

Your Strongest Weapon Against Demonic Religious Intolerance

On a mission trip to Eastern Europe, we ministered in a city in south central Ukraine. This being a major metro area of about a million people, the church there appointed us a driver to chauffeur us around. Thus we met a former Soviet army colonel I'll call Sergei, with the intimidating appearance of the army officer he once was. Beneath his tough exterior, however, lay a gentle heart of gold.

Sergei eagerly told us his story, and I never tire of repeating it. In his army unit was a young private, a Baptist Christian. Each day the men lined up in formation to recite the pledge of allegiance to the USSR. On the basis of his Christian conscience, this young private refused.

Obviously, this caused a problem for Sergei, who perceived it as a threat to discipline in the ranks. Frustrated and having no idea what to do, he decided to speak with the young private's pastor, and together they worked out a solution. The private could recite the pledge up to the part that violated his conscience, at which point he could remain silent; because everyone else would be facing forward at attention, no one would notice. So far, so good, except that Sergei now considered this young man to be a troublemaker.

To deal with the issue, he began to assign this Baptist conscript all the worst jobs, from cleaning toilets to shoveling mud. It wasn't long, though, before he noticed something he didn't expect. No matter what he did to this young man, he never heard a complaint out of him, never a hint of rebellion or anger. He saw only the heart of an obedient servant.

Looking a bit deeper, he saw that when the other members of

his unit had problems, they turned to this Baptist private for counsel and solace. Sergei told us, "That was the first drop in the bucket toward me repenting and becoming a Christian."

As so often happens when cultures deny God, crime and theft run rampant—and so it did in the culture of the Soviet army. Twice or more every year, each commander had to go before the "minister," as they called the government representative, to account for conditions under his command. No commander ever looked forward to these meetings.

A Christian at this point, Sergei sought the counsel of his pastor about how to reduce the crime rate in his unit in advance of his next meeting with the Soviet minister. "Well, do you pray for your men?" the pastor queried. Sergei took his pastor's advice and began to pray.

At the next meeting with the government minister he reported that crime in his unit had decreased to nearly nothing. In fact, he made up two incidents that didn't really happen, hoping to stave off an accusation that he was lying about the crime rate. The minister accused him of lying anyway, insisting that such a huge reduction in crime could not have happened. An investigation was launched in which it was found that Sergei had lied about the two incidents to prevent being accused of lying about the reduction in crime.

After admonishing him never to lie again, the minister clearly stated that the reduction in crime had to be because of God; otherwise it would have been impossible. Sergei's wife then became a believer through her husband. She served as an aide to the commander of another unit. She too sought her pastor's counsel about what she could do as a believer and began to pray. This led to the conversion of her unit's political officer.

In the USSR a political officer was, in effect, the priest of the communist way, charged with enforcing proper communist

doctrine and holding the military rank of major. Speaking to such a person about Jesus therefore involved tremendous risk, as atheism was historically the official Communist Party doctrine with regard to religion. She obeyed God, however, not allowing the light to be obscured by fear.

Hearing the truth in her heart and her words, the major gave his life to Jesus. Struggling now with how to continue spouting communist doctrine in conflict with his newfound faith, the political officer also sought out his pastor for advice, asking, "What do I do now?" His pastor told him that he must tell his troops about God.

All this came about because one insignificant, no-name private in the army of a godless government refused to allow a basket to be placed over his light. Darkness gathered around him, but light shines brightest in dark places. His simple witness and servant's heart were the pebble that started a landslide. He could have protested and complained of injustice, but he chose to be a servant, strategically placed, who acted in love and bore enormous fruit. {eoa}

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