

Ukrainian, Russian Baptists still united, historian insists

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UKRAINE (BP)—Baptists in Ukraine and Russia likely will maintain unity beyond contentious political elections and Vladimir Putin's nationalistic aggression, but the United States could do more to contain the crisis, historian Albert W. Wardin Jr. said.



Historian Albert

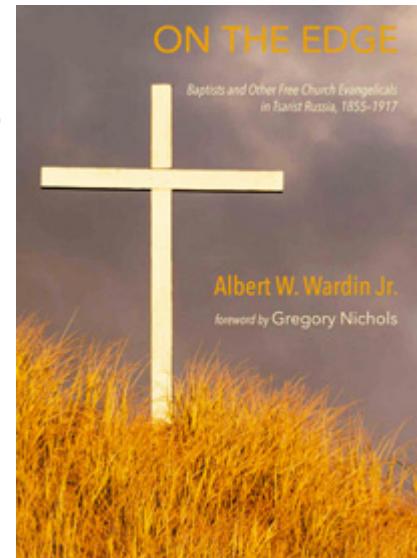
Wardin, who maintains close ties to Baptists in Ukraine and Russia, is certain the two groups will work to maintain unity as pro-Russian forces seek to redraw borders established in the 1991 fall of USSR. (BP Photo by Diana Chandler) "I'm sure the Baptists will try their best to retain their Baptist relationships, not only in Ukraine itself, including both the Russian-speaking and the English-speaking, (but) they would have a relationship with the Russian Baptist Union which is under Putin's control," Wardin said. "I think that's very, very important, and they may be the peacemakers."

Wardin, the author of many books on the history of Baptists and other Protestants in Eastern Europe, has close ties to Baptists in the region. His latest book, [*On the Edge: Baptists and Other Free Church Evangelicals in Tsarist Russia, 1855-1917*](#), was released in 2013.

A united Baptist Union

“The All-Ukrainian Union of Associations of Evangelical Churches-Baptist is a united union, even though members may speak either Ukrainian or Russian as their first language,” Wardin said. “With the Russian Baptist Union in the Russian Republic, the All-Ukrainian Union is seeking a peaceful resolution of the political crisis fueled by contending forces from Western Europe and Russia that (threaten) the division of the country.”

Still, U.S. President Obama would do well to impose more stringent sanctions against Putin to stop any attempts to annex portions of Ukraine or provoke a civil war, Wardin said, characterizing Putin as a “bully” who “doesn’t negotiate.”



Without sending in troops, the United States could send material aid to strengthen Ukraine’s military, Wardin said, and could get Putin’s attention through much stronger sanctions on Russian industries, including oil and banking.

“I certainly would not want to send American troops there. America doesn’t want that,” he said. “We would try to negotiate as much as we possibly can

and see if we can resolve it without confrontation. But I do think that since Putin is a bully, ... it's like any bully on the playground in school. That bully just goes ahead and takes advantage of the people he considers weak. But if somebody really stands up to him and knocks him down, ... it's a different message."

As Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine seek to separate from the free republic and unite with Russia, Baptists are working to maintain unity and likely will continue fellowship across borders, Wardin said.

Ukrainian Baptists comprise the largest Baptist body in any one country in Europe, even more than in England or the Russian Republic, according to the [East-West Church and Ministry Report](#) from spring 2013.



Ukrainians gather for

a political rally before elections set for May 25. (Voice of America image) Baptists in Ukraine numbered 151,000 and were dispersed among 2,517 congregations in 2010, according to the report, and are well organized with an association in each of the country's 25 provinces. The 25 associations are grouped into six regions, each headed by its own superintendent, Wardin said. Another 16,000 worship as unregistered Baptists, refusing to comply with government regulation of churches.

A third of the Baptists in Ukraine are located in eastern provinces

A third of the Baptists in Ukraine are located in region five of the Baptist union. It includes the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, where pro-Russian forces held a rogue and largely unrecognized May 12 election declaring independence from Ukraine.

The country has a Baptist presence in its parliament, according to a Baptist World magazine 2013 article. About 15 members of parliament from different political parties have comprised a prayer group since 2008 that has met for prayer and Bible study each Thursday before parliamentary sessions.

In Crimea, annexed by Russia, Baptists number 3,836 and maintain 469 churches, according to the ministry report. Churches in Crimea would be welcomed in the Russian Baptist Union, as would Baptist churches in eastern Ukraine provinces where pro-Russian forces are active, Wardin said.

"If they (eastern provinces) were actually annexed, I am sure the Russian Baptist Union would accept them, even though the Russian Baptist Union wants peace and doesn't want disruption," he said. "No doubt, a lot of Baptists would not like to be with the Russian Republic either, politically, so there's those things."



Gottfried Alf, the first ordained Baptist minister in Russia. Baptists would enjoy enough religious freedom in Russia to

continue fellowship and evangelism, Wardin said.

"I think even if (Ukraine) were gobbled up in Russia, Baptists are kind of a small minority, so I think they would get as much freedom as it is in Russia itself," Wardin said. "And Baptists are doing pretty well when it comes to freedom in the Russian republic."

Ukraine's population of 44.8 million is nearly 70 percent Orthodox Christian, and only 2.4 percent Protestant, including Baptist, Pentecostals and others, according to the Ukraine census.

In April, Baptist leaders from Russia and Ukraine met for the first time since the February overthrow of the Ukrainian government. They drafted a joint statement encouraging prayer and peace, according to the Russian Baptist union.

'Pray for peaceful resolution'

"All of our congregations pray continually for peace between our peoples as well as for those who have suffered during the course of the recent political stand-off," the statement reads. "We pray for the maintenance of lasting peace and understanding between the citizens of our countries independent of their national and confessional affiliations. ...

"We call on our brothers and sisters in the churches of Russia and Ukraine to pray for a peaceful resolution of the political confrontation between our two countries," Ukrainian and Russian Baptists stated jointly.

"We call on our people to make every effort to avoid any provocations, to retain in their hearts love for the neighbor, to respect his human dignity and religious beliefs. We are ready, regardless of our circumstances, to cooperate further in proclaiming the gospel in our own countries and throughout the world."

Wardin's interest in Eastern European Baptists soared after he learned of his ancestral ties to the spread of the Baptist religion there.

First ordained Russian Baptist minister

"My great-great-granduncle, named Gottfried Alf, was the first ordained Russian Baptist minister in the Russian Empire. He was living in what today would be Poland, which then was a part of Russia," Wardin said.

"And on his own study of the Scripture, he had a religious experience. Nobody came to convert him. And he was so excited about what he felt about the Lord and salvation and so on, he began to preach. He became a kind of revivalist on his own, and he got response."

Wardin recorded Alf's Baptist work in the 2003 book, *Gottfried F. Alf: Pioneer of the Baptist Movement in Poland*, published by the [Baptist History and Heritage Society](#) of Brentwood, Tenn., and Fields Publishing Inc. of Nashville.