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**Keston Institute: KGB's Bête Noire**

by Xenia Dennen

What is Keston Institute and why did it become the KGB's *bête noire*, near the top of the KGB's list of the most dangerous Western organisations?

Keston, as I will call it, was established during the Cold War in 1969 in response to a request from Christians in the Soviet Union who had been battered by an intense anti-religious campaign organised by Nikita Khrushchev from 1959-1964. Over 10,000 churches had been closed (more than half of those functioning before 1959), many church members were harrassed in various ways and some were imprisoned. And this at a time when a thaw was underway following the end of the Stalin period: exciting new literary works were being published like *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Solzhenitsyn (1962) and *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov (1966). But Khrushchev's Party Programme adopted in 1961 promised that Communism would be achieved in 20 years time. According to the Party ideology, Marxism-Leninism, there would be no room for religion in this "brave new world". Thus religion needed to be expunged from Soviet society, following the relative tolerance – though in a highly controlled form – of certain Christian denominations, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, during the Second World War and after. While the Communist Party campaigned against religion, Soviet propaganda at the same time made out that there was "freedom of conscience" in the USSR, that citizens could freely attend church and believe what they wanted.

Where was the truth? Keston set out to find it. How did it try to do this? By gathering well-researched information, by basing its publications on documentation wherever possible, on published as well as unofficial sources. As a result Keston built up over the years an enormous archive, now possibly the largest in the world on the subject of religion in Communist countries. Though our focus at first was entirely on the situation in the Soviet Union, as the years passed we expanded and covered Poland, former Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, East Germany, former Yugoslavia and even China up to a point.

We published our findings in a news service, an academic quarterly journal, *Religion in Communist Lands*, which I founded and edited for eight years, and a more popular magazine called *Frontier*. We also published many books. Some of us on the staff travelled all over the country giving talks, and as a result a number of support groups were formed in the UK.

As our work grew during the 1970s and 1980s we became particularly concerned about religious believers who were arrested and imprisoned. We regularly published booklets listing all known religious prisoners of conscience and any information which we had about them. We publicised the cases of many individuals, often in great detail, translating and publishing trial transcripts, when these reached us, or any documents by or about particular people.

Religion in a Communist country was highly politicised, since atheism was a basic component of the ideology, and so, although Keston was a non-political organisation, indeed a charity which could not get involved in any campaigns, its work was also politicised: in the USSR we were accused of being anti-Soviet, and in this country we were accused of being right-wing. In fact we were simply trying to tell the truth.

The information Keston gathered on the Soviet Union (and that was my field) contradicted the claim of the Soviet authorities that there was freedom of conscience and that the churches were not persecuted. We were aware that the guarantees of freedom of conscience in the Soviet Constitution were only on paper and were not observed in reality. The constitutional separation of church and state was pure fiction since the Communist Party's arm for controlling religious groups, the Council for Religious Affairs, interfered constantly and monitored what was going on in the churches. Furthermore, there was no such thing as the rule of law: legislation could be geared to catch a religious believer, law courts followed decisions taken by the local Party boss, and often instructions on the outcome of a trial were given by telephone. Such information and Keston's publicising of it were not to the KGB's liking, and most of those working on Keston's staff were one by one refused visas to the Soviet Union. I was banned in 1976.

### **How Keston began**

I began working for the founder of Keston, Canon Michael Bourdeaux, two years before the organisation came into existence. So there were just two of us at the beginning, but by the early 1980s Keston had grown into a team of 30, with specialists on every country of East and Central Europe as well as on the USSR, speaking all the required languages and covering all religions. Behind the organisation were 12,000 members from all over the world who supported Keston financially, as well as many volunteers who helped with the administration.

But what gave birth to the idea of founding such an organisation?

In 1964 Canon Michael Bourdeaux travelled to Moscow for just a weekend and while there heard that a Russian Orthodox church had been blown up in the city centre. He decided to go and have a look. There he saw two women peering through the fence at the ruins, one lifting the other up to look through a hole. Once the women had moved away from the square, at a safe distance from observation by the police, Michael went up to them and asked them to tell him what they knew. They jumped with excitement as they had come to Moscow, again for just two days from Ukraine, where their sons were being persecuted as monks at the Pochaev Monastery; they had come specifically to find a foreigner who could tell the outside world what was happening in the Soviet Union. They asked him to follow them. He was led to the outskirts of Moscow where a group of Russian Orthodox Christians had gathered in a small house. Michael, when back home in Oxford, had just read some documents, signed by two Ukrainian women about the persecution of the Pochaev Monastery, which had been smuggled out to Paris and then sent on to England. The two Ukrainian women started to tell him about the persecution of the monastery, whereupon he replied that he had read documents about this. To his amazement he discovered that the two signatories were the very women who had just led him to this room on the edge of Moscow. Michael was asked "please be our voice where we cannot be heard" by those gathered there, and from that point he determined to do just that, to get at the true facts, to publicise them in the West, to write and publish. This was in 1964. Five years later, with the help of two professors from the LSE and a former British diplomat, Sir John Lawrence, the institute was founded.

The name Keston comes from a village south of Bromley in Kent. At first the organisation was called the Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism, but when we bought a former Church of England school building in Keston we took the name Keston College, and later Keston Institute when the organisation moved to Oxford. Today we have no premises: we exist as a UK charity with a board of trustees, the Council of Management.

## Background

### 1960s: religious dissent and the dissident movement

Keston was a product of the 1960s, a period which saw the beginnings of protest within the churches in the USSR. After the fall of Khrushchev in 1964 and the accession of Brezhnev, religious protest became entwined with the general Soviet dissident movement, or human rights movement, whose birth most would date to 1968.

In 1965 two Russian Orthodox priests, Fr Gleb Yakunin and Fr Nikolai Eshliman, wrote a long exposé of their church's situation which they sent to the Soviet Prime Minister and the Patriarch. They showed how the church was unable to act freely, how the Constitution's guarantee of freedom of conscience was a fiction and that the law in force (1929 law) made normal parish life impossible. For this they were both banned from serving as priests. A year later in 1966 a detailed account of persecution and restrictions in the Kirov diocese, written by a remarkable elderly mathematician, Boris Talantov, gave Keston detailed information on exactly how churches were being closed. Talantov sent this document to the Patriarch after which he was attacked in the local press, summoned to the KGB headquarters, arrested in June 1969 and imprisoned in a labour camp where he died in 1971.

Another group of Christians also started to protest in the 1960s about the lack of religious freedom: these were Baptists who led a reform movement and started sending a mass of documents out to the West which found their way to Michael Bourdeaux. The Baptist reformers accused their leadership of caving in to the Soviet authorities and of accepting restrictions imposed upon them by the State which they totally rejected. They thus became a leading voice in the struggle for religious freedom. Many of them were imprisoned and their cases were publicised by Keston, while Michael Bourdeaux wrote a detailed account of this movement in his book *Religious Ferment in Russia* published in 1968.

### *Helsinki Declaration & religious freedom*

Particularly important both for Russian believers struggling for greater freedom and for human rights activists in the Soviet Union was the Helsinki Agreement of August 1975 which was signed by 35 governments including Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. A Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, CSCE, had been created in 1973 as part of the détente phase of diplomatic relations between East and West. With meetings over a two year period in Helsinki and Geneva, the CSCE eventually reached agreement and produced the Helsinki Final Act on 1 August 1975. This included what were called three "baskets": basket 1 on political and military aspects of security; basket 2 on cooperation in economic, scientific, environmental fields; and basket 3 about cooperation in the humanitarian field.

Principle No 7 in the preamble to the Helsinki Agreement was a crucial statement for religious believers in the Communist bloc and used by them in their campaigns for freedom of conscience:

'The participating States will respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.'

Just three months after the Helsinki Agreement was signed, the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) met in November 1975 and for the first time was compelled to start discussing religious freedom in the Soviet Union - a subject which it had carefully avoided until then.

The delegates had received an appeal from Fr Gleb Yakunin and a Russian Orthodox layman Lev Regelson which described the persecution in the USSR and asked the World Council to help. Two days before the delegates disbanded it was proposed that a report on religious liberty in the signatory States of the Helsinki Agreement be presented to the WCC's Central Committee the following year in August 1976. Keston at this point got to work and published with two other institutes a detailed report on infringements of religious liberty in the USSR with an in-depth analysis of Soviet legislation affecting religion.

Meanwhile in Moscow a Helsinki Monitoring group was founded in May 1976 which emphasized two sections of the Helsinki Agreement: Principle Number 7 on human rights and religious freedom, and Basket 3 on co-operation in the humanitarian field. The group planned to pass on information to the heads of the States which signed the Helsinki Declaration about any human rights violations, and to publicise these cases.

The Helsinki movement in the USSR rapidly grew: in November 1976 groups were set up in Ukraine and Lithuania; the following year a group was formed in Georgia (January 1977) and another in Armenia (April 1977). However, by December 1976 the KGB had decided that this expanding movement had to be stopped. It struck first at the Ukrainian group that month, then at the Lithuanian group in January 1977. The Georgian group was suppressed before the spring of 1978, while the Armenian group's members had all been arrested by that summer. The Ukrainian group was no longer functioning by 1980 and the Lithuanian group was effectively silenced by November 1981. Only the Moscow group managed to survive after 1981 but in September 1982 it too was forced to admit defeat.

The Moscow Helsinki Monitoring Group managed to issue a large number of documents on infringements of human rights, some of which were concerned with the treatment of religious believers. For example it compiled detailed reports on the persecution of Catholics in Lithuania, on Pentecostals, Baptists and Adventists in the USSR.

On 1 August 1976, the anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Agreement, the Group issued a document with a depressing assessment of the Agreement's effect on human rights in the USSR: prison conditions for prisoners of conscience had grown 'more cruel'; the abuse of psychiatry had not been curtailed; emigration was no easier; the reunification of divided families was still difficult; all associations independent of the Communist Party continued to be repressed and all independent sources of information persecuted.

### ***The Christian Committee***

Closely connected with the Helsinki Agreement and the growth of Helsinki monitoring groups in the USSR was the foundation in Moscow of a group specifically concerned with religious freedom and problems facing believers. This was the Christian Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights founded in December 1976 by three Russian Orthodox Christians including the indefatigable Fr Gleb Yakunin.

The Christian Committee liaised with groups within the various Christian denominations which were themselves gathering information about discrimination against their members. By the spring of 1980 the Committee had sent out 423 documents, many of which were concerned with specific cases where believers' rights had been infringed. Many of these documents reached Keston, thus making the Christian Committee a vital source of information for us on what was happening.

In Keston's journal *Religion in Communist Lands* I published articles about the Committee and translations of many of its documents, including its founding Declaration. In this the Committee declared that it intended to collect, study and distribute information on the situation of religious believers in the USSR; to give legal advice to believers; to appeal to state institutions on their behalf; and to clarify the legal and actual position of religion in the USSR. The Declaration pointed out that although the right to believe in God and to live in accordance with this belief was acknowledged by the basic legislation of the USSR:

'in practice the principle of freedom of conscience proclaimed in the Constitution comes up against considerable difficulties due to the attitude to religion of a government which is constructing a non-religious society. This attitude is expressed not only in the character of existing legislation, but also in the violation by the State administrative authorities of even those rights which believers legally possess.' (*Religion in Communist Lands* Vol.6, No.1, spring 1978)

### ***Lithuanian Catholic Committee***

Two years after the Christian Committee's formation, a similar one was founded in November 1978 by Lithuanian Catholics who in a letter to Pope John Paul II asked for his blessing on their work and stated that no longer was their Church to be 'the Church of Silence':

'we priests of Lithuania have decided to speak up and to defend the sacred rights of the Church and the believers, as our silence and inaction provide the atheists with the best conditions for destroying the Church from without and demoralizing it from within.'

Keston had been following events in Lithuania closely for many years thanks to an extraordinary samizdat publication called the *Lithuanian Catholic Chronicle* which began appearing in 1972. By August 1982 it had published, of course secretly, 54 issues. We had received many of these and from them we gathered detailed information. We both translated and published many of them. Much of our research on Lithuania was then contained in a Keston book, *Land of Crosses* by Michael Bourdeaux which was published in 1979 covering the struggle for religious freedom in Lithuania up to 1978.

Because of Keston's concern for Lithuania, we were sent for safekeeping in 1972 a remarkable document: this was a one-page text in Lithuanian demanding religious freedom which had been signed by 17,000 Lithuanians at great cost to themselves and which had been smuggled out to the West. This one-page text with all the signatures attached was preserved by us in the Keston Archive. After we had included it with many of our documents in an exhibition at the Vilnius National Library in 2005 we received an appeal for its return, and so in 2007 Michael Bourdeaux took it back to Lithuania where it is now revered like a religious relic.

### ***Repression of dissent***

From 1979 until the death of Brezhnev in November 1982 repression against dissidents and against religious believers became more severe. By the end of the Brezhnev period the number of Christian prisoners in the USSR had risen from 147 in 1977 to at least 180 in 1979 and to 400 in November 1982. By January 1982 reports reached the West from believers in the USSR who felt that a further increase in anti-religious activity was planned by the Soviet authorities. A few months after Brezhnev was succeeded by Yuri Andropov, who had been head of the KGB for 15 years, Keston publicised in its news service a document which stated that 'there has been a hardening of government policy

towards religion following the changes which have taken place in the Soviet leadership.' (KNS No 178, 14 July 1983) Then the Christian Committee confirmed that the new administration was continuing the offensive against dissent in a document which Keston's journal published ('The Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR Lives On' *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol.11, No 3 1983) and which stated:

'A new wave of persecution has been initiated by the Andropov administration, with the aim of putting an end once and for all to any attempt by the Soviet people to assert their rights as citizens.'

### ***Collapse of USSR***

Now we are drawing near to what no Soviet expert was expecting, the collapse of the USSR.

As early as 1969 a book foretelling such a collapse by a Soviet dissident had been published in Amsterdam: this was *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* by the historian Andrei Amalrik. In March 1985 Gorbachev came to power and with his advent began the period of *perestroika* or 'restructuring' which led eventually in 1991 to the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Communist Party's domination. The new Party leader realised that the Soviet Union was dying, its economy unproductive and its political system in need of reform. The Chernobyl disaster in 1986, which revealed the system's dishonesty and criminal incompetence, gave an additional important impetus to the system's demise.

And what of Communist Party policy towards religion? This dramatically changed in 1988 after there had been amnesties of political and religious prisoners the previous year and during which the Soviet press had begun portraying religion in a more positive light. The year 1988 marked the millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church which was allowed in June to celebrate this important occasion far more elaborately than initially expected. Then followed in late June 1988 the 19<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Communist Party, when Gorbachev condemned both disrespect towards a spiritual worldview and discrimination against religious believers.

### **What is Keston today?**

The results of Gorbachev's reforms and of perestroika took nearly all of us by surprise: we did not expect the Communist "house of cards" to collapse so quickly. Keston was delighted to see the many prisoners of conscience, whose cases it had been publicising over the years, released from labour camps and prisons. But at the same time Keston's large number of supporters gradually melted away and confronted the organisation with potential financial disaster by the early 2000s. Most people in the West during the 1990s could not see that there was any problem any longer for religious believers in the former Communist bloc and thus no role anymore for Keston. So its trustees had to put the organisation through its own perestroika or restructuring, and I was made chairman in the midst of this financial crisis. I had to steer the charity into a new phase. No longer could Keston afford to employ anyone, so our research and publishing work was cut back, we sold our academic journal now called *Religion State & Society* to its publisher, we discontinued our news service and more popular magazine *Frontier* and found a new home for our by now very large archive and library. These are both now housed in a new institution in the US: the Keston Center for Religion Politics and Society specially created by Baylor University, Texas, to house this collection and to promote research in our field.

So what does Keston in the UK now do? With our limited resources, we offer grants to researchers working in Keston's field and particularly to those who want to work in the Keston archive in the US. We publish a monthly internet journal in Russian on our website, and I produce a small publication on my computer for our members and anyone interested in our work.

In addition, since the late 1990s we have produced a massive study of religion in the Russian Federation with a small team of Russian researchers who have travelled the length and breadth of the country. We call this an encyclopaedia. It is made up of seven volumes covering all religions, and includes an intricate geographical study showing the relations between church and state at grass-roots level in every administrative sub-division of the Federation. These seven volumes, in Russian, have sold like hot cakes, and now the publisher wants Keston to produce a new edition. Since 1999 I have been joining the team on many of its field trips which have taken me up to the Arctic Circle, to Siberia, to Russia's Far East as well as to much of European Russia.

Unlike the early 1990s when you could really claim that there was religious freedom in Russia, today since a law on religion was passed in 1997, there are many religious denominations, including all Protestants and Catholics, who are often treated unfairly, indeed as second class citizens, and face varying forms of discrimination. The Russian Orthodox Church, although not legally an established church, behaves like one and supports the Putin regime. In many dioceses the non-Orthodox are not treated justly and have difficulty in building a church or even getting registered with the local authorities. A Pentecostal church on the edge of Moscow, for example, was bulldozed last year.

In my travels with the Encyclopaedia team I have been struck by how different from European Russia are areas which lie beyond the Urals, in Siberia, in Russia's Far East or distant south, by how much more tolerant are religious people, and particularly the Russian Orthodox, in these areas. Last summer I enjoyed hearing an Orthodox bishop in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, describing Protestants and Catholics as his "brethren" rather than as invaders who threaten Russia's "spiritual security". In the non-European parts of Russia - for example, in Buryatia (east of Lake Baikal), Kalmykia (on the western shores of the Caspian Sea), the Altai (in southern Siberia) - Russian Orthodoxy lives side by side with various strands of Buddhism, pagan beliefs and shamanism, and co-exists peacefully with Protestant and Catholic congregations.

In Buryatia, a traditionally Buddhist part of Russia, the Orthodox Church has learnt to be tolerant. The bishop, a Chuvash by nationality, told me last summer that he sympathised with the Buryats, a small ethnic group like his own, and was certainly not planning to launch some aggressive Orthodox mission campaign. He loved to ride his fine-looking thoroughbred wearing his episcopal robes and headpiece – not quite a mitre – and showed me a video of himself flying a small aircraft since he had originally trained for the airforce.

It was in Buryatia that I and my two Russian colleagues learnt that you should not trust the "experts" back in Moscow: what you found on the ground was often different. And so it was all these thousands of miles away. We had been told that an interesting rival group to the dominant central Buddhist organisation, the Traditional Buddhist Sangha of Russia, had ceased to exist after the death of its founder and leader in 2005. This "alternative" Buddhist group was called "Maidar" and had at one time, we knew, had a small community up in the hills outside Ulan-Ude, the capital of Buryatia. So we took a taxi to that location, walked up a hillside along a dirt track, surrounded by undulating forest-clad Buryat mountains, miles from anywhere. At the top of the hill we saw two yurt-shaped buildings: out of one emerged a sleepy 15-year-old lad, out of the other an old woman with long unkempt grey hair. We got into conversation and discovered that the 15-year-old's uncle was a leader

of “Maidar”. Within minutes the young lad had rung his uncle on his mobile and arranged for us to meet him. So down the hill we went, with the young lad as our guide, and managed eventually to catch a minibus back into Ulan-Ude. As we bumped along towards the city I talked to the 15-year-old and discovered that he loved Italian opera, that his grandfather had studied singing with Shalyapin in St Petersburg, that he had read Harry Potter and Tolkien! He led us to a Scientific Archival Centre, a large new shed full of shelves piled high with journals and newspapers, which was part of the local Academy of Sciences. Here we met his uncle who worked as a bibliographer and the latter’s mother who worked as an archivist. They told us that the “Maidar” movement was by no means dead, and that its founder’s teaching was still observed by the members: “we will continue to live as our teacher taught us,” they said, “although our teacher has gone away”.

In Buryatia I also met some shamans. They were not exactly what I had expected, as they wore shirts and ties (except for the one woman shaman) with mobiles going off at frequent intervals. Their chief sat at the head of the table in a splendid wooden chair with a carved eagle and other creatures adorning its high back. We sat in what was a small wooden hut on a hillside overlooking Ulan-Ude: this was the headquarters of the Religious Organisation of Tengeri Shamans (tengeri = gods of sun, moon and mother earth) to which 67 shamans belonged. Altogether there were four separate shaman organisations, I was told, and 3000 shamans in Buryatia who were resurrecting ancient forms of Buryat shamanism which had survived during the Soviet period in Mongolia: “we are returning to our ancient roots,” they said. The sky seemed to be their main god with a large hierarchy beneath it; but they did not dabble in the nether world, in black magic, they assured me; they only aimed “to do good”, to heal the psychologically sick and deal with natural catastrophes: “Today demands the resurrection of these ancient rituals as many current illnesses are incurable...We can influence the elements...we could put out the fires in California, in Chita, in Krasnoyarsk...we can deal with global warming, tornadoes, floods....We worship the gods which the West has forgotten....If the West does not recognise these gods, then these problems will continue... How many people will die if shamanism is not accepted.” Despite the grimness of their warnings, they were a most friendly lot, though, of course, what they were like when dressed in their shaman robes and in a trance, I know not – endowed with special powers and no doubt not at all cosy.

In Kalmykia, a tiny country from which all the inhabitants were deported under Stalin during the war, I found the Russian Orthodox bishop, like the one in Buryatia, wanted to encourage dialogue with Kalmyk Buddhists, who, he said, “loved holy things” like bees attracted to honey. He got on well with the leader of the Union of Buddhists of Kalmykia, who had said to him, “Dear brother, let us take down the fences between us; maybe we’ll find common ground.” You had to start by drinking a cup of tea together and then go on to public dialogue, the bishop added.

In Kalmykia I also met a scholar of Buddhism at the Humanities Institute, Elizaveta Petrovna Bakaeva, who explained that many schools of Buddhism were taught in Kalmykia. Everything connected with Kalmyk religion and culture had been destroyed after 1943 until 1957 when the Kalmyks were allowed to return to their homeland following their deportation; in exile it had been impossible to observe Buddhist rituals and most Kalmyks had lost all knowledge of their religion. A “dual” form of belief had developed and, partly thanks to russification, by the early 1990s it was not unusual for Russian Orthodox icons to be placed beside Buddhist images, for parents to have their children baptised in the Russian Orthodox Church, and for Kalmyks to observe the main Russian Orthodox religious festivals. Since perestroika certain ancient Kalmyk beliefs had been revived with a “White *Starets*” who, as a link between the sky and the earth, protected the Kalmyk nation and was revered as a local god - indeed an icon of him was often placed on the left of the Buddha.

In the Altai, in southern Siberia, the indigenous religion is called Burkhanism, a name which derives from the word “burkhan” or horseman: in 1904 a white “burkhan”, a godlike figure, had appeared to a shepherd, according to local accounts, after which thousands of Altaians congregated in a valley to worship this mysterious visitor. Another name for this local religion is the White Faith which many Altaians consider to be Buddhist at root. Others believe it is a form of paganism. A local intellectual turned businessman on the staff of the Institute of Altai Studies, whom we met, was working hard to revive the White Faith, and headed what he called the White Faith Movement. He established a series of White Faith rituals, organised missionary groups to visit Altai villages, and stopped archeological digs which had not been preceded by rituals which would prevent the “underworld” being disturbed and spirits from being let loose. An influential follower of the White Faith was an intriguing character: this was the head of the Altai’s national theatre, a highly sophisticated actor, steeped in Russian literature, who had trained in Moscow’s Shukinsky drama school. He told me, as we talked in his small kitchen, that he had had an inner crisis and had returned home to the Altai where he had recovered, had found his ‘soul’ through a rediscovery of the Altai’s ancient religious traditions. He now claimed to have second-sight, to be in touch with the Altai’s ‘living soul’; he prayed to all corners of the Altai from the top of its holy mountains and worshipped every plant, animal and river. My evening ended with him singing to me, accompanying himself on a *topshur*, a local stringed instrument.

On many of these field trips I have had to cope with rather sub-standard hotels such as the Hotel for Military Sportsmen in Belgorod in south-west Russia, and one in Tula at the beginning of winter which had no heat or hot water, when I had to sleep in my fur coat, gloves, and thick scarf round my head. In the Altai I remember lying on my bed and seeing a large gathering of what looked like flying bed bugs on the ceiling of my hotel room and dreading lest they parachute down onto me. When I put on my glasses I was delighted to see they were ladybirds, dear friends known as “God’s little cows” in Russian, who would do me no harm.

More frightening, I fear, will be the wild bears in Kamchatka whither I am flying in two weeks’ time with the team. I have taken to heart some excellent advice reported in *The Times* some time ago about how to deal with bears which had come into Syktyvkar, the capital of another area I and the team have visited, the Komi Republic. The poor bears short of nuts and berries because of a heatwave had come into the city searching for some succulent morsels. According to *The Times*, the residents of Syktyvkar were advised by the town’s local authorities that, should they be approached by a bear, they should speak to it “in a firm voice” and should never turn their backs.

When in the Far North, in the Nenetsky Autonomous Region within the Arctic Circle, I might have encountered a somewhat less fearsome sort of creature, the reindeer, since the locals, the Nentsy, are reindeer herders and depend on them for their survival. The local Russian Orthodox priest in Naryan-Mar, the main city of the Region, told me a charming story: one winter, he related, the Nentsy had to get a herd of reindeer across a frozen river, so a group of Orthodox faithful gathered on the river bank, got down on their knees and started to pray for a safe crossing. When the ice started to give way the Nentsy herdsmen panicked, but the Orthodox went on praying. The reindeer managed to swim across safely and then all lined up on the river bank and went down on one knee, bowing to the Orthodox on the opposite side.

Further west down the White Sea coast from the Nenetsky Autonomous Region is the great northern port of Archangel built on the banks of the River Dvina. A few miles up river we visited a thriving Russian Orthodox parish, with lots of children and families. This was in a village called Lyavlya near the islands in the Dvina delta which are flooded in the spring and where particularly nutritious grass

grows and feeds Russia's best cattle, the Kholmogory herd. But whilst nutritious grass grows on the surface, underneath, I learned, were the mass graves of prisoners from the Gulag, many of whom had been shot on barges travelling down the Dvina. The buildings of a former monastery nearby had become the headquarters during Soviet days of the secret police running the complex of "special purpose northern camps". Prisoners—men, women and children—used to be marched from Lyavlya to the forests to fell trees.

Then across the White Sea from Archangel is Solovki, one of the most beautiful places in the world, an archipelago of islands, from which Solzhenitsyn got his title *The Gulag Archipelago*. This was the site of the first Soviet "special purpose" labour camp, one of the most notorious. In October 1923 there were two and a half thousand prisoners on Solovki, by 1927 there were nearly 13,000, and by January 1930 over 53,000. About 100-200 clergy were imprisoned there at any one time. About 40,000 people are believed to be buried on the islands.

Keston today, while studying the contemporary religious situation in Russia, also has a duty towards the past: it must encourage scholars to record the 20<sup>th</sup> century religious history of the communist bloc; it faces the task of preserving the memory and publicising the often heroic lives of the many remarkable people whose biographies lie hidden in the Keston archive, many of whom suffered in the Gulag and lie buried in mass graves with no visible record above ground. The message of those remarkable people, Keston believes, should not be forgotten: they defended freedom of mind and spirit in the face of a political system which claimed total control over all aspects of human life. Keston, the old *bête noire* of the KGB may have died, but a slimmed-down, more svelte creature lives on: like the reindeer of the Nenetsky Autonomous Region, this slender creature goes down on one knee in respect for those who struggled for religious freedom in communist countries, and will try to make sure that their courage is not forgotten.