Rules*.

⁵⁶ Item 2, 'Thoughts on Imprisonment', *The Rules*. See also Babcock, 'The Ethics of Smuggling' in idem, *Stones of Remembrance*, 75–9; Henderson, 'A Word from the Author', in idem, *Tripping*, 5–7.

⁵⁷ Item 4, 'Helpful Things to Remember', *The Rules*.

“Do you have religious literature with you?” you are to answer “No”, instructed the Rules. ‘The Bible is not merely religious literature, it is the living word of God. Remember, concealment of the truth is not lying.’⁵⁸ Young trippers setting out to ‘cross the bridge’ were further reminded: ‘you don’t have to say the whole truth. For example, if it is your intention to go to Ostend, you can say you were going to Brussels, since you must pass through Brussels on your way to Ostend’. Or, again, ‘Ask yourself the real meaning of the words they use. For example, “Do you know Mr Y?” Psychologists say that it takes about seven years to really get to know a person. Sometimes you can truthfully answer “No”.’⁵⁹ Such tricks were calculated to make trippers appear calm and assured, helping to make their cover stories more plausible to the border police.

Before leaving to cross the bridge, and as part of their overall preparation, trippers were expected to ‘realize and come to terms’ with the ‘fact that they could be imprisoned in one of the countries they travelled to’. They were therefore subjected to training of various kinds, including physical fitness, simulated interrogations, and what one team leader whom I interviewed referred to obliquely as ‘pressure’.⁶⁰ It was well understood by handlers that worry about families at home could tempt otherwise steadfast smugglers to talk. Trippers were therefore required to write an ‘Emergency Letter’ to be delivered to their parents in case of arrest. ‘If your parents are too emotional’, ran the instructions, ‘you may choose to write another relative ... If you are a regular tripper, you may also want to write a letter to a close Christian friend with whom you have shared about the work. Immediately upon receiving this letter, they would know to start praying for you.’⁶¹ In the emergency letter left for family, which the Rules stated could not be shown to a Western consular officer or journalist until two weeks after a tripper had failed to return from a Communist country, it was to be clearly stated that ‘you are not with O.M. or ANY OTHER ORGANIZATION. Make it clear that this trip was your own idea.’⁶² The emergency letter was also required to include a clause stating that it was the tripper’s wish to be represented by the organization’s legal team, rather than by a different

⁵⁸ Item 14, ‘Crossing the Bridge’, *The Rules*.

⁵⁹ Items 12 and 14, ‘Interrogation’, *The Rules*.

⁶⁰ Interviews by the author with a former Team Member of OM (3 February 2022; 10 February 2022; 15 March 2022). See also Henderson, *Tripping*, 44.

⁶¹ Point 3, ‘Interrogation Preparation’, *The Rules*.

⁶² Point 5, ‘Interrogation Preparation’, *The Rules*.

lawyer or their country's own consular services.⁶³ Western consular staff were to be told exactly the same cover story as the one concocted for the Communist authorities. This detail is significant: it means that both honesty and allegiance to one's own country were to be sacrificed to what was evidently perceived to be a higher good, the missionary task of saving souls. In this respect, Bible smuggling needs to be sharply distinguished from state-sponsored book smuggling, such as that undertaken by the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies.

As with the intelligence services, the priority at OM was to protect the organization, rather than the individual. The most important thing for trippers to remember, if caught and questioned, was to deny the very existence of the organization which had sent them. The second most important thing was to keep silent about the secret mechanisms – 'gizmos' as OM called them – which opened and closed hidden spaces for concealing Bibles, pamphlets, hymn books, cassette tapes, microfiche, rolls of film, parts of printing presses, medicines and other illicit materials, such as ink for photocopiers. 'Whatever answer you give', insisted the Rules, 'it must not betray the vehicle'.⁶⁴

It is easy to see why the OM leadership was so concerned to protect its specially doctored vehicles. Smuggling techniques, which mostly made use of false bottoms, double walls and camouflage, grew increasingly sophisticated over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. Some audaciously constructed camper-van and lorry shells – especially those with complex opening mechanisms – could take months, even years, to design, test and build; and it could take just as long to raise the money to pay for them. Back in the 1960s, simple items reminiscent of contemporary James Bond films had been used: gas cannisters adjusted so that the amount of propane was reduced, leaving space for secreting books and pamphlets; oil drums given a false bottom, leaving room for paper to fill the bottom quarter, while oil filled the remaining three-quarters. Private Bible-smuggling archives, one housed in Sweden and another in the Czech Republic, contain common personal objects, such as a handbag, briefcase or thermos flask, provided with secret compartments suitable for carrying a microfiche or small machine parts.⁶⁵ These simple adaptations in

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Item 13, 'Crossing the Bridge', *The Rules*.

⁶⁵ See, for example, the *Ljus i Öster* [Light in the East] secret archive kept in Stockholm, Sweden, which holds photographs of a variety of objects which were used for smuggling.

some cases enabled entire printing presses to be smuggled, piece by piece, and reassembled on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Specially tailored underclothes, rather like long johns but with multiple hidden pockets, could be worn for concealing Bibles, or bags of printer ink, under outer clothes and an overcoat.⁶⁶

By the 1980s, far more elaborate smuggling vehicles were being designed and purpose-built by OM in specialist garages: for example, entire lorries encased in a false outer shell began operating out of Finland. To give some idea of scale: one large Ford transit van, outfitted by the team with a false floor and wall compartment, and operated by an electronic opening mechanism, was able to conceal and transport 1,400 Bibles.⁶⁷ This compares very favourably with the number of illicit books that the CIA was able to smuggle into the Eastern bloc, even at the height of its Book Distribution Programme, which ran from 1956 to 1991. In a recent study, Alfred Reisch suggests that in 1968, 'the best year' for the secret Cold War Book Distribution Programme, a total of some 328,000 books were distributed to 'individuals and institutions' across the Eastern bloc.⁶⁸ This was roughly equivalent to 234 Ford vanloads per year. OM had a range of vehicles – some of them able to carry much larger loads than the Ford – at their disposal: these included not only cars, vans and camper-vans, but also articulated lorries and vast, ocean-going ships. Moreover, OM was just one Bible-smuggling organization amongst many. The Bible-smuggling organization Open Doors, for example, claimed to have delivered 'a million' Bibles to China, by barge and tugboat, in just one night in 1981 in an international operation code-named 'Project Pearl'.⁶⁹

Some are shown in a Finnish retrospective article by a former smuggler: Esko Mäki-Soini, 'Rekkamiehen muistoja matkan varrelta' ['A Trucker's Memories Along the Way'] (4 January 2018), online at: <<http://suuressamukana.fi/rekkamiehen-muistoja-matkan-varrelta/>>, accessed 20 April 2022.

⁶⁶ One such set is displayed in a glass case at the Keston Institute, Keston Center, Baylor College, Waco, TX.

⁶⁷ Henderson, *Tripping*, 13–22, as summarized in Schneider, 'Through the Seams of the Iron Curtain', 40.

⁶⁸ Alfred Reisch, *Hot Books in the Cold War: The CIA-funded Secret Western Book Distribution Program behind the Iron Curtain* (Budapest, 2013), 266.

⁶⁹ Brother David, with Dan Wooding and Sara Bruce, *God's Smuggler to China* (London, Sydney, Auckland and Toronto, 1981), 310, 322–3. See also 'Project Pearl', online at: <<https://www.billionbibles.com/china/project-pearl.html>>, accessed 7 November 2024;

Operation Mobilisation (OM), though staffed by amateurs and funded through voluntary donations, appears to have been rather more adept at breaching the Iron Curtain than the USA's lavishly funded Central Intelligence Agency. It was certainly just as creative: indeed, it is not always clear which organization drew inspiration from the other.⁷⁰ Driving instructions for Bible drops organized by OM included a complicated system of reconnaissance, undertaken up to a year, or even two years, before the final drop at a safe house. Methods used by the team to transport Bibles into Communist countries included floating large plastic rubbish bags filled with Christian literature down an Albanian river; sending pamphlet-balloons across the Iron Curtain (a trick also used by the CIA); anchoring boats – and, eventually, large ocean-going sea liners – offshore from which lifeboats could be launched or to which locals discretely come aboard.⁷¹ One of the large ships, *Logos*, in use from 1970 to 1988, was joined by a second ocean-going ship, *Doulos*, from 1977; later, *Logos II*, *Logos Hope* and *Doulos Hope* were added to the fleet.⁷² Another tactic was to create ever smaller, miniature Bibles of durable, heat-resistant plastic. Not only could a larger number of 'Bible units', as OM referred to them, be crammed into every available space on board a specially adapted vehicle; but the miniature Gospels were small enough to be concealed in a hand and tough enough to withstand being hidden in a toilet or a

and Brother David with Paul Hattaway, *Project Pearl* (Oxford and Grand Rapids, MI, 2007).

⁷⁰ On the Cold War as a religious or 'spiritual' war, together with the use of Christian propaganda, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, as official Western strategies to weaken and discredit the Eastern bloc, see, for example, Uta Balbier, *Altar Call in Europe: Billy Graham, Mass Evangelism and the Cold-War West* (New York, 2022); Michael Graziano, *Errand into the Wilderness of Mirrors: Religion and the History of the CIA* (Chicago, IL, 2021); Jonathan Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford, 2011); Dianne Kirby, ed., *Religion and the Cold War* (Houndmills, 2003); Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

⁷¹ The method of sending balloons across the Iron Curtain containing pamphlets or leaflets was also used by the CIA, for example in Hungary in 1956 in the weeks preceding the 'uprising' or 'revolution' in Budapest: see 'Meeting at the White House (7 November 1956)', as cited in US State Department, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957*, 25; *Eastern Europe* (Washington, DC, 1990), 423 n. 177.

⁷² See the interview by the present author with a former volunteer with OM (10 August 2022) about life on the ship and her motives for joining. Author's private archive. Details of OM's 'ship ministry' in 2024 can be viewed online at: <<https://www.om.org/eng/ships/the-ships>>, accessed 22 January 2024.

mug of hot coffee.⁷³ Small wonder that, as early as 1973, the Stasi had set up at least three counter-smuggling operations – code-named ‘Apostle’, ‘Transport’ and ‘Container’ – to deal with the seven Bible-smuggling channels which they had identified operating in East Germany alone.⁷⁴ After the Helsinki Final Act (1975), which achieved wide agreement on security and human rights, the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II (1978) and the rise of the Solidarity movement (1980), the Romanian *Securitate*, Czechoslovak *StB*, East German Stasi, and Hungarian *Államvédelmi Hatóság* or ÁVH, were all increasingly preoccupied with monitoring, and seeking to infiltrate, covert operations run by book smugglers, including those run by what they referred to as Bible-smuggling ‘cults’.⁷⁵

CHRISTIAN OUTLAWS

Bible-smuggling organizations operating in Europe in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s created what was in effect a shadow Christian intelligence and espionage service. This distinctively Bible-centred intelligence agency, however, worked for no state. It did not even work for any particular church or denomination: a smuggler’s home church was often just as much in the dark about its member’s secret activities as anyone else. Bible-smuggling organizations like Open Doors, Underground Evangelism, Voice of the Martyrs and Operation Mobilisation set their own priorities: to transport Bibles and religious literature across the Iron Curtain and into the hands of scattered communities of marginalized Christians. They made their own rules and had their own ethical codes. These included finding it

⁷³ Schneider, ‘Through the Seams of the Iron Curtain’, 54. This was confirmed in interviews by the author with a former smuggler and mechanic for OM (19 April 2022; 22 April 2022; 6 May 2022; 17 May 2022; 23 May 2022); a sample miniature Bible was sent to the author by that interviewee’s wife, and is now held in the author’s private archive.

⁷⁴ Schneider, ‘Through the Seams of the Iron Curtain’, 57.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Bucharest, Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității [National Council for the Study of Security Archives; hereafter: CNSAS], Ministerul de Interne [Ministry of Interior], 11195, Fond Documentar, Informări și rapoarte promovate în anii 1971, 1974, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981 linia/problemei ‘CULTE-SECTE’ [Documentation Collection, Information and Reports from the years 1971, 1974, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981 concerning/problem ‘CULTS-SECTS’], D 012389, vol. 1, fols 1–46. On the wider context, see, for example, Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe and Czech Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Peter Sarros, *U.S.-Vatican Relations, 1975–1980: A Diplomatic Study* (Notre Dame, IN, 2020).

morally acceptable to mislead not only Communist authorities in states which were hostile to missionary work, but also their own governments in the West, which did not restrict the printing or dissemination of Bibles and religious tracts. Bible smugglers showed equal disregard for international rules and conventions. It was not only in the Communist 'Eastern bloc' but also in the 'free world' that customs declaration forms were required to be filled out, visa regulations adhered to, passports and vehicle registration documents checked. Consular officers from the Bible smugglers' countries of origin often found themselves forced to agree with the Communist authorities that their own compatriots had broken the laws or ignored the customs of the state they were visiting.⁷⁶ Bible smugglers, in short, lived on the edge and were a law unto themselves.

The people Bible-smuggling organizations recognized as their own were Christians of a certain disposition, which we might broadly describe as 'evangelical' in the stress they placed on the importance of conversion, atoning grace through the crucifixion, the need to live by and spread the Good News, and the primacy of the Bible.⁷⁷ We might also consider them 'fundamentalist' in the weight they put on the precise wording of the gospel. This spiritual outlook had little to do with nationality. The mental maps which Bible smugglers had in their heads were not the standard geopolitical maps to be found in an atlas. Indeed, the borders which were shown on published maps were the very ones which smugglers made it their business to subvert. The Bible smugglers' view of the world more closely resembled that of the earliest days of the church, when essentially the whole world was hostile to Christianity, with just a few pockets of believers, scattered here and there, keeping the flame alive. In their heroism, and sometimes martyrdom, Bible smugglers could feel themselves to be preserving the faith, protecting the truth, passing on revelation as transmitted from the earliest Christians. This sense of kinship with the apostles could sometimes be quite literal. Richard Wurmbrand, for example, who worked for Underground Evangelism before setting up his own series of missionary organizations

⁷⁶ In the Hathaway case, for example, the British Consul in Prague agreed that Hathaway had broken Czechoslovak law and would need to serve the sentence meted out by the court. See Prague, Ministry of Interior Archive, Archiv bezpečnostních složek [Security Services Archive], Fond V/Plzeň, V-8558, 'Plzeň, David Gordon Hathaway' for interrogation, court prosecution and related records. See also David Hathaway, *Czech-Mate* (London, 1974).

⁷⁷ See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 2–17.

to the 'Communist world', claimed that it was only after his experiences in the 'secret church' that he was able to 'understand texts of the Bible' which had previously passed him by. Formerly, he had not been clear as to 'why it is written in the Bible that a man named Simon was called Peter. Simeon was called Niger and so on. Everyone is called other than his mother called him'. In light of his own experience, he now understood the extensive use of nicknames in the New Testament to be code-names used by the apostles to avoid blowing each other's cover. As he explained in his testimony to the US Senate subcommittee on Communism and religion in 1966: "In every village," ... he too, "was called by another name. I was called Valentin, Georgescu, Ruben. In every village I had another name, and so I could preach."⁷⁸ The same close reading of the Bible in light of his new experiences also made clear to him that Jesus, too, had used techniques of espionage such as dead-letter drops. As Wurmbrand explained:

I did not understand in earlier times why Jesus, when He wishes to have the last supper, said: 'Go in[to] town and you will see a man with a pitcher and go after him and where he enters prepare the supper.' Why does he not give an address, a number and a street? Now we know it when we make secret prayer meetings. We never give the address. We don't know if that man is not the informer of the secret police. We tell the man to wait in a public garden or somewhere, and one with a flower here, or with a necktie passes, go after him. We don't introduce ourselves to each other, and if somebody asks the name of the other one, we know that he is the informer of the secret police. And so we have developed a technique of secret church work.⁷⁹

To Bible smugglers, the existential struggle of the twentieth century was not over whether the USA or the Soviet Union, NATO or the Warsaw Pact, would 'win' the Cold War, but rather whether men and women, wherever they lived and however they had been raised, would choose to follow God or Satan.⁸⁰ In this sense, Bible smugglers were levellers, judging Western materialism to be as empty as Communist atheism. Bible-smuggling organizations took no heed of official Western policies such as *détente*; they were equally unmoved by the Soviet policy

⁷⁸ *Communist Exploitation of Religion*, 3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 3–4.

⁸⁰ Crucial to this perspective was Billy Graham's essay on communism: Billy Graham, 'Satan's Religion', *American Mercury* 79 (1954), 41–6, at 41–3.

of *perestroika* ('restructuring') under Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Their own shifts in missionary priorities, methods and approach were determined behind closed doors, without regard to the diplomatic niceties or the political goals even of their own governments, let alone those of the declared enemies of God.

It will have been noticed that Bible-smuggling organizations, which linked like-minded Christians across international and political boundaries, had many qualities which we might associate with a cult. The intensity of commitment, the secrecy and the separation from ordinary society all point in that direction. However, although Bible smugglers, like spies, sought to make themselves invisible and their covert operations undetectable, they also needed publicity to raise money, attract recruits and to protect their secret missions. Furthermore, however marginal they might have seemed to outsiders, their own sense of themselves was as fully and deeply Christian, intrinsically part of a wider apostolic, Christian and Protestant tradition spanning centuries.

Western Bible smugglers saw themselves as bringing the light of the gospel to places of darkness. To them, the struggle was ideological and spiritual, not material. In contrast, evidence from the secret police archives suggests that the threat which Communist regimes perceived to come from Bible smuggling was not so much spiritual or even ideological, but rather political. Communist regimes, Western assumptions notwithstanding, did not seem to fear penetration of ideas per se; at any rate, it was not the gospel of Jesus Christ which made them tremble. What the Communist authorities went to extraordinary lengths to seek to prevent, contain and destroy was rather the creation of rival structures, parallel channels of communication, and effective networks for the distribution of goods and services. When Bible smugglers were caught, it was not their Christian literature which preoccupied border guards and the secret police so much as the mechanisms used to conceal it. Communist police, in short, were not so much concerned about the importation of Bibles as by the way they were concealed, imported and distributed.⁸¹

⁸¹ See, for example, CNSAS, Ministerul de Interne [Ministry of Interior], 11195, Fond Documentar, Informări și rapoarte promovate în anii 1971, 1974, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981 linia/problemei 'CULTE-SECTE' [Documentation Collection, Information and Reports from the years 1971, 1974, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981 concerning/problem 'CULTS-SECTS'], D 012389, vol. 1, fols 1–46.

CONCLUSION

Bible smuggling was predicated on the idea that Communist-controlled East-Central Europe was a territory 'starved' of Bibles and, by implication, knowledge of Christ. This increasingly widespread perception led to the creation of a secret Cold War army of Protestant missionaries, rugged individuals whose sense of mission to convert the world was not limited by state borders, denominational boundaries or even conventional Christian morality. The fact that Bible-smuggling networks criss-crossed Cold War Europe suggests that the Iron Curtain was considerably more porous than is popularly believed.⁸² As intelligence-gathering institutions, Bible-smuggling organizations like Open Doors, Underground Evangelism, Voice of Martyrs and Operation Mobilisation played a central role in discovering and publicizing conditions in Communist prisons, the existence of underground churches in formally Communist countries, and high-profile cases of Communist conversions to Christianity. In so doing, they influenced public opinion, and sometimes even foreign policy, in the West.

Bible smuggling was arguably more about perception than reality. Smugglers took part in a cosmic drama in which they acted out their beliefs that Christianity was under existential threat; and sought to persuade the world of that perception. Although the phrase 'the culture wars' has only come to prominence in the anglophone world relatively recently, the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s can, in many ways, be seen as a series of victories for the Liberal-left over traditional Christian attitudes towards sexuality, gender, the family and other emotive topics. The so-called 'fall' of Communism in Europe in 1989 was a decisive moment. For some Bible smugglers, it was devastating: almost overnight, their life's work was made irrelevant.⁸³ Others managed to weather the storm, turning to China, North Korea or the Middle East as places to target with Bibles. In the East, contacts with the West continued, not only among the

⁸² Specialists are already aware. See, for example, van Dongen, Roulin and Scott Smith, eds, *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War*; Simo Mikkonen and Pia Koivunen, eds, *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe*, rev. edn (New York and Oxford, 2018; first publ. 2015).

⁸³ Gouverneur, 'Underground Evangelism', 83; interviews by the author with a former smuggler and mechanic for OM (19 April 2022; 22 April 2022; 6 May 2022; 17 May 2022; 23 May 2022). Recording in author's private archive.

high-profile dissident groups who were to come to power after the anti-Communist revolutions in 1989/90, but also in the minority Protestant circles which were scattered across Central and Eastern Europe, and were disproportionately influential in seeking to discredit, and eventually overthrow, the Communist regimes.⁸⁴ This may help to explain why Pentecostals, Baptists and other evangelical groups were often at the forefront of religious revival in the 1990s: these were groups whose contacts were already in place, and which did not have to shake off accusations of collaboration or compromise with the previous regime.

Bible smuggling today remains a tried and tested method to raise funds, galvanize followers and missionize to Christians living under hostile regimes. Seen as marginal, even laughable, by those on the liberal side of the culture wars, on the evangelical side, Bible smugglers remain central to heroic narratives of Christian missionary endeavour. For those who made a career out of Bible smuggling across Europe in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s, the political Cold War may have ended, but the spiritual Cold War has not. Christ himself, they remind themselves, was an outcast who was reviled by the authorities and executed like a criminal. His apostles learned more than how to bless, pray and live Christian lives. As the New Testament shows, they also learned how to deflect police questioning, move undetected around hostile territory, and keep in secret contact with one another. What we might think of as God's secret service remains as necessary today, in their own view, as it was during the Cold War.

The mentality which was spread through Cold War Bible smuggling, in which Christians are imagined as a suffering and persecuted minority, did not disappear at the end of the Cold War. Popular evangelical notions of a world in which Bibles need to be smuggled to needy Christians around the world left a rich legacy of Bible-smuggling testimony and memoirs. This message is amplified today through Mega-church fundraisers, online charity drives and advertising campaigns in Christian newspapers, magazines, radio and on social media. As the 'culture wars' continue to sharpen political differences between 'traditional Christian' and 'progressive Liberal' values, the Bible has become a highly politicized symbol in what is presented as an existential struggle. It is not only the liberal Left, watching the rise of

⁸⁴ See, for example, Sparks, *Detour*, 148–9.

Christian nationalism across Europe and America, which fears for the future. The Christian film 'Disciples in the Moonlight' (2024) imagines a 'not-too-distant' dystopian America in which 'Christians are persecuted, the Bible is banned as "hate speech"' and the 'government has issued its own "inclusive, welcoming" and censored version of the Bible'.⁸⁵ The film, which appears under the banner 'Christians are persecuted and the Bible is banned', carries endorsements by former US Vice-President Mike Pence. Soon, it suggests, it will no longer be oppressed Christians abroad, but rather outlawed Christians at home, who will need Bibles smuggled to them, in the dead of night, by God's secret agents. In this new Cold War, shaped and prepared by decades of Bible-smuggling organization, training, fundraising, literature and intelligence work, the enemy is no longer abroad, but within.

⁸⁵ Kathryn Post, 'In "Disciples in the Moonlight", US Christians are persecuted and the Bible is banned', *RNS*, 16 July 2024, online at: <<https://religionnews.com/2024/07/16/in-disciples-in-the-moonlight-us-christians-are-persecuted-and-the-bible-is-banned/>>, accessed 20 October 2024.