

## **The Extraordinary Background of *A Newcomer's Guide to the Bible***

*A Newcomer's Guide to the Bible* emerged from one of the most pivotal moments in modern history – the collapse of the Soviet Union. But to understand what led to it, we must step back into pre-Soviet Russia.

For centuries under the czars, character training for children was considered the duty of teachers, not parents. The word for a teacher in Russian is almost identical to our English term pedagogue, a now outdated term that was quite commonplace in America until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The word in both English and Russian derives from a Greek term for the slave charged with supervising the studies of the master's children. As in czarist Russia, the pedagogue was charged with the duty of instilling proper habits and behavior in those in his charge.

Russian teachers are very proud of this heritage. And because Russia was largely Christian in its worldview, they based their training on principles found in the Bible.

This training was disrupted, however, when the Communists took power in 1917. They quickly replaced the character curriculum in the classrooms with communist ideology. They also undertook a determined effort to destroy all semblance of biblical influence in education.

They set out to confiscate every Bible in Russia, along with books on history or philosophy which cast Judaism or Christianity in a favorable light. Stiff prison terms or even sentences to the gulags befell those found to have held onto a Bible in secret.

When the Soviet system collapsed, teachers seized on the occasion to toss out the communist character curriculum. Their dream was to return to the Judeo-Christian outlooks of the Bible as the base for character instruction.

But they faced an immense problem. The obliteration of all semblances of Christian materials under Soviet rule meant that they had no literature that could guide them in revising character studies.

About that time, Dr. Mike Armour made the acquaintance of Dr. Vladimir Skovorodnikov. Vladimir was the minister of education for a sprawling region of Russia and the deputy director of the nationwide association of ministers of education.

He asked Americans whom he had met if they could develop character case studies that could be used in public classrooms. Mike and his wife Fran volunteered to take on the assignment.

The Russian reception to these materials was so enthusiastic that Vladimir turned to Mike with another request. “Your character studies,” he said, “draw on characters from the Bible, which is what we wanted. But our teachers know almost nothing about the Bible. Most have never even touched one.”

He then explained a dilemma which had developed. When they were teaching the case studies, their children would start asking questions about the Biblical characters at the heart of them. Because the teachers had little knowledge of the Bible, they were unable to answer student questions. Not only that, many teachers were so embarrassed by these turns of events that they were losing their enthusiasm for teaching the case studies.

“What we need,” he said, “is a textbook, perhaps 225 to 250 pages long, that explains the Bible fully to someone who knows absolutely nothing about it. Could you provide us such a book?”

Without thinking, Mike said he could. His idea was to find a good introduction to the Bible in English and secure permission to publish it in Russian.

But when he set out to find what Vladimir wanted, Mike discovered that it did not exist. While there were many excellent introductions to the Bible in English, all of them presumed that the reader had a basic Christian vocabulary. None of them were written for someone who had never even seen a Bible.

Mike therefore set out to write a book that conformed with what his friend Vladimir was requesting. Over the next six months it took shape. Because it was to be translated immediately into Russian, and since English-to-Russian translations are highly nuanced, he opted for a style that would minimize the risk of mistranslations.

To that end, he wrote the book in a manner that was totally free of idiomatic expressions. This turned out to be an exceptional feature of the book. Because it was free of idioms, it translated quickly and easily into languages other than Russian. Today it's in two-dozen languages.

As soon as *A Newcomer's Guide to the Bible* was published in Russian, ministries of education began adopting it as a high school and university textbook. Mike began traveling to Russia routinely to teach seminars for teachers on how to utilize the book in their classrooms.

The national ministry of education in Ukraine caught wind of this resource and asked if *A Newcomer's Guide to the Bible* could be made available for their own classrooms. The book was translated into Ukrainian and eventually became a national textbook, studied in high schools and universities across the entire nation.

From there the book spread to Romania, the Baltics, Poland, and other former nations of the Soviet bloc. Because fund-raising to support these efforts was based fully in the U.S., Americans began asking Mike to make the book available in English. Later, he made it available in Spanish under the title *La Biblia al Alcance de Todos*.

All told, a unique book with a unique history. And its influence continues to spread.