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Soviet Atheism and Russian Orthodox Strategies of Resistance, 1917–1932*

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When the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia in 1917, party leaders understood well that a thorough social transformation lay between them and the full realization of long-term revolutionary objectives. The seizure of political authority and even a proposed redistribution of economic goods and services would not themselves create citizens of a new type, nor would they spontaneously recast the quality of Russian life. Yet party behavior on the road to revolution had done little to communicate any precise plan for reshaping society. On the contrary, Bolshevik political militancy, tactical brashness, glib sloganeering, and the lack of a well-defined, comprehensive program all understandably caused contemporaries to question not only the politics of the party but also its grasp of the complexities of social reform.

Once in office, however, the Bolshevik leadership did not hesitate to begin promoting a new society. Although unequivocally committed to fundamental political change, the men and women who led the October Revolution made it clear that they did not aspire only to power in a raw, hegemonic sense. Their mission also included a reconfiguration of “culture,” a term leading Bolsheviks, having emerged from the Russian radical intelligentsia, understood not as something manifested but as something attained. In other words, one achieved a level of culture and tried to impart it to others.¹ Thus, it was the announced intention of the party, just as it had been an ideal of the prerevolutionary intelligentsia, to raise the “dark masses” to higher levels of consciousness and behavior.

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¹ Such perceptions of “culture” were in no way confined to Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 200–206, 226. For the definition of “culture” employed herein, see n. 6 below.

The process the revolutionaries called “building socialism” consequently mandated new thinking. If predominantly peasant Russia were to progress from its condition in 1917 through socialism to communism, the argument ran, society would have to learn to understand its collective experience in a new way—that is, in terms of the rational application of scientific principles to social development. Philosophical materialism, in short, was to provide the basis of a new, prevailing worldview.² In pursuit of this objective, Soviet leaders began to promote a new conception of citizenship even before they had fully consolidated political power.³ They implemented changes in the very essence of public education; redefined law, criminal justice, and social welfare; tried to alter aesthetic expression and, by extension, the consciousness of the intended audience; legislated new family relations; and sought generally to replace religious views with secular values.⁴

At the grassroots level, however, more immediate realities shaped this attempted revolution of consciousness. Bolshevik leaders recognized that they could not simply impose new modes of thinking. In 1917–32, the party could not yet accomplish with force all that it failed to gain through propaganda, and none but the most dogmatic expected laws and decrees alone, even when reinforced with coercion, automatically to alter public consciousness.⁵ These

² Endless examples exist, but for representative articulations of this attitude see *Radio v derevne*, no. 10 (April 1–10, 1931), p. 2; *Radio v derevne*, no. 20 (July 10–20, 1931), p. 1; *Antireligioznik*, no. 6 (June 1930), p. 53; *Nash bezbozhnik*, no. 9 (June 7, 1924), p. 4; *Nash bezbozhnik*, no. 11 (June 25, 1924), p. 1; *Nash bezbozhnik*, no. 10–11 (August 30, 1925), p. 7.

³ See Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1989); James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993); and the works cited in both.

⁴ Recent English-language monographs have devoted considerable attention to various facets of this transformation. See William Chase, *Workers, Society and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918–1929* (Urbana, Ill., 1987); Susan Gross Solomon and John F. Hutchinson, eds., *Health and Society in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, Ind., and Indianapolis, 1990); Larry E. Holmes, *The Kremlin and the Schoolhouse: Reforming Education in Soviet Russia, 1917–1931* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991); Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine D. Worobec, eds., *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford, 1991); Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge, 1992); Jonathan Coopersmith, *The Electrification of Russia, 1880–1926* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992); Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge, 1993); Alan Ball, *And Now My Soul Has Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918–1930* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994).

⁵ This article employs the term “propaganda” in its British usage, i.e., as the systematic propagation of a particular doctrine or practice. This reflects the Russian sense of the term, and it frees the word from a common American colloquial association of “propaganda” with “falsehood.” An overview of the extent and limits of state power in the first

reservations were well founded, for in society at large deeply ingrained habits fostered vigorous resistance to Bolshevik initiatives. Among all strata, culture—that is, sets of strategies by which a society explains and understands its collective experience—reflected attitudes that impeded any unqualified acceptance of party desiderata.⁶ The traditional beliefs of all classes combined diverse elements in unequal measures: a common predisposition to expect regular supernatural intervention in daily affairs; religious and quasi-religious rituals associated with childbirth, marriage, and death, as well as with extensively utilized practices of folk medicine; religious rationales for perpetuating existing constructions of gender; and a calendar crowded with religious holidays, some of which occasioned several days of seemingly secular and even pre-Christian modes of celebration.

This posed special problems for those who intended to turn society atheist, and nothing in the early Soviet period generated more elemental, emotional resistance than Bolshevik antagonism toward the sacred. Russian Orthodoxy was more than the state religion of the former tsarist empire and the leading denomination in most ethnically Russian territories. Deeply embedded in Russian culture, it also shaped rituals of celebration, rites of passage, and the ordering of social routines. Orthodoxy helped inform popular wisdom and folklore, and it provided a symbol of national identity even for those who were lax about religious observance. To the majority in society, the status quo was therefore more a preordained order than an intellectual or even personal choice, and protecting familiar rhythms of life was all but instinctive.

In this regard, the lower classes needed to devise no new tactics after 1917. Like their counterparts in other societies, the disenfranchised in Russia—especially, but not exclusively, the peasantry—had long ago worked out elaborate methods of resisting unwanted outside intrusions and pressures. In addition to

decade of Soviet rule can be found in Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918–1929* (Cambridge, 1992).

⁶ In contrast to the Bolshevik use of the term, the definition of “culture” used in this article follows Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973); William J. Bouwsma, *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990); E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (New York, 1993); and Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes of French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), and *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York and London, 1990). See also Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, rev. ed. (Brookfield, Vt., 1994), pp. xiv–xxvii. A concise definition in Geertz’s own words is “The culture concept to which I adhere has neither multiple referents nor, as far as I can see, any unusual ambiguity: it denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London, 1965), p. 3.

the sporadic use of force, Russian weapons of the weak had for centuries included inertia, calculated incompetence, manipulating the prejudices of those in power, dissembling before authority, stealth, peer pressure, and solidarity against outside forces.⁷ Society consequently reacted with not one but a variety of strategies. Sincere religious conviction and a legitimate sense of violation led thousands of believers to employ both defiance and circumvention against Bolshevik antireligious measures. But this was not the whole story. Soviet citizens were also to prove capable of framing their objections to any unwanted policy in religious terms, and they became skilled at using religious rationales to perpetuate what was preferable largely because it was familiar.⁸

This article will explore how Russian workers and peasants employed resistance and circumvention to protect traditional beliefs and practices during the period 1917–32. Opposition from below assumed three main forms. First, believers turned to violence and terrorism. Second, they co-opted and adapted Soviet laws, state policies, and bureaucratic procedures to their own ends. Third, the faithful relied on stratagems of circumvention when more overt opposition would have been futile. Examination of these conflicts thus probes a key dimension of early popular opposition to Bolshevism. Scrutiny of early Soviet atheism illustrates that the attempt to recast Russian thinking about religion was more variegated and nuanced than has been previously believed and that religious resistance had more diverse motivations than existing works on church-state contention would suggest.⁹ In addition to their impact on Soviet

⁷ The expression “weapons of the weak” is that of James C. Scott, *The Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn., 1985). Also see Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Resistance in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, Conn., 1976), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, Conn., 1990). The pathbreaking work on such resistance in Russia is Daniel Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston, 1976). Current works on the full scope of peasant resistance in the early Stalin period are Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York, 1994); and Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York, 1996).

⁸ On the propensity of Soviet peasants to frame secular protests in religious terms, see Fitzpatrick, pp. 6–7.

⁹ Informed largely by the concerns of the Cold War and religious partisanship, the majority of works in English utilize a structural, state-versus-church framework of analysis and frequently rely on victimization as their basis of interpretation. See John Curtiss, *The Russian Church and the Soviet State, 1917–1950* (Boston, 1953); George Kline, *Religious and Anti-religious Thought in Russia* (Chicago, 1968); David E. Powell, *Anti-religious Propaganda in the Soviet Union: A Study of Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); Matthew Spinka, *The Church in Soviet Russia* (New York, 1956); James Thrower, *Marxist-Leninist “Scientific Atheism” and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR* (Berlin, 1983); Dmitry V. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Anti-religious Policies*, 3 vols. (New York, 1987–88); John Anderson, *Reli-*

life in 1917–32, these dynamics would ultimately have important long-term ramifications in the Communist experiment in Russia.

ACTIVE AND PREEMPTIVE RESISTANCE

Orthodox believers at times countered Soviet brutality with open insubordination and force. This took the shape of support for the armed opponents of Bolshevism during the Russian Civil War, but with the Bolshevik victory it became by the early 1920s, of necessity, largely ad hoc. Supporters of religion used violence for self-defense, resistance, retaliation, and intimidation.

On the most visible level, acts of violence against churches and believers alienated large numbers of Russian Orthodox officials, clergy, and laity from the outset, and the crudeness of early Soviet social engineering inevitably made relations between church and state acrimonious. Patriarch Tikhon pronounced an anathema on the Bolsheviks in January 1918, just as the regime decreed the separation of church, state, and school and the nationalization of ecclesiastical property. High and parish clergy overwhelmingly sided against the Reds during the Russian Civil War of 1918–21, when Bolshevik partisans carried out some of their most heavy-handed violence against Orthodoxy.¹⁰ The seizure of church valuables in 1921–22, ostensibly for famine relief, further galvanized the faithful, as did attempts throughout the 1920s to secularize the full range of social rites and to eradicate religious influences as a whole. The Soviet Law on Religious Associations of 1929 only increased tensions by severely re-

gion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States (Cambridge, 1994); Pedro Ramet, *Cross and Commissar: The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Bloomington, Ind., and Indianapolis, 1987); Michael Bourdeaux, ed., *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (New York, 1995); Richard Pipes, ed., *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive* (New Haven, Conn., 1996), pp. 150–55. Post-Soviet works in Russian and the choice of previously secret documents for publication also display an emphasis on institutions, religious partisanship, and a preoccupation with casting the Soviet regime largely in the role of victimizer. See O. Iu. Vasil'eva, "Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' i sovetskaia vlast' v 1917–1927 godakh," *Voprosy istorii*, no. 8 (1993), pp. 40–54; N. N. Pokrovskii, "Politburo i tserkov', 1922–1923," *Novyi mir*, no. 8 (1994), pp. 186–213. Two innovative exceptions break with traditional historiography by exploring extensively the social ramifications of institutional behavior, although they do not address the full cultural dimensions of church-state interaction. Glennys Young, "Rural Religion and Soviet Power, 1917–1932" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1989); Daniel Peris, "Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless and Bolshevik Political Culture in the 1920s and 1930s" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1994), "Clergy in Red Cossacks: Former Priests in the League of the Godless," *Slavic Review* 54 (Summer 1995): 640–64, "The 1929 Congress of the Godless," *Soviet Studies* 44 (July 1991): 711–32.

¹⁰ For a critique of early antireligious work, see the official organ of the Moscow Committee of the Union of Atheists, *Antireligioznik*, no. 11 (November 1926), pp. 3–5.

stricting remaining rights of worship and proselytizing. Finally, the forced collectivization of agriculture and elimination of the kulaks included a concentrated assault on religion in the countryside, and no act during these campaigns precipitated violence as consistently as the closing of the village church.¹¹

The dynamics of state policy at any given moment influenced its choice of tactics. Initially, the Bolsheviks treated the eradication of religion as a problem to be handled administratively by the VIII Section of the People's Commissariat of Justice (Narkomiust). Amid the breakdown of civil order that enveloped the country after 1917, however, Narkomiust could neither deter nor promote the widespread violence against churches and clergy that occurred. The Red Army and antireligious militants killed large numbers of bishops and priests during the Russian Civil War, a time when atrocities and retributions carried out by Reds and Whites alike took the lives of literally millions of citizens.¹² It is therefore worth emphasizing in this context that in the period from the Revolution until the mid-1920s the Bolshevik Party directed the main thrust of its coercive and ideological antireligious assault not against individual believers but against church hierarchs and the institutional and property base of religion in the country. The arrest of the patriarch and prominent bishops, the exploitation of internal divisions within Orthodoxy, the nationalization of ecclesiastical property, and the broad separation of church and state all characterized this early course.

By mid-decade, however, propaganda received stronger emphasis. Conducting aggressive antireligious agitation had been a priority from the outset, but a more self-critical attitude, the lessons of experience, and above all a perception that religion was not only surviving but possibly increasing led the party to place greater stress on this tactic by the mid-1920s. Indeed, the Party Department of Agitation and Propaganda complained that churches once considered permanently closed now again operated and that the antireligious effort was moving backward.¹³ Party, youth, and trade union organs were all repeatedly reminded of their responsibility in this sphere, and in 1925 the Union of Atheists formally began operations as well. But when agitation and propaganda

¹¹ For an official admission that offending religious sensibilities of the population during collectivization strengthened anti-Soviet feeling, see Archive of the Museum of the History of Religion (hereafter GMIR), folder 21, l. 3 ob. During the reorganization of this archive in 1995, some files that will ultimately receive permanent designations are listed only by temporary folder numbers, as contained in the GMIR card catalog in use during the transition. Abbreviations follow standard Russian archival notations: opis' (op.), fond (f.), delo (d.), dela (dd.), edinitsa khraneniia (ed. khr.), list (l.), listy (ll.), oborot (ob.).

¹² See Hoover Institution Archives, Boris I. Nicolaevsky Collection, series 114, box 182, folder 14.

¹³ The Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents on Recent History (formerly the Central Archive of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union [hereafter RTsKhIDNI]), f. 17, op. 60, ed. khr. 791, l. 31.

failed to produce the desired result, the party changed its tactics again and now proceeded with far greater repression of grassroots believers and parishes.¹⁴ Indeed, the tactics of 1928–32 increasingly incorporated coercion. Collectivization campaigns regularly included an assault on churches and local priests, millions of urban and rural dwellers were automatically enrolled in atheist organizations, and antireligious work in general meshed with national politics and attempts to root out the real and imagined enemies of the emerging party leadership. After 1932, with the number of churches and local priests greatly reduced and under the threat of retaliation against individual worshippers, church and state entered a different stage of their rivalry.¹⁵

Thus, from the beginning church-state contention contained both ideological and violent dimensions, and believers answered Bolshevik assaults with their own show of force. During the Civil War, when the survival of the revolutionary regime was still in doubt, clergy gave active as well as moral assistance to the Whites. The archbishop of Ekaterinburg, for example, organized a pro-tsarist demonstration after the execution of the royal family there in July 1918, and he formally celebrated Admiral Kolchak's entry into the city in February 1919.¹⁶ The Cheka (political police) in Ufa unsuccessfully tried to prevent a local bishop from rallying the population against the Bolsheviks in 1918 with nationalistic, xenophobic speeches.¹⁷ The journal *Tserkovnye vedomosti* (Church herald), anticipating what it thought was the imminent capture of Moscow by the Whites in 1919, called the defeat of the Reds a "sacred moment."¹⁸ Churchmen in Siberia aided Kolchak by organizing military "Jesus Brigades." High clergy used their considerable influence to support General Anton Denikin on the southern front and in appeals to public opinion in Western Europe. And the village priests—by speaking widely against Bolshevism, leading White partisan movements, and as a result providing martyrs to the cause—made an even more diverse contribution.¹⁹

¹⁴ A thorough examination of party policy is Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917–1929* (Helsinki, 1994).

¹⁵ Fitzpatrick ([n. 6 above], pp. 204–14) offers a concise summary of the complex tension between oppression and accommodation on the question of religion in the countryside in the 1930s. Maurice Hindus, in his account of a single village following collectivization, also comments on the contrast between the 1920s and 1930s regarding religion as well as the survivals of religiosity. Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread: Collectivization in a Russian Village* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), pp. 34–35, 44, 186–209, 304–6, 311.

¹⁶ *Bezbozhnik*, no. 9 (February 11, 1923), p. 7.

¹⁷ State Archive of the Russian Federation (hereafter GARF), f. 353, op. 2, d. 712, ll. 1, 4, 7, 13, 54.

¹⁸ Quoted in B. Kandidov, "Uchastie tserkovnikov v grazhdanskoi voiny i interventsii" in *Voinstvuiushchee bezbozhie v SSSR za 15 let, 1917–1932*, ed. M. Enisherlov, A. Lukachevskii, and M. Mitin (Moscow, 1932), p. 101.

¹⁹ E. Iaroslavskii, *Protiv religii i tserkvi, tom I* (Moscow, 1932), p. 45; Peter Kenez, *Civil War in South Russia, 1919–1920* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1977), pp. 78–80.

Attempts to implement the decree on the nationalization of church property of 1918 proved particularly incendiary. Regarded as part of the legal separation of church and state, this function of the VIII Section of the People's Commissariat of Justice was beset by the disorder that prevailed during the Civil War. As already noted, Narkomiust could control neither its own regional functionaries nor undisciplined militants outside its organization, and coarse initiatives carried out in the name of Bolshevism and atheism frequently enraged local populations. Uncoordinated attacks on clergy and places of worship predictably generated criticism of the regime, and attempts to carry out even rudimentary atheist agitation usually misfired and added to the resentment. To cite but one such technique, to demystify the remains of saints militant atheists opened burial vaults in nationalized monasteries and showed crowds the decayed corpses.²⁰

Faced with prospects such as these, church officials resisted. They created delays in turning over the keys of nationalized church buildings and challenged in minute detail the meaning, intent, and legitimacy of the decree on the separation of church and state. Hoping to generate public reactions, clergy issued their own proclamations that contradicted official versions of the decree and, as intended, created confusion and anger. This complicated the work of the VIII Section, which found itself embroiled in protracted wranglings on a case-by-case basis over whether buildings were to be put to constructive social use as schools, workers' clubs, movie houses, and the like (as required by party policy) or used for unauthorized purposes (as clergy claimed).²¹

Believers and clergy, however, did not limit themselves to such obstructionism, and the state by no means fabricated the contention that the church actively worked to undermine Soviet power. On the contrary, nuns at the Krestodvizhensk Monastery in Nizhnii Novgorod province, for example, literally blocked the entry of a commissar in April 1918. When Red Guard reinforcements later forced their way in, they found the property of local merchants hidden in the monastery warehouse. As officials then conducted the inventory prescribed by law, nuns sounded an alarm, which mobilized the local population. A shot from the crowd wounded a Red Guard, and the shooter was killed

²⁰ GARF, f. 353, op. 2, d. 734, passim. For photographs in connection with the closing of the Sergei Radonezh Monastery, see *Revoliutsiia i tserkov'* 6–8 (1919): 56–58. Although not endorsed by the church, the belief that the remains of a true saint would not putrify had deep roots in Russian popular religion. The most frequently cited literary representation of this is the case of Father Zossima in Fedor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York, 1955), pt. 3, bk. 7, chap. 1.

²¹ GARF, f. 353, op. 2, d. 695, l. 185; f. 353, ed. khr. 745, ll. 1, 7; f. 353, ed. khr. 749, l. 2. Examples from Nizhnii-Novgorod can be found in *Revoliutsiia i tserkov'* 1 (1919): 44–48. Narkomiust published a circular on January 1, 1919, requiring that seized religious buildings be placed in the service of an existing institution. The People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) reinforced this position with its own decree of February 28, 1919.

on the spot. In a separate incident from the same area, officials who entered the Oranskii Monastery in June 1918 found a considerable stock of monarchist literature.²² These were representative rather than isolated incidents. Indeed, daily reports from state security organs to Vladimir Lenin during 1919–23 contained no shortage of frank assessments of political instability in the country, the weakness of local support for the regime, and the concentrated hostility of the religious faithful.²³ And candid admissions that middle and poor peasants, as well as kulaks, opposed the revolutionary state punctuated internal party documents throughout the 1920s.²⁴

The campaign to confiscate church valuables during the famine of 1921–22 generated especially vitriolic confrontations. One highly publicized incident in the textile manufacturing center of Shuia (Ivanovo-Voznesensk province) provides a case in point. In keeping with the VTsIK (Central Executive Committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets) instruction on the seizure of church valuables, the executive committee of the district soviet in this working-class enclave negotiated on March 9, 1922, for the surrender of the property. But a meeting of believers on March 12, a Sunday, showed the matter to be far from resolved. A determined minority vocally opposed any dealings with the state, and they unsuccessfully tried to block the election of representatives to meet with a commission from the soviet on the following day.²⁵

At the conclusion of the Monday church service, this opposition grew bolder. A clique remained in the church and intimidated the arriving commission into postponing its work until Wednesday. When the officials tried to leave, crowd members cursed, pushed, and punched them. By Wednesday, the clergy had raised a larger crowd, which now included a considerable number of women and children. This group became increasingly confrontational, even as six mounted police tried to restore order. Revolver shots then greeted reinforcements from the Red Army, and the believers threateningly surrounded the soldiers. The Bolshevik version of what followed claims that the presence of bystanders restrained the troops from returning fire, and they shot only into the air to restore order. This is unlikely, however, since an unspecified number of demonstrators lost their lives. For their part, the crowd beat four soldiers, one critically. That evening, authorities arrested four church members, and at the

²² *Revoliutsiia i tserkov* 1 (1919): 45.

²³ See, e.g., RTsKhIDNI, f. 5, op. 1, d. 2620, l. 1, for a notation of religious hostility. The reports contained in RTsKhIDNI, f. 5, op. 1, dd. 2618–56, focus on problems of security and instability in general. Significant regional variations are reflected in them, and in many cases they are silent on issues of religion and atheism. I thank Gregory Freeze for calling these materials to my attention.

²⁴ See, e.g., the January 1926 report “On the Mood of the Peasantry” in RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, ll. 29–32.

²⁵ GMIR, f. 29, op. 2, d. 3, ll. 1–5.

end of the month clergy in this manufacturing town surrendered the valuables without further incident.²⁶

Factories produced particularly bitter confrontations. In 1922, the priest Pobedov gathered seven hundred predominantly female workers from the Naro-Fominsk textile mill to organize a religious commune. When the Cheka sent Ia. P. Gorbachev to investigate, Pobedov incited the crowd to attack him. Only intervention by a counterdemonstration of four hundred men rescued the surrounded Gorbachev.²⁷ Tensions also ran high at the former Prokhorov factory in Moscow. The “proletariat” there mixed those who defended Soviet power with others who had spent the Civil War in the countryside, and religion provided a highly charged symbol of their differences. Immediately following the war, religious activity in the plant was vigorous. Priests had full access to workers’ barracks, and despite a directive by the factory party cell several old iconostasis continued to be displayed. Senior skilled workers conducted religious instruction among the unskilled and collected donations for the support of the priest and the construction of a new church. The Party began publishing a factory newspaper, *Without God and Boss*, irregularly in 1923, but only in 1925 was the factory committee able to close one of three local churches and launch a campaign to remove icons.²⁸

Both sides utilized energetic tactics. A general meeting at the former Putilov (later Kirov) factory in Leningrad in December 1924 produced a resolution to close the church there, but priests and believers fought back. Clergy and religious women made the rounds of workers’ apartments collecting signatures on a petition, and crowds gathered at the factory committee office “from morning until late at night” with a variety of appeals and documents obtained from superordinate institutions. These, in combination with the fact that a gathering of seventy-eight office workers on January 3, 1925, produced only nine votes for closure, forced a new meeting, which religious supporters disrupted so effectively that the issue could not be resolved. The antireligious faction then called in as reinforcements supporters from several other factories, including five hundred from the Volodarsk typography plant. Two thousand attended a meeting on January 25, 1925, where the chairman of the Putilov factory com-

²⁶ Ibid. Lenin chose to capitalize on the Shuia incident. He wrote to the Politburo that “our opponents have committed a grave strategical error” in creating, during the famine, a rationale for energetic Bolshevik aggressiveness against the church. “K 120-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia V. I. Lenina,” *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 4 (1990), pp. 190–93. See p. 193, n. 3, for a fuller chronology of events than is summarized here. Also cited in Gregory L. Freeze, “Counter-Reformation in Russian Orthodoxy: Popular Response to Religious Innovation, 1922–1925,” *Slavic Review* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 310–11.

²⁷ M. U. Voronin, *Naro-Fominskaia fabrika* (Zvengorod, 1928), p. 35.

²⁸ Lapitskaia, *Byt rabochikh Trekhgornoi manufaktury* (Moscow, 1935), pp. 128–29, 137.

mittee reaffirmed the church closing on the strength of prior approval by the executive committee of the provincial soviet. Religious sympathizers then carried their protest to the streets, into the market, and back to the provincial soviet, which ordered a full reconsideration at a general factory meeting on February 5. After three spoke for and three against the closure, the eight thousand in attendance watched as the worker Smoliak cut down the church crosses amid cries of “Antichrist.”²⁹

Collectivization, with its accompanying attack on religion, gave rise to additional hostility in rural areas. Bolshevik antireligious propaganda in mass publications had always equated organized religion with the shared interests of unreconstructed monarchists, kulaks, Nepmen, and the bourgeoisie.³⁰ Therefore, by definition, the campaign to exterminate the kulaks as a class extended to religion, even as central officials publicly decried local “excesses.”³¹ When violence reminiscent of 1918–21 erupted in villages already divided on the issue of religion, the concomitant breakdown of civil order enabled those so inclined to attack churches and clergy in addition to those otherwise unfortunate enough to be labeled “kulaks.” But where support for Soviet power wavered, priests would not only exploit the problems of the state—food procurement, rationing, goods shortages, the international situation—for religious ends but would also extend blame to the regime for other local calamities. Thus, the fact that a fire broke out in Igelkino in 1929 during the showing of a film gave the priest all the opening he needed to condemn films in general and to agitate against its party and Communist Youth League (Komsomol) sponsors.³²

Faced with superior force, rural and urban inhabitants turned to terrorism against atheist agitators, even before collectivization. In early 1929, unidentified persons murdered a Komsomol member conducting antireligious work in

²⁹ S. Kostiuchenko, I. Khrepov, and Iu. Fedorov, *Istoriia Kirovskogo zavoda, 1917–1945* (Moscow, 1966), pp. 212–18.

³⁰ See, e.g., *Derevenskii bezbozhnik*, no. 1 (March 1928), p. 1; *Radio v derevne*, no. 52 (December 23, 1928), p. 1; *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, no. 1 (1929), p. 6. When the leadership of the Union of Militant Atheists sent instructions on antireligious propaganda to its regional and local organizations on January 23, 1930, the directive specifically spoke of religious organizations coming to the aid of the kulaks in the campaign to eliminate kulaks as a class, and it ordered a campaign to turn the poorer and middle peasants against the kulaks by liberating them from “kulak religious influence.” GARF, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 41, l. 1. “Nepmen” were private entrepreneurs during 1921–28.

³¹ Recent scholarship on the early Stalin period increasingly shows that central officials could encourage but not control rural actions. See the essays and citations in J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1993).

³² RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 32, ed. khr. 142, l. 24.

the workers' settlement of Barvenko in the Donbas, and on the eve of Easter the Komsomol musical group received an ominous threat not to play on the holiday.³³ In Sredensk okrug, clergy played an instrumental role in organizing a Union of Michael the Archangel for violence against atheists, and in another locality a group of workers unmercifully beat a school teacher for entering into an antireligious disputation.³⁴

When collectivization began in earnest, violence on both sides increased, and not only in the countryside. As officials employed force against the population, reports of murdered antireligious agitators reached the center from points as diverse as the highly industrialized Ivanovo oblast', largely agricultural Middle-Volga krai, and Chita oblast', where an antireligious teacher was killed for attempting to organize an atheist evening.³⁵ Virtually no antireligious circles existed in either town or village schools in Syzran' okrug because agitators feared the consequences of attempting to organize them.³⁶ In Stavropol, the priest Pomrianskii led a group who murdered a member of the *selsoviet* (rural soviet). And during the night of July 31, 1930, when the local Union of Militant Atheists was preparing an antireligious day, "hooligans" broke into the local club. They rifled the document files and bookcases, scattering and defiling the contents. They also broke the movie projector, tore off half the screen, and in general vandalized the premises. In Orenburg okrug, churchmen participated in a night raid of the Griazno-Irtek kolkhoz (collective farm) in 1930. Surrounding the collective on three sides, they intimidated a significant number of families into fleeing.³⁷

Beyond this, clergy led civil disobedience. One village deacon in Moscow province headed a group who encouraged peasants not to pay their taxes or turn over required grain requisitions.³⁸ In Khyr-Kasinsk, churchmen and believers publicized the end of the world and the inevitability of war in order to encourage an exodus from the kolkhoz.³⁹ And throughout 1929–30 security

³³ *Stenograficheskii otchet vtorogo vsesoiuznogo s'ezda voinstvuiushchikh bezbozhnikov* (Moscow, 1930), p. 71.

³⁴ RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 32, ed. khr. 142, l. 24. The main administrative units of Soviet Russia at the time were the krai (at this time, more than one province), guberniia (province), and oblast' (large subdivision of a province or an administrative unit consisting of parts of more than one province). Provinces were further subdivided, in descending order, into units named okrug, raion (which could also be a region within a city), uезд' (district), and volost' (which could be either a village or a section of an urban settlement).

³⁵ *Sredne-volzhskii bezbozhnik*, no. 2 (August 22, 1930), pp. 2–3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 1 (August 11, 1930), p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 2 (August 22, 1930), pp. 2–3.

³⁸ GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 14, l. 126.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 19, l. 211.

organs failed in their attempt to prevent the believer K. A. Odintsev from publicly encouraging peasants to rise and overthrow the Soviet state.⁴⁰

Even spontaneous resistance, however, assumed traditional forms. When local officials rapidly carried out full collectivization of the village of Karel' in 1930 and moved, in the view of higher party officials, to the premature action of closing all churches and arresting clergy, the local old women (*bab'i*) reacted in a predictable manner: they employed the long-standing strategem of staging a demonstration from which males abstained. This won the release of the local priest.⁴¹ One atheist publication counted no fewer than twenty such reported "excesses" by female "fanatics" in a single year.⁴² Others mixed political desiderata with religion. Peasants in Vladivostok okrug circulated a "letter from heaven" that absolved from sin all those who killed atheists: "Whoever will believe will be delivered from their sins, even when the sins are stained with blood. Whoever adheres to the commandments will have all his sins melt away like snow."⁴³

At no time before 1932 did the Bolsheviks feel they controlled the situation. In late 1922, the journal *Nauka i religiia* (Science and religion) might celebrate the arrest of a bishop and group of priests in Tomsk for leading resistance to the Soviet state through their churches. The atheist organ *Bezbozhnik* (Godless), however, by no means considered the problem of religiously rooted, militant, underground resistance to the Soviet state resolved. It consistently maintained that clergy coordinated local actions in a united front against the revolution, and it cited monasteries in particular as breeding grounds of opposition. The paper seized every opportunity to report proreligious demonstrations.⁴⁴ Party experiences reinforced this assessment. During the second half of the 1920s, organs in Nizhnii Novgorod continued to encounter no shortage of religious groups that effectively circulated anti-Soviet political materials, and similar reports that legal organizations served as fronts for oppositional activity reached party leaders from other locales as well.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 7, l. 59.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 52, l. 61. See also Lynne Viola, "Bab'i bunt and Peasant Women's Protest during Collectivization," *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 23–42.

⁴² *Antireligioznik*, no. 1 (January 1930), p. 5.

⁴³ GMIR, folder 21, l. 8.

⁴⁴ *Bezbozhnik*, no. 5–6 (January 21, 1923), p. 1; *Bezbozhnik*, no. 26 (June 17, 1923), p. 1. See also *Antireligioznik*, no. 6 (June 1929), p. 5; Iaroslavskii (n. 19 above), pp. 249, 363–64, n. 32. *Bezbozhnik* was the title of both a newspaper and a journal, and both are cited herein.

⁴⁵ On anti-Soviet agitation, see RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 217, l. 92; on legal organizations as fronts, see *ibid.*, f. 89, op. 4, ed. khr. 26, ll. 1–2.

CO-OPTATION AND ADAPTATION OF SOVIET PROCEDURES

The lower classes, however, more frequently employed indirect tactics. Since open resistance to the Russian state had proven largely futile in the past, they had long ago devised their own ways to deal with superior force. Emerging Soviet law unintentionally provided them with new opportunities.

After 1917, religious believers drew heavily on past experience and guile. Supporters of Orthodoxy used their numerical superiority, for example, to infiltrate antireligious education groups in Nizhnii Novgorod province and to substitute a close reading of religious texts for the intended Bolshevik activity. In Revdinsk (Urals), the church elder and “kulaks” took over the leadership of the local antireligious circle, while a deacon headed one in the village of Novyi Tan’in (Middle Volga).⁴⁶ In other areas, clergy attempted to preempt the antireligious movement by counterposing their own women’s holiday to International Women’s Day (March 8) and organizing special units to agitate among women as rivals to the Women’s sections (*zhenotdely*) of the party.⁴⁷

Workers and peasants also required no instruction in composing petitions. Workers in Vitebsk did not hesitate even at the height of the Civil War to produce scores of signatures demanding the speedy trial and release of the priest of the Pokrov church.⁴⁸ And when the 1918 law on the separation of church and state made possible the transfer of nationalized places of worship to registered communes of believers, congregations quickly recognized the potential thereby to gain control of their parishes. The application of the Moscow Nikolaev Church on October 23, 1918, provided a textbook example of a correct registration. The requisite inventory listed all church property ranging from icons to the clock, tables, and carpeting, complete with measurements.⁴⁹ A parish of the Old Believer sect carefully quoted the 1918 decree on the separation of church and state and the Narkomiust instruction on its implementation (August 24, 1921) in their 1921 petition to the Administrative Department of the Moscow City Soviet for the return of a church on Malaia Anron’evskaia

⁴⁶ “Kulak” must be employed with caution, especially after 1929. Initially used to identify the most prosperous stratum of the peasantry, it became something of a tautology as it became more elastic during collectivization (i.e., a “kulak” could be anyone who manifested “kulak” behavior or sympathies). In this particular material, it is clear that the term describes religious sympathizers who were also among the village economic elite. This was not always the case in Bolshevik documents. Hence, since kulaks and support for the church were linked in party verbiage, any person engaged in proreligious activity might, in a political shorthand, become a “kulak.” Similarly, any conversation with an “anti-Soviet element” such as a priest might automatically be “anti-Soviet.”

⁴⁷ GARF, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 35, ll. 63, 85–86.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 353, op. 3, d. 737, ll. 11, 12, 12 ob.

⁴⁹ State Archive of Moscow Oblast’ (hereafter GAMO), f. 4998, op. 1, d. 4, ll. 1–3.

street.⁵⁰ These cases were far from unique; city and regional archives contain hundreds of similarly thorough documents that poured into local soviets, which frequently gave church buildings back to the petitioners.⁵¹ In fact, believers employed state procedures so consciously and adeptly that by 1926–28 the language of state decrees and that of the petitions was virtually identical.⁵²

Concern among the leadership for observing the principle of revolutionary legality aided those seeking to use the letter of Soviet law to subvert its intent. With regard to church closures and nationalizations, the religious opponents of Bolshevism did not distinguish between actions sanctioned by Soviet law and those that violated it. This distinction, however, was critical for the VTsIK Commission on Religious Issues and, in a larger sense, to all who believed that a new conceptualization of law would help recast social consciousness and build the legitimacy of the revolutionary regime. To this end, the Commission on Religious Issues persistently called for actions to be taken against parishes only with the prior approval of higher organs, in keeping with the resolutions on antireligious work adopted at party congresses, and especially without any violations of Soviet law.⁵³

This was, to be sure, a legality of pragmatism rather than of principle or compassion. It strove for the maximum number of church closures with the minimum disruption of the local community, as when the Moscow Committee of the Union of Militant Atheists in 1929 carefully distinguished between the ongoing goal of closing churches and the need to replace counterproductive tactics in doing so.⁵⁴ The VTsIK and the Commissariat of Finance also exhibited far greater concern for legality when a church seizure involved objects of gold, precious icons, or historically significant buildings.⁵⁵ And Soviet law, of course, worked in both directions. If a church was not functioning, had no historical significance, and the local soviet could demonstrate an economic use for the building, petitioning to reverse a nationalization already implemented was extremely difficult.⁵⁶ Local authorities might also disregard legality altogether. Some 230 workers in the railroad settlement of Babaevo learned this

⁵⁰ Central State Archive of the City of Moscow (hereafter TsGIAgM), f. 1215, op. 1, d. 339, ll. 6, 8–11.

⁵¹ TsGIAgM, f. 1215, op. 2, dd. 75–170; GAMO, f. 66, op. 18, dd. 320–44; GARF, f. 353, op. 4, d. 378, l. 102.

⁵² TsGIAgM, f. 1215, op. 3, dd. 1–128, all relate to the registration of churches or religious communes. See esp. dd. 2, 6, 21, 101, 124. To compare the wording, see TsGIAgM, f. 1215, op. 1, d. 350, l. 11.

⁵³ GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 21, l. 16; f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 3, l. 35.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 31, ll. 42, 42 ob.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 19, ll. 10, 12–15, 21, 23–24, 33, 106.

⁵⁶ TsGIAgM, f. 1215, op. 1, d. 344, ll. 3, 3 ob. See also ll. 4–61 for similar resolutions.

lesson when, at the beginning of 1919, the construction committee of a proposed church was arrested and the money they raised confiscated.⁵⁷

Still, even a politically pragmatic commitment to legality aided religious groups, and, if unsuccessful at the local level, believers directed grievances to central authorities in the hope of having lower decisions overturned. They succeeded often enough that the practice continued well into the 1930s. Mikhail Kalinin, chairman of VTsIK, enjoyed a reputation as a sympathetic figure to whom the wronged could turn, at least until 1932.⁵⁸ Scores of petitions addressed to “little father” Kalinin thus reached central authorities through the VTsIK Commission on Religious Issues. Voicing a common objection, anti-religious agitators in Nizhnii Novgorod province complained that “believers know the path to VTsIK and Mikhail Ivanovich [Kalinin] very well.”⁵⁹

One particular incident demonstrates how both sides in local disputes might try to influence central authorities. In their petition to the Presidium of VTsIK from the village of Verovka (Rykov raion), religious citizens described how a church closing in January 1929 ran the gamut of legal and illegal tactics. According to the document parish representatives filed in protest, local atheists first took steps toward the closure of the Nikolaev Church, and parishioners countered with a registration of believers in order to regain it. When only 709 of a potentially much larger number had signed, however, the head of the local party organization intervened and confiscated the registration book. Angry church supporters sent representatives to the raion and okrug administrative departments, but officials turned them away. A rumor then began to circulate that the church would close by May 1. This became a reality on April 25, when the chairman of the Rykov regional soviet executive committee officially notified the clergyman and church elder. At five o’clock the following morning, a group of church members arrived at the Artemov okrug administrative department to protest what they contended was an illegal closing of their church. Within an hour, however, the Rykov militia, local Komsomol members, and the secretary of the local party cell burst into the church, smashed the iconostasis, defiled the icons, and carried off all church goods on two trucks.⁶⁰

According to the believers’ report, the Artemov okrug administrative department then pressed the offensive. Far from acceding to protests on April 26 and

⁵⁷ GARF, f. 353, op. 2, d. 706, ll. 46–47, 49, 49 ob., 64. Babaev included settlements of railroad workers at Iashkomlevo, Rystsevo, Shiglino, and Nikol’skii Zavod.

⁵⁸ On the decline of Kalinin’s popularity in the countryside after 1932, see Fitzpatrick (n. 6 above), p. 290.

⁵⁹ This propensity to appeal directly to high authority, the report continues, thwarted the closing of churches even in industrial areas where the majority of workers had ceased observing religion. *Bezbozhnik*, no. 23 (June 12, 1929), p. 4.

⁶⁰ GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 3, ll. 53–54.

28, they declared the seizure to be legal and announced that the clergyman and church council would be held responsible for any disorders. “We [parish members] were especially exasperated when we saw that a room for a movie house was being added to the church. On April 30 this agitation became a riot [*bunt*]. A crowd of thousands from Verovka and [other] parish villages appeared at the church, drove out the invaders from the place of worship, and sounded the alarm. Parents and children exchanged shouts and fisticuffs.”⁶¹ When the regional militia intervened and firefighters doused the demonstrators with cold water, a generational dimension of the affair came into play. Komsomol members beat mothers, and mothers trampled Komsomol and militia members. The believers retained control of the church for five hours, and in the aftermath Soviet forces banned believers from the building altogether and posted a guard night and day. According to the religious petitioners, brother fought brother and fathers opposed sons, but the believers desisted rather than cause violence within families.⁶²

But local officials related a decidedly different story to VTsIK. They had collected more than fifteen thousand workers’ signatures in favor of closing two churches in the area, they said, and on April 24 the central executive committee of the district soviet gave its approval by telegram. Not a “crowd” of believers, but “twenty to thirty women” protested at the church on April 26. The rapporteurs also appealed to official disapproval of antisemitism by including that the crowd mainly questioned why their church and not the nearby synagogue was being seized. The “thousands” described by the parishioners to have protested on April 30 appear as 150 in the report by local officials, and the extensive fighting was reduced to one Komsomol member being briefly hospitalized after being hit with a rock. Central officials did not attempt to reconcile such disparate accounts from a distance and after the fact, and neither side achieved full satisfaction. The church remained closed, but the security police, based on the fact that any incident at all occurred, initiated an investigation of the local officials’ handling of the affair and of their fitness for office.⁶³

Internal VTsIK documents indicate that central officials did not simply dismiss violence and breaches of law against the religious. Even at the height of collectivization in 1930, for example, Kalinin’s secretary filed a report that summarized the large number of complaints of illegal actions against believers. He stated frankly that “there exists no sign of elementary revolutionary legality

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 3, l. 53.

⁶² *Ibid.*, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 3, ll. 53–54.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 3, l. 47. This report illustrates that local Bolsheviks also knew how to manipulate the prejudices of their superiors. In addition to their mention of antisemitism, emphasizing that the demonstrators were predominantly female played directly on the prevailing Party assumption that rural women were the most backward element in society and, not coincidentally, the chief repository of religiosity.

toward them as *lishensty*. There reign in the local areas complete arbitrary rule and a lack of understanding of the policy of the party in this politically important process.”⁶⁴ Officials abused tax laws to deprive believers even of what was necessary for family maintenance, and they rounded up the religious without regard for age, gender, or health to clean pig sties and work as janitors. Kalinin ordered an investigation.⁶⁵

Believers exploited this concern at the center by filing—in addition to documents of legitimate grievance—disingenuous petitions. The central executive committee of the Middle Volga krai soviet complained that Kalinin’s frequent intervention on behalf of church members and his support of false petitions undermined local authority. Officials, for instance, had closed a nonfunctioning church in the village of Bogdanovka in 1929 in accordance with the precepts of Soviet law, that is, with a prior petition by the local population and the transformation of the building into a house of culture, elementary school, and machine tractor shop. Local supporters of religion reacted by sending a single representative directly to the VTsIK commission on religious issues. On the basis of his appeal, which included the presentation of signatures of those who in some cases later turned out to be children less than ten years old, the commission overturned the closing. The Middle Volga krai soviet furnished additional examples of how a small number of believers could manipulate the process if they were willing to address central officials directly, as when fabricated versions of events had brought about reversals of closures in Khvorostianko and elsewhere in the region. Middle Volga officials demanded that Kalinin desist.⁶⁶ Far from being intimidated, however, supporters of religion often pressed an advantage. The VTsIK chastised the leadership of the regional soviet in the town of Azarmass, which in 1921 had thirty-six churches, not only for closing the final two in the 1930s but also for employing administrative methods in doing so. Believers seized the opportunity to demand the reopening of all thirty-six.⁶⁷

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY

Direct resistance and the manipulation of the state apparatus, however, paled beside everyday modes of attempting to control the social environment.

⁶⁴ GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 7, l. 71. Literally the “deprived ones,” the *lishentsy* were those without rights of citizenship in the 1920s because of their class, economic, legal, or prerevolutionary status.

⁶⁵ GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 7, ll. 71, 71 ob.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 30, ll. 66, 66 ob., 67. Charges of listing even babes in arms as petitioners and appealing to superordinate organs in order to circumvent the decision of the factory committee also appeared in the church closure at the former Putilov factory described above. See Kostiuhenko, Khrepov, and Fedorov (n. 29 above), p. 212.

⁶⁷ GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 21, ll. 197–99.

Rumor, rituals of celebration, folklore, and songs articulated messages that could not be advanced as effectively by any other means. Long-standing practices protected not only what many perceived as a consecrated order of earthly and heavenly affairs but also the convenient and familiar.

Nothing surpassed rumor in its capacity to influence a large audience, and rumormongers found their voice from the very beginning of the Soviet period.⁶⁸ Common predictions of the coming of the Antichrist and end of the world understandably caused anxiety, but less ominous stories could be equally disruptive. When the party attempted an organizational meeting of women in Mamenko (Voronezh province) in 1923, a local rumor that the real purpose was to collect a tax on spinning wheels kept several away. A variation of this story hampered the Zhenotdel in Novokurlai volost', where a tax ranging from three to ten arshins of canvas was said to be levied on those who attended gatherings.⁶⁹ From the village of Krasnyi, every newspaper subscriber was said to have to register with the raion militia and pay a fee, while a story that originated in Voronezh province spoke of a tax to reimburse the dispossessed for their nationalized property. As Lenin lay critically ill in 1922–23, rumors related to his death abounded. One held that Soviet power would consequently end by April 15, 1923, while in a different version all churches would be converted into movie theaters when he died. Still another canard spoke of the French army as having already conquered Berlin and being on the march toward Moscow.⁷⁰

Obviously, one cannot attribute all such stories to forces of religion working against the Soviet state. Indeed, one cannot identify the source of most rumors at all. Nevertheless, a kind of story oriented generally toward behavior harmful to the announced objectives of the revolution and favorable to positions commonly supported by religious believers appeared in significant numbers in both town and village. For instance, a tale that the Antichrist would arrive at noon and put his mark on school children caused mothers and sisters to gather outside the Fedoseevo-Pustinskaia school and demand that students be dismissed immediately. Although children remained through the end of the lesson, relatives took them home during recess. The Soviet government interpreted this 1918 incident as an attempt to combat the recent separation of church and school.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Pathbreaking work on apocalyptic peasant rumors appeared in Lynne Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare: Visions of the Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside," *Journal of Modern History* 62 (December 1990): 747–70.

⁶⁹ A unit of linear measure equal to approximately thirty-nine inches.

⁷⁰ Ia. Shafir, "Slukhi, chudesa, i znamenie nebesnoe (iz umonastiroenii sovremennoi derevni)," *Kommunisticheskaia revoliutsiia*, no. 10 (July 1, 1923), pp. 48–53.

⁷¹ GARE, f. 2306, op. 2, d. 402, ll. 70–76, cited in *Kul'turnoe stroitel'stvo v SSSR: Dokumenty i materialy, 1917–1921, tom I*, ed. M. P. Kim (Moscow, 1983), p. 106.

Yet even when the circumstances did not suggest such a direct causal connection, many rumors expressed a kind of anti-Soviet attitude by implication. In one anti-Bolshevik, antisemitic story during the Civil War, a Jewish commissar shot an icon but died himself when the holy image deflected the bullet back toward him.⁷² The year 1924 witnessed what one newspaper called “an epidemic of miracles” as reports of icons being spontaneously restored, lamps without oil lighting themselves and burning prolongedly, and similar tales made their way into towns and especially through the countryside.⁷³ A priest confounded antireligious work in Saratov in 1926 simply by telling villagers that Marx was a religious believer.⁷⁴ And monks selling crosses in Old Dondukovskii (Maikopskii okrug) shouted threats to passersby that approaching bandits would chop up anyone without one.⁷⁵ God would punish Iaroslavl province for atheism with uninterrupted rain, ran one story of the second half of the 1920s. Another predicted that an old man would be found in a coffin, beneath which would be an inscription predicting famine and war.⁷⁶

When collectivization began in earnest, rumors of divine intervention against those who cooperated with the Soviet state proliferated. The village priest in Sendavko (Orenburg okrug) at night heard “the voice of the Lord,” who told him that “whoever enters the kolkhoz passes into the hands of the Antichrist.” In the village of Rybkin, a sectarian wrote letters to kolkhoz members, signed by Michael the Archangel, that seriously disrupted sowing by influencing families to flee. And in Samara okrug, a churchman brought about a similar exodus when he warned that all would perish in the collective.⁷⁷ God allegedly authored a letter warning that the kolkhoz was the sphere of the devil: “Whoever is not tempted into the kolkhoz is saved; all kolkhoz members will be annihilated in the next few days.” A variation of this document advised peasants “to exit the collective and take up shock work [*udarnichestvo*] to bring about the collapse of the collective farms.” And a letter attributed to the Mother of God in Berezovsk warned of the nearness of the final judgment and the need to battle collectivization and atheism.⁷⁸

Some rumors addressed multiple targets. Clergy claimed a miracle just before Easter in 1930 in Mordovsk oblast'. The report brought forth a larger crowd than usual on Easter not only from Mordovsk but also from Mokshansk,

⁷² Kenez (n. 19 above), p. 80.

⁷³ *Nash bezbozhnik*, no. 20–21 (October 4, 1924), p. 5; *Nash bezbozhnik*, no. 22–23 (November 29, 1924), pp. 1, 7.

⁷⁴ *Antireligioznik*, no. 7 (July 1926), p. 50.

⁷⁵ GMIR, folder 81, l. 17.

⁷⁶ A. Kostitsyn, *Trudiashchaia zhenshchina i religiia* (Moscow, 1929), p. 49.

⁷⁷ *Sredne-volzhskii bezbozhnik*, no. 2 (August 22, 1930), p. 2.

⁷⁸ GMIR, folder 21, l. 6. For additional assessments of the role of apocalyptic rumor during collectivization, see GMIR, folder 81, l. 26.

Isoiisk, Penza, and other nearby raiony. Clergy, invoking what were by then stock phrases, then told the throng of the arrival of the Antichrist, the end of the world, and “the nationalization of women under collectivization.”⁷⁹ And one of the more direct rejections of Bolshevik materialism and of faith in technology came from the village of Stolpino (Ivanovo oblast’) in 1931. Rumors spread by parishioners there convinced other peasants that the tractor was a “Satanic force” that “will plow up the bones in your parents’ graves.” Many consequently refused to use them in the fields.⁸⁰

But if accepting anti-Soviet rumors entailed at least a predisposition to entertain hearsay, impeding Bolshevik efforts on a second front—the alteration of holidays and patterns of celebration—required nothing more than a desire to enjoy oneself in familiar ways. This was no trivial matter for a regime hoping to improve labor productivity on a broad scale and to raise social consciousness. Orthodox holidays numbered between 150 and 200 per year, and Russians generally observed about fifty, in addition to Sundays, as days free from labor. Beyond Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, major feasts included Epiphany, the Presentation in the Temple, the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, Palm Sunday, the Ascension, the Transfiguration, the Dormition, the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, and the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. Special observances also marked the Circumcision, the Nativity of John the Baptist, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Beheading of John the Baptist, and the Protection of the Mother of God. According to the inclinations and especially the means of individual parishes, there might be additional celebrations associated with the Virgin Mary; feasts of Michael, Nicholas (in May as well as December), and other saints; and various days that, for example, venerated miracle-working icons or commemorated past military victories.⁸¹ Every locality also observed one to four regional patrons’ (*prestol’nyi*) holidays, in addition to weddings and baptisms.⁸² Pre-Christian survivals such as Paraskeva Fridays and the day of Ivan Kupalo pushed the total even higher.⁸³ These were not anachronisms; the number of holiday observances among peasants in at least some localities appears in fact to have increased after the middle of the nineteenth century.⁸⁴

The revolutionary state responded in part by creating its own holidays. It

⁷⁹ *Sredne-volzhskii bezbozhnik*, no. 5 (November 9, 1930), p. 3.

⁸⁰ For further examples, see GMIR, folder 21, ll. 1 ob., 2, 2 ob., 3.

⁸¹ See, e.g., the discussion of personages in Linda Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (Armonk, N.Y., 1989), pp. 19–37.

⁸² Nikolai N. Rumiantsev, *O prestol’nykh prazdnikakh* (Moscow, 1939), p. 4.

⁸³ *Prazdniki i sviatye russkogo pravoslaviia* (Moscow, 1992), p. 1. For Ivan Kupalo and other pagan survivals, see Ivanits, pp. 1–18 and *passim*.

⁸⁴ Vera Shevzov, “Universal, National and Local Feasts: Competing Parameters of Orthodox Identity in Rural Russia” (paper presented at the National Conference of the

counterposed International Labor Day on May 1 to Easter and added International Women's Day, the International Day of Youth, and International Cooperation Day to the calendar. Harvest Day in mid-October and the Day of the Tractor were designed to replace traditional fall festivals, and the anniversary of the October Revolution (November 7) became paramount. Soviet New Year's, which later would include decorated trees and the exchange of gifts, was to displace Orthodox Christmas (January 7). These proved only relatively easier to implement in the factories than in the village. Authorities exercised less than complete control over the industrial workforce, while peasants either ignored Soviet holidays altogether or observed both religious and secular feasts, thereby increasing still further the total of work-free occasions.⁸⁵

Ideally, establishing Soviet observances would not only reduce the number of labor free days but would also eliminate modes of celebration that cut further into productivity prior to and following the religious feast itself. Party officials mounted strident criticisms against the frequent fasting and ritual drunkenness associated with Orthodox holidays. Six-week fasts occurred during Lent and before Christmas, a four-week Fast of the Holy Apostles took place during the summer, and two weeks of fasting preceded the Dormition. Whole-week fasts were associated with Shrove Tide, Easter, Pentecost, Christmas Tide, and the holiday of the Publican and Pharisees. A one-day fast was to take place every Wednesday and Friday, in addition to the Epiphany, the commemoration of the Beheading of John the Baptist, and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.⁸⁶ In light of such protracted periods of minimal sustenance, the Bolsheviks articulated their opposition principally in terms of public health. Among an already poorly nourished population, they argued, the diet of those observing the fasts resulted in chronic anemia, malnutrition, digestive problems, and night blindness.⁸⁷

Bolshevik disapproval of drunkenness went even further. *Bezbozhnik*, for example, mixed its reports on "drunken holidays" in various regions with didactic cartoons, such as one of a man drowning in a bucket of *samogon* (home brew).⁸⁸ The Moscow Komsomol in 1928 advocated banning the sale of vodka

American Association of Slavic Studies, Washington, D.C., October 27, 1995) (cited by permission).

⁸⁵ On the peasantry, see Fitzpatrick (n. 6 above), p. 207. Also, complaints that appeared in the antireligious press as late as 1941 indicate that the rural dimension of the problem was not easily eradicated. Drunkenness associated with summer religious holidays actually increased after collectivization and was considered more serious since whole collectives and not just individual farms participated. *Bezbozhnik*, no. 19 (May 11, 1941), p. 1.

⁸⁶ *Prazdniki i sviatye russkogo pravoslaviia*, p. 1.

⁸⁷ A. E. Segal, *Religiia i znakharstvo* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1931), p. 11.

⁸⁸ *Bezbozhnik*, no. 13 (March 25, 1928), p. 5.

everywhere in the province during the periods surrounding Christmas and New Year's celebrations and called for sterner measures against bootlegging. Similarly, the Raion Party Committee in Rogozhsko-Simonov wanted to curtail the sale of spirits from December 21 to 27.⁸⁹ Such tactics arose in a context in which the Bolsheviks had initially set out in 1917 to continue wartime prohibition and wean the population from alcohol as a remnant of capitalism. By 1930, however, they had decisively lost a war against illegal distillation and retreated to a pragmatic reimposition of the state liquor monopoly that existed under tsarism.⁹⁰

The party was under no illusions about the extent of the phenomenon. Within normal parameters (even when it includes messianic exaggeration, propaganda must at least approximate the familiar if it is to resonate with the intended audience), Bolshevik representations accented the negative. Wrote one teacher, "In the villages we cannot afford books or primers or pencils, not to speak of paints and other teaching materials. But the peasants spend hundreds of rubles on God's drunken holidays." In this account, each household laid out a minimum of five rubles on a local (*prestol'nyi*) holiday and larger sums for major celebrations. A rural correspondent in Riazan province wrote that households would leave themselves destitute rather than scrimp on hospitality. One family of eight that lived in a filthy space measuring eight-by-eight arshins entertained twenty to thirty guests so lavishly on the Feast of Pokrov (Protection of the Mother of God) that they were reduced to eating black bread, cucumbers, and potatoes the rest of the year. The gathering consumed thirty-six liters of vodka, 180 liters of home-brewed beer (*braga*), a sheep, and a thirty-six-pound pig.⁹¹ At a Pokrov celebration in Chelatny, home brew and vodka "flowed like a river." Young and elderly men and women, boys and girls of all ages, and even the officials of the rural soviet became drunk, swore, argued, and fought. During a typical Easter period in Omsk okrug, violence related to alcohol abuse resulted in four killings and forty-four serious woundings. One doctor estimated that 56–80 percent of all children drank vodka in earnest on holidays and that 90 percent had at least tasted it.⁹²

The antireligious press seemed never to tire of linking such holiday "drunk-

⁸⁹ GAMO, f. 66, d. 631, ll. 2, 4.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 66, d. 631, ll. 1–2, 4. In addition to this frank assessment of the weak battle against samogon, see Neil Weissman, "Prohibition and Alcohol Control in the USSR: The 1920s Campaign against Illegal Spirits," *Soviet Studies* 3 (July 1986): 349–68; Helena Stone, "The Soviet Government and Moonshine, 1917–1929," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 27 (July–December 1986): 359–80; Stephen White, *Russia Goes Dry: Alcohol, State and Society* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 15–27.

⁹¹ Nikolai K. Amosov, *O p'ianykh prazdnikakh* (Moscow, 1929), pp. 3–5, quotation on p. 4.

⁹² Kostitsyn (n. 76 above), pp. 60, 62–65. For a vivid and detailed description of holiday celebrations in Tver' province, see Helmut Altrichter, "Insoluble Conflicts: Village Life between Revolution and Collectivization," in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations*

eness, hooliganism, [and] fights” to lost productivity in agriculture.⁹³ One priest was so successful in convincing the chairman of the Path of Socialism Collective Farm in Orenberg okrug to suspend labor on religious holidays that the kolkhoz not only failed to fulfill its plan but also gave up a significant part of its land to a neighboring collective.⁹⁴ Officials in Leningrad oblast’ calculated that the six hundred labor days Borovich raion lost during the three-day winter feast of St. Nicholas cost eleven thousand tons of output. The figure itself was undoubtedly exaggerated, but the interruption of labor was nonetheless real.⁹⁵ Spring holidays, especially the Purification, annually disrupted sowing, according to specific reports of widespread absenteeism for religious observances that reached the center from numerous outlying regions.⁹⁶

Holidays similarly affected industry, especially those branches in which a significant number of workers maintained ties to the countryside. During the early Soviet period, even factory administrators sympathetic to the revolution continued the prerevolutionary practice of closing textile mills for two weeks at Easter, sometimes citing very real shortages of raw materials and fuel in order to put the best possible face on the situation. Few party leaders pressed the issue initially, but even those who did could not prevent closings for religious feasts at a time when maintaining any production at all was problematic.⁹⁷ Nor could the regime count on unalloyed support inside industrial enterprises. When officials promoted the worker Iurova to an administrative post at the Red October factory (Saratov province) in the mid-1920s, she used her new power to press for a four-day closure at Easter. In Moscow, the death of the former proprietress of the Ustinskaia silk mill, one Nyrnova, disrupted production for a day. In prerevolutionary times, the pious Nyrnova had imposed a strict religious regimen on her nine hundred laborers, personally leading them the few steps from the workers’ barracks to church on Sundays and holidays. Mourners paid tribute by leading her large funeral procession onto the factory grounds during working hours. Elsewhere in the capital, the size of the Palm Sunday observance at the Red Rosa factory caught the attention of officials, as did the scope of the resistance to closing the church at the Leader of the Proletariat factory.⁹⁸

in *Soviet Society and Culture*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Richard Stites (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), pp. 195–200.

⁹³ *Volzhskii bezbozhnik*, no. 30 (May 10–20, 1931), p. 2. For an example of antialcohol propaganda from a newspaper of another type, see *Radio v derevne*, no. 44 (October 28, 1928), p. 1.

⁹⁴ *Sredne-volzhskii bezbozhnik*, no. 2 (August 22, 1930), p. 2.

⁹⁵ *Bezbozhnik*, no. 1 (January 1931), pp. 4–5.

⁹⁶ *Volzhskii bezbozhnik* 11 (February 20–30 [third decade], 1931), p. 3; *Antireligioznik*, no. 2 (January 1932), p. 31.

⁹⁷ GARF, f. 5457, op. 3, d. 57, l. 21.

⁹⁸ Kostitsyn, pp. 42–46.

The passage of time and exposure to additional antireligious propaganda did not immunize industrial workers and students to the lure of good times. At Easter in 1928, notwithstanding claims that attendance at work was generally better than in the previous year, the Voznesensk factory in Moscow experienced six times its usual absenteeism and the AMO factory reported truancy in excess of 10 percent of the workforce. Only eighty of six hundred students of the Industrial-Economics technicum reported for classes.⁹⁹ Outside the capital, workers and students stayed away in even greater proportions. At the Krasnyi Perekop factory in Iaroslavl, 548 machines stood idle while 1,101 workers observed Easter. In the Tver wagon works, 25 percent of the workforce failed to appear, while 30 and 50 percent, respectively, chose celebration over labor at the Trud factory and the Vitebsk bread bakery. In fifteen schools in Voronezh, only 36 percent (1,328 of 3,605) of pupils attended on Orthodox Christmas, while one rural teacher estimated a usual rate of 75 percent absenteeism on church holidays. During one semester in the Korchezhinskaia school (Smolensk province), students lost thirty-five of seventy-five instruction days to weddings, holidays, and other religious observances. And despite a curriculum that encouraged secularism, one atheist teacher complained in 1928 that the “percentage of nonbelievers is becoming smaller and smaller.”¹⁰⁰

But convincing workers and peasants to give up time off from work, an opportunity to eat gluttonously, the prospect of community dancing and singing, rituals of flirting and courtship for the young, and a socially sanctioned excuse to get drunk depended on more than their level of religiosity. Leaders of the Union of Militant Atheists readily admitted the folly of simply asking the population to surrender holidays with nothing more than slogans in return, but they also resolutely maintained that the observance of feasts did not necessarily involve an active religious commitment for all involved. Indeed, party opinion by the mid-1920s was that most celebrated holidays more as symbolic reenactments than as expressions of deeply felt religiosity.¹⁰¹ Hence, advocates of atheism took encouragement from the fact that village youth in particular—regarded as less educated, less sophisticated, and less organized than their counterparts in the factory towns—eagerly anticipated religious holidays but observed them largely as days of recreation. Loud singing and carousing about the village dominated these occasions, even though the holiday began with

⁹⁹ *Bezbozhnik*, no. 19 (May 6, 1928), p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Kostitsyn (n. 76 above), pp. 62, 74–75. By contrast, in 1929 the Union of Atheists of Moscow uезд’ reported the cancellation of Christmas and Easter as school holidays as one of its recent achievements. *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, no. 8 (1929), p. 22.

¹⁰¹ GARF, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 14, l. 4; *Antireligioznik*, no. 12 (December 1926), p. 41. The journal does not, however, present evidence to support its further opinion: that the majority who participated might not be far from atheism.

attending church.¹⁰² Moscow workers who had long ceased actively practicing religion might also turn up at church on a major holiday.¹⁰³ And between celebrations, as one peasant in Petrovskoe (Moscow oblast') informed the VTsIK agitator Uzkov, "there is nowhere else to go" for entertainment other than church. Others told Uzkov, following his lecture on the class essence of religious holidays, that young people committed "hooligan" acts because they had nothing to do other than wander the streets, while for all ages the church was clean, comfortable, warm, and—unlike the monthly movie at the kolkhoz club—free. Also, the choir did not sing badly.¹⁰⁴

The Bolsheviks, however, learned these lessons largely from their early failures. Especially during the first years of Soviet power, they expected more than was realistic from object lessons and the work of Narkomiust, and they left most atheist agitation in the hands of amateurs. Against the counsel of higher party officials, untrained locals—in addition to their sporadic violence—in-effectively engaged clergy and believers in public disputations. Their use of simplistic ploys, such as demanding a miracle on the spot as evidence of the existence of God, harmed the atheist cause more than it helped. Such occasions often disintegrated into shouting matches, and Bolshevik sources noted that almost always the public perception was that the believer had bested his opponent. Some Soviet publications claimed that the audience lacked the awareness to grasp the atheist argument, but less wishful elements in the party decried the poor preparation of agitators, cautioned against crude direct attacks, and denounced the disputation as an ineffective tactic.¹⁰⁵

Yet organized party activities were not significantly more sophisticated. From December 25, 1922, through January 6, 1923, the Moscow Communist Youth League launched the first Komsomol Christmas (they added Komsomol Easter in 1923). Designed primarily as a "carnival," Komsomol Christmas parodied church processions and rituals while providing a secular, didactic alternative. House-to-house caroling (*koliada*) concentrated on local atheist

¹⁰² V. A. Murin, *Byt i nrvy derevenskoi molodozhi* (Moscow, 1926), pp. 38–39; S. Mark'ev, "Komsomol Prionezh'ia," in *Komsomol v derevne*, ed. V. G. Tan-Bogoraz (Moscow-Leningrad, 1926), p. 92.

¹⁰³ GMIR, folder 202, l. 1.

¹⁰⁴ GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 21, ll. 179 ob., 180.

¹⁰⁵ Shafir (n. 70 above), pp. 1, 48–53, esp. p. 53; Iakov A. Iakovlev, *Derevnia kak ona est'* (Moscow, 1924), p. 98. For an account of a disputation that degenerated into angry shouting in Malaia Vishera (Novgorod province) in 1921, see GARF, f. 353, op. 4, d. 378, l. 45. RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 56; RTsKhIDNI, f. 17, op. 60, ed. khr. 792, l. 33; *Nash bezbozhnik*, no. 14 (November 26, 1925), p. 1; *Kommunizm i religiia* (Moscow, 1922), p. 3; *Bezbozhnik*, no. 53 (December 7, 1923), p. 6; Shafir, p. 53; S. Abramson, p. 16; *Bezbozhnik*, no. 3 (January 18, 1925), p. 8; *Bezbozhnik*, no. 33 (August 16, 1925), p. 2; *Bezbozhnik*, no. 45 (November 8, 1925), p. 6. For a later reference to the crudeness of early tactics, see GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 3, ll. 34, 35.

themes, other singing with a decidedly antireligious flavor took place, films were shown, skits focused on revolutionary subjects, and activists lectured on the Bolshevik understanding of Christmas. Conducted at forty-five locations throughout Moscow, the first Komsomol Christmas enlisted the talents of such celebrities as director Vsevelod Meyerhold. The press reported 417 observances in other cities and 184 carnivals throughout Soviet Russia in 1922.¹⁰⁶ Subsequent Komsomol holidays followed the same model in organization and content during the next several years. About two hundred young people turned out in Voznesensk volost' (Leningrad province) for the 1923 Komsomol Christmas, which, like youth rituals associated with religious holidays, started just before midnight and continued until six o'clock the following morning. Reports of similar gatherings paid close attention to the degree of drunkenness in evidence and stressed a strong generational split among those who attended and those who stayed away.¹⁰⁷

Despite the generally positive reaction from the press initially, more circumspect voices within the party criticized Komsomol Christmas and Easter from the outset. As early as February 1923—that is, following the initial Komsomol Christmas but before its first Easter—the Party Commission on the Separation of Church and State objected to the prevailing carnival atmosphere and demanded more ideologically substantial films, songs, reports, and lectures.¹⁰⁸ Carrying satiric “Red Christmas trees” in a mock procession in no way compensated for generally poor organization, as when campaign literature appeared only the day before the actual event.¹⁰⁹ Finally, the exercises affronted the sensibilities of the religious segment of the population without producing any significant political advantage. Angry reactions to the first anti-Christmas from the elderly in Kiev, Khar'kov, and Saratov, although initially the stuff of humor, did not amuse those more concerned with winning over the population than with insulting it.¹¹⁰

By the mid-1920s, therefore, the Union of Atheists issued its own, more precise instructions. Local atheist cells and the Komsomol were to use symposia, lectures, and other activities to separate youth specifically from church, drunkenness, and “holiday rowdyism” but not through narrowly conceived

¹⁰⁶ V. I. Brudnyi, *Obriady vchera i segodnia* (Moscow, 1968), pp. 71–72. For an enthusiastic report on the event put on by the Komsomol at the Institute of Oriental Studies, see *Bezbozhnik*, no. 5–6 (January 21, 1923), pp. 2–3. See also *Bezbozhnik*, no. 7 (February 28, 1923), p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Makar'ev, “Komsomol Prionezh'ia,” p. 105; *Bezbozhnik*, no. 1 (January 4, 1925), p. 3; *Nash bezbozhnik*, no. 14–15 (July 29, 1924), p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ RTsKhIDNI, f. 89, op. 4, ed. khr. 115, 1. 3.

¹⁰⁹ A. Bakurova, “Komsomol na antireligioznom fronte,” in Enisherlov, Lukachevskii, and Mitin (n. 18 above), pp. 305–6.

¹¹⁰ *Bezbozhnik*, no. 5–6 (January 21, 1923), pp. 3–4.

Christmas and Easter campaigns of limited duration. Holiday agitation was to be not an end in itself but the basis for extended and continuous cultural-enlightenment work, and different tactics were needed for city and countryside. Preparations in urban areas, leaders felt, should begin well before Christmas and should stress natural history, quality of life (*byt*), and political/historical themes. In the village, in light of the many negative results of previous agitation, propagandists would have to use even greater care. Above all, the atheist leadership advised, activists should frame the approach there in terms of how religion hindered agriculture.¹¹¹

The onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1928 generated antireligious agitation that dwarfed earlier efforts. To cite one example, a demonstration—surely orchestrated—involving party, Komsomol, school, and trade union representatives involved some three thousand participants, who called for the liberation of the masses from addiction to religion and the transformation of churches into schools.¹¹² In this atmosphere, the tenor of the propaganda also changed. The 1928 Komsomol anti-Easter campaigns judiciously avoided similarities to previous Komsomol Easters, since any such association would cause peasants to dismiss the event as “new” or “Soviet” Easter. Rather, appeals to the village were to concentrate on a list of themes that included “Easter and the Sowing Campaign,” “Is It Possible to Rise from the Dead?” and “Health and Religion.” Topics for urban areas were to encompass, among others, “The Similarity of Church and Theater” and “Youth, Culture, and Religion.” And in both town and village, agitators should relieve uninterrupted propaganda with episodes of pure entertainment.¹¹³ Directives for the 1929 anti-Easter campaign similarly provided different strategies of agitation for town and for village. A variety of organizations would launch antireligious work on March 15 and continue through May 15, with May 1 receiving special attention as a featured holiday.¹¹⁴

Yet as the Cultural Revolution proceeded, antireligious goals were increasingly subsumed under broader political objectives. The anti-Christmas campaign of 1930–31 mobilized 444 newspapers for a press campaign that began in late November and continued until January 10, 1931. Its anti-Christmas catch phrases not only worked against religion, however, but also reflected rivalries over power within the party by attacking the right and left “deviations.” Slogans also sought specifically to involve atheists (*bezbozhniki*) in shock work, full collectivization, and the campaign against illiteracy. Local

¹¹¹ GARF, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 12, ll. 20–21. For a report on using different anti-Christmas strategies for town and countryside in December 1925, see Smolensk Archive, WKP 459: 25.

¹¹² GARF, f. 5263, op. 1, ed. khr. 3, l. 63.

¹¹³ *Bezbozhnik*, no. 14 (April 1, 1928), p. 7.

¹¹⁴ *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, no. 5 (1929), p. 20; GARF, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 39, l. 5. See also *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, no. 23 (1929), *passim*.

antireligious lectures addressed the liquidation of supply and distribution bottlenecks and the implementation of collectivization, in addition to criticizing priests.¹¹⁵ Beyond this, during and following collectivization clergy were victimized for reasons not strictly connected to their religious standing: to scapegoat elites, for example, and to settle personal feuds and village rivalries.¹¹⁶

The Central Council of the Union of Militant Atheists thus exulted in successes and lamented shortfalls. In a style typical of the period, the Middle Volga krai reported that membership in antireligious organizations rose from 35,000 to 120,000 members during a nine-month period. Three hundred antireligious brigades worked on spring sowing, and 90 percent of kolkhoz members were counted as atheists. Believers were said to be exiting religious communes, few were taking holy orders, churches were closing, and religious holidays were disappearing.¹¹⁷ Of the 1931 anti-Christmas campaign, the Central Council reported that only insignificant numbers still observed the holiday or attended church, factory productivity continued unabated, and the lack of discipline usually associated with church holidays was no longer in evidence.¹¹⁸ Even where previous propaganda had foundered, a small number of activists who conducted an intensive campaign could reinvigorate antireligious work.¹¹⁹ And for the 1934 anti-Christmas in Ivanovo oblast', the Central Union of Militant Atheists felt confident enough now to require local organs to provide information on church attendance during working hours on January 7, the composition of the crowd at church and in the choir, the nature of church decorations, public prayers conducted house to house, the level of absenteeism in the industrial enterprises, and the incidence of drunkenness.¹²⁰

Other reports, however, contradicted such enthusiastic assessments and complained of the gap between planning and implementation. Indeed, the common claim that every Komsomol member was also a member of the Union of Atheists was, as the atheist leadership frankly admitted, an empty slogan, since Komsomols regularly joined nonparty youth in drunkenness, hooliganism, and "old" forms of celebration.¹²¹ Even with the Cultural Revolution under way, *Bezbozhnik* carried photos of state cooperatives selling Christmas ornaments and other holiday items.¹²² And the same papers that celebrated the end of

¹¹⁵ GMIR, folder 34, ll. 2–3, 5, 7–15, 18, 21.

¹¹⁶ Fitzpatrick (n. 7 above), pp. 233–61; Viola (n. 7 above), pp. 26–29.

¹¹⁷ *Sredne-volzhskii bezbozhnik*, no. 1 (August 11, 1930), p. 3.

¹¹⁸ GARF, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 72, l. 80; S. Abramson (n. 105 above), pp. 16–18; *De-revenskii bezbozhnik*, no. 4 (June 1928), p. 5.

¹¹⁹ GARF, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 23, ll. 1–3.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 21, l. 29.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, f. 5407, op. 1, ed. khr. 12, ll. 20–21.

¹²² *Bezbozhnik*, no. 2 (January 1929), p. 11.

religiosity carried, often in the same issue, complaints about the weakness of antireligious cadres.¹²³

The real problem lay less with planning and organization than with the fact that the majority of the population did not enjoy the Soviet holidays as much as those they were being asked to give up. Typically, antireligious celebrations in town and village strongly featured reports and lectures, and entertainment concentrated on antireligious didacticism. Special variations might appear to be appropriate—the Day of the Harvest would feature an agronomist and “games ‘of a harvest character’”—but in general the format (lectures such as “Primitive Man and the Conception of Religious Belief” and the performance of a Komsomol antireligious play) did not deviate far from the norm. The party was talking past its intended audience. Responses, as for example at an occasion in Tambov province that generated about thirty audience questions, concentrated on more specific but mundane issues: “Was God on earth?”; “Will our church soon be turned into a club?”¹²⁴ But by the late 1920s, it was not only Orthodox celebrations that harassed the party. Singing, dancing, and musical circles organized by sectarian proselytizers also proved more interesting than atheist occasions, which bored even those responsible for organizing them.¹²⁵ When reproached in 1930 for the shortfalls of antireligious work in the Middle Volga, the head of the agitation-propaganda section of one Komsomol cell replied unabashedly that he “did not find it interesting.”¹²⁶

Hence, by the early 1930s the Central Council of the Union of Militant Atheists had to balance their optimistic pronouncements with more sober assessments. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, membership in the Union rose to 5 million, but the council questioned the meaning of such figures. If anything, one leader maintained, even half that number of reliable followers would be better than what actually existed. There was also a question of the quality of cadres. As soon as someone proved capable in local antireligious work, they would be transferred to other, ostensibly more important duties. In reality, the number of the true activists rose and ebbed in an ironic rhythm: “The mass is born at Christmas, dies at Easter, and is resurrected by May 1.”¹²⁷ In the end, astronomical rises in membership in antireligious groups and a

¹²³ *Sredne-volzhskii bezbozhnik*, no. 1 (August 11, 1931), p. 3.

¹²⁴ Makar’ev, “Komsomol Proinezh’ia,” p. 105; *Antireligioznik*, no. 7 (1929), p. 91; *Nash Bezbozhnik*, no. 2 (January 25, 1925), p. 2.

¹²⁵ *Radio v derevne*, no. 52 (December 23, 1928), p. 1.

¹²⁶ *Sredne-volzhskii bezbozhnik*, no. 2 (September 20, 1930), p. 2. For a similar assessment by the chairman of the rural soviet in Kemennyi raion, see *Kommunisticheskaia molodezh’* 9–10 (May 1933): 23.

¹²⁷ GARF, f. 5407, ed. khr. 95, ll. 59–62.

drop in the number of those observing religious holidays no more signaled an increase in sincere atheist convictions than the persistence of traditional celebrations represented deep, abiding religiosity.

We can assess yet a third dimension in the promotion of and resistance to atheism by examining folklore and ethnography. Sophisticated in the ways of communicating uncomplicated messages to an audience not fully literate—as evidenced by the Bolsheviks' powerful use of poster art—party activists attempted to co-opt preexisting traditions of popular expression.¹²⁸ To this end, the Soviet state, despite its general scarcity of resources, continued the extensive ethnographic research in the countryside begun in the second half of the nineteenth century. Research expeditions specifically targeted marriage customs, living conditions, the influence of religion on the local economy, witchcraft and sorcery, popular tales of the occult, and other so-called superstitions.¹²⁹

These involved more than disinterested scholarly investigation. “Comrades! The goal of our expedition is antireligious propaganda,” began one set of methodological instructions.¹³⁰ Published articles spoke no less candidly:

We can conclude that in addition to studying folklore for the purpose of conducting antireligious work, we must [at the same time] create other materials very similar in type to folklore, but which carry out our own objectives more fully and pointedly. [But] folklore-purists frequently object to any alteration of folklore materials. I would suggest, however, that where the objective is agitation and propaganda for the purposes of political enlightenment, such scholarly purism is misplaced. One ought not, of course, present changed or newly created jokes, songs, etc. (done in the style of folklore) as recorded folklore, [but] to introduce alterations and additions in publications for mass consumption is completely natural. It is necessary to direct the attention of our proletarian writers—especially our collective farm proletarian writers—to this task.¹³¹

¹²⁸ See Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven, Conn., 1988). On religious/antireligious themes, see esp. pp. 5–6, 6, n. 38, 7, 9, 11, 23–24, 32, 37, 43, 47, 51, 55, 57–58, 68, 105, 121, 140, n. 80, 149. See also Leah Dickerman, ed., *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design, 1917–1937* (New York, 1996).

¹²⁹ Relevant records are filed in the Archive of the State Museum of Ethnography (hereafter GME), f. 2, op. 1, d. 87 (religious holidays, celebrations, and customs), d. 116 (wedding celebrations), d. 132 (general research), d. 135 (living conditions), d. 143 (religion and the economy), f. 2, op. 2, d. 5 (wedding ceremonies), d. 22 (celebrations and living conditions), d. 30 (weddings), d. 34 (sorcerers and sorcery), d. 35 (wedding and other celebrations), d. 38 (popular tales on the occult), d. 39 (superstitions), d. 40 (weddings), and d. 42 (sorcery).

¹³⁰ GME, f. 2, op. 1, d. 343, 1. 2.

¹³¹ N. P. Andreev, “Fol’klor i antireligioznaia rabota,” *Voinstvuiushchii ateizm*, no. 12 (December 1931), p. 3.

In short, the Bolsheviks would attempt to counterpose a new, didactic popular culture to what had evolved organically over centuries.¹³²

Well suited to this type of rapid dissemination of Soviet ideas was the *chastushka*.¹³³ Peasants had long composed these popular rhymes to express diverse emotions of love, humor, and social criticism. As peasant laborers carried their traditions with them into the factories, the “urban *chastushka*” evolved, which in turn influenced changes in the village *chastushki* when the peasants periodically returned to the village.¹³⁴ None of this had escaped the notice of prerevolutionary ethnographers, who cataloged hundreds of examples well before 1917.¹³⁵ Thus, when Soviet ethnographers arrived in the villages during the 1920s—eager to find evidence of Soviet enlightenment and to criticize vestiges of “backwardness”—they came prepared to encounter *chastushki*. Indeed, they weighed the relative influence of new Komsomol and party compositions against those that expressed “anti-Soviet” or “hooligan” sentiments as a barometer of progress.

Finding either variation presented no problem. As these representative samples illustrate, in the 1920s traditional themes of love and the expression of high spirits mixed with criticisms of hard times, pro- and anti-Soviet sentiments, antireligious messages, and general didacticism. Traditional prerevolutionary personal themes certainly survived: “My dear one is married off to someone else / And all life has changed / My dear one is being married / And

¹³² We should not read more into this passage than the evidence will bear. There is no denying that the Bolsheviks didactically adapted long-standing customs to their present purposes, but in so doing they did not differ significantly from what other states and nationalist and liberal movements attempted in nineteenth-century Europe. See Eric Hobsbawm, “Inventing Traditions” and “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 4–10, 263–66, 271, 274, 303–7.

¹³³ *Chastushki* were topical songs composed of couplets. In the most common form, two thematically linked couplets comprised a verse. A *chastushka* could consist of a single verse, but the most elaborate *chastushki* might contain dozens of verses.

¹³⁴ In one account, the factory, workers’ barracks, bars, the railroad, the boulevard press, and popular literature aimed at workers all influenced the *chastushki*, beginning in the 1890s. B. A. Rozenfel’d, “K voprosu o proiskhozhdenii i formirovaniu zhanra sovremennoi chastushki,” *Khudozhestvennyi fol’klor*, no. 4–5 (1929), pp. 172–92, esp. pp. 182, 184, 186. Readers, however, might treat with skepticism Rozenfel’d’s assertion that new *chastushki* also reflected the rhythm of factory machinery at work. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹³⁵ On the shift from love to other themes as urban experiences produced different inspirations, see V. V. Stratem, “Tvorchestvo gorodskoi ulitsy,” *Khudozhestvennyi fol’klor*, no. 2–3 (1927), pp. 144, 147–48, 151–62. On the sustained fascination of Russian ethnographers, Gleb Uspenskii alone had collected hundreds and published extensively on the subject by the late nineteenth century. V. Plemiannikova, “Stat’ia Gl. Uspenskogo o chastushkakh,” *Khudozhestvennyi fol’klor*, no. 4–5 (1929), pp. 160–71.

all love is ended.”¹³⁶ Youthful willfulness and defiance (relabelled “hooligan” [*chastushki*] in Soviet parlance) also sustained their appeal: “The old women sit on the bridge, / I am growing up as a rogue; / Don’t judge us, old ladies; / We’ll send you straight to hell.”¹³⁷ *Chastushki* blamed the Soviets for hard times: “Speculators speculate / But the Soviet state requisitions.”¹³⁸ And on the antireligious side appeared: “Now I don’t go to church, / There’s absolutely nothing there for me to do. / I go to the reading room, / And there I read in the evenings.”¹³⁹ And from the Komsomol came: “Go, you girls / Stroll about with the Komsomol members. / The Komsomol members will teach you / To read the books of Lenin.”¹⁴⁰

OLD STORIES AND NEW

Nothing ultimately suggests that the battle between church and state was fought between equivalent forces in 1917–32, and both sides pressed whatever situational advantages they enjoyed. The Soviet regime could marshal significantly superior physical resources and the manifold intangible advantages that accrue to any government in power. It also benefited from any preexisting animosity in society toward clergy and church. For its part, Russian Orthodoxy boasted a far greater numerical membership than the party, in addition to the considerable authority that came from more than nine centuries of existence. And the extensive degree to which its rituals informed Russian social existence provided levels of loyalty and familiarity to which the Bolsheviks initially could only aspire.

This battle of competing visions of truth and reality produced lessons of experience for all involved, but no definitive victor. Bolshevism proved to be no single-minded monolith determined to eradicate religion as an end in itself and at all cost. Despite the countless antireligious resolutions routinely passed at all levels of party and state work, the promotion of atheism was chronically underfunded, neglected by the very organs designated to carry it out, and left to amateurs and the least talented cadres. High officials made a sustained effort

¹³⁶ “Moi milasha zhenitsia / I zhizn’ vsia peremenitsia, / Milasha obvenchaetsia / I vsia liubov’ konchaetsia.” Plemiannikova, p. 166.

¹³⁷ “Baby sidiat na mostu, / ia mazurikom rostu; / ne sudite, baby, nas; / posylaem k chortu vas.” A. Smirnov-Kutacheskii, “Khuliganskaia chastushka sovremennoi derevne,” *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia*, no. 7 (October–November 1925), p. 130.

¹³⁸ “Spekuliantiki spekuliruiut, / A Sovetskaia vlast’ rekviziruiet.” A. Smirnov-Kutacheskii, “Proiskhozhdenie chastushki,” *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia*, no. 2 (March–April 1925), p. 47.

¹³⁹ “Ne khozhu teper’ v tserkov’, / Mne tam delat’ nechego. / Ia khozhu v izbuchital’niu, / Tam chitaiu vecherom.” L. Stal’, “Zhenshchina, sem’ia i religiia,” *Antireligioznik*, no. 2 (February 1939), p. 32.

¹⁴⁰ V. Ershov, “Komsomolets v sem’e,” in Tan-Bogoraz, ed. (n. 102 above), p. 140.

to maintain Soviet law and restrain crude attacks at the regional and local levels, but in the process they created avenues through and around Soviet policy. Nor were the Bolsheviks free of misconceptions about the designated constituency of the revolution. The party propensity to emphasize differences in society—between workers and peasants, young and old, men and women, and urban and rural—reflected important Russian realities, but it also failed fully to appreciate key situational variations. The use of bifurcated categories like “worker” and “peasant” that dominated antireligious propaganda underestimated the importance of the significant experiential overlap found throughout society, especially in light of the high mobility of the population at this time. In the end, the increasing replacement of antireligious propaganda with violence in the late 1920s came not as the culmination of the Bolshevik atheist agenda but as its antithesis. But Russian Orthodoxy also suffered reversals. The church vacated the moral high ground when it fought back with violent tactics that contradicted church precepts. Similarly, the actions the laity took against the state in the name of religion came to be motivated not only by religious convictions but also by the desire to defend what was simply familiar and enjoyable. And, over time, state repression and coercion understandably took a toll on religious observance among those least resolute and pious.

In the end, these encounters between irreconcilable forces had far-reaching implications. The conflict by no means resolved the issues that separated state and society with any finality. It did, however, fully establish the patterns of assertion, resistance, adaptation, and circumvention that were to have relevance in Soviet life not only during 1917–32 but beyond as well.