



EURASIA



Ezra Taft Benson, fifteenth secretary of agriculture, January 21, 1953–January 20, 1961.

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Apostle Ezra Taft Benson's 1959 Sermon
at Moscow's Central Baptist Church

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While visiting members and missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Eastern Europe in the summer of 2009, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf and Elder Neil L. Andersen toured Moscow's Central Baptist Church. The two LDS officials toured the historic structure on June 2 with Baptist leaders Vitaly Vlasenko and Sergey Zolotarevsky. What prompted twenty-first-century Mormon leaders to seek out this historic Baptist church in Russia of all places?

Five decades earlier, this two-hundred-year-old Protestant chapel, located near the Russian Kremlin and Red Square, was the site of a remarkable Christian sermon by one of President Uchtdorf and Elder Andersen's apostolic predecessors. On October 1, 1959, Elder Ezra Taft Benson,¹ then U.S. secretary of agriculture under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, visited the Moscow church during

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his two-week diplomatic tour of Eastern Europe and there offered an impromptu Christian sermon during the height of the Cold War.

“Fifty years go fast, and lots of things have changed. But the desires of the heart have not changed,” President Uchtdorf remarked to Zolotarevsky. “And we appreciate very much that Apostle Benson could come here and talk about Christ as you still do here, and as we try to do.” The Mormon leaders reflected on the warm welcome they received from Moscow’s Baptist officials. “Our friends from the Baptist church were very kind, very friendly. They invited us to come. We met with them in this historic place and stood at the pulpit with them and could feel how the message of Jesus Christ—even with different doctrinal feelings and different beliefs—unites us [as] people as we try to follow Him, our Savior,” President Uchtdorf commented.²



Pastor Sergey N. Zolotarevsky, Vitaliy K. Vlasenkov, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, and Elder Neil L. Andersen stand at the pulpit Elder Ezra Taft Benson spoke from in 1959, at the Central Baptist Church, Moscow, Russia, June 2, 2009. (© Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

Although the Prophet Joseph Smith called two missionaries to preach in Russia in 1843 (they never made it), and a few scattered members were baptized in the 1890s, it was not until the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War that Latter-day Saints truly made a proselyting push into Russia, despite dedicating the land for the preaching of the gosepl in 1903. In fact, Mormon missionaries first arrived in St. Petersburg in 1990, and Russian lawmakers officially recognized the Church in May 1991.³ Since Benson's visit in 1959, Moscow's Central Baptist Church has been a favorite place for local Latter-day Saints and visiting Church authorities to tour. General Authorities and other Church guests are regularly brought to the location and photographed outside its walls.

Secretary Ezra Taft Benson Confronts Communism

Ezra Taft Benson was born in August 1899 in the small farming community of Whitney, Idaho. After serving in the military during World War I, he served as a missionary to England and thereafter graduated from Brigham Young University with honors. He then attended Iowa State College for graduate training in agricultural science. Upon graduation, he worked as a farm agent for his hometown community, served as a specialist for the University of Idaho, and promoted farm cooperatives. Eventually he was named the executive secretary of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, one of America's largest agricultural organizations, and served on President Franklin D. Roosevelt's National Agricultural Advisory Committee during the dark years of World War II. He also served as a stake president in Boise, Idaho, and later in Washington, DC.⁴

Church leaders called Benson to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in October 1943. Following the devastation of World War II, he presided over the European Mission and oversaw the humanitarian

efforts of the Church in those war-torn nations, beginning in 1946. This leadership experience abroad had a major influence on his worldview. "Confronting the horrors of National Socialism and Stalinist Communism, he developed a deep, abiding hatred of fascism, socialism, and especially Communism," one historian noted. "For Benson, individual liberty lay at the heart of God's plan for his children."⁵ He was particularly troubled by the rise of nonbelief and the demise of civil liberties in the Soviet Bloc. To Benson, Communism and atheism "were an affront to his role as an Apostle of Jesus Christ and a denial of everything he held sacred. There could be no compromise with such a system. He was willing to debate the political and the economic issues involved in the conflicts between capitalism and Communism, but his mind was closed irrevocably against any concession to atheism," one of his biographers explained. "This accounts for his unyielding, implacable opposition to Communism and Communistic governments."⁶ Benson returned from the European Mission an ardent opponent of these noncapitalistic and anti-Christian systems.

In 1953, ten years after Benson's apostolic ordination, President Dwight D. Eisenhower invited him to serve in his cabinet as secretary of agriculture, a post he would hold until 1961.⁷ Never before had a Latter-day Saint held such a high position in the government of the United States. He quickly became known for his conservative political views and innovative agricultural initiatives. In the fall of 1959, Soviet premier Nikita S. Khrushchev announced an official state visit to Washington, DC, preliminary to a reciprocal diplomatic visit to Moscow by Eisenhower planned for the following year. The political frost of the Cold War seemed to be thawing, and leaders of both superpowers, along with the rest of humanity, hoped to ease tensions and promote world peace. Khrushchev desired to see America and its supposedly flawed capitalist system firsthand.

That September, the U.S. State Department asked Benson to escort Khrushchev's envoy to one of the Department of Agriculture's



Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev with Agriculture Secretary Ezra Taft Benson and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge during his visit on September 16, 1959, to the Agricultural Research Service Center. Left to right: U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge, Secretary Ezra Taft Benson, Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, and high milk producer Impgodo Alice. (Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.)

experimental agricultural stations. “I, of course, agreed, but I must say my enthusiasm for the project could have been put in a small thimble,” he wrote. “By my lights, Khrushchev was, and is, an evil man. He has about as much conception of moral right and wrong as a jungle animal. I just couldn’t picture President Eisenhower sitting down with him and accomplishing anything worthwhile.”⁸ Notwithstanding his personal reservations, Benson accompanied the Soviet leader to the USDA’s Research Center, located in nearby Beltsville, Maryland, on the morning of September 16. Khrushchev recalled in his memoir, “It was suggested I go there, and I accepted the invitation. There I was

shown chickens, geese, ducks, and above all turkeys. Turkey meat is especially valued in the United States. On holidays every American considers it obligatory to have a roast turkey on the table. I inspected their poultry farming installations with interest.”⁹

Khrushchev had more than a passing curiosity in American fowl and farming. During the Cold War, agricultural output, along with every other productivity metric, was used by Russian and American leaders alike to “keep score” in the battle between communism and capitalism in the public square. Not surprisingly, Khrushchev and Benson postured accordingly during their strained encounter on the animal farm. There is no question that the two men were advocating radically different economic and political systems, and neither was shy about expressing his divergent hopes for the future. Although fairly cordial that day in Maryland, each man would go away convinced that the other was misguided at best and dangerous to political aspirations for the world at large. Benson despised Khrushchev in the years to come.¹⁰

Secretary Benson’s 1959 Tour of Eastern Europe

The Soviet premier remained in America until September 27, touring a number of cities and sites. A week after meeting with Khrushchev in Maryland and Washington, DC, Benson departed the United States on a diplomatic tour of the Soviet Union. Joined by his wife, Flora, and daughters Beverly and Bonnie, Benson and four USDA staffers flew out of the nation’s capital on a chartered military plane. Ten American journalists assigned to cover Benson’s European travels accompanied the group. Between September 23 and October 9, the Bensons and their entourage toured Yugoslavia, West Germany, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. During his trip, the Mormon Apostle often reflected on how much had changed since the dark days of World War II, but also on the contemporary problems he encountered. Given his previous humanitarian

experiences in Europe in 1946 and his resulting disdain for all things communistic, he did not relish the opportunity to be back in Soviet territory.

The American diplomatic envoy visited Belgrade, Yugoslavia, its first stop on the European tour, and Benson was granted an audience with President Tito. "Tito is head of a totalitarian, Communist government and I never lost sight of that fact, yet he did impress me as being sincerely desirous of peace between east and west and of improving economic conditions in his country. If only he could be made to see the dynamic quality of freedom!" Next they traveled to Germany, which was then divided between west and east. "In Germany we continued the pattern, visiting government officials, holding press conferences, and visiting farms." The juxtaposition of Allied versus Soviet Berlin left a confirming imprint on Benson's worldview.

Benson and his party next toured Warsaw, Poland, and the surrounding environs. He noted that the Polish farmers seemed bent against communal ownership of agricultural lands, preferring to own and farm their own properties. Not surprisingly, Benson focused his attention on the produce, dairy, and meat production capabilities of the Communist system, just as Khrushchev had viewed American farms with a close eye earlier that year. Although Benson's guides kept him from some less-developed agricultural centers, even what he was permitted to see was underwhelming.¹¹

As both a seasoned political official and an ordained Apostle of Jesus Christ, Benson was even more concerned about the religious hunger in communist Poland. Thirteen years earlier he had visited Warsaw during his post-World War II humanitarian mission and witnessed firsthand the physical and spiritual devastation there. As Benson and his American entourage passed through the Jewish ghetto, he became heartsick as memories of his previous visit combined with his present reality. Thirteen years had passed, but not much had improved for the Polish people in Benson's mind.

Secretary Benson's private plane next flew from Poland to Russia, arriving in Moscow on Tuesday, September 29. "The Soviet Union insisted on putting a Russian crew aboard to assist our U.S. crew," he groused. Benson and his associates were curious and unsure what to expect as they landed in the heart of the Soviet Union. "Flying into Moscow, perhaps because we had been so heavily briefed, we were looking forward to new experiences. We carried much disconnected knowledge of Russia with us, but we knew the Russians would only let us see the picture they wanted us to see," he recalled.¹² Benson later described in detail the choreographed and deceptive nature of his Russian hosts. He would leave the Soviet Union feeling even more disillusioned and pessimistic about the future of communism than he did upon his arrival. This would be Benson's first and last trip to Russia as a member of Eisenhower's cabinet and of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Soviet minister of agriculture Vladimir V. Matskevich, Benson's governmental counterpart, greeted the Americans at the Moscow airport with the Russian news media in tow. That evening the Americans planned to attend a Christian service at the Central Baptist Church, at Benson's request, but due to their delayed flight, they missed their chance to worship Christ in the Soviet Union that night. The following day they visited the Russian Ministry of Agriculture, toured the Exhibition of Economic Achievements of the USSR, and walked through the All Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences. That evening they attended the world-renowned Bolshoi Theater and were dazzled by the Soviet performance. In fact, this cultural event provided one of the few positive moments of the trip for Benson.¹³

On their final day in Russia, October 1, Benson and his team were shown additional Soviet state farms and agriculture displays in the morning. That afternoon their Russian hosts took them to see downtown Moscow. They first toured Red Square, including the Christian St. Basil's Cathedral (which Benson complained was closed) and the open tombs of Communist leaders, which were a major tourist draw. Even

the world-class Kremlin Museum and treasures of the czars failed to impress the Apostle. The tour of Red Square ended at the famous GUM department store. Everywhere he looked in the Soviet Empire, Benson saw the deleterious effects of Communism and the deception of a ruling class bent on their own aggrandizement and power, the antithesis of his idealized America. He described, “The Russian leaders are



Ezra Taft Benson on Red Square in front of St. Basil's Cathedral and Lenin's Tomb, Moscow, Russia, October 1, 1959. Left to right: Ezra Taft Benson, Flora Benson, and daughters Beverly (Parker) and Bonnie (Madsen). (Courtesy of Church History Library.)

very conscious of their limitations and they try to compensate by putting up a big front.”¹⁴ Virtually nothing about Russia was particularly impressive, noteworthy, or worthy of emulation, in Benson's mind, not even the czar's tourist traps along the Muscovy River.

Moscow's Central Baptist Church

After touring the historic heart and Communist center of Russia, Benson and his party were scheduled to travel on to Kiev, Ukraine. “The most remarkable incident of the entire trip occurred our last evening in Moscow,” Benson reminisced.¹⁵ Up to this point he had been experiencing his trip as secretary of agriculture for the United States, and the vast majority of his comments were offered from that perspective. But on that October 1959 night, he was an Apostle of Jesus Christ. (Years earlier he had been “set apart” as a U.S. cabinet member by Church leaders and told to share his testimony.) He noted in his memoir that for the

past four decades the leadership of the Soviet Union encouraged atheism and discouraged religion. Lenin, Marx, and Stalin had all embraced Communism and rejected Christianity. Benson did note, however, that a few churches were open for worship in Moscow but were viewed as “merely to create a pretense of freedom.” According to his sources, in a city of over five million inhabitants, there were only twenty-eight churches in Moscow holding services, twenty-three of them being Russian Orthodox, with two Baptist churches, two Jewish synagogues, and one Muslim mosque. He continued, “The Communists say those who go to church do so out of curiosity, not devotion or belief. The young people don’t go, we were told, only the old.”¹⁶

Recall that two days earlier Benson and the American delegation had arrived in Moscow too late at night to worship in Russia. Now, as they headed to their airport to depart, it seemed that he would never have the chance to celebrate Jesus Christ on Soviet soil. For several days, the Mormon Apostle had requested to visit one of the capital city’s Christian churches, and his host, Matskevich, promised to deliver the desired opportunity. But Benson’s Russian guides had done nothing to make this a reality and actually seemed bent on thwarting his request. Finally he took matters into his own hands and learned the location of the historic Christian congregation not far from Red Square. Having run out of excuses about the same moment the Americans were almost out of time, the Russians at last gave in to his request. “I mentioned again to one of our guides my disappointment that we had had no opportunity to visit a church in Russia,” recalled Benson. “He said a few words to the chauffeur, the car swung around in the middle of the avenue and we eventually pulled up before an old stucco building on a dark, narrow, cobblestone side street not far from Red Square. This was the Central Baptist Church.”¹⁷ Benson’s wish was finally granted—he would be able to worship with other Christians in the center of Communism.

The American reporters accompanying Benson and his family did not initially share the Mormon leader’s enthusiasm for church

services in Moscow. For example, Grant Salisbury and Warren K. Leffler, the writer-photographer team for *U.S. News and World Report*, remembered that they and their fellow journalists laughed about this possibility in atheist Russia—the previous Sunday all members of the press corps had declined Benson’s invitation to join him and his family at a West Berlin chapel. “In Moscow, we had no choice because the cars picked us up at the hotel and stopped at the church on the way to the airport. It was around 7:30 o’clock on the chill, rainy evening of October 1. As the cavalcade of cars arrived at the Central Baptist Church, on a narrow side street not far from Red Square, somebody wisecracked, ‘Well, boys, you’re going to get to church whether you like it or not,’” the two reporters noted.¹⁸ The American leader and Mormon Apostle took the American press group to church, giving them a memory they would never forget.

The Americans were not sure what to expect when they disembarked from their Russian limousines at the historic Baptist building that night. Certainly, they did not anticipate many Russian Christians to be in attendance. Benson explained, “Our guides had told us that the churches were empty, that no one attended church any more, that religion was the opiate of the people, and that the people had risen above religion.” So he and the others expected few worshippers to be in the chapel. “It was a rainy, disagreeable October night with a distinct chill in the air. But when we entered the church, we found it filled; people were standing in the hall, in the entry, even in the street. Every Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday, we learned, similar crowds turnout,” Benson described. “I looked at the faces of the people. Many were middle-aged and older but a surprising number were young. About four out of every five were women, most of them with scarves about their heads. We were ushered into a place beside the pulpit.”¹⁹

The scene likewise took the American journalists by surprise. Tom Anderson, editor and publisher of *Farm and Ranch* magazine, wrote with emotion, “Every face in the old sanctuary gaped incredulously as

our obviously-American group was led down the aisle. They grabbed for our hands as we proceeded to our pews, which were gladly vacated for our unexpected visit. Their wrinkled, old faces looked at us pleadingly. They reached out to touch us almost as one would reach out for the last final caress of one's most-beloved just before the casket is lowered. They were in misery and yet a light shone through the misery. They gripped our hands like frightened children."²⁰ Others likewise described the surprisingly cramped quarters: "The small church was packed, with people standing wherever they could find room."²¹ Over a thousand Christians filled the small chapel that evening. None of the Americans in attendance anticipated such a meeting in atheistic Russia.

While Benson had sought to worship with a Christian congregation in the Soviet Union, he did not plan on speaking that October evening. After being ushered into the Baptist building, the Bensons and the American journalists were seated on the rostrum, overlooking the congregants. Benson was moved by what happened next: "The minister spoke a few words, and then the organ struck a chord or two and began a hymn in which the entire congregation joined as one. Hearing a thousand to 1,500 voices raised there became one of the most affecting experiences of my entire life. In our common faith as Christians, they reached out to us with a message of welcome that bridged all differences of language, of government, of history." Following the opening hymn, the Baptist minister invited the still emotionally reeling Mormon Apostle, through an interpreter, to share a Christian sermon. "It took me a moment of hard struggle to master my feelings sufficiently to agree," Benson noted.²² He would not miss this opportunity to share his feelings on the Savior with the beleaguered Baptists and other Christians in attendance.

Benson had not come prepared to speak, but he shared his testimony of the Christian gospel and a loving Heavenly Father who esteemed all of his earthly children, whether Russian or American. His spontaneous remarks were translated from English into Russian

for the assembled crowd and captured on paper by journalists. “It was very kind of your minister to ask me to extend greetings to you,” Benson began his impromptu sermon. He continued:

I bring you greetings from the millions and millions of church people in America and around the world.

Our Heavenly Father is not far away. He can be very close to us. I know that God lives. He is our Father. Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the World, watches over this earth. He will direct all things. Be unafraid, keep His commandments, love one another, pray for peace and all will be well.

This life is only a part of eternity. We lived before we came here as spiritual children of God. We will live again after we leave this life. Christ broke the bonds of death and was resurrected. We will all be resurrected.

[I believe very firmly in prayer. I know it is possible to reach out and tap that unseen power which gives us strength and such an anchor in time of need.]

I leave you my witness as a church servant for many years that the truth will endure. Time is always on our side. God bless you and keep you all the days of your life. I pray in the name of Jesus Christ.²³

The Mormon Apostle reminisced that his words seemed to naturally flow and that his ideas seemingly reached the hearts of his listeners. As the Russian translator shared each of his short sentences, women waved their handkerchiefs, men nodded their heads, and many shed tears. When he lifted his eyes over the congregation, Benson noticed that even the second-story gallery was filled to capacity. An older woman caught his eye, and he directed his remarks to her: “With each sentence I uttered, the old head nodded assent. And old, feeble, wrinkled as she was, that woman was beautiful in her devotion.”²⁴ Two reporters described, “Watching the Russian congregation, you could see tears welling up in the eyes of people as the Secretary’s words were relayed to them through a translator.” Salisbury and Leffler continued, “At the mention of the promise of life hereafter, muffled sobs could be heard in the small church. These people, after all, were sacrificing their

chances of participating in the gains of the Communist society of Russia. Though worshipping God no longer is forbidden in the Soviet Union, those who do so usually find themselves cut off from advancement.”²⁵

Benson’s talk was not a long one, even with the Russian interpreter’s translation, but it was heartfelt and full of love. He shared, “I don’t remember all that I said, but I recall feeling lifted up, inspired by the rapt faces of these men and women who were so steadfastly proving their faith in the God they served and loved.”²⁶ The Mormon Apostle concluded his remarks when he was overcome by emotion and could no longer address the audience. Journalists Salisbury and Leffler described the final scene: “As the Secretary returned to his seat, the congregation broke into the familiar hymn, ‘God Be With You Till We Meet Again.’ They were still singing and waving their handkerchiefs as we followed Mr. Benson out of the church. All the way along the crowded aisle, hands were outstretched to shake our hands.” The duo further recalled that on the way to the Moscow airport, one of the female Soviet interpreters confessed that she felt like crying as she listened to Benson’s message that October evening.²⁷

A Night Never to Be Forgotten

Secretary Benson and his press entourage arrived back in the United States in early October 1959, after about a week in Eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, Benson returned to America more pessimistic about the agricultural production, political oppression, and spiritual starvation in the Soviet empire. Their goodwill mission had deepened his suspicions and confirmed his worst fears about Communism. “Compared with typical American country life, Soviet rural standards are almost primitive,” he later described. “Few Soviet farms have electricity compared with 97 per cent of ours and with electricity in the United States have come running water, radios, televisions, refrigerators, deep freezers, vacuum cleaners, and a whole multitude of conveniences that make

the typical farm home as modern as those in the cities. Many families on Soviet farms live in wooden cabins, even mud huts. They get to town about as often as farmers in this country used to sixty or seventy-five years ago.” Benson further noted how advanced America was in comparison to Russia in terms of transportation and telecommunication infrastructure: “Our farm families drive modern cars on hard-surface highways. The Soviet farm family rides in horse-drawn carts over roads to match. We have more telephones on farms in this country than can be found in all of Russia, city and farm combined.”²⁸ Russia had little to offer the free markets and political system of the United States, except for a case study in the futility of Communism, according to Benson.

Benson’s firsthand observations during that autumn colored his perception of the Soviet Union for the rest of his political career and Church service. In November 1959, one month after Benson’s return from Eastern Europe, President Eisenhower met with Benson and his other advisors, including Christian A. Herter, secretary of state; Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; and John A. McCone, chairman of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. Two months had passed since Khrushchev’s visit to the United States, and Eisenhower wanted to hear his inner circle’s impressions of the Soviet premier and his nation. When several cabinet members suggested that the Communists were making notable progress, Benson strongly countered their sentiments with his recent experiences in Eastern Europe. One attendee remembered, “A somewhat discordant note was produced by Benson, who had found nothing good in the USSR on his visit to see agriculture. He ended his speech on a very emotional note, describing his visit to a crowded church in Moscow and said this was the only favorable point in his visit to Russia.”²⁹ In hindsight, the fall of 1959 was one of the few positive moments in U.S.-Soviet relations after World War II. The Cold War continued to thaw until May 1960, when the Soviets shot down an American plane spying over Russia and a deep freeze returned.

When Richard Nixon, Eisenhower's vice president and the Republican nominee, lost to Democrat John F. Kennedy in the November 1960 presidential election, Benson also vacated his cabinet appointment. After eight years of living in the nation's capital, he and his family were ready to return to Utah. In early 1961 Benson resumed his full-time apostolic responsibilities at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. While he had left the politics and government affairs of Washington, DC, behind him, he "continued to express himself on political matters—frequently in a blunt, outspoken manner," according to historians Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster. "Above all, Benson increasingly clamored to alert the nation to the dangers of Communism, which, he believed posed a grave, imminent threat to American civilization. . . . In the period from 1961 to 1963, Benson promoted his increasingly strident anti-Communist views in various forums both inside and outside of his official capacity as a Mormon apostle." He also associated closely with and advocated for the John Birch Society, a right-wing activist group bent on the defeat of Communism at home and abroad.³⁰

Benson's remarkable career and Church service would continue to crescendo in the coming decades. He succeeded Spencer W. Kimball as President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1973 and as President of the Church in 1985. Benson passed away in late May 1994 at the age of ninety-four, the only Latter-day Saint to have served in the highest government and ecclesiastical circles. Given everything that he experienced and accomplished during his lifetime, it is remarkable to think that his spur-of-the-moment speaking opportunity in a Moscow Baptist church during the height of the Cold War remained one of his most meaningful experiences. The significance of that 1959 night in Russia stayed with Benson throughout his life, and he referred to it often in his apostolic ministry. "It has been my privilege to speak before many church bodies in all parts of the world, but the impact of that experience is almost indescribable. I shall never forget that evening as long as I live," Benson

reminisced. “Seldom, if ever, have I felt the oneness of mankind and the unquenchable yearning of the human heart for freedom so keenly as at that moment.”³¹

Significantly, Benson was not the only one present who felt the Spirit of Christ in the Central Baptist Church that rainy October night. To him, the power of that evening was that others heard his apostolic witness and felt a confirming testimony of God’s love for all of his children. It was a communal, not individual, experience. One American reporter described, “The Communist plan is that when these ‘last believers’ die off, religion will die with them. What the atheists don’t know is that God can’t be stamped out either by legislated atheism or firing squad. This Methodist back-slider who occasionally grumbles about having to go to church, stood crying unashamedly, throat lumped, and chills running from spine to toes. It was the most heart-rending and most inspiring scene I’ve ever witnessed.”³² His testimonial was supported by other reporters present that evening. “It turned out to be one of the most moving experiences in the lifetime of many of us. One newsman, a former marine, ranked it with the sight of the American flag rising over the old American compound in Tientsin, China, at the end of World War II,” Salisbury and Leffler wrote for their national magazine.³³

As an Apostle of Jesus Christ, Benson was a light in the darkness that night in Moscow, and his words “time is always on our side” proved to be prophetic. In June 1991, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir toured Central and Eastern Europe and performed in Moscow on June 24. After the concert, at a dinner hosted by Church officials, newly elected Russian vice president Alexander Rutskoi announced that as of May 28, 1991, the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union had legally recognized the Church and welcomed the Latter-day Saints’ efforts to “assist in the spiritual regeneration of Russia.”³⁴ A few days after this historic event, Elders Russell M. Nelson and Dallin H. Oaks reported this to President Ezra Taft Benson, recalling his visit

to Moscow in 1959. The light of the gospel had prevailed, and time proved to be on President Benson's side.

Notes

1. Biographies of Ezra Taft Benson include Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987); and Francis M. Gibbons, *Ezra Taft Benson: Statesman, Patriot, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996).
2. "Apostles Recall Historic Sermon by Ezra Taft Benson at a Moscow Baptist Church," *Mormon Newsroom*, June 5, 2009.
3. See Gary L. Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997); and Kahlile B. Mehr, *Mormon Missionaries Enter Eastern Europe* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002).
4. Reed A. Benson, "Ezra Taft Benson," in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 93–94.
5. Gary James Bergera, "Ezra Taft Benson's 1946 Mission to Europe," *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 112. See also Ezra Taft Benson, *A Labor of Love: The 1946 European Mission of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989).
6. Gibbons, *Ezra Taft Benson*, 227.
7. Reed A. Benson, "Ezra Taft Benson: The Eisenhower Years," in *Out of Obscurity: The LDS Church in the Twentieth Century* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 53–62. See also Gary James Bergera, "'Rising above Principle': Ezra Taft Benson as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, 1953–61, Part 1," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 81–122; Gary James Bergera, "'Weak-Kneed Republicans and Socialist Democrats': Ezra Taft Benson as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, 1953–61, Part 2," *Dialogue* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 55–95; and Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Ezra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture: The Eisenhower Years, 1953–1961* (Danville, IL: Interstate Printers and Publishers, 1975).

8. Ezra Taft Benson, *Cross Fire: The Eight Years with Eisenhower* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 467.
9. Sergei Khrushchev, ed., *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, vol. 3: *Statesman, 1953–1964* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2007), 158; see 187n1 for clarifying details.
10. During his October 25, 1966, address to Brigham Young University’s student body, Benson shared details surrounding Khrushchev’s visit to the United States seven years earlier: “I have personally witnessed the heart-rending results of the loss of freedom. I have talked face-to-face with the godless Communist leaders. It may surprise you to learn that I was host to Mr. Khrushchev for a half-day when he visited the United States. Not that I’m proud of it. I opposed his coming then, and I still feel it was a mistake to welcome this atheistic murderer as a state visitor.” Ezra Taft Benson, “Our Immediate Responsibility,” *BYU Speeches of the Year, 1966–67* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1966), [page].

In his political memoir, Benson described the Russian premier thus: “Khrushchev himself was the personification of Kipling’s bear who walks like a man—a short, stocky, powerful body, a round head, a full rather coarse-featured face, a great reservoir of animal energy. Khrushchev is undeniably a shrewd and single-purposed mind, cunning and alert. The more I studied him, the more I saw the bear. Like those denizens of my native West, he could be playful and jovial one moment and dangerously aggressive the next. What lay behind those appraising eyes, the loud laugh and bluff mannerisms?” Benson, *Cross Fire*, 468.

Benson would continue to reflect on and recall his 1959 interaction with Khrushchev in later speeches and publications. See Gary James Bergera, “Ezra Taft Benson Meets Nikita Khrushchev, 1959: The Embellishment of Memory,” unpublished paper, copy in author’s possession.

11. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 475–76.
12. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 477; emphasis in original.
13. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 477–79.
14. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 480–81.
15. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 485.
16. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 485.

17. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 485–86.
18. Grant Salisbury and Warren K. Leffler, “A Church Service in Soviet Russia,” *U.S. News and World Report*, October 26, 1959, 76.
19. Ezra Taft Benson, *This Nation Shall Endure* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 83.
20. Tom Anderson, “Straight Talk,” *Farm and Ranch*, December 1959, 8.
21. Salisbury and Leffler, “Church Service in Soviet Russia,” 76.
22. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 486.
23. Salisbury and Leffler, “Church Service in Soviet Russia,” 76. Benson’s bracketed fifth paragraph on the efficacy of prayer did not appear in contemporary accounts of his 1959 speech. It first appeared in his 1962 political service memoir, *Cross Fire*, 487.
24. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 487.
25. Salisbury and Leffler, “Church Service in Soviet Russia,” 76.
26. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 487.
27. Salisbury and Leffler, “Church Service in Soviet Russia,” 76.
28. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 482.
29. George Bogdan Kistiakowsky, *A Scientist at the White House: The Private Diary of President Eisenhower’s Special Assistant for Science and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 145.
30. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster, *The Mormon Quest for the Presidency* (Independence, MO: John Whitmer Books, 2008), 141–43. See also Gregory A. Prince, “The Red Peril, the Candy Maker, and the Apostle: David O. McKay’s Confrontation with Communism,” *Dialogue* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 37–94.
31. Benson, *Cross Fire*, 487.
32. Anderson, “Straight Talk,” 8.
33. Salisbury and Leffler, “Church Service in Soviet Russia,” 76.
34. Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel*, 156–57.