'How to Build a Godless Corner:' Oppression, Propaganda, Resistance and the Soviet Secularization Experiment

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Abstract

The Soviet government utilized a variety of tactics while attempting to secularize the U.S.S.R. Oppression of the Russian Orthodox Church demonstrates how interconnected faith and the former tsarist regime were. It is ironic that while trying to wipe out religion, the Bolsheviks replacement methods carried religious-type qualities as well.

The assault on the Orthodox Church that began immediately following the 1917 October Revolution in Russia has been marked with a wide range of correlated factors that together led to the organisation of the Soviet secularization experiment. The Russian Orthodox Church had for centuries been under the power and supervision of the tsarist state; as such it was deemed of utmost importance to bring a marked break between the church and the government when the Bolsheviks ascended to power. Though other denominations and belief systems were likewise hounded and harassed, such repression had often been present under tsarist rule and thus the maltreatment at the hands of the Communist party was in some ways a continuation of state intervention.

The persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church was thus unique as it fell from favour with the government and was specifically targeted because of its close links to the old royalty. The Bolsheviks in fact expected that it would collapse in the post-revolutionary order along with all other vestiges of tsarism.[1] While religious adherents were by no means the only persons targeted for Soviet discipline, the fact that Marxist-Leninist officials held such great contempt for religious belief but simultaneously trusted in the clout of religious concepts for taking hold of a people's imagination is of great historical value and interest.[2] It is indeed fascinating to look at the initial attacks on the Church, the replacement of religion with atheism and the final capitulation of the government's anti-religious stance following the outbreak of the Second World War. While the purges of religious leaders and closure of churches continued through the first two decades of Communist rule, the tactics for breaking the hold of the 'opiate of the people' transitioned into the assailment of personal belief through antireligious propaganda between 1922 and 1923. Before a thaw in relations between church and state could be ushered with the signing of a concordat between Metropolitan Sergii and Stalin in 1943, the implementation of an antireligious agenda as a way of bringing about the solidification of

Bolshevik power would take place through fascinatingly incongruous turns.

When analysing the secularizing policies of the Soviet government, one must be careful not to pit the brand of atheism that was instated by Marxist-Leninists as a necessary antonym of religion. With the emergence of personality cults dedicated to the state leaders, it is hardly possible that practices associated with religious-like behaviour were erased from the daily realities of Soviet citizens from 1917 to 1943. The depth of devotion expected from the citizens for their government and its leaders necessitated a similar type of fervour that had been present under the tsarist regimes in the Russian Orthodox Church. The Soviet secularization experiment proved to be one of the most ironic enterprises ever undertaken as the drive to wipe out all religion from the lives of the comrades was followed with fervent attempts to replace the notion of religious belief with one of 'scientific atheism.' This name was used by the Communist government to instil religious-type rituals and practices in order to gain legitimization and acceptance in the minds of the Soviet subjects. The League of Militant Atheists was formed following a congress of party propagandists and agitators in 1925 that had begun the official atheist newspaper *Bezbozhnik u Stanka* in

December 1922.[3] Among its marked goals, the Communist Party Congress' outline for the dissemination of anti-religious propaganda specifically stated that the printed materials should "unmask the counter-revolutionary role of religion and the Church, especially the Russian Church."[4] Thus it is evident that the Russian Orthodox Church was pointedly linked with tsarism and viewed as a dangerous entity that had to be forced out of the lives of the peoples of the Soviet Union.

The ascension of the Provisional Government in February 1917 allowed for a council to be called in the Russian Orthodox Church for the first time after two centuries of tsarist domination in church affairs. Patriarch Tikhon was voted into office as leader of the Russian Orthodox Church and the need for the Church to remain politically neutral was emphasised before the council disbanded in August 1918.[5] Yet even while the Russian Orthodox Church was deliberating over these measures, Lenin was working with other Bolsheviks to curtail its influence and power. By the end of January 1918, the registrations of births, marriages and deaths had been turned over to the State and all property owned by the church was nationalised. The "Decree of the Soviet of People's Commissars on the Separation of the Church

from the State, and of the School from the Church" which appeared during that same month, established that religion could no longer be taught in schools. In December 1921, a motion by Anatoly Lunacharsky, leader of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, decreed that all priests would be subject to censorship by having to submit their sermons for review prior to delivering them to their congregations. Two years after Tikhon's death in 1925 and despite continued harassment, his successor Metropolitan Sergii offered an affirmation of loyalty to the Soviet government. The illusionary bond between the Soviet government with the Russian Orthodox Church under Metropolitan Sergeii served to alienate many church members who were forbidden the practice of holding religious memorials for those of their members who were arrested. Such activity was deemed counterrevolutionary and the Patriarch continued to tout that members of church congregations were taken away for their political rather than religious convictions.[6] It was due to the apparent paradox of having the official ecclesiastical body affiliated with an atheistic regime that the underground Church came into existence.[7]

With the mass closures and desecration of churches, the religious devout turned to meeting in private

homes and apartments to fulfill their spiritual needs for congregation.[8] These gatherings were fraught with risks as large numbers of arrests; deportations and executions were being carried out against the faithful. Other believers ceased to attend religious institutions but continued to hold their convictions and tried to conceal these from the prying eyes and ears of informers and double-coats.[9] Although the persecution of religious leaders remained constant between the 1917 October Revolution and the Second World War, a host of itinerant priests sprang up and continued to conduct religious rites. The extent of their work was such that on April 15, 1937, Emelian Yaroslavsky, leader of the League of Militant Atheists, wrote in the Russian newspaper *Trud*: "It is stupid to think that if a priest is deprived of his parish he ceases to be a priest."[10] In the article, he went on to describe how the League was aware of hundreds of priests who continued to go about their religious work by wandering from villages to communal farms with their small arsenal of religious items. Resistance to anti-religious drives thus came through overt but also subversive measures as devout individuals used agency to accomplish the practice of their faith by working to evade government reprisals with varying degrees of success.

Religion in Soviet Russia between 1917 and World War Two is thus a topic ridden with profuse contradictions and ironies. Whether one chooses to discuss the strong pro-atheistic agenda of the Soviet government or the emergence of underground churches, it is difficult to simply pit the opponents as a struggle between religious and anti-religious forces. In attempting to become the anti-Church, the movement of the godless took on a fervour which was indeed religious in appearance as it sought to evangelize millions of Soviet citizens with the gospel of atheism, replacing hitherto religious practices, rituals, symbols, holidays, leaders, funerals, marriage ceremonies and even baptisms with their own Marxist-Leninist counterparts which came to be equally revered and perceived as sacred. In 1924, a brochure entitled "How to Build a Godless Corner" was included in an issue of *Bezbozhnik*. These set-apart areas of the house, school or factory also popularly appeared as 'Lenin Corners' due to the cult of personality which was triggered by Stalin following his predecessor's death. Regardless of whether they were purely atheistic or if they replaced a saint's image with that of Lenin, the corners were directly inspired from the Russian Orthodox tradition with its array of icons, prayer books and votive candles to be traditionally found in every religious household.[11] For a period of

time in 1929, the League of Militant Atheists even toyed with the idea of introducing a revolutionary calendar that would do away with the birth of Christ as the base for counting the years. A proposition to rename the days of the week so as to erase the Biblical themes of Sabbath and Christ's resurrection was also considered. Yet the revolutionary calendar was never officialized as it resembled the failed French Revolution experiment too closely and it was thought that it would shock much of the population beyond what it could accept.[12]

The League of Militant Atheists contributed to the spread of anti-religious propaganda by introducing anti-Easter and anti-Christmas campaigns and seeking to reduce absenteeism in factories during former religious holidays.[13] The first to appear among forty-four such institutions, an antireligious museum opened its doors in November 1929 in central Moscow where "the conflict of science and religion, the common origin of all religions, and the hand-in-glove relationship between the Orthodox Church and the monarchy" were emphasised.[14] Bolshevik publications had for a long time used Biblical allusions as vehicles for introducing atheist writings, such as *The Ten Commandments of the Social Democrat* in 1906 and the 1907 *Catechism of a Soldier*.[15] In the years

following the October Revolution, alternatives for religious activities and concepts sprouted at a prolific speed. The veracity of spiritual faith was brought into question and undermined in a variety of questionable ways. On February 14, 1919, the People's Commissariat of Justice ordered the relics of Russian Orthodox saints to be disinterred. If these were not preserved in their entirety, the relics were passed off as fraudulent and this type of 'proof' was utilized to subjugate belief in the supernatural.[16] Vehicles for antireligious propaganda included theatre productions, films, Soviet realism art along with a slew of efforts to depict religious activity as unhygienic, such as the kissing of icons or the taking of communion offered by a dirty priest. An 'atheist' board game of snakes and ladders was even published in a 1927 issue of *Bezbozhnik*. The text for one square of the game read, "A group of travelers has stopped to say their prayers before crossing the border into the USSR. You arrive at that moment and inform them that there is no god. By orders of the priest, the border guards deny you entry to the USSR. You return to N° 62."[17] It was thus in a variety of intriguing and at times astonishing ways that organisations such as the League of Militant Atheists sought to replace religion with an atheism of Marxist-Leninist flavour.

In 1937 the Communist government undertook a census to gauge, among other things, the proportion of Soviet citizens who retained religious beliefs after two decades of anti-religious efforts. If the League of Militant Atheists could claim success in shutting down a great number of churches during this period, the persistence of religious belief, which remained in the deepest recesses of the individual's soul, was another matter altogether. The results of the survey showed such a high proportion of lingering religious belief that the Soviet government refused to publish it. The 1937 census was declared as having contained "gross violations" of statistical norms and attempts to analyse the data were rapidly curtailed. Along with indicating a worrisome decline in the population of the Soviet Union, which reflected the overall effects of the purges, the results of the census showed that a third of the urban population and over two-thirds of the rural inhabitant still held and practiced religious belief.[18] Subsequent censuses never again questioned religious belief in citizens of the Soviet Union on the basis that, due to the separation of church and state, personal religious belief was of no interest to the state.[19] The irony had come to a full circle.

It is possible to tell from the numbers of churches that remained open how aggressive the persecution of

the Russian Orthodox Church came to be by 1936, ranging from the Ivanovo oblast which retained 61.3 percent of its churches prior to the 1917 Revolution, to the Saratov division which lost all but 6 percent of its active churches.[20] On the eve of the Second World War, the number of churches had declined to a mere 10 percent of its original 1917 number of 66,140 Russian Orthodox parishes.[21] Religious persecution had separated the superficial adherents from the convinced believers and caused great factions in the Soviet Union. Churches had been wiped out and a torrent of persecution, harassment, repression and propaganda had fallen on the religious peoples of Russia following the 1917 Revolution. Amazingly, a large number of individuals still persisted in their religious beliefs; the 1937 census had served to prove perhaps even how many found it wiser to refuse to voice their actual convictions in a government survey.

Displeased with the failure of the League of Militant Atheists to produce a more complete transformation of the Soviet people's religious consciousness, Stalin effected a turnabout with his policy on antireligious oppression. On September 4, 1943, Stalin met with Metropolitan Sergii and ratified a concordat, thus allowing for a new council to gather once again. This measure brought a watershed to the persecution of

the Russian Orthodox Church.[22] Though religious suppression and persecution was by no means abolished by the advent of World War II, a fragile partnership of more relaxed coexistence came into being between the Soviet government and the Russian Orthodox Church. The League of Militant Atheists had been disbanded in 1941 and would not reappear until the post-war period, when a similar though subdued version would be reinstated under the name of "Society for the Dissemination of Scientific and Political Knowledge."[23] It has been suggested that this change in official state policy was a deliberate attempt to eliminate the Russian Orthodox Church as an enemy. During the Second World War, the Soviet Union understandably sought to increase internal unity.[24] By ensuring that the official Church of Russia was once again in the favour of the government, Stalin harnessed a body that was well versed in the control of its people and he promoted national harmony over ideological purity in preparing the Soviet Union for war.

The Soviet secularization experiment brought together a slew of tactics that the Communist government was able to use to various degrees of success in seeking to re-educate its peoples whose minds had been blurred with centuries of sedative religion. The effect

of targeting the Russian Orthodox Church for religious oppression served to show how the official state religion was seen as so inextricably linked to vestiges of tsarist tyranny that it must not remain unchallenged by the new Bolshevik regime. In analysing the effects of church closures and repression of ecclesiastical officials, it can be argued that the Communist government helped to strengthen the prevalence of religious belief in the hearts of the sincere. However, the coupling of anti-religious projects with other repressive measures in the Soviet Union served to characterise its citizens with a growing sense of caution and self-preservation. From their very ascent to power, the Bolsheviks would undertake exuberant efforts to wipe out religious institutions from the face of the Soviet Union as these were, in their ideology at least, diametrically opposed to the philosophy of Marxist atheism. The League of Militant Atheists devised ways to replace traditional religious dogma in the soviet man's consciousness with a glut of 'scientific atheism' alternatives which retained numerous elements associated with the fulfilling of a human being's spiritual need. If one is to examine the experiences of the Soviet peoples under the Communist regime prior to World War II, it is important to acknowledge that, despite the evident irony in the desire of the Soviet

government to eradicate belief in God and the supernatural realm, the methods of replacement in Marxist-Leninist atheist tactics certainly carried religious-type qualities. As the Russian Orthodox Church was in a large part forced underground, the Soviet government faced a failure in its physical harassment of ecclesiastical buildings and then moved to subvert religious convictions through pro-atheistic propaganda that took on a variety of forms and often substituted one religious symbol with an atheist replacement. When the thaw in the relations between the Church of Russia and state under Stalin at last took place, the struggle had not ended in clear defeat for either opponent. The number of open churches had been whittled down to a meagre proportion of its pre-Revolutionary strength, but the peoples of the Soviet Union had not wholly embraced Marxist atheism and in fact such a measure of disbelief would never be confirmed.

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[1] Daniel Peris, *Storming the heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 19.

[2] Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 45.

[3] Robert Conquest, *Religion in the U.S.S.R.* (New York and Washington: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1968), 17.

[4] Conquest, 17.

[5] Gerald Buss, *The Bear's Hug: Religious Belief and the Soviet State* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 20.

[6] William C. Fletcher, *The Russian Orthodox Church Underground 1917-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 98.

[7] Buss, 26.

[8] Fletcher, 84.

[9] Fletcher, 87.

[10] Fletcher, 93.

[11] Anne Gérin, *Godless at the Workbench: Soviet Illustrated Humoristic Antireligious Propaganda* (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 2003) 41.

[12] Paul Gabel, *And God Created Lenin: Marxism vs. Religion in Russia, 1917-1929* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 198.

[13] Conquest, 25.

[14] Gabel, 357.

[15] Gabel, 361.

[16] Alexander N. Yakovlev, *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia* Translated by Anthony Austin, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 156.

[17] Gérin, 1.

[18] Froese, 121-122; Dimitry V. Pospielovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* Vol. 1 of *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice, and the Believer*. (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1987), 65.

[19] Pospielovsky, 163.

[20] Anne Dickinson, "Quantifying Religious Oppression: Russian Orthodox Church Closures and Repression of Priests 1917–41," *Religion, State & Society* 28, No. 4 (2000): 330.

[21] Dickinson, "Oppression," 332.

[22] Buss, 33.

[23] Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1961), 3.

[24] Anne Dickinson, "A Marriage of Convenience? Domestic and Foreign Policy Reasons for the 1943 Soviet Church–State 'Concordat'," *Religion, State & Society* 28, No. 4 (2000): 338.