

Stalin's War on Religion

James Coe⁵³

huma.now.official@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the context, actions, and motivation of Joseph Stalin's war on religion between the years of 1929 and 1941. This paper documents Stalin's context through the works of Karl Marx, anti-religious precedents set by Vladimir Lenin, and Stalin's own personal views on religion. Anti-religious actions of Stalin examined within this paper include the Law on Religious Associations, reshaping of the Gregorian calendar, support for the League of Militant Godless, and the Great Purge. This paper argues that Stalin's extreme levels of religious repression were done not with the sole intention of fulfilling communist ideology but rather held a distinct power-oriented motive. Religion was a state-undermining influence to Stalin's communist regime through religious followers' allocation of authority to a higher power rather than Stalin and the Communist Party. Furthermore, religion propagated ideals contradictory to the state. Stalin eases his anti-religious policies during and after World War II when it aided in stabilising his position of power proving that following communist doctrine was not his sole motivation.

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The Soviet Union has an extensive history of persecuting followers of religion. However, between the years of 1929 and 1941, the Soviet Union experienced a period of heightened religious repression under Joseph Stalin's regime. Religious gatherings were suppressed and religious followers were targeted by the state in attempts to create an atheist society. Atheism was a longstanding goal of communist ideologues and Stalin was no exception. Although Stalin held communist beliefs, he targeted religion not with the sole intention of fulfilling his ideology but instead as a practical way of solidifying his own power. Stalin's process of religious repression may begin to be understood through communist doctrine itself. This includes the teachings of Karl Marx, the anti-religious precedent by Vladimir Lenin leading into Stalin's policies, and Stalin's own view on religion. The anti-religious policies taken by Stalin include direct actions such as his Law on Religious Associations and reshaping of the Gregorian calendar, social actions such as support of the League of Militant Godless' activity, and the culmination of anti-religious repression during the Great Purge. The proof of Stalin's power-oriented motive for repression of religion may be drawn from religion's state-undermining influence and Stalin's relaxation of aggressive anti-religious policies during and after World War II when it served his own interests.

The teachings of German philosopher Karl Marx were responsible for the political ideology of communism. Marx largely concerned himself with attempting to explain the laws of history, specifically with a focus on the economic means of production. Marx divided the world into oppressive bourgeois factory owners and the downtrodden working-class proletariat. In addition to economics, Marx also addressed the issue of religion, writing: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."⁵⁴ To Marx, religion was illusory happiness which prevented true happiness by liberation in the form of communism from occurring.

Vladimir Lenin, the Soviet Union's first leader, implemented anti-religious policies that were justified by the teachings of Marx and helped to lay the groundwork for Stalin's policies. Lenin proclaimed that the entire Marxist outlook on religion should be based upon Marx's "opium of the people" quotation.⁵⁵ Lenin elaborated, writing that "Marxism has always regarded all modern religions and churches, and each and every religious organisation, as instruments of bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class."⁵⁶ It was clear to Lenin and his Bolshevik party that religion was used by the ruling class to keep the masses in thrall.⁵⁷

When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they promised to create a new civilization and sweep away the old.⁵⁸ In addition to economic, cultural, and political restructuring, religion was targeted. In order to achieve his communist utopia, Lenin adopted the policy of "gosateizm," or, in English, "state atheism". Atheism in the Soviet Union was not the same as the emotionless "bourgeoisie atheism" which saw God as a philosophical question; instead, Soviet atheism was seen as a scientific truth and deliberately partisan just like communism.⁵⁹ Lenin declared a separation between church and state on 20 January

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, "Introduction," in *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, ed. Joseph O'Malley, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/>.

⁵⁵ Vladimir Lenin, "The Attitude of the Worker's Party Towards Religion," in *Lenin Collected Works*, trans. Andrew Rothstein and Bernard Isaacs, vol. 15, March 1908-August 1909 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 402.
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/pdf/lenin-cw-vol-15.pdf>

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁵⁷ Stephen Smith, "Communism and Religion," in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, ed. Juliane Fürst, Silvio Poons, and Mark Selden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 312.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316471821>.

⁵⁸ Daniel Peris, "Introduction," in *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1. <https://doi-org/10.7591/9781501735196>.

⁵⁹ William van den Bercken, *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 125.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110857375>.

1918. The Decree on Separation of Church and State nationalised church property; removed recognition of religious entities as legal entities; ended religious education in schools; turned birth, marriage, and death into civil matters; removed religious symbols and rituals from public life; and allowed for the following of any or no religion.⁶⁰ Priests were targeted during this time and were consequently denied the right to vote, forced to pay higher taxes, and given restricted access to state resources such as rations and housing.⁶¹ Due to this treatment, many religious officials aligned with the White Army during the Russian Civil War, a decision that would lead to the death of 28 bishops and several thousand clergymen at the hands of Lenin's secret police, "the Cheka," and the Red Army.⁶² After the civil war, religious organisations were seen by Lenin as a remnant of the enemy and a final threat to his consolidation of state power. Although Lenin engaged in anti-religious policies such as sending soldiers to seize religious artefacts and sell them for famine aid in 1922, there was not a clear consensus among Bolsheviks on how to remove religion from society. There were debates as to whether religion would simply wither away as society progressed; if long-term education of science and rationality was the answer; or if the state should forcefully eliminate religion through ideological, legal, and repressive means.⁶³ Lenin's successor, Stalin, would opt for the latter.

Stalin's view on religion shaped his aggressive anti-religious policies. Stalin was first introduced to Marxism in his youth while attending Tiflis Theological Seminary. Stalin was eventually expelled from the seminary school when he became a Marxist. After a period of political activism in the Caucasus, Stalin became known to Lenin and slowly made his way into the Bolshevik Party structure. Given his close ties to Lenin and the theories of Marx, it is unsurprising that Stalin developed similar anti-religious thoughts. Stalin's view differed, however, as he took a much more repressive approach to dealing with religion. Marx only provided an ideological basis for religion's removal and Lenin failed to completely remove religion from Soviet society. Stalin believed that like the *kulaks*, an economically above-average peasant class, religion could be liquidated.⁶⁴ In 1932, the League of Militant Godless, an organisation founded in 1925 to promote atheism, announced, under the orders of Stalin, that by 1937, "not a single house of prayer shall remain in the territory of the USSR, and the very concept of God must be banished from the Soviet Union."⁶⁵ Stalin's government saw religion as the only legally existing counterrevolutionary force.⁶⁶ Such a hardline view of atheism encapsulates Stalin's anti-religious policy and his war on religion.

Soon after consolidating his power over the Soviet Union, Stalin would implement laws to directly repress religious citizens. While Lenin tended to target religious institutions, Stalin shifted focus towards denouncing religion as a whole.⁶⁷ The Law on Religious Associations, issued on 8 April 1929, was one of Stalin's early and most significant anti-religious policies. It sought to remove religion by narrowing its borders of legality within the Soviet Union and to bring all aspects of religious life under state control.⁶⁸ The Law on Religious Associations resulted in the banning of public worship, closing of religious buildings, removal of church bells, heavy taxation on functioning congregations, and the mass

⁶⁰ Smith, "Communism and Religion," 308-09.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁶⁴ Denzil Harber, "Religion in the Soviet Union," *Workers International News* 6, no. 1 (October 1945): 31. <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspaper/win/v06n01-oct-1945-workers-intl-news.pdf>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Victoria Smolkin, "The Religious Front: Militant Atheism under Lenin and Stalin," in *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 46. <https://doi-org/10.2307/j.ctt1zgb089>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

arrest of clergymen.⁶⁹ Furthermore, almost every religious activity was made illegal, including producing or distributing religious literature and raising money for charity.⁷⁰ Religious associations of at least twenty adults would face difficulty obtaining legitimacy by having to apply for permission to operate and prove they have a religious building in which they would worship.⁷¹ These local associations were the only legal religious structure recognized by the Soviet Union. In the same year, Stalin introduced the continuous five-day week. The five-day week reshaped the previous Gregorian calendar into 365 days with six five-day weeks equating into one month. Citizens were assigned different days of work and days off. Stalin enacted this dramatic change to increase factory production; however, there was a deliberate anti-religious element. Sunday, a shared day of rest when Christians could gather at church, no longer existed. Similarly, Friday no longer existed for Muslims as a holy day and Saturday no longer existed for Jews. There were no designated religious holidays, instead only five revolutionary holidays. Such actions by Stalin damaged the ability for individuals to exercise religious observance.

In addition to state law, Stalin also fostered social anti-religious behaviour. Decentralised movements were encouraged to promote anti-religious propaganda so that Stalin's atheist objective would appear to be a spontaneous desire of the masses rather than a government initiative.⁷² As previously noted, one of the most prominent anti-religious social organisations was the League of Militant Godless. Although the League of Militant Godless were founded in 1925, in June 1929, they gained extensive powers by Stalin to launch their renewed campaign to destroy religion.⁷³ By 1932, the League had five and a half million members, two million more than the Communist Party itself.⁷⁴ The League sought to bring atheism to the masses by promoting anti-religious propaganda through their newspaper entitled "*Bezbozhnik*," or in English "The Godless," as well as through journals, posters, lectures, and demonstrations.⁷⁵ One of their posters reads "the struggle against religion is the struggle for socialism" while depicting two strong red-coloured men who are about to drive their tractor over various religious caricatures.⁷⁶

A key part of society targeted by Stalin and his social organisations was academia. Lenin removed religion in schools, yet it was not replaced by atheism. Instead, schools became irreligious.⁷⁷ However, under Stalin, higher educational institutions were made actively anti-religious resulting in purges.⁷⁸ Additionally, The League contributed to the attack on academia by establishing anti-religious departments within the universities.⁷⁹

The repressive laws and social attitudes of Stalin's regime culminated between the years of 1937 and 1938 in what came to be known as the Great Purge. During the Great Purge, Stalin's paranoia infiltrated all aspects of civil life, resulting in the death or imprisonment of one and a half to five million Soviet citizens. If a citizen was arrested, their friends and family were targeted soon after. Stalin sought to purge any allegedly dissident element of society, and, due to the historical context of communist doctrine, religious members were a prime target. The Orthodox Church was accused of collaborating with domestic

⁶⁹ Smith, "Communism and Religion," 313.

⁷⁰ Philip Walters, "A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy," in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511598272.002>.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 13-14.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁴ Peris, "Introduction," 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ "The Brutal Art of Early Soviet Antireligious Propaganda Posters, 1920-1940," Rare Historical Photos, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/soviet-antireligious-propaganda-posters/>.

⁷⁷ Smolkin, "The Religious Front," 33.

⁷⁸ Walters, "A survey of Soviet religious policy," 14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

religious underground organisations and counterrevolutionary agents abroad.⁸⁰ The 1929 Law on Religious Associations was seen as too permissive towards religion and anti-religious policy was further intensified. Between 1937 and 1938, 14,000 churches were closed and 35,000 “servants of religious cults” were arrested.⁸¹ 168,300 members of the Orthodox Church clergy were arrested and 106,300 were killed.⁸² Despite such an extreme war on religion waged by Stalin, religion prevailed. A 1937 census of 98,412 people saw 56.17% of respondents identify as believers; this number rose to two thirds in rural areas.⁸³ In 1939, the census removed the question on religion to avoid this social reality, however, when they requested “citizen of which state,” various respondents wrote “Christian” or “Orthodox.”⁸⁴

Stalin’s reference to communist doctrine during his war on religion was convenient and duplicitous. His true motive was to solidify his own power. Stalin attempted to depict religious followers as subversive to the revolution and incompatible with a communist utopia. In reality, many religious individuals worshipped in the Soviet Union without posing any threat to the governing authority; this was especially true in the countryside. Given this is the case, why would Stalin delegate the amount of effort he did into targeting followers of religion? Religion undermined Stalin’s power. Instead of being a strong counter-revolutionary force, religion provided a guide to life for the individual distinct from that of the communist state. God’s authority was placed above the state giving Him more power than Stalin. The Torah, Bible, and Quran’s teachings transcended the teachings of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin giving religious texts more authority than those in which the state based their rule upon. Without religion the state decides social moral principles which citizens must adhere to. For example, the mass murder of alleged enemies of the revolution is acceptable under Stalin’s moral code but goes against the fundamental tenets of most religions, notably, in Exodus, the sixth of ten commandments: “You shall not kill.”⁸⁵ Holding a religious based moral code contradictory to that of the state posed a threat to Stalin’s supreme rule by potentially undermining his violent policies. The war on religion would solidify Stalin’s political power by halting the political influence of religious institutions and, thereby, suppressing the beliefs of individual religious followers.

Further evidence that Stalin’s war on religion was based on his desire for power rather than following of communist doctrine can be seen with his shift in attitude during World War II. When German soldiers occupied parts of the Soviet Union, they began to encourage the revival of religion among inhabitants by reopening churches.⁸⁶ This was a deliberate attempt to undermine Stalin’s regime. In June 1941, at the time of Germany’s invasion there were several hundred churches across German-occupied Soviet territory, such as Ukraine and Belorussia; by 1944 this number reached approximately 10,000.⁸⁷ Continuing to pursue anti-religious policy would hurt Stalin’s rule as it could encourage Nazi sympathy among Christian followers within occupied lands. Inside Soviet-controlled territories, the Nazi invasion created a rise in patriotism among Orthodox Church followers.⁸⁸ Stalin recognised that he could use religion for his own power by tying the Orthodox Church to Russian national identity. In this process, Stalin relaxed many of his anti-religious policies. Although the church was unable to practise social welfare and education, they were able to grow their clergy and parishes, reopen a small number of monasteries and theological schools, raise income, and rent or construct buildings.⁸⁹ In September 1943,

⁸⁰ Smolkin, “The Religious Front,” 47.

⁸¹ Smolkin, “The Religious Front,”

⁸² Alexander Yakovlev, “The Clergy,” in *A Century of Violence in the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 165.

⁸³ Smolkin, “The Religious Front,” 48.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Exodus 20:13 King James Version.

⁸⁶ Smith, “Communism and Religion,” 313.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 314.

Stalin allowed the election of the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church to transpire; this marked a significant shift in Stalin's relationship with religion. Stalin undermined the anti-religious communist doctrine upon which he based his own previous anti-religious policies when it helped him to maintain his power.

Stalin's pre-World War II regime saw a period of heightened repression through the suppression of religious gatherings and the persecution of religious individuals. Stalin attempted to create an atheist society as justified by communist doctrine, but covertly fuelled by his quest for personal power. The basis for Stalin's actions can be understood through the teachings of Marx, the anti-religious precedent by Lenin, and Stalin's own view on religion. Stalin's anti-religious policies can be analysed by examining direct actions such as his Law on Religious Associations and reshaping of the calendar; social action such as support of the League of Militant Godless' activity; and the culmination of anti-religious repression through the Great Purge. By understanding the context from which Stalin operated and his subsequent actions in relation to the state undermining influence of religion, it is clear through juxtaposition with his eventual relaxation of anti-religious policies, that Stalin's war on religion was ultimately waged to maintain his own position of political power.

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