

***“Religion is the opium of the people”*: The political intentions behind the Bolshevik anti-religion campaign of 1917-1929.**

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This paper challenges the prevailing assumption that the 1917-1929 anti-religion campaign, carried out by the Bolsheviks in the Russian countryside, was primarily intended to secularize the peasantry. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, this paper analyzes the two main tactics of the anti-religion campaign within the context of spiritual belief in rural Soviet Russia: the persecution of the clergy and the seizure of religious property. I argue that the campaign was not designed to secularize the peasantry, but to undermine the political autonomy of Russian villages.

The Marxist attitude views religion as a symptom of socioeconomic exploitation rather than as a disease itself; Marx considered religion to be “a way of dealing with an intolerable situation.”¹ To Lenin, religion was both a symptom and a disease. He wrote, “we may believe that a god or the gods will provide us succor under trial...Yet, we are deluded, for these beliefs serve to make us content...to stay the hand of justice.”² Lenin distinguished between the personal spirituality of religious people, with which he took little offense, and the institutional religion of those who propagated contentedness under oppression. Marx’s and Lenin’s ideological understanding of religion is the context that the Bolshevik anti-religious campaigns of 1917-1929 must be viewed through. There is a divergence between the Marxist and the Leninist understanding of religion, which sought to raise people above the yolk of religious belief, and the Bolsheviks’ anti-religious campaign, that worked under the guise of Marxist and Leninist thought to destroy the autonomy of peasant villages and bring the countryside under Bolshevik control. There were two major tactics within the 1917-1929 campaign: the persecution of the clergy and the appropriation of religious land and property. This paper will analyze both tactics and their impact on village cultural, political, and spiritual life, arguing that the 1917-1929 anti-religious campaign was an attack on village political and cultural autonomy,

¹ Robert Boer, *Lenin, Religion, and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 10

² Boer, *Lenin, Religion, and Theology*, 11

and not an attempt to end rural superstition.

The distinction between personal and institutional religion is a very common method within analyses of religion in Russia. Sergey Stepniak, an early revolutionary, argued in 1894 that Russian peasants are deeply spiritual yet entirely lacking in theology, and so were simultaneously very religious yet indisputably non-Christian.³ The 1922-46 Renovatianist movement in Russia, also known as the ‘Living Church,’ sought to replace Old Church Slavonic (the ancient language that prayers and hymns were written in) with modern Russian and end the blind veneration of relics, under the recognition that Christianity was essentially incomprehensible to peasant Christians.⁴ As recently as 1998, Daniel Peris argued that when studying rural Russia, “we need to distinguish between institutional religion and private religious beliefs.”⁵ Through this distinction, the general historical consensus has been that the 1920s anti-religion campaign was successful in damaging institutional religion by persecuting the clergy and appropriating religious property but failed to affect personal beliefs. However, this consensus has been based on a misunderstanding - and overestimation - of the roles that clergy and religious property actually played in rural life.

Firstly, the Russian clergy had very little to do with the peasantry’s personal beliefs, and so persecuting them could not have been expected to impact peasant religion. There were myriad ways in which the clergy was persecuted, and Bishops and ascetics were targeted most heavily. On the eve of the October Revolution of 1917, there were about one hundred and thirty bishops and assistant bishops; fifty were executed between 1923-1926 and sixty-six were either in prison or exile by the winter of 1924-25.⁶ Glennys Young argues that this persecution brought

³ Sergey Stepniak, *The Russian Peasantry*, 3rd ed, (London: S. Sonnenschein & Co, 1894), 341-4.

⁴ Gregory Freeze, “Counter-Reformation in Russian Orthodoxy: Popular Response to Religious Innovation, 1922-1925,” *Slavic Review* 54 (July 1995): 312-3.

⁵ Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 6.

⁶ Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 148.

indirect hardship on the rural villages by making the upper-clergy dependent on parish funding and manpower, but, strictly speaking, the bishops were very much removed from rural life. Belliustan, a Russian parish priest, recounted in his 1858 memoirs, “To put it briefly, bishops not only do not want to see priests as servitors of the Heavenly Father, as their co-workers in the great cause of pastorship, or even as human beings.”⁷ Thus, while the Bolsheviks successfully eviscerated the upper-clergy and shut down many monasteries, this had little effect on life in the countryside.

The persecution of parish priests, on the other hand, directly affected the villages. Prior to the revolution, village priests were supported entirely by their congregation. Village assemblies, the formal political authorities since 1861, raised money for the upkeep of their priest and church property, and priests charged fees for dispensing religious sacraments (i.e. baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, anointing of the Sick, taking holy orders, and matrimony).⁸ After the revolution, the 1918 Decree on Separation of Church and State stripped parishes of all money and property, with a 1929 amendment that outlawed priests from charging fees for performing sacraments, and the 1918 Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic excluded priests from collecting food rations.⁹ Tax rates were also exorbitantly higher for priests than for laymen. Throughout the 1920s priests were paying about 1,780 rubles per year, compared to a worker’s 320 rubles per year.¹⁰ The combination of losing their savings and property, losing the ability to charge for their services, being refused rations, and bearing absurd tax burdens made it nearly impossible for parish priests to survive, leading to a flood of priests forsaking their vows and abandoning their villages. From this perspective, the Bolshevik’s anti-religion campaign appears to have been successful in undermining institutional religion for, unlike with

⁷ I.S. Belliustan and Gregory Freeze, *Description of the Clergy in Rural Russia: The Memoir of a Nineteenth-Century Parish Priest* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 169.

⁸ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 21-5.

⁹ John Curtiss, *The Russian Church and Soviet State, 1917-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1953), 61.

¹⁰ Curtiss, *The Russian Church and Soviet State*, 230, 273.

the upper-clergy, parish priests did play active roles in their villages.

However, parish priests had little influence on the personal beliefs of the peasantry. Parish priests were in general not respected as pious, religious figures, but were seen, in the words of Vissarion Belinsky in the early nineteenth century, as “symbol[s] of gluttony, avarice, sycophancy [, and] bawdiness.”¹¹ Belliustan explained that “for him [the parish priest] the epitome of pleasure is to fraternize with the peasants in noisy, wild drinking bouts,”¹² and in response to a 1911 survey on clerical morality, one peasant from Vladimir province replied that “the clergy gives sermons from time to time, but their influence seems to be little, and in general, respect for the clergy by the people is remarkable undermined, because they themselves drink even more than the people.”¹³ Parish priests were essentially used for their ability to perform sacraments.¹⁴ Yet even this ability was not always needed, as in the case when, in the village of Korshevo in 1930, a priest refused to bless a group of peasants who were about to attack the local Bolshevik authorities. In response, the peasants broke into the church and commandeered some religious artifacts in order to bless themselves.¹⁵ Clearly, a priest’s role in a village was not overly pastoral.

As the most educated people in a village, parish priests served an important secular, and increasingly politicized, role in the countryside. Peasants and landlords alike looked to priests for advice in law, economics, and agriculture. An 1880 autobiography by Aleksander Romanov, a priest in Saratov province, recounted:

The priest became his [the peasant’s] lecturer and advisor in all of his affairs; if the miller needed to lease some land from him, [the landowner] would first ask the priest about it; if he wanted to buy some

¹¹ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 13.

¹² Belliustan and Freeze, *Description of the Clergy*, 126-7.

¹³ Patricia Herlihy, *The Alcoholic Empire: Vodka and Politics in Late Imperial Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88.

¹⁴ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 12-3.

¹⁵ Richard L. Hernandez, “Good Shepherds: The Public Authority of Parish Clergy in the Era of Collectivization,” *Russian History* 32 (2005): 200.

forest land, he would first try to see the priest; if a peasant committed an offence, he would go for protection to the clergy; if he wanted to get his son exempted from military service, he would go to petition the priest.¹⁶

Priestly secular authority was more dangerous to the Bolshevik regime than religious authority, because the Bolsheviks had to compete directly with priests for influence over peasant life. When the state began monopolizing trade in grain, some priests instructed farmers to sell their grain to the highest bidder.¹⁷ When the Komosol and the League of the Godless, a Bolshevik youth wing and anti-religious group, respectively, began holding ‘disputes,’ or public show-debates between anti-religious activists and Christians, priests were not only vastly superior debaters but their presence emboldened the peasantry to speak up for themselves.¹⁸ This phenomenon continued into village assemblies. One first-hand account of a Bolshevik during a village Soviet meeting recalls how “the mood noticeably changed for the worse” once the village priest arrived, and the murmurs that followed him eventually “turned to shouts of defiance” against requisitioning.¹⁹ The same Bolshevik complained that the priest “taught peasants to ask delicate questions...about the grain requisitioning.”²⁰ At the extreme, parish priests organized armed resistance to Bolshevik intrusion into the villages. For example, on June 25, 1929, the priest in the village of Zhruovka organized four hundred peasants in his church to attack local Bolsheviks in response to the ever-increasing taxes. There was a similar event on December 9, 1929, when the priest in the village of Gvazdy organized six hundred villagers to drive off some Bolsheviks who had come to close down the church.²¹ From these examples, parish priests were clearly dangerous to the Bolshevik regime, not because of their religious authority, but because of their political authority.

From the beginning of the revolution, the Bolsheviks had

¹⁶ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 20.

¹⁷ Hernandez, “Good Shepherds,” 205.

¹⁸ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 99.

¹⁹ Hernandez, “Good Shepherds,” 210.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 210.

²¹ *Ibid*, 200-1.

recognized that, in order to bring about a socialist state in a peasant country, they would have to bring the peasants under their direct control. Young argues that the 1924-5 policies of “revival of villages soviets” and “face to the countryside” were both explicitly intended to destroy village autonomy.²² In this context, since bishops and priests had little to no religious/moral authority among the people, the persecution of clergy should be considered, not as a means of rooting out religion, but as yet one more means of undermining village autonomy by removing them as political authority figures. One only has to examine the trial record of Father Ivanov, from the village of Verkhonii-Mamon, in which there is no reference to him spreading superstition or deluding the peasantry. Rather, the accusations and testimony focused exclusively on him “as a competing rational authority, one whose presence and rhetoric in the village belied their [the Bolsheviks’] own claims to rationality.”²³

The second major element of the anti-religious campaign was the closing and appropriation of religious buildings by the state. On January 3, 1919, a Circular on the Problem and the Separation of Church and State granted village soviets the authority to shut down or take control of religious property if they decided that it was not being taken care of properly, or if they needed a building for public purposes. Later, on April 4, 1924, a second circular took this authority from local soviets and gave it directly to the Central Committee.²⁴ It should be noted that the power to close churches was not entirely coercive or arbitrary. There are certainly instances of extrajudicial closures, especially by over-enthusiastic Komsomol members, but these were condemned by the state, and, for the most part, consent had to be given through a vote in the village soviet before 1924, and even after 1924 it was possible for peasants to successfully petition the Central Committee to keep their church open.²⁵ Thus, in 1925, the League of the Godless was tasked with persuading the peasantry to allow their churches to be closed.²⁶ Although it largely failed to do so, the League did succeed in achieving increased church closures

²² Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 110-1.

²³ Hernandez, “Good Shepherd,” 209.

²⁴ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 226-7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 227-8.

²⁶ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 10, 120.

by subterfuge. For example, when meetings were being planned to discuss the closing of a church, League members would omit the topic from the meeting agendas, or change the meeting locations to unusual places at the last minute, so that anybody who otherwise would have opposed the closure would not know about it until it was too late.²⁷ Additionally, the League would threaten would-be opposition with persecution as kulaks or by withholding pension payments.²⁸ The campaign to close churches was slow at first, with about four thousand closed by 1929, but this would increase exponentially to forty thousand by 1938.

What, then, was the importance of shutting down these buildings? Certainly, the church was an integral part of peasant religion. People flocked there on weekends and religious holidays for sermons, and baptism and marriage were important events in village life. Yet, the church was so much more than just a religious space. The church was at the very core of village identity and culture. It was, in the words of Lynn Viola, “a symbol of village solidarity” and “an icon of the village’s history, traditions, and major life events.”²⁹ As evidence of this, consider the sacrament of matrimony among loyal socialists. The Bolsheviks specifically outlawed church marriages in the 1918 Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship, providing legal status to civil marriage only. However, both the Komsomol and the League of the Godless, each considered a vanguard of secularization in the countryside, discovered that most of their members continued, not only to be baptized, but also married in their village churches.³⁰ Young contends that this is proof that anti-religion activists were not whole-heartedly opposed to religion. The simpler implication is that Komsomol and League members did not consider marriage and baptism to be entirely religious practices, but rather cultural traditions which were fundamental to the village’s group identity. Consider, also, the somewhat surprisingly well-documented importance of church bells to rural life. Hernandez points out that church bells marked the cycles of village time, announcing, to

²⁷ Ibid, 135.

²⁸ Ibid, 135.

²⁹ Lynn Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 39.

³⁰ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 87-90.

everyone for miles around, the time to plow, plant, and harvest their plots. The bells also sounded emergency alarms, rallying people in defense of their village or to combat a fire.³¹ Most importantly, church bells were often hundreds of years old and unique to the village they occupied, and thus were important symbols of tradition and identity.³² “This symbolism was so potent in Russia,” argues Hernandez, “that the bell eventually served ‘at large’ as a peculiar bearer of Russian national identity long before the Bolshevik Revolution produced alternative symbols for this purpose.”³³ To the Bolsheviks, who wanted to recreate Russia into an entirely socialist society that identified monolithically with the Party, the survival of autonomous village cultural identities was essentially anti-socialist. The centrality of church bells to village tradition is all the more important to recognize in light of the Bolsheviks’ specific targeting of these bells for destruction. The state demanded that church bells be melted down for industrial use. On December 15, 1929, the All-union Central Executive Committee gave local soviets the power to control when the bells could ring. Most strikingly, Komsomol and League members forcibly removed and destroyed village church bells, taking ‘selfies’ while standing beside the ruins of these gigantic bells.³⁴ Given the importance of churches to village cultural identity through the examples of marriage ceremonies and church bells, the Bolshevik’s campaign to close churches cannot be approached as a purely anti-religious campaign, but also an attack on the traditional culture and autonomy of village identity.

The two major elements of the Bolshevik anti-religion campaign of 1917-1929 that have been discussed, the persecution of clergy and the closure of religious buildings, had far-reaching effects on peasant life that cannot be reconciled with Marxist-Leninist condemnations of religion. According to the writings of both Marx and Lenin, religion was undesirable because it encouraged the people to blindly accept the issues of the world

³¹ Richard L. Hernandez, “Sacred Sound and Sacred Substance: Church Bells and the Auditory Culture of Russian Villages during the Bolshevik Velikii Perelom,” *The American Historical Review* 109 (December 2004):1478-80.

³² Hernandez, “Sacred Sound,” 1478.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1482.

³⁴ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 83.

(inequality, disease, etc.) instead of working to solve them. According to Marxism-Leninism, education in science would bring an end to superstition, and the Bolsheviks did make attempts at educating the peasantry. However, they also went beyond the demands of Marxism by targeting the clergy and religious property, which had a much larger effect on peasant culture and identity than their religion, and by doing so revealed that their intent was not merely to end religion, but to bring the peasantry under party control. In terms of the persecution of clergy, the upper-clergy (bishops, assistant bishops, monks, etc.) were successfully repressed, yet Belliustan's memoirs illustrate how the upper-clergy had no relationship with rural religion. Similarly, parish priests had little sway in moral and religious matters due to their vice and corruption. They did, however, play an important political role as the most educated in the village, providing peasants and landlords with legal advice, leadership, and support in resistance to Bolshevik incursion into the countryside. As such, the persecution of clergy affected peasant political capacity instead of peasant religion. As for the closure of religious property, churches were important for their utility and symbolic importance; they were more important as sites of village identity than of religion. The continued practice of baptism and church marriage among the members of the Komsomol and the League of the Godless illustrates how these practices were not considered to be primarily religious in nature, but rather as traditional rituals that fostered a cultural group identity. In view of these facts, the Bolsheviks' specific targeting of religious property illustrates how the anti-religion campaign worked more to undermine village autonomy than to end rural superstition.

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