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### Evolution of Soviet War on Religion

One of the cornerstones of the communist movement in Russia was the abolishment of religion. The Bolsheviks saw religion as a tool of the old order; believing that the tsar and the church gave peasants fake promises of rewards in the afterlife for their hardship then. As a result of their beliefs, the Bolsheviks would continuously keep trying to eliminate religion in Russia for decades until finally stopping in the 1980s. The execution of this belief evolved throughout Soviet Russia and went through many different phases. In this paper, I will explain the evolution of the Bolshevik's attempts to eliminate religion—specifically the Orthodox Christian church—as well as why their efforts ultimately failed.

When the Bolsheviks first came to power, they started enacting their beliefs into policies rather quickly both economic and religious. They dealt with religion in two different ways, dealing with the church, and dealing with individual people. Lenin and the other Bolsheviks had ideological differences with the Orthodox Church, but they also mostly saw them as a political enemy rather than an ideological one. The Bolsheviks feared that the Russian Orthodox Church wanted to overthrow them and reinstate the tsar. The Bolsheviks began their war on the church by stripping the church of its political power. In the 1920's they started to confiscate gold and other riches from the church to pay for food and other supplies for the Russian people due to the famine of the 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

1. "Confiscating Church Gold" (text), "1921: religion, texts," Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Michigan State University, accessed April 12 2020, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1921-2/confiscating-church-gold/>

The Bolsheviks created pressure on the church trying to paint them as not caring about those suffering from the famine. Some complied with the Soviets, while others—including the patriarch—resisted. Those who resisted were typically put on trial and sometimes even executed.<sup>2</sup>

While the Orthodox church was their main enemy when it came to religion, the Bolsheviks also created measures against other religious groups. They made it so that religious organizations had to be registered with the state and could only hold religious gatherings if they had permission from the authorities. Religious groups also could only hold meetings in a single building that also had to be registered and approved by the state.<sup>3</sup> When it came to individuals who practiced religion, the Soviets tended to have a less restrictive stance. Lenin and the others believed that if individuals had to practice religion, then they should do it from inside their house. This idea was because the Bolsheviks believed that those who practiced religion in privacy were essentially stuck in the old way of thinking. It was only with the case of religious gatherings or preaching religion to others that the Bolsheviks were more restrictive.

During WW2 Soviet ideology about religion made its first significant evolution. During the war, the Russian people were reluctant to fight the Germans even though Germany had already begun invading Russia. Stalin, to rally the Russian people, relaxed the Soviet stances on religious groups—specifically the Orthodox church—in the hopes that they would rally the people.

2. “Confiscating Church Gold” (text), “1921: religion, texts,” Seventeen Moments in Soviet History, Michigan State University, accessed April 12 2020, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1921-2/confiscating-church-gold/>

3. “Soviet War on Religion,” *Advocate of Peace through Justice* 92, no. 2 (May 1930): 109-110.

Thus, Stalin and the church entered an uneasy partnership in 1943. Both sides of the relationship would end up getting something out of the other. The church ended up getting seats of power again and helped raise funds for the Russian military and field hospitals. Stalin ended up getting other platforms for his rallying cries and gained symbols of religious and government leaders united against the enemy to use as propaganda.<sup>4</sup>

The next evolution of the Soviet religious beliefs occurred during the 1950s under Khrushchev. During this time the church had managed to rebuild most of their previous infrastructure, however, the state also reintroduced aggressive policies against the church at the time. They began initiating policies that they previously had in the 1920s, and even went beyond them into more and more aggressive and violent ways. Another method they tried was by trying to turn atheism—effectively—into a religion. The Soviets attempted to preach atheism to the people in this type of pseudo-religion to weaken their beliefs in established religions. One way they did this was by using the space race to try and show what could be accomplished by science rather than religion. In her 2018 book, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty*, Victoria Smolkin discusses how the Soviets attempted this. She talks about how during the space race one of the Russian cosmonauts went up into space and proclaimed it “Godless.”<sup>5</sup> The idea was that if someone had gone up into space and declared that they saw no God; then it would make people who worshiped lose faith in religion.

4. “Orthodox Patriarch Appointed” (text), “1943: religion, texts,” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, Michigan State University, accessed April 12 2020, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1943-2/orthodox-patriarch-appointed/>

5. Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 88.

The Soviets attempted many ways to eliminate religion through their continual evolution, however, all their attempts failed. The question is why did they fail? Fundamentally the Soviets did not understand the belief in religion. They kept trying to preach atheism as a replacement for religion, believing that people could put their faith equally into it as they did religion. However, atheism cannot work as they tried it because fundamentally, it is not a religion. Religion requires people to believe that there is some type of divine force or being will help them if they act the right way. However, atheism does not work in this way because the idea of atheism is that there is no divine force or being, so there is not anything to worship or put faith in. When it came to the Soviets wanting to replace faith in religion with faith in the space race, a similar issue occurred. People believed that man couldn't reach space and so there was a constant wonder about space. This wonder was still present when the first person was sent into space, but once that happened, the wonder disappears. This is because the impossible became possible, so people would not care as much after the first person was sent into space. Eventually, the wonder would become indifference, and indifference is ultimately the death of movements or ideas. Ideas and movements can work when there is an enemy because it becomes a them vs. us question. This can be seen with the Orthodox Church; the Soviets were able to make a us vs. them stance and it worked for a time. However, this same stance cannot be taken with indifference because people would not be motivated either way and fundamentally would not care. Ultimately it would be the combination of the Soviets not understanding how belief in religion work and the gradual indifference from the people that would end the struggle against religion. The Soviets were able to bend their beliefs to fit difficult situations and even became allies with the church at points. However, since they never fully understood their opponents, they were not able to create solutions to the problem of religion.

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