

THE ANTI-RELIGIOUS CAMPAIGN

Replacing Religion with State Atheism (1918-1928)

Karl Marx, the founder of communism, called religion “the opiate of the masses.” Lenin claimed that religion contributed to the “stupefaction of the working class.” From the earliest days of communism in Russia, the Bolsheviks attempted to replace faith with State Atheism by persecuting the church.

The government ended religious and ethnic privileges. In November, 1917, Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin signed *The Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia*, which ended privileges based on faith or nationality. With this act, the Mennonites lost the rest of their privileged status in Russia, including their military exemption. This also affected the Russian-Orthodox Church, which had long been tied to and funded by the state.

Religious Instruction of Youth Was Prohibited. In January, 1918, officials forbade religious instruction in schools. On June 13, 1921, religious instruction of anyone under the age of 18 was forbidden.

The Bolsheviks murdered large numbers of clergy and believers during the Russian Civil War (1917-1922). Those in the Orthodox Church became special targets because the church had received special privileges under the Tsars. Beginning in 1918, numerous priests were killed. Some were cut to pieces, some were beaten, some lost limbs, and one 75-year old abbot was even scalped and beheaded. The Party claimed that these people had supported the Tsar and had bourgeois sympathies. After the Civil War, persecution continued: between 1922 and 1926, 1200 Russian Orthodox priests were killed, and many more arrested, imprisoned, and exiled.

The government seized church property and restricted church rights. In January, 1918, Lenin issued a decree that all church property was to be nationalized. Religious organizations could no longer own property or teach religion in schools or to any minors. All theological schools were closed. Over the next few years, the state took over churches and stripped the clergy of their power. In Kharkov, Ukraine, the clergy could not baptize, marry, or bury anyone without permission of the local Soviet Executive Committee. In 1921-22, the state robbed the churches of much of their wealth in the name of “famine relief.”



A 1929 issue of *Bezbozhnik* (*The Godless*), showing workers dumping Jesus out with the garbage. The article suggests that Soviet Industrialization Day should replace the Christian holiday, Transfiguration Day.

Anti-religious propaganda emerged. Journals and magazines sprung up that were devoted to promoting atheism, such as *Revolution and the Church*, *Pravda* (*Truth*) and *League of the Militant Godless* (later shortened to *The Godless*). They portrayed religion as unscientific, and faith as a vice, rather like drunkenness or greed. The intended purpose was to justify the mistreatment of religious people.

Religious days were desecrated. People had to work on their days of worship, Jews on Saturdays, and Christians on Sundays.

As time passed, it became clear that religious conviction was not easy to dismantle. In 1924, Leon Trotsky warned that it would be a long struggle against religion, and any means should be used to attack it except the forced closure of churches, since he didn't

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The beautiful Church of Christ the Savior in Moscow was demolished in 1931 and replaced with a public swimming pool.



The banner over the entrance of this cathedral reads: "Monks, the bloody enemies of the working people."

want to create religious martyrs. It was never officially illegal to be a believer for the same reason. Thus religious people were never officially persecuted for their faith, but for all kinds of other fabricated reasons (usually resistance to the state).

A Reprieve in the middle-1920s. The New Economic Policy (1924-28) gave a brief reprieve from religious persecution. To improve its reputation, the state halted its practice of murdering religious believers without trials. Controls on emigrating were also lifted, so 21,000 Mennonites left the USSR in the 1920s, seeking religious freedom in the U.S. and Canada.

The leniency didn't last. The doors for immigration closed again once Josef Stalin came to power, and in the late 1920s, the communist party began a fresh attack against religion. Groups like the Mennonites that had escaped notice during the first wave of persecution were now targeted as well.

Institutions worked to discredit belief. The Komsomol (Communist Youth Organization) held theater performances that ridiculed religious services, and

sometimes even held services themselves, called "Komsomol Christmases" or "Komsomol Easters" where they would burn religious books and icons, and mock pictures of Christ. They held parades on Christmas and Easter, right outside churches, hoping to make worship impossible inside. The League of Militant Atheists operated from 1925 to 1947, and had 3.5 million

members by 1941. The League published newspapers, sponsored movies, held lectures and demonstrations, set up museums to discredit faith, and even visited believers to convince them that God doesn't exist. "Struggle against religion is a struggle for socialism," was the League's slogan.

Despite the state's efforts to drive out religion, many believers in the USSR remained staunchly devoted to their religious convictions. The persecution of the church was overt and ugly, and didn't win over the people as intended. The Communist Party had a way of alienating many, particularly those it threatened, disenfranchised, starved, worked, and persecuted. Faith was merely driven underground.



The magazine cover of the Soviet atheist magazine, *Society of the Godless*, depicts Jesus as a puppet of the Russian Orthodox church, which is luring in its prey.