

# History of the Hare Krishna Movement in the U.S.S.R.

by David V. Jakupko

In 1965, His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, traveled from India to New York City on the instruction of his Spiritual Master to establish the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), more commonly known as the Hare Krishna Movement. Soon, the Movement grew into a worldwide spiritual society dedicated to transplanting the timeless spiritual culture of ancient India to the twentieth-century Western world.

In 1971 after traveling around the globe establishing sixty-five centers of ISKCON Srila Prabhupada made an official visit to Moscow at the invitation of Professor G. G. Kotovsky, head of the Indian and South Asian

Studies Department of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences.

Srila Prabhupada hoped to speak extensively before Soviet audiences as he had addressed audiences during his travels throughout the world. However, upon his arrival in the Soviet capital he found this was not possible and it appeared his audience would be limited to this one Soviet Indologist.

Srila Prabhupada had only one meeting with the Russian scholar. At that meeting Srila Prabhupada expressed his eagerness to lecture before the interested academicians in the Academy, but the Professor flatly refused stating that it would not be permitted.

Professor Kotovsky cited the fact that numerous ancient Indian classics had been translated and published in the Soviet Union. They were so popular that the entire printing of each book had been sold out in one week. He also commented that the Soviet people had great interest in ancient Indian culture. It could be understood that since there was such an extreme interest in the culture and philosophy of India, it had to be somewhat restricted, thus it was impossible for Srila Prabhupada to speak. One day two young men, one the son of an Indian diplomat and the other a young Muscovite, met Srila Prabhupada's secretary on a Moscow street while he



*His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada visiting Moscow in 1971.*

was out shopping. The secretary, a Western disciple, dressed in his flowing white robes, and with a long tuft of hair at the back of his shaved head, attracted their attention. They went with him to the National Hotel to meet Srila Prabhupada in his room. The Indian boy was very friendly and helpful and offered to bring green vegetables for Srila Prabhupada. The Russian boy, Anatoli Pinyayev, was very interested in philosophy and Srila Prabhupada began explaining the philosophy of Krishna Consciousness conveying as much basic information as possible during the short visit. He also taught him how to chant the Hare Krishna mantra and sing traditional songs of devotion.

Anatoli returned to Srila Prabhupada's room for the next two days and learned from him the principles of Krishna Consciousness including traditional Indian vegetarian cooking. He was being trained so that after Srila Prabhupada left Moscow he could continue on his own. In the young Russian's eagerness and intelligence Srila Prabhupada found the real purpose of his visit to the U.S.S.R.

Srila Prabhupada had brought the Hare Krishna Movement to yet another country and planted the seed of spiritual growth in a most unlikely place. It was like the needle and everyone and everything connected with him were like many pieces of the thread that would follow.

Srila Prabhupada had commented that when cooking rice, the cook need test only one grain to determine if the entire pot of rice is done. Similarly, by talking with this one Russian youth, Srila Prabhupada could tell that millions of other Russians would also be interested in Krishna Consciousness. Srila Prabhupada formally initiated this young Russian man into spiritual life and gave him the name Ananta Shanti dasa. The establishment of the Hare Krishna Movement in the Soviet Union was opened not by devious espionage against the Soviet government, but by the presence of Krishna's dedicated representative and his desire to impart Krishna's message to the people of the Soviet Union.

During the next ten years, Anatoli was joined by a few members of the



BBT stall at 1979 Moscow International Book Fair.

Hare Krishna Movement, including one of the Movement's spiritual masters, Srila Harikesa Swami Visnupada, who continued to train him in the science of Krishna Consciousness. Anatoli traveled extensively throughout the Soviet Union. He preached and taught what he learned from his spiritual master, Srila Prabhupada, and what he had read in Srila Prabhupada's books, published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT), the publishing division of ISKCON. These books are elaborate translations and commentaries of the great Vedic literatures of India.

In 1979, David V. Jakupko (Kirtiraja dasa), an International Representative of the BBT, attended the Second Annual Book Fair to set up and manage a BBT stall displaying all of Srila Prabhupada's sixty books. Thousands upon thousands of interested Soviet citizens came to view the beautiful book display; more than 26,000 people sampled traditional Indian sweets prepared by the Soviet Hare Krishna devotees and offered to Lord Krishna. Soviet authorities now credit this 1979 Moscow International Book Fair as the time when the Hare Krishna Movement began to gain substantial influence in the U.S.S.R.

The first publicity that the Hare Krishna Movement received in the Soviet press was compliments of S. Tsvigan, who was then the number two man in the K.G.B. In an article published in "Kommunist", the official journal of the Soviet Communist

Party, he stated that "the three greatest threats to the Soviet Union were Western culture, pop music and Hare Krishna."

In the Spring of 1981, the Soviet newspaper "Sotsialisticheskaya Industriya", published an article detailing the arrest of Yevgeny Tretyakov in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk. Yevgeny was charged with organizing a branch of the Hare Krishna Movement there. He was sentenced to 1-1/2 years in prison.

In 1981, a Hare Krishna congregation in Moscow, led by Vladimir Kritsky and Sergei Kurkin (see page 31), applied to register the Movement as an official religious organization. They had been instructed to do this by the local officials and were informed that the police and K.G.B. would continue to raid their meetings as long as they were not "registered."

Their application was refused with the explanation that "the Hare Krishna Movement is ideologically deviant" and that "there is only one ideology permitted in the Soviet Union and that is Marxism-Leninism." Shortly afterwards, they were both arrested and charged under Article 227 of the criminal code of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. This law prohibits "anti-social religious activity."

The exact wording of Article 227 is as follows:

"Infringement of Person and Rights of Citizens Under Appearance of Performing Religious Ceremonies."



*A group of Hare Krishna believers in the U.S.S.R.*

"The organizing or directing of a group, the activity of which, carried on under the appearance of preaching religious beliefs and performing ceremonies, is connected with the causing of harm to citizens' health or with and other infringements of the person or rights of citizens, or with the inducing of citizens to refuse social activity or performance of civil duties, or with the drawing of minors into such groups, shall be punished by deprivation of freedom for a term not exceeding five years or by exile for a similar term with or without confiscation of property.

"The active participation in the activity of a group specified in paragraph one of the present article, or the systematic propaganda directed as the commission of acts specified in paragraph one of the present article, shall be punished by deprivation of freedom for a term not exceeding three years, or by exile for the same term, or by correctional tasks for a term not exceeding one year.

Note: If the acts of persons stated in paragraph two of the present article, and the persons themselves, do not represent great social danger,

measures of social pressure may be applied to them. (Ved. 1962 No. 29 item 449, Edict. 25 July 1962)".

In December of 1982, Vladimir Kritsky was sentenced to 4 years in a corrective labour camp and Sergei Kurkin to 2-1/2 years.

In February of 1983, the trade union newspaper "Trud" said that the Hare Krishna Movement was "illegal" because it is "anti-Communist" and caused "mental distress among its devotees."

In June of 1983, "Nedelya", the weekly supplement to the Soviet newspaper "Izvestia", alleged that a clandestine Hare Krishna organization had been set up in the Soviet Union following a visit by an American member, Robert Campagnola (Sri Visnupada), and that its activities were funded by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The article stated that Sri Visnupada was a long time C.I.A. agent who specialized in ideological subversion. Both claims, of course, are completely unfounded. In the article, "Nedelya" also published a photo of Sri Visnupada which was taken by a Hare Krishna member during a ceremony in Moscow. The photo had been confiscated from the

member by the K.G.B.

Also in 1983, the Soviet journal "Science and Religion" published an extensive thirteen page, two part article on the Hare Krishna Movement, presenting the Movement, needless to say, in a very negative way.

Judging from the extensive coverage given to the Hare Krishna Movement in the official Soviet press, the authorities regard it as strongly anti-Soviet. What also appears to be of major concern to the Soviet authorities is the fact that most of the members of the Hare Krishna Movement in the U.S.S.R. are from the intelligent class of Soviet society. Most are either University students or University graduates and professionals. In one police raid of a meeting of Hare Krishna devotees and people interested in Krishna Consciousness, in the town of Ovrdlowks, the police and city authorities were surprised to find a university professor, a newspaper editor and an astronomer in attendance.

In August of 1984, the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust published the Russian language edition of "Bhagavad-gita As It Is" by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami



*A gathering of devotees in Soviet Armenia.*

Prabhupada. It has been enthusiastically received by those scholars and members of the general public in the U.S.S.R. who have been fortunate enough to receive a copy of it. Due to strict Soviet censorship, it is not possible to officially import these books into the country.

These followers of the Hare Krishna Movement in the Soviet Union, who are confined to labour camps and compulsory labour are there not for crimes or violence. They have been imprisoned simply because they have peacefully and non-violently exercised their right to freedom of religion. This right is guaranteed by the Soviet Constitution (articles 50, 52, 56) the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (articles 18, 19), ratified by the U.S.S.R. in 1973 and by the Helsinki Accords on Security and Cooperation in Europe (section 1 (a) VII).

Throughout the country, in all major cities and towns of all the Soviet Republics there are Hare Krishna devotees. There are three hundred fully initiated members of the Hare Krishna Movement in the Soviet Union. Unofficial sources in the U.S.S.R. estimate that there are over ten thousand practitioners of Krishna Consciousness in the U.S.S.R.

Those initiated by a Krishna Conscious spiritual master one must have been following for at least the

previous one year the four basic regulative principles which are:

1. No eating of meat, fish or eggs.
2. No gambling.
3. No taking of intoxicants, including drugs, alcohol, coffee, tea and cigarettes.
4. No illicit sex. (This means no sex outside of marriage and in marriage only for the procreation of children).

In addition, also for at least one year, the prospective candidate for initiation must have been chanting the Hare Krishna Mantra: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, at least 1,728 times daily, in a similar way as one would say the rosary on special

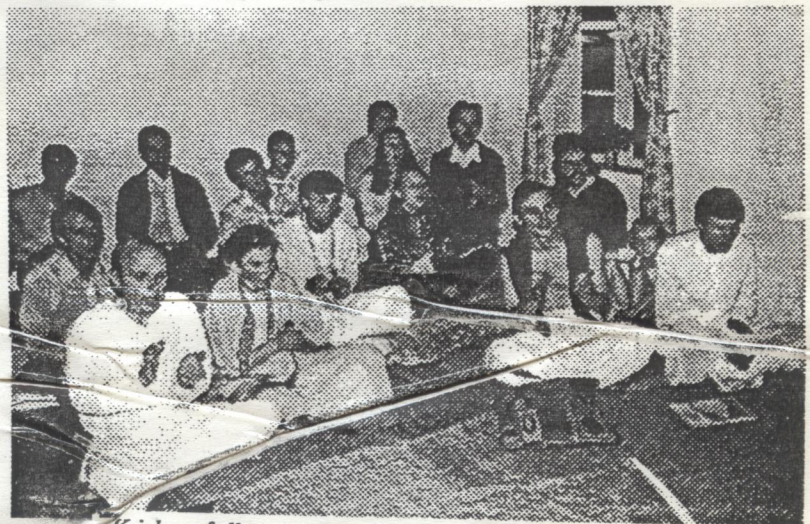
prayer beads. This chanting usually takes about 1-1/2 hours and is done in the early morning.

Presently there are seven members of the Hare Krishna Movement who are imprisoned in labour camps and compulsory labour in the Soviet Union. All seven are adopted by Amnesty International and the members of A.I. are working very actively on behalf of these prisoners of conscience.

At this time, an international campaign is underway to demand the following of the Soviet authorities:

1. That all members of the Hare Krishna movement imprisoned in the U.S.S.R. be released from their imprisonment in Soviet labour camps and compulsory labour and, if they so desire, be permitted to leave the Soviet Union with their families to freely practice the religion of their choice.

2. That those members of the Hare Krishna Movement in general, choosing to remain in the Soviet Union, and agreeing to follow the laws of their country, be permitted to register branches of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in their respective cities and villages. And, subsequent to this registration, the members of the congregation, be permitted to practice their religious beliefs and ceremonies without intrusion on the part of the Soviet authorities and without threat of prosecution and imprisonment. □



*Soviet Hare Krishna followers chanting. The Movement has spread to over 60 cities in the U.S.S.R.*

# Activities of Soviet Hare Krishnas

## Summer 1987 — Hare Krishna Devotees Chant in the Streets of Major Soviet Cities Despite Police Persecution

In July 1987, the "Festival of India" went to the Soviet Union. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev welcomed the event. Mr. Gorbachev quoted the classic Indian scripture *Bhagavad-gita* at one of the functions in Moscow while receiving Mr. Gandhi and other Indian dignitaries.

The opening of an Indian festival in their country encouraged the Soviet Hare Krishna devotees to take to the streets of the biggest Soviet cities and chant traditional Indian prayers openly exposing their fellow citizens to the spiritual culture of India.

In India, chanting of God's name in public, as well as individually, is an ancient religious practice. On many occasions each year thousands of devotees take to the streets for festivities glorifying the Supreme Lord.

In the Soviet Union, however, these spiritual practices have been unthinkable for years because of the harsh persecution of the Hare Krishna devotees throughout the country. At that time there was 23 Hare Krishna followers in the U.S.S.R. imprisoned in labour camps and psychiatric hospitals despite all the claims of "glasnost" or greater openness in Soviet society.

Still, one day in July 1987 more than 50 Soviet Hare Krishna members gathered near Lenin Stadium in Moscow where the Festival of India was taking place. They came to the Soviet Capital from Leningrad, Riga, Vilnius, Tallin, Kiev, Tbilisi, Yerevan and many other Soviet cities. Welcoming the Festival of India to their country, the Soviet followers of Indian spirituality started to chant "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama" in public

for the first time in the history of the Soviet Hare Krishna Movement.

This event was attended by media reporters from Austria, Switzerland, West Germany, Great Britain and the USA. Hundreds of people in the streets also gathered to witness this unusual occasion.

Soon Hare Krishna devotees could be seen chanting and dancing in many different locations in Moscow, such as Staray Arbat, VDNH, Gorki Park and even Red Square. While the Festival of India was in Moscow the visiting Indian musicians joined the Hare Krishnas on the streets after presenting their own programs on stage. This was a very happy experience for the Soviet Hare Krishna followers, singing and dancing with guests from India, who were so much surprised to find followers of Indian spiritual culture in the U.S.S.R.



*Chanting outside the Festival of India by Soviet Hare Krishnas in Moscow.*



Public chanting in Moscow, July 1987.

By the beginning of August 1987, the Hare Krishna devotees could be seen in the streets of several major Soviet cities. Public chanting took place in Leningrad outside the famous Kazansky Cathedral (now used as a museum of atheism) in the center of the city, as well as outside the Petropavlovskaya Fortress, and at the Russian Museum. Many people appreciated these new scenes in the streets of big cities and joined the devotees in their chanting and discussions of Indian spiritual tradition, philosophy and culture. On weekends crowds of over one thousand people took part. *Washington Post* reported that this was tangible indication of what Mr. Gorbachev's "glasnost" gives to the Soviet people.

Unfortunately, this new tolerant attitude of the Soviet authorities did not last very long. On the 16th of August 1987 more than 30 devotees celebrated their greatest holiday of the year, the appearance day of Lord Krishna, by congregational chanting on Staray Arbat. There they were joined by a large crowd of people. The next day, however, the chanting on Staray Arbat was quickly stopped by the police and 10 devotees were taken to a police station. They were detained for 6 hours, accused of "disturbing the public order" and fined 50 rubles each. The devotees were told to stop the congregational chanting on Moscow streets even though so many people appreciated it.

On the 18th of August the chanting was stopped outside the Concert Hall in the city of Riga.

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Several devotees were arrested. One Krishna devotee, Valentin Yaroshuk,

collected signatures for a letter of protest from among the people watching the chanting party. He managed to collect 20 signatures before he was arrested himself by two policemen with dogs. After his arrest he was severely beaten and taken to a hospital.

Earlier in August, Krishna devotees in Kiev were arrested and beaten for performing congregational chanting in the streets there. Among them was the father of two small children, Lev Chernyak, from Chernigov. His sister held a demonstration in Moscow and his wife, Larissa Chernyak, who was undergoing surgery in Kiev, went on hungerstrike. Only after this was Lev Chernyak released.

Harassment of Hare Krishna devotees for chanting in the streets of Soviet cities is continuing. In her letter to Soviet legal authorities, Larissa Chernyak wrote, "the Festival of India is now going on in our country with great success. Why are we not allowed to sing in the streets the very same songs that are heard at the Indian festival???" Many people in the Soviet Union and around the world are also interested to know why. □



Krishna devotees chanting publicly in Riga, July 1987.