CHAPTER ONE

# The Religious Front

## MILITANT ATHEISM UNDER LENIN AND STALIN

ON THE EVE of the 1917 revolution, the Russian imperial autocracy was an Orthodox Christian state mapped onto a multiconfessional empire. It covered a sixth of the world's landmass, and its more than 130 million subjects included Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Catholics, Lutherans, and various Protestant confessions as well as followers of numerous indigenous traditions. To govern this large and diverse population, the imperial autocracy relied on what historian Paul Werth calls the "multiconfessional establishment," using religious institutions to extend its reach—both out to the borders of the expanding empire and deeper into the lives of ordinary subjects whose worlds remained far from the center of tsarist authority.[1] Through religious institutions, the state projected its power, unified its diverse peoples, governed its growing number of "foreign" confessions, and disciplined individual morality.[2] The Orthodox Church had a privileged place at the top of the empire's confessional hierarchy and had historically performed an essential political role for the Russian state alongside its spiritual mission, providing transcendent legitimation for the tsar's earthly authority. Orthodoxy's position as the first among equals was formalized in the middle of the nineteenth century with "Official Nationality," a tripartite ideological formula for imperial power that encompassed Orthodoxy (*pravoslavie*); autocracy (*samoderzhavie*); and nationality (*narodnost'*), a term that implies that the people's "nation-mindedness," encompassed in their obedience to the tsar and devotion to the Orthodox Church.[3] In short, religion—and Orthodoxy in particular—was doing a lot of work for the old regime.

Whereas the Russian autocracy was an Orthodox Christian state mapped onto a multiconfessional empire, the Bolsheviks were an atheist party that sought to create a modern secular state to build a new Communist order. To do this, the Bolsheviks first had to deal with the institutions, ideologies, and

cultural frameworks that they inherited from imperial Russia, and displace religion from the center of politics, ideology, society, culture, and everyday life. Once in power, the Bolsheviks used different channels to turn their vision into reality, from education, enlightenment, and cultural reforms to administrative regulation, political repression, and terror and violence. Yet despite their anti-religious sloganeering at home and the image of godless atheism that quickly spread beyond Soviet borders, the immediate reality was that the Bolsheviks had neither a systematic approach to managing religion nor a clear consensus about the nature and purpose of atheism in the Soviet project. Rather than being guided by a coherent vision of atheism's role in forging the new Communist world, Soviet policies were improvised, dictated by competing objectives, and constrained by the political and social realities on the ground. In their drive to preserve the revolution and consolidate power, the Bolsheviks often had to choose between ideological purity or effective governance, cultural revolution or social stability. The question of how the Bolshevik Party's commitment to atheism should shape Soviet engagements with religion remained without a definitive answer long after the revolution, producing the oscillations and contradictions that shaped political, social, and spiritual life under Lenin and Stalin.

## *The Old World*

For Russia, the story of the "old world" begins in 988, with the Baptism of Rus'. According to the *Primary Chronicle* the "land of Rus'" came into being when Grand Prince Vladimir's adoption of Christianity unified his lands and peoples. Before 988, Vladimir had already tried to build a pantheon to the multiple pagan gods of the eastern Slavs living in his realm in an effort to consolidate power, but when the pantheon failed to do this political work, Vladimir turned to the monotheistic faiths of his neighbors. In 986, the story goes, he received emissaries from the Muslim Bulgars of the Volga, the Jews of Khazaria, the Western Christians of Rome, and the Eastern Christians of Constantinople. Impressed by what he heard about Constantinople, Vladimir sent his own emissaries to Byzantium, who, upon their return, reported that Constantinople's St. Sophia Cathedral was so magnificent that they "did not know whether we were in heaven or earth."[4] Vladimir became a Christian, destroyed the pagan pantheon, and forcibly baptized his people. And so, in 988, the land of the Rus' became Christian, and in becoming Christian, it became a state with a history.

The story of the Baptism of Rus' is as much about the consolidation of political power as it is about spiritual salvation. From the beginning, Russian statehood and political identity were inextricably connected with Orthodox Christianity. In part, this was because of growing tensions between the Latin West and the Byzantine East, which eventually split Christendom in the Great

Schism of 1054. Kievan Rus', which had been converted not long before, remained under the authority of Byzantium. Byzantium declined over the next two centuries, and compromised with the Latin Church by recognizing papal authority at the 1438 Council of Florence, in exchange for assistance against the Ottoman threat. The Orthodox Church in Russia, unwilling to make the same compromise, became de facto independent of the Byzantine Church.[5] When Constantinople fell in 1453, Muscovite Russia positioned itself as the only politically independent Orthodox state, which endowed Muscovite ideology with considerable political capital. As Muscovy consolidated political power, the Orthodox Church too became more assertive, establishing its own patriarchate in 1589. The relationship between church and state, then, was reciprocal. Just as the Orthodox Church depended on the Russian state to defend its ecclesiastical autonomy, the Russian state depended on Orthodoxy for its political legitimacy. The theoretical foundation of Russia's statehood was formulated by ecclesiastical writers, and the authority of the Orthodox ruler was grounded in his ability to protect and defend the true faith. Russian rulers, therefore, depended on Orthodoxy for its symbolic investment of the political order with sacred meaning.

The thread that runs through Russian history is that Russia's salvation rests in power, and, more specifically, in the state's capacity to contain two perennial threats to its territorial and cultural sovereignty: domestic disunity and foreign occupation. A strong state—or, perhaps more importantly, the image of a strong state—was considered essential to this enterprise. Russian history is punctuated by political salvation from recurring crises. Indeed, the Romanov dynasty, which ruled Russia for more than three hundred years, was founded in 1613 in the aftermath of the "Time of Troubles," a period when political disunity and social disintegration opened the state to foreign invasion. It was under the threat of being ruled by a Polish (and Catholic) prince that the Orthodox Church and the Muscovite political elite came together to elect the first Romanov tsar, Mikhail Fedorovich (r. 1613–45), after decades of political infighting. Young and pious—he was only sixteen when he became tsar—Mikhail was dominated by his father, Feodor Nikitich Romanov (c. 1544–1633), who became, in 1619, Filaret, Patriarch of the Church. The origin of Russia's old regime, then, lay in the shared power of church and state.

Russia's old regime was a traditional political order: the ruler was autocratic, and the people were subjects, not citizens. At the same time, beginning with the rule of Tsar Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725), the Russian imperial autocracy became part of a broader European process that saw the rise and consolidation of the state. To mobilize resources and govern most effectively, the early modern European state enlisted the church as a partner in the project of disciplining its subjects. Peter's vision of a rational state placed Russia within this broader European pattern,[6] and like elsewhere in Europe, the political consolidation of the imperial Russian state was carried out at the

expense of religious authority. The Russian state's precarious grasp on power and tenuous reach into local governance meant that it always saw the church as both an ally and threat—a competing authority that could both support and undermine the state. Peter, growing up in the wake of the Old Believers schism that marked the tumultuous rule of his father, Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (r. 1645–76), had witnessed the devastation that competing centers of authority could inflict, and believed that the consolidation of state power depended on the state's ability to incorporate the church into the work of government. With his church reforms, Peter placed the church under the oversight of the Holy Synod, a new government body headed by a layperson. This strengthened the bureaucratic and political reach of the state by institutionalizing the record keeping of births, marriages, and deaths (to be carried out through local parishes), disciplining "superstition," making annual confession mandatory, and obligating the clergy to report the content of confession if it was construed as a political threat.[7] Indeed, from the perspective of an autocrat governing a geographically vast and confessionally diverse land, the work of defining and regulating correct conduct was far too important to be left outside the state's authority.[8] Indeed, as Viktor Zhivov argues, "Peter did not aspire to any form of revived piety. In general, for Russian rulers discipline was immeasurably more important than any kind of religious values."[9] But the purpose of Peter's church reforms was not just to place the political authority of the state above that of the church; it was to appropriate the church's spiritual charisma. Indeed, the primary value of Orthodoxy, for Peter, was its ability to buttress state ideology. As Vera Shevzov notes, Peter's Spiritual Regulation (1721) was intended to make clear to his subjects—who "imagine[d] that such a [church] administrator is a second Sovereign, a power equal to that of the Autocrat, or even greater than he"—the distinction between political and spiritual authority, and primacy of the former over the latter.[10] During the imperial period, then, the Russian state and Orthodox Church worked, in the words of Nadieszda Kizenko, "hand in hand," both governing the people and directing their spiritual salvation.[11]

The autocracy reached its apogee during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (r. 1825–55), but before long, Tsar Alexander II's (r. 1855–81) Great Reforms of the 1860s, in the spheres of jurisprudence, economy, military, and education, began to strain Russia's traditional order.[12] Perhaps the most significant reform undertaken by the imperial autocracy was the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, which gave Russia's peasants new freedoms, including the right to move in search of better opportunities. By the end of the nineteenth century, Russia's economic transformation, and industrialization in particular, meant that these opportunities were concentrated in the empire's urban centers. As peasants moved to the cities and became workers, their worlds expanded beyond the village, with the factory and the new urban culture they encountered beyond it shaping their worldviews. In the city, these new workers also en-

countered modern politics and the revolutionary intelligentsia, who organized political "circles" to make workers conscious of their misery and teach them what they could do to better their lot.[13]

At the same time, even as the empire modernized, much that was customary persisted, including religious culture. Indeed, the concept of religion—in the modern definition of the term, as something grounded in belief that happened in a specially designated time and space—would have remained unfamiliar for most people. Rather than being relegated to a distinct sphere, religion extended far beyond the church and its dogma. Religion remained at the core of politics, bureaucracy, culture, and education, and continued to be embedded in the places and practices of everyday life, ordering space and time, separating work and rest, shaping communal bonds around a shared history, and forming the foundation of individual and group identity. Through religion, communities came together to make pilgrimages, celebrate feasts, observe fasts, and mark births, marriages, and deaths. Religion was less about belief than about experience, encompassing values and customs that most simply took for granted.[14] Even as the links between the worker and the village grew weaker, they rarely disappeared.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, under imperial Russia's last ruler, Tsar Nicholas II (r. 1894–1917), the autocratic order was breaking down under the pressures of modernization. During the revolution of 1905, the people's political demands forced the tsar to concede certain civil rights and political freedoms, including religious toleration, which made it legal for individuals to leave the Orthodox Church.[15] In this newly pluralistic religious marketplace, the Orthodox Church, the established church, found it difficult to compete with confessions that had control over their own affairs.[16] This was especially the case with regard to the various "sects" that were becoming more numerous and vocal.[17] At the same time, religion was so central to the political, social, and cultural framework of the empire that even liberal reformers were wary of placing the Russian state on secular foundations—both administratively, by establishing a secular bureaucracy, and ideologically, by fully institutionalizing the "freedom of conscience" promised by the tsar in his October Manifesto.[18] Indeed, the Edict of Toleration underscored the contradictions of the modernizing autocracy, since it fell short of true freedom of conscience by only permitting conversion to (but not away from) Christian confessions, and not allowing for confessionlessness or unbelief.[19]

Russian statesmen also worried that without religion as a foundation, the growing chasm between the state and people—who, in the state's view, remained superstitious, irrational, and thus potentially subversive and ungovernable—would become unbridgeable. Conservative officials feared that removing religion from the political and ideological foundation of the imperial order would lead to atheism, and atheism would bring about moral collapse and undermine the state. But even liberal reformers committed to freedom of conscience

in principle acknowledged that the Russian state lacked the bureaucratic capacity to do without the multiconfessional establishment. Finally, for much of the revolutionary intelligentsia, the intimate relationship between the Russian autocratic state and Orthodox Church made the latter, and religion more broadly, into the enemy of all that was good, just, and enlightened. Atheism, which, as Victoria Frede argues, had not been "thinkable" even among the educated elite in the early nineteenth century, had become by the twentieth century a means of asserting moral and political autonomy in opposition to both the church and state.[20]

In the period between the Great Reforms and the Bolshevik Revolution, then, Russia's traditional order came to be burdened with many contradictions. The regime was faced with the proliferation of new sects and "foreign" faiths, mounting demands for civil rights by an increasingly urban and educated population, and new conceptions of religion as a matter of individual conscience rather than group belonging—all of which clashed with the autocracy's continued reliance on the political, ideological, and administrative functions of religion. Modernization strained the autocratic regime and presented it with questions and problems that it could not afford to ignore. Nevertheless, until the end, the tsar continued to see his people as subjects rather than citizens. The people, however, increasingly understood themselves beyond the traditional categories of estate and confession, identifying as members of ethnic and national groups and classes, as well as individuals endowed with freedoms and rights.

This, then, was the political, social, and cultural landscape that the Bolsheviks inherited when they seized power in October 1917.

## *The Bolsheviks as Leninists*

The Marxist-Leninist framework within which the Bolsheviks understood religion followed a clear telos. Since religion was considered to be the product of oppressive political structures and unjust economic relations, the revolution could not be considered complete until religion was exorcized from the body politic. Marx believed that religion would disappear of its own accord with the eradication of the political and economic base in which it was rooted. Engels added to this an emphasis on scientific enlightenment, which would cure the people of false and primitive ideas about the world. Lenin's emphasis on the vanguard role of the Bolshevik Party demanded of every Bolshevik an active struggle against religion in all its forms—although, like Marx, he advocated against offending religious feelings, since doing so could turn passive believers into active counterrevolutionaries. For the Bolsheviks, overcoming religion was a process: religious institutions had to be neutralized before religious beliefs could be eradicated, and worldviews had to be freed from religious beliefs

before everyday life could be transformed. The first step, then, was to solve religion as a political problem.

Following the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks found themselves surrounded by hostile powers abroad and embroiled in a civil war at home (1917–21), and their first priority was to stay in power. For Lenin, the success of the revolution depended on the modernization of the state, and he considered the subjugation of religion to state authority to be an essential component of a modern political order. As he argued in "Religion and Socialism" (1905), only the secularization of religion would "bring an end to [Russia's] shameful and cursed past, wherein the church was enserfed to the state, and the people were enserfed to the state church. . . . The full separation of the church from the state—this is what the socialist proletariat demands of the modern state and the modern church."[21] Following this logic, the Bolsheviks, immediately passed a series of decrees to establish the foundations for a modern secular state. The "Decree on Land" (October 26, 1917) nationalized all monastic and church land.[22] Another decree, "On Civil Marriage, Children, and on the Registration of Acts of Civil Status" (December 18, 1917), created a secular bureaucracy—the office for the registration of acts of civil status (Zapis' aktov grazhdanskogo sostoianiia, or ZAGS)—to take over the registration of births, marriages, deaths, and divorces from religious institutions.[23] Finally, a third decree, "On the Separation of Church from State and School from Church" (January 23, 1918), deprived religious organizations of their status as juridical entities and removed religion from government and education.[24] Besides disenfranchising the church, the Bolsheviks also took the administration and control of religious life out of the clergy's hands. No longer allowed to own property, parishes now had to lease church buildings from the state. The clergy became employees of the parish "twenties" (*dvadsatki*), groups of lay parishioners that registered as a religious congregation and administered parish affairs. Together, these measures dramatically reduced the autonomy of religious institutions and made the state the final authority over religious life.

For the Bolsheviks, what was at stake in the secularization of the state was, above all, the removal of religion from politics and public life. The 1918 Soviet Constitution endowed the individual with "freedom of conscience," defined as the right to profess any religion or none at all, as well as the right to fulfill religious "needs," defined as liturgical. Soviet law also stipulated that the activities of government and social organizations could no longer to be accompanied by public religious rituals or ceremonies, and private rituals could be performed only "inasmuch as they do not disturb the social order and did not infringe on the rights of citizens of the Soviet republic."[25] Atheism, however, had no restrictions on its entry into the public sphere. Religion thus became something that happened on the margins—within an individual, in private, and in

a distinct time and space—whereas atheism was cast as the normative center of the new Soviet order.

At the same time, Lenin was a politician, and he understood that the party's prospects for turning Communism into reality depended on its ability not just to make a revolution but also to stay in power. If in theory Bolshevik approaches to religion were shaped by ideological tenets, in practice they were determined by immediate priorities and exigencies. The Bolsheviks took religion seriously when it posed a political threat, and since the Orthodox Church presented the most serious threat to Soviet power, their first priority was to neutralize its influence.[26] Whereas the Bolsheviks could dismiss private religiosity as a sign of cultural backwardness doomed to extinction, they saw in the Orthodox Church a powerful institution with symbolic and material capital that could be transformed into a political weapon, fomenting religious opposition abroad and mobilizing religious activism at home. The Bolsheviks—not without reason—feared that the Orthodoxy could transform private religiosity into public action.

Bolshevik policies, therefore, did not have the same impact on all confessions. Whereas they drastically limited the privileges to which the Orthodox Church, as the established church of the old regime, had grown accustomed, they granted other confessions new rights. The Bolsheviks understood that while their hold on power was precarious, they could not afford to alienate those who could help them liberate political and social life from Orthodox influence. Indeed, to weaken the Orthodox Church, the party was willing to forge alliances with those religious groups that had been persecuted under the imperial autocracy. Sectarians, for example, initially found the new order more congenial than the old regime.[27] This was partly due to Lenin's affinity for Russian sectarians, whom he saw as hardworking, rational, collective minded, and sober. Their religious dissent, Lenin wrote in 1899, was not the typical "Russian revolt, pointless and merciless" (*russkii bunt, bessmyslennyi i bezposhchadnyi*) but rather political protest voiced in a religious idiom.[28] Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich (1873–1955)—the godfather of Bolshevik atheism and himself a historian of religious sectarianism—presented sectarians as potential allies whose discontent could be channeled to support the revolutionary cause.[29] The Bolsheviks were also reluctant to pursue militant antireligious policies in the borderlands, where religion was intimately connected with nationalism, since they were mindful of exacerbating already volatile separatist movements. Therefore, even if the Bolsheviks considered religion in general to be a tool for the exploitation of the proletarian masses, their early antireligious measures were aimed above all at the Orthodox Church.

The party's support of reformers within the Orthodox Church was another temporary strategy intended to divide and undermine the church. The revolution had deepened internal divisions between Orthodox reformers and conservatives, which had been brewing for decades and had come to the surface

during the Church Council of 1917–18.[30] The anathema on the Bolsheviks and excommunication of the "open and secret enemies of the church" issued by Patriarch Tikhon (Belavin) on January 18, 1918, only sharpened this division.[31] Whereas Orthodox conservatives denounced cooperation with the Bolsheviks, Orthodox reformers, the Renovationists (*Obnovlentsy*), viewed reforms as a necessary step in what they believed to be a much-needed modernization of Orthodoxy and saw the potential for common ground with the new regime. The Bolsheviks, eager to manipulate these internal divisions, supported the Renovationists in the early 1920s.[32]

During the Civil War, as the Bolsheviks fought for survival, they put aside their commitment to secular norms and turned to extralegal measures against those they perceived to be hostile to Soviet power. In February 1922, they used the devastating famine produced by Bolshevik economic policies—which claimed close to seven million lives—to engage the church in an open conflict by demanding that it give up property to be sold for famine relief.[33] Recognizing the vulnerability of the church, Patriarch Tikhon agreed to cooperate, but the Bolsheviks found his stipulation that the church would be in charge of the relief efforts unacceptable. However, as Bolsheviks began to requisition church property by force, they were met with resistance from locals unwilling to turn over sacred objects. This conflict over the requisition of church valuables came at a moment when Soviet power was especially precarious. Not only had the civil war devastated the countryside and strained urban infrastructure, leading to outbreaks of famine, crime, and disease, but the Bolsheviks were also losing their social base—a fact painfully revealed by the uprising of the Kronstadt sailors in 1921.

For Lenin, popular resistance to Bolshevik attempts to confiscate church valuables was intolerable—not because it actually managed to stop the requisitions (it did not), but because it mobilized the masses against Bolshevik power. Behind this resistance, Lenin saw the work of the clergy, which meant that the church was no longer just a reactionary force but also an active agent of counterrevolution, and therefore a political actor. In a secret letter written to the Bolshevik Politburo on March 19, 1922, Lenin announced that the Soviet regime was declaring a "ruthless battle against the black-hundreds clergy" (*besposhchadnoe srazhenie chernosotennomu dukhovenstvu*), and opined that "the greater number of representatives of the reactionary clergy and reactionary bourgeoisie we manage to shoot on this basis the better."[34] Lenin's letter—unknown during the Soviet period, and published only in 1990—set off a new militant phase in the Bolsheviks' war against religion.

Yet even as Lenin cast the church and clergy as political enemies that needed to be neutralized, he continued to caution against aggressive antireligious agitation among the masses, which he warned would politicize the religious question. Shortly before sending his letter, Lenin had written "On the Meaning of Militant Materialism," an essay that has come to be regarded as his

"philosophical testament," in which he wrote that even though the party had seized power, the revolution would fall without allies outside party ranks.[35] "One of the biggest mistakes made by Communists," Lenin declared, "is the idea that a revolution can be made by revolutionaries alone."[36] At the same time, he pointed to the danger that many among the non-Bolshevik intelligentsia were apologists for religion and other "prejudices of bourgeois reaction."[37] To "expose and indict" these "overeducated lackeys of clericalism" (*diplomirovannykh lakeev popovshchiny*), Lenin called for the liberation of the masses from religious darkness through the preaching of militant materialism.[38] To reach the "millions of people . . . who have been condemned by all modern society to darkness, ignorance, and superstition," Bolsheviks had to use any available tool and method, especially atheist literature and the natural sciences. "It would be the biggest and most grievous mistake a Marxist could make to think [that the masses] can extricate themselves from this darkness only through a purely Marxist education."[39] Instead, the masses had to be enlightened with "the most varied atheist propaganda material [and] approached this way and that, so as to get them interested, to wake them from their religious slumber, to shake them from every possible angle and using any possible method."[40] Together, these two documents—Lenin's letter calling for an assault against the clergy and his article advocating militant materialism as a tool of enlightenment—capture Lenin's thinking about religion and atheism and provide the context for the turn away from the passive secular approaches adopted immediately after the revolution toward a more militant atheism.

For the Bolsheviks, the campaign to requisition religious property also had the benefit of sowing deeper divisions within the church, since Patriarch Tikhon's opposition to the requisitions gave the Renovationists the opportunity to depose him. In April 1922, Tikhon was arrested and held at the Donskoi Monastery, and the Bolsheviks openly backed the Renovationists. The Orthodox laity was likewise divided on Soviet power, with many choosing to go underground into the "catacombs" rather than recognize the authority of the Renovationists.[41] After Tikhon's death in 1925 and the Bolsheviks' abolition of the patriarchate in 1926, the question that faced Orthodoxy was whether the future of the faith lay in the underground church or compromise with Soviet power, which now looked like it was there to stay. In 1927, Metropolitan Sergii (Stragorodskii), the guardian of the vacant patriarchal throne and acting head of the church, issued an open declaration of loyalty to the Soviet state. In it, he joined the fate of the Orthodox Church to that of the Soviet project, stating, "We want to be Orthodox, and at the same time to acknowledge the Soviet Union as our civic Motherland, whose joys and successes are also ours, and whose woes are our woes."[42] Sergii's profession of loyalty to Soviet power granted Orthodoxy a limited "right to citizenship" in the Soviet Union, but also pushed more believers underground, which in turn made Orthodoxy more suspect. For the Bolsheviks, who perceived what were in fact diverse religious

movements as a monolithic counterrevolutionary force, the existence of a religious underground was a political threat that they answered with administrative restrictions and terror,[43] using the existence of the religious underground as a pretext for repression of the legally functioning Orthodox Church.[44]

Overall, the first decade of Soviet engagements with religion was driven by the Bolsheviks' belief that to stay in power, they had to establish a state infrastructure that could withstand the pressures of war, civil war, economic backwardness, and social unrest. Therefore, while the Bolsheviks were fighting for the regime's survival and establishing the institutions that would go on to define the Soviet system, religious policy was driven more by the established anticlericalism of the radical intelligentsia than any serious engagement with atheism. Because the Bolsheviks saw secularization as a fundamental part of modernization (as well as a step on the path to forging an atheist society), they initially deployed legal and administrative measures to manage religion. Indeed, the first—and, until the establishment of the Cult Commission under the Central Executive Committee (Vsesoiuznyi Tsentral'nyi Ispolnitel'nyi Komitet, or VTsIK) in 1929, the only—organization officially charged with governing religion was the eighth department of the People's Commissariat of Justice, which operated from 1918 until 1924.[45] At the same time, since they believed that secularization had divorced religion from politics, the Bolsheviks perceived clergy and believers who violated the new boundaries between private and public religiosity, church and state, as political versus religious actors, who were being persecuted not for their religious beliefs but rather for their counterrevolutionary politics. The secular face of the Soviet state depended on the support of extralegal security organs, which always operated behind the scenes to help the party achieve its goals.

## *The Bolsheviks as Agents of Enlightenment*

According to Marxist-Leninist theory, the revolution created the conditions for a bright Communist future that was inherently atheist. The Bolshevik Party, however, still had a central role to play in the revolutionary drama. As the political vanguard and a beacon of class morality, its role was to bring the revolution's "human material" to Communist consciousness. For the party, the end of the civil war and the transition to the New Economic Policy (NEP) meant that the revolution had moved from fighting for its survival to the work of building the new world. As the Bolshevik theorist Lev Trotsky (1879–1940), one of the party's most articulate proponents of cultural revolution and the new Communist byt, wrote in his essay, "A Person Does Not Live by Politics Alone,"

> The prerevolutionary history of our party was a history of revolutionary politics. Party literature, party organizations, everything around us stood under the slogan of "politics." . . . After the conquest of power and

> its consolidation as a result of the Civil War, our main goals have moved into the sphere of economic and cultural construction. . . . [They have become] more complicated, more scattered, more focused on details and in some ways more "prosaic."[46]

The religiosity of the masses was, of course, among the most prosaic aspects of life. Since there was no room for religion in the new Communist world, the party would have to tackle religiosity in culture and the sphere of everyday life, or byt.

In principle, popular religiosity—if it stayed within the secular parameters established after the revolution—should not have been perceived as a problem. Why should it matter to the party if Soviet people had icons in their home, celebrated Easter, or baptized their children? After all, none of these practices violated Soviet laws and indeed were among the rights accorded to citizens by the Soviet Constitution. But for the Bolsheviks, secularization was not the goal of the revolution but only the precondition for birth of the new Communist order. Once religious institutions had been deprived of their political support and economic power, and once the people had been liberated from the influence of the clergy and enlightened, the Bolsheviks had no doubt that the masses would embrace atheism. Especially if the Bolshevik Party guided the process and sped it along.

For the Bolsheviks, popular religiosity was the product of a backwardness, and Bolshevik logic held that education and enlightenment would lift the veil of superstition from the eyes of the masses and show them the light of reason. They believed in the transformative power of propaganda, education, and enlightenment, and enlisted these as essential tools of cultural transformation. The first strategy, antireligious propaganda, fell under the purview of party and Komsomol activists, who were also aided by members of the League of the Godless (after 1929, the League of the Militant Godless). Militant atheists saw themselves as warriors fighting on the religious front, and their primary objective was to destroy religion's authority and influence among the population by undermining the church and unmasking the clergy. In practice, this meant requisitioning and destroying religious spaces and property, persecuting and "unmasking" the clergy (as duplicitous enemy agents or immoral swindlers who took advantage of simple folk for personal gain), and undermining belief in the supernatural (especially its material manifestations, like relics and miraculous icons).[47] The party also believed in the power of the word to spread the message and deployed numerous publications—the journals *Revolution and Church* (*Revoliutsia i tserkov'*) (1919) and *Under the Banner of Marxism* (*Pod znamenem marksizma*) (1921), and the newspapers *Atheist* (*Bezbozhnik*) (1921) and *Atheist at the Workbench* (*Bezbozhnik u stanka*) (1922), among others—to depict religion as a backward, reactionary force in the service of counterrevolution. But above all, the Bolsheviks relied on visual propaganda. In a country where much of the population was still barely literate, newspapers

and pamphlets could carry the atheist message only so far, and the Bolsheviks realized quickly that the effective transmission of Communist ideology depended on captivating visual aids conveyed in a familiar idiom.[48] Antireligious posters and caricatures became a staple in the arsenal of militant atheism (see figure 1.1).

If the goal of administrative repression and militant atheist propaganda was to relegate religion to the margins of public life, the goal of education and enlightenment was to transform individual worldviews and bring consciousness into the light of scientific materialism. Unlike militant antireligious propaganda aimed at the church and clergy, education and enlightenment targeted the Soviet masses, casting them as victims of backwardness. In the tradition of nineteenth-century reformers, the Bolsheviks believed education was central for turning individuals into conscious agents capable of changing the world.[49] Lunacharskii, head of the Soviet Commissariat of Enlightenment—the institution in charge of education—saw the school as a vehicle of cultural transformation that could "take fresh, small hearts and bright, open, little minds [and make], given the right education approach, a true miracle . . . a real human being."[50] Teachers, therefore, had a "sacred calling" in the project of human emancipation.[51] Yet curiously, religion was so far outside his vision of education that Lunacharskii—like Marx, Engels, and Lenin—did not, at the outset, see the need for an explicitly antireligious curriculum in the classroom; it was enough to remove religious instruction and spread enlightenment.

In the early Soviet period, the idea that Soviet schools should become temples of atheism did not materialize. As historian Larry Holmes points out, people continued to perceive the school as "a conduit for useful information" as opposed to a vehicle for cultural transformation.[52] Given scarce resources and massive absenteeism, teachers prioritized instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic over antireligious agitation, seeing it as "a luxury no one could afford."[53] Those teachers who tried to press the antireligious agenda found themselves without support from above and facing hostility from below, as parents resisted the removal of religion from the classroom, sometimes threatening teachers with violence.[54] Moreover, even if religion did disappear from the classroom over time, it was not replaced by atheism. The Soviet school had become an irreligious, but not an atheist, space.

Beyond the classroom, the Soviet masses were to be transformed through cultural institutions in which they would encounter and internalize the narrative of scientific progress, with science as the untiring enemy of a religious establishment committed to thwarting human emancipation.[55] This narrative embedded religion in the story of human attempts to overcome powerlessness in the face of nature, and cast atheism as the inevitable product of people's growing understanding of the sublime forces that governed the universe. As human understanding evolved, materialism would replace religious explanations of the world. This tale of progress concluded with the human triumph

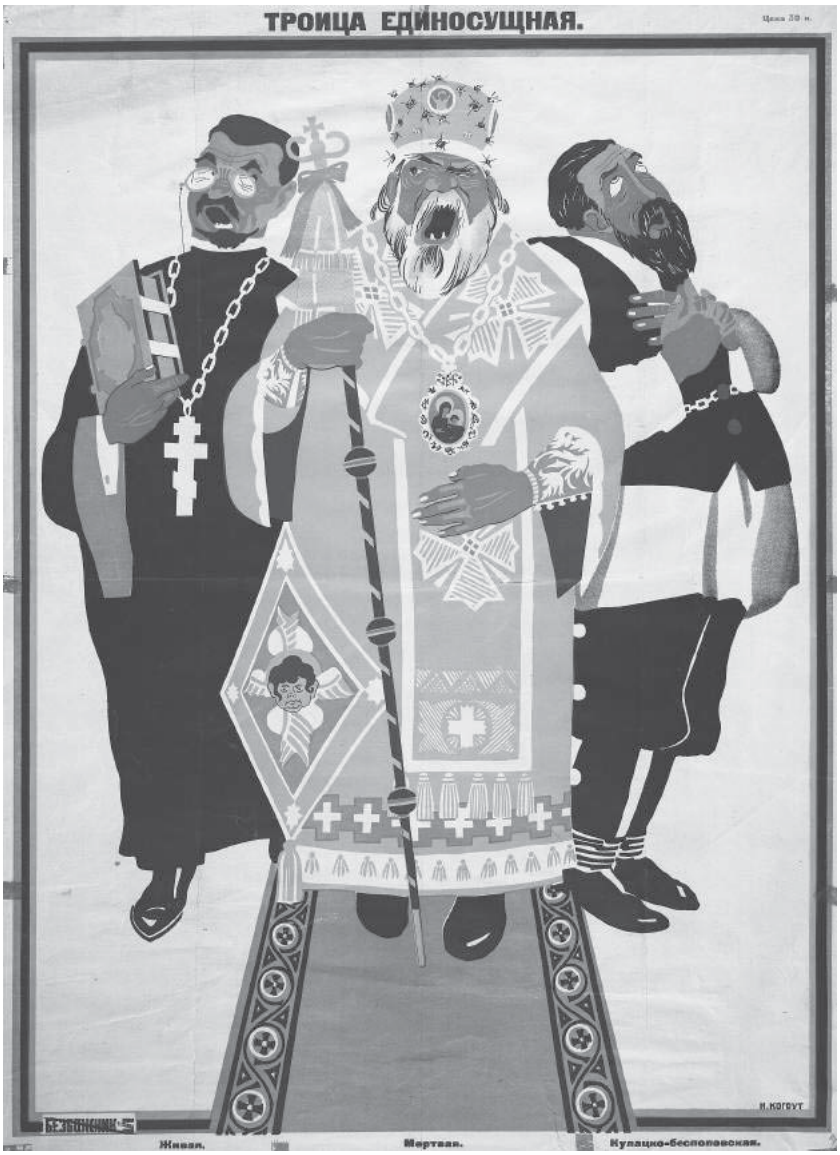


FIGURE 1.1. Nikolai Kogout, "Consubstantial Trinity" (*Troitsa edinosuchshnaia*). Moscow: Gublit, Mospoligraf, 1926. Soviet Anti-Religious Propaganda Collection, Saint Louis University Libraries Special Collections, Saint Louis, MO.

over nature, which included everything from liberating humanity from the plight of drought and hunger, to colonizing other planets and overcoming death.

The most common spaces for both atheist propaganda and scientific enlightenment were new institutions like reading huts, cultural clubs, and antireligious

museums. Cultural clubs were envisioned as centers for enlightenment activities (reading and political discussion groups) and entertainment (dances, amateur theater, and film screenings). Clubs were channels through which the party could disseminate political and cultural enlightenment, and were intended to replace the church as the centers of community life. Indeed, local activists would often turn the local church into the village club, thereby recasting it as a secular space. In more populated towns, the Bolsheviks created antireligious museums.[56] Like schools, antireligious museums also fell under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat of Enlightenment and were run by activists from the local party or League of Militant Godless cell. The exhibits consisted of antireligious posters and religious objects from recently closed churches, mosques, and synagogues, and were considered most effective when they occupied religious spaces that had been repurposed for atheist use. Indeed, the most prominent antireligious museums were established on the grounds of some of the country's most important monasteries and churches: the Moscow Antireligious Museum in the Donskoi Monastery (1927), Central Antireligious Museum in Moscow's Strastnoi Monastery (1928), State Antireligious Museum in Leningrad's St. Isaac's Cathedral (1931), and Museum of the History of Religion in Leningrad's Kazan Cathedral (1932). This museumification of religion transformed sacred objects and spaces into sanitized cultural artifacts. To underscore their commitment to scientific enlightenment, the Bolsheviks also invested significant resources to construct two monuments to scientific materialism in the center of Moscow. The first, the Donskoi Crematorium (1927), built on the grounds of the Donskoi Monastery, promoted a sanitized view of death that left no space for the soul or an afterlife.[57] The second and far more successful of the two was the Moscow Planetarium (1929), which presented science as the triumph of reason over nature.[58]

The Moscow Planetarium was the first planetarium in the Soviet Union, and was the product of the Commissariat of Enlightenment's proposal to create "a new type of enlightenment institution."[59] Designed by constructivist architects Mikhail Barshch and Mikhail Siniavskii according to the most progressive principles in construction and city planning, and armed with the latest German equipment, the planetarium concentrated the hopes of the Soviet enlightenment project.[60] Indeed, considering the material constraints of the USSR in the 1920s, the Bolsheviks' dedication of resources for the construction of a planetarium is evidence of their faith in the transformative potential of scientific enlightenment.[61] The planetarium's location, next to the Moscow Zoo, was emblematic of the didactic vision it was meant to embody: in one trip, a visitor, with the guidance of educational lectures, could follow the path of evolution and uncover the material nature of the universe.

Highlighting its transformative power, the constructivist artist Aleksey Gan described the planetarium as "an optical scientific theater" whose primary function was to "foster a love for science in the viewer." In general, Gan

saw the theater as a regressive rather than progressive force. The theater, Gan wrote, was simply "a building in which religious services are held," a space to satisfy the people's primitive instinct for spectacle—an instinct that would persist "until society grows to the level of a scientific understanding [of the world], and the instinctual need for spectacle comes up against the real phenomena of the world and technology." The planetarium, then, would satisfy the instinct for spectacle, but shift it "from servicing religion to servicing science." In this new type of theater, the workings of the universe would be revealed to the masses; everything was "mechanized" and people had a chance to direct "one of the world's most technologically complicated machines." This experience helped the viewer "a scientific understanding of the world and rid himself of the fetishism of a savage, priestly prejudices, and the civilized Europeans' pseudoscientific worldview."[62]

When the planetarium opened its doors in Moscow in November 1929, the confidence that the light of science would defeat the darkness of religion was paramount.[63] Indeed, Iaroslavskii invested the planetarium with tremendous ideological potential, stating that "priestly fables about the universe turn to dust in the face of scientific conclusions, which are supported by the kind of picture of the world provided by the planetarium."[64] In the 1930s, the planetarium hosted over eighteen thousand lectures and eight million visitors. It organized a young astronomer's club; a "star theater" that staged plays about Galileo, Copernicus, and Giordano Bruno; and a "stratospheric committee" that counted among its members the mechanical engineer and "tireless space crusader" Fridrikh Tsander as well as the father of the Soviet space program, Sergei Korolev.[65] The main question that worried atheists was not *if* the assault of scientific materialism on religion would ultimately be victorious but *when* and through what means victory would finally be achieved.

## *The Bolsheviks as World Builders*

The final frontier in the party's war against religion was byt. Whereas religious institutions were irredeemable, and therefore subject to antireligious repression and militant atheist propaganda, popular religiosity proved to be more complicated. As Trotsky wrote, "Owing to its dialectical flexibility, communist theory develops political methods that guarantee its influence under any conditions. But a political idea is one thing, byt is another. Politics is flexible, but byt is immobile and stubborn. This is why there are so many conflicts over byt among workers, when consciousness comes up against tradition."[66] In theory, the Bolsheviks believed cultural revolution and enlightenment would empower humanity to reclaim agency and overcome alienation. In practice, they consistently encountered the "stubborn" religiosity of the masses.[67]

The problem of byt had long been a contested issue for both the political and creative intelligentsia. The Russian creative intelligentsia had been engaged in a "battle with byt" (*bor'ba s bytom*), to borrow the writer Andrei Bely's phrase, since the turn of the twentieth century, seeing bourgeois byt as the embodiment of the old world's philistinism and corruption.[68] Byt was, in the words of the theorist Roman Jakobson, "a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold," and the revolution was an aesthetic project that would shed this "slime" and liberate the creative power of the people.[69] For the Bolsheviks, on the other hand, the revolution, including its cultural dimension, was less an aesthetic project than a civilizing mission. The Bolsheviks waged war against what they perceived to be the vestiges of the old byt among the masses—poor work ethic, foul language, spitting, drunkenness, and sexual promiscuity—by inculcating "culturedness" (*kul'turnost'*): literacy, hygiene, sobriety, and correct public conduct.[70] Issues like marriage and sexuality, ethics and morality—and of course religion—were discussed in party meetings, the press, and Communist study circles, as the party tried to work out the contours of the new Communist byt and the correct Bolshevik approach to everyday life, and especially to the home and the family.[71]

Trotsky was one of the few among the Bolshevik elite to really acknowledge the power of byt.[72] In his writings on the subject, he emphasized that in the battle against byt, antireligious campaigns and enlightenment measures were not enough. He argued that since the religiosity of the masses was not a consciously held belief but rather set of habits and customs taken for granted, atheist propaganda that appealed to reason would have little effect. "Religiosity among the Russian working classes does not really exist in practice," Trotsky wrote. "The Orthodox Church was a daily custom and a government institution. It was never successful in penetrating deeply into the consciousness of the masses, nor in blending its dogmas and canons with the inner emotions of the people." Popular religiosity remained reflexive, the habit "of the street sight-seer who on occasion does not object to joining a procession or pompous ceremony, listening to singing, or waving his arms." Religion was the background of life (see figure 1.2). The masses turned to the church because of its "social-aesthetic attractions," Trotsky argued. "Icons still hang in the home just because. Icons decorate the walls; they would be bare without them; people would not be used to it." The scent of incense, the brilliant light, the beautiful singing, offered "a break in the monotony of ordinary life." If the Bolsheviks hoped to "liberate the common masses from their habitual rituals and ecclesiasticism," they had to provide "new forms of life, new amusements, new and more cultured theaters."[73]

In his reflections on the problem of byt, Trotsky noted the power of rituals, and rites of passage in particular, in keeping religion in people's lives. Even as Trotsky proclaimed that "the worker's state has rejected church ceremony,

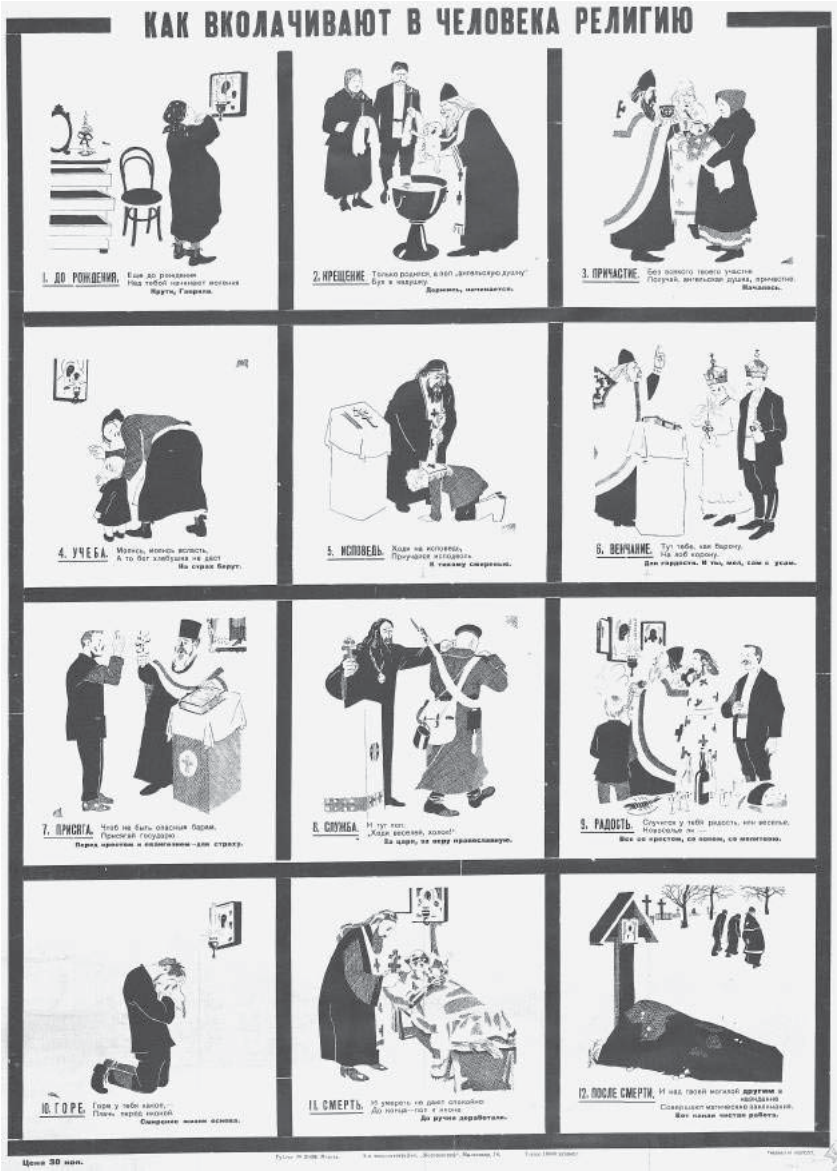


FIGURE 1.2. Nikolai Kogout, "How they beat religion into a person" (*Kak vkolachivaiut v cheloveka religiiu*). Moscow: Gublit, Mospoligraf, 1926. Soviet Anti-Religious Propaganda Collection, Saint Louis University Libraries Special Collections, Saint Louis, MO.

and informed its citizens that they have the right to be born, marry, and die without the mysterious gestures and exhortations of persons clad in cassocks, gowns, and other ecclesiastical vestments," he also warned that if the Bolsheviks hoped to build a new world without religion, they could not ignore rituals.[74] "How is marriage to be celebrated or the birth of a child in the family?" he asked. "How is one to pay the tribute of affection to the beloved dead? It is on this need of marking the principal signposts along the road of life that church ritual depends."[75] Trotsky underscored the emotional component of ritual as an important part of human experience noting that, "It is much easier for the state to do without rituals than for everyday life." Those who believed they could bring forth a new way of life without rituals were going to extremes, and "in the battle with the old byt would break their forehead, nose, and other essential organs."[76]

In theory, then, the Bolsheviks sought to transform the backward masses into new Soviet people.[77] Yet in practice, the forms of the new Communist byt remained vague through the 1920s and 1930s, the stuff of debates among the creative intelligentsia and party theorists rather than the lived experience of the masses.

For the Bolsheviks, there was also the question of how Communist ideology should shape the morality and byt of the party's own cadres. With the adoption of the NEP, as the party retreated from Marxism-Leninism in politics and economy, the struggle for ideological purity moved into the sphere of byt, codes of Communist behavior and morality. Historian Michael David-Fox observes that "a preoccupation with the 'revolutionary everyday' came to the fore as a way of transforming the NEP 'retreat' into a cultural advance," especially as byt increasingly came to be seen as a marker of "one's relationship to the revolution" and "a badge of political affiliation, staking out the boundaries of the revolutionary and the reactionary."[78] Bolsheviks agreed that the Leninist conception that morality was grounded in class and rejected the purportedly universal morality of the old faiths, which served only the interests of the exploiting class. Anything that advanced the revolution was inherently moral.[79] Over the course of the 1920s and early 1930s, morality and byt turned into instruments to discipline rank-and-file party members, who regularly found themselves under review for various infractions of Communist norms.

One of the problems with the Leninist thesis that the party was the vanguard of the revolution was that, in theory, each party member had to be a model of political consciousness and living embodiment of the new byt. For this reason, nowhere are the contradictions between Communist ideology and Soviet reality more apparent than in the party's effort to discipline its own cadres. After the revolution the party expanded its ranks, and grew even larger following Lenin's death in 1924 with the "Lenin Levy." As the party grew, the Bolshevik

old guard found itself having to define and often defend the ideological purity of the party. It also had to balance its commitment to ideological purity with the need to become the party of the masses, for whom the active atheist position required of party members frequently presented an obstacle.

In the first years after the revolution, the Central Committee regularly received letters from party cells asking for guidance on how to treat the religiosity of party members: Should party members who baptized their children or got married in a church be expelled? For the Bolshevik old guard, the answer was ideologically simple but politically complicated. Leading Bolshevik theorists—Iaroslavskii, Lunacharskii, Trotsky, Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov (1870–1928), and Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938)—argued that religion was associated with powerlessness, weakness, and passivity, whereas atheism meant agency, strength, and creativity.[80] To be an atheist was to shed comfortable illusions and take charge of one's fate. To be an atheist also meant to shed the individualistic fear of death and concern with personal salvation and embrace collective immortality, which could be attained only by giving all of oneself to the revolution and creation of the new world. A party member who held onto religious commitments—whether in the form of belief in supernatural forces or the observance of rituals and traditions—was, in the words of Aron Sol'ts, the party theorist of Communist ethics, "a deserter from the byt front [*bytovoi front*]."[81] To build the new world, Bolsheviks had to be atheists.

The Second Party Program, adopted at the Eighth Party Congress held March 18 to 23, 1919, made explicit that with regard to religion, the party was not satisfied by the "bourgeois democratic" separation of religion from the state and education, which had been decreed in 1918. Rather, the party demanded that members work toward "the complete destruction of the ties between the exploiting classes and the organization of religious propaganda, [by] effecting the liberation of the masses from prejudices and organizing the broadest scientific-enlightenment and antireligious propaganda."[82] As Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhenskii (1886–1937) stated in *The ABC of Communism* (1919), a pamphlet that popularized the new party program for the party rank and file, religion was incompatible with the calling of a Communist, but personal unbelief, while necessary, was not sufficient. A true Communist had to actively work to eradicate religion and spread atheism.[83] Neither the party program nor *The ABC of Communism*, however, made explicit what exactly was required of each party member to liberate the masses from religion, nor did it make explicit the consequences for violating Bolshevik directives, leaving unanswered questions about how exactly the Bolshevik party program should be brought into the lives of rank-and-file party cadres.

The person who took it on himself to guide the party on this issue was Iaroslavskii. In a two-part *Pravda* series titled "A Tribute to Prejudices" (1919), Iaroslavskii laid out the Bolshevik position on religiosity among party cadres.[84]

In the first article, Iaroslavskii made it clear that for the Bolsheviks religion was not a "private affair" but a political position in open violation of the Party Charter. "In order to carry out antireligious propaganda among others," Iaroslavskii wrote, "party members themselves have to be free of religious prejudices." After all, a Bolshevik could not be a convincing atheist agitator if he continued to "pay tribute" to religion.[85] But Iaroslavskii's logical reasoning generated heated debate among the rank and file, and the Central Committee received numerous letters from both party cadres and ordinary Soviet people asking for clarification on the party's position on religion.

Iaroslavskii laid out the crux of the debate in a second article, which he organized around three letters: one from a twelve-year-old named Vendrovskii, and the others from two individuals who signed off as "The Russian" (*Russkii*) and "A Speculator on the Way to Moscow" (*Edushchii v Moskvu spekuliant*). The chief objections to the party's demand that all members be active atheists, Iaroslavskii summarized, fell into three categories: that Point 13 of the Party Charter contradicts the Soviet Constitution, which guarantees all citizens the right to conduct religious and antireligious propaganda; that the party will have to take religious prejudices into consideration if it does not want to "put the lives of many Communists in the village and in the city in a very difficult family situation"; and that it is "necessary to differentiate between those who observe the prejudices of others, and those who observe their own prejudices."[86] To the first point regarding the contradiction between the secular constitution of the state and atheist obligation of the party, Iaroslavskii clarified that the party was a voluntary organization, which meant that whereas the program was "not obligatory for 'all citizens,' for Communists it is." For Iaroslavskii, it was "completely childish" to appeal to the constitution in this matter, "as if every Communist is first a citizen of the Soviet republic, and only after, a member of the party," as if "the party is just a part of the state," rather than the "vanguard division" of the revolution. The party had "strictly established codes of conduct that are mandatory for all members." Those who "still do not understand this, and want the Communist Party to open its doors for any interested person, regardless of their convictions," need to be reminded that the party, as a voluntary organization, had the right to "demand that members break with everything that gets in the way of completely accepting the Communist program."[87] Iaroslavskii also reminded party cadres that Bolsheviks operating in the underground before the revolution "had to definitive[ly] break with families that were against our revolutionary activity"—a situation that for many continued after the revolution as well. Iaroslavskii conceded that this put some party members in a difficult situation within their families, but he was unforgiving with regard to those who observed religious rites and traditions simply to avoid domestic strife. "These people have no belief, they are called hypocrites," Iaroslavskii asserted. "It's not for them to bring

the Communist program to life."[88] Communists needed to be moral models since the masses, and especially the peasant masses, "are very sensitive for the deeds of the Communist not to depart from his words."[89] In 1921, the party issued a decree "On the Organization of Antireligious Propaganda and the Violation of Point 13 of the Party Program," which again reminded cadres of the party's expectations.[90]

The party's efforts to discipline religion were further exacerbated when the party opened its ranks, following Lenin's death on January 21, 1924, to new cadres with no experience in the revolutionary underground and little schooling in Marxist-Leninist theory. When Iaroslavskii addressed the question of party discipline shortly after Lenin's death, he found himself facing the swollen ranks of the party's Lenin Levy, consisting of workers and peasants, many of whom saw no contradiction between Communism and religion, and did not understand why they had to give up their customary ways.[91] In an article titled "Is It Possible to Live without God?," Iaroslavskii observed that in every party meeting, the religious question was an obstacle for workers. "There have been almost no instances when workers would express disagreement with some other point of our Communist program: they accept it wholesale," Iaroslavskii wrote. "But the question of religion, gods, icons, the observance of rituals . . . not infrequently is the hardest of all to figure out for the workers, especially the women workers." To help new recruits see their way through this dilemma, Iaroslavskii reminded them of Lenin's position on religion:

> There can be no doubt that Lenin was for propaganda, that is, for the preaching of godlessness, that Lenin considered religious beliefs a sign of a lack of consciousness, darkness, or obscurantism, a weapon of bourgeois class rule. And can we be indifferent to the lack of consciousness, to darkness, to obscurantism? This is the question to which each Leninist must give an answer. And if he thinks his words through to their logical conclusion, then, of course, he will not be able to accept half-measures, that cowardly decision, that says to him: you can remain a Communist, you can remain a Leninist, but you can throw aside Lenin's thoughts on religion and consider Lenin's position on the religious question mistaken and unacceptable. No, our program on the religious question is completely tied up with the entire program of our party.[92]

The Communist program, Iaroslavskii concluded, "is founded on the scientific worldview [and] has no room for gods, angels, devils, or any other fabrications of human fantasy." Religion was thus irreconcilable with the calling of a Bolshevik. "To be a true Leninist means to accept the entire program, all of the understandings of society and nature that our program provides, which has no need for gods, devils, or priests, regardless of the guise in which they are presented [*pod kakim by sousom oni ne prepodnosilis'*]."[93] Communists

have no need for the consolations of religion, for dreams about immortality, Iaroslavskii proclaimed, because their commitment was to "creat[ing] a life full of joy on Earth."

> Marx has died. Lenin has died. But we say: Marx lives in the minds of millions of people, in their thoughts, in their struggle; Lenin lives in each Leninist, in the millions of Leninists, in the entirety of the proletariat's battle, in the Leninist party fulfilling Lenin's testament and leading the working class in its battle for the construction of the new world. This is immortality; and we Communists only think about this type of immortality; not in the air, not in the skies, not on the clouds, which we will leave for the priests and the birds happily and free of charge, but on the Earth on which we live, rejoice, suffer, and fight for Communism.
>
> It is not only possible to live without belief in god; it is possible to live joyously, to fight with conviction, to act with courage.
>
> One cannot be a Leninist and believe in God.[94]

For the Bolshevik old guard, party members who believed in or even "paid tribute" to religious prejudices were not true Communists since their loyalties were divided or—worse yet—undetermined.

At the same time, Iaroslavskii acknowledged the tremendous power religion still exercised in the home and in the family.[95] In "domestic byt," Iaroslavskii wrote, "there is not one event, beginning with birth, that happens without the clergy. The priest gets involved in all even remotely significant life events." For the masses, life without "this priest, his prayers, the splashing of 'holy water' . . . without all this sorcery" is "deprived of meaning." For the peasant masses in particular, "everything that a priest says is the holy truth."[96] To build the new Communist order, the Bolsheviks believed they had to transform the family as an institution; but in the meantime, the Bolsheviks recognized that their task was to help party cadres navigate their actual families.

Party cadres from the provinces wrote to the center asking for guidance on their domestic conflicts which Iaroslavskii shared on the pages of *Prarda*. A peasant named Suravegin recounted how, following an argument, his wife gouged out the eyes of the portraits of party leaders he had hung up in their home, after which he threw her icon of the Mother of God on the floor, breaking it into pieces. In another family, the Communist husband and children burned the religious wife's icons in her absence, after which she burned down their "atheist corner" (*ugolok bezbozhnika*).[97] "What should a Leninist do if his family is still religious, does not permit taking down the icons, takes the children to church, and so on?" asked a rural party member named Glukhov. "Can icons be hung in his home against his will and desire? Should he force his family to submit to his views, even if it brings the matter to divorce?"[98] Glukhov's own

position was categorical. If the family did not submit to his views, then it was necessary to "break with the family," since it was "impermissible for icons to hang in the home of a Leninist, for a priest to baptize a Leninist's children, and for a Leninist's children to go to church."[99]

Iaroslavskii approached the matter more pragmatically. He noted that, with the gender ratio in the Bolshevik party being eight to one, if male Bolsheviks wanted to avoid family discord over ideological issues, then "male communists could only marry female communists," which meant that only one male party member out of eight would be able to get married and the rest would be consigned to bachelorhood."[100] Instead, Iaroslavskii suggested a softer and more gradual approach to family disagreements over religion. Rather than break with his family, a Leninist should strive to enlighten. "If a wife hangs icons," he suggested, a worker should say to her, "You insult me as a communist. I can hang antireligious posters next to your icons, which you won't like."[101] More generally, the task of a Leninist, Iaroslavskii posited, was to work on the moral upbringing and political consciousness of family members, making sure that his children are brought into the party ranks through the pioneers and the Komsomol.

As the Soviet system became more stable and the party's power more secure, the personal conduct of party cadres again became of critical interest to the guardians of Bolshevik orthodoxy.[102] Addressing the question of what the party demanded of Communists in their personal conduct and whether the party should interfere in their personal lives, Iaroslavskii clarified that the inner "convictions" of party members could not be considered their "private affair" (*chastnoe delo*).[103] The Soviet government, Iaroslavskii pointed out, "does not demand of anyone that he belongs to the [League of the Militant Godless] or that he break with religion." On the contrary, the government "guarantees every citizen full freedom" whether to believe or not, to belong to a religious community or the League of the Militant Godless. "But the party is another matter," Iaroslavskii wrote. "The party demands of all members not only to break with religion, but to actively participate in antireligious propaganda." For the party, therefore, "the kind of family a Communist makes was not 'all the same.'" Iaroslavskii noted that even if these questions were not explicitly addressed in party documents, "it is self-evident that a Communist, in his personal byt and in his family life, has to be an example for all the nonparty masses, whom he calls onto the path of the new life, the path of the restructuring of all human relations."[104] Nevertheless, the question of how to incorporate Communist morality and byt beyond the party, into the lives of the masses, long remained unanswered.

The Bolshevik Party's neglect of private life in the early Soviet period was a symptom of the ascetic revolutionary milieu in which it had been forged—a milieu that renounced personal ties in order to single-mindedly devote all

intellectual, physical, and emotional resources to the revolution. For the Bolsheviks, true meaning was never to be found in private life, since it was in the public sphere that the important questions would be worked out. Once in power, though, the Bolsheviks were faced with the question of how their revolutionary asceticism could or should be translated into cultural policy for the masses. The fact that in the early Soviet period, byt always remained secondary to other concerns—political, economic, social, and even cultural—is a reflection of how the Bolsheviks understood the process of transforming the old world they had set out to destroy into the new world in the name of which they made a revolution.

Bolsheviks recognized that, having transformed into a party of the masses, they could not demand that all party members renounce familial ties, even when these ran counter to party ethics. At the same time, they were unwilling to abandon the domestic sphere to the forces of backwardness. Individual morality, byt, and the family remained central concerns, though whether the party was active or passive in its engagement with these issues changed over time and depended on numerous external factors. But ultimately, if the Soviet project was to succeed, the party had to conquer the home and the family since these remained the central site of reproduction—reproduction that was not only demographic also but cultural, ideological, and political.

## *The Bolsheviks as Stalinists*

The secular framework adopted immediately after the revolution undermined the juridical, economic, and political power of the Orthodox Church, but the church nevertheless remained "a very powerful social corporation" through the 1920s.[105] While the Bolsheviks could read Metropolitan Sergii's declaration of loyalty to Soviet power as a political victory, they had no illusions that the people had given up faith or tradition. Until collectivization, however, the Bolsheviks were concerned primarily with subordinating the church as an institution, leaving local religious life more or less intact.[106] In part this was a political strategy, since rather than subduing religious communities, Bolshevik repression instead often mobilized religious activism.[107] Indeed, historian Glennys Young shows that over the course of the early Soviet period, religiosity became increasingly politicized. For example, Young traces the transformation of the word *tserkovnik* in the Soviet press, noting that whereas in the mid-1920s, journalists "tended to use *tserkovnik* as a synonym for 'clergy,'" the term gradually "ceased to be a solely religious category."[108] When religious activists began to influence rural politics by joining local soviets, the rhetorical tserkovnik "became a political as well as a religious actor" whose "identity [was] associated with the frustration of Soviet goals and expectations."[109] By the early 1930s, the term *tserkovnik* had become "a synonym for a factional

politician of the rural world."[110] Indeed, as Gregory Freeze shows, often the Bolsheviks came to see religious activists as a greater threat to Soviet power than the church and clergy because they had support from nationalists, rich peasants, and other anti-Soviet groups.[111]

As the Bolsheviks mobilized for the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32), party leaders like Bukharin were describing the religious question as a "front in class war," and religion itself as an "enemy of socialist construction [that] fights us on the cultural front."[112] This shift in antireligious rhetoric toward denouncing religion in general, rather than religious institutions in particular, was a sign that the project of socialist construction had entered a new phase. With the First Five-Year Plan, the Bolsheviks sought to mobilize all resources toward industrialization, collectivization, and cultural revolution. The antireligious campaign was an important part of the broader cultural revolution, since the cultural revolution was about class war, and religion was a class enemy. The party marshaled all the means at its disposal—atheist propaganda, legal and administrative restrictions, and extralegal repression—to prevent religion from becoming an obstacle to constructing "socialism in one country."

Before making the change of course public, the party worked behind the scenes. On January 24, 1929, a secret party circular titled "On Measures for the Intensification of Antireligious Work" declared that "religious organizations are the only legally existing counterrevolutionary organizations" in the USSR, which made it imperative to wage "a merciless war" against them. The resolution called on the League of the Militant Godless (which now had "militant" added to its name) to intensify atheist propaganda and become a more powerful force in local politics.[113] Shortly after, on April 8, 1929, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) and VTsIK issued the decree "On Religious Organizations," which formalized the Bolshevik plan to remove religion from politics and public life by radically narrowing its "borders of legality."[114] The 1929 law was intended to bring all aspects of religious life under state control by repealing numerous provisions established in 1918: it outlawed the religious education of children and charity work, closed monasteries, and dictated that religious communities had to register with local government organs. To make sure the league faced no competition, the Bolsheviks revoked the right to "religious propaganda" from the fourth article of the Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR), which had, until then, guaranteed Soviet citizens "freedom of religious and antireligious propaganda."[115] It was not enough, moreover, to marginalize religion; public life also had to be made visibly Soviet.[116] In effect, the only right Soviet citizens retained was the right to worship inside the confines of specifically designated religious spaces.

Given the centrality of religion to Russian rural life and primacy of collectivization to Stalin's modernization program, the First Five-Year Plan

demanded a solution to the religious question. In June 1929, at the Second Congress of the League, the Leningrad atheist Iosif Eliashevich called for a "godless five-year plan" (*bezbozhnuiu piatiletku*), and local cells were instructed to "take measures for the mass exit of laborers from religious communities."[117] As Iaroslavskii declared at a 1930 league meeting, "The process of full collectivization is tied with the liquidation of a significant part of churches."[118] In practice, collectivization often began with the forced closure of the local church, which was followed by popular protest. This scenario was common enough that on March 14, 1930, the party issued a decree against so-called excesses in antireligious measures. This, of course, had little to do with a commitment to legality, and everything to do with the fact that starting a collectivization campaign by closing the village church prevented effective implementation. Rather than a change of policy, the decree was a warning about strategy. Churches continued to be closed, repurposed, or destroyed, and religious communities were dissolved.[119]

The Second Five-Year Plan (1933–37) brought with it the aim to "liquidate capitalist elements and classes" and produce a classless society, which made the place of religion even more precarious. On the one hand, from the perspective of socialist ideology, religion had no future in the Soviet Union; the only question was how much political effort the party should exert in hastening its demise. On the other hand, vehement international opposition to Soviet antireligious repression hamstrung the Soviet state, which aspired to recognition on the world stage. But by the mid-1930s—as the 1934 murder of Sergei Kirov, a Leningrad Bolshevik whose popularity made him a potential rival of Stalin, raised the pitch of class warfare and political terror—there was a growing consensus among the Bolsheviks that religious institutions in general and the Orthodox Church in particular remained politically dangerous, and therefore needed to be definitively neutralized.[120]

In 1937, at the height of the Great Terror, the Bolshevik political elite discussed the idea of a Soviet Union completely free of religion. The party accused the Orthodox Church of collaborating with the religious underground at home and counterrevolutionary agents abroad,[121] and cast the 1929 law as too permissive for allowing the continued existence and even proliferation of religion.[122] In 1937 alone, the Bolsheviks closed more than eight thousand churches (with another six thousand in 1938), and arrested thirty-five thousand "servants of religious cults."[123] The Bolsheviks also exiled or murdered much of the Orthodox Church hierarchy. The historian Mikhail Shkarovskii argues that by 1938 the Orthodox Church was "on the whole, destroyed."[124] Local organs charged with managing religion were liquidated as unnecessary, thereby "eliminating even the possibility of contact between the state and the church."[125] By the end of the 1930s, the only institution that was still charged with managing religious affairs was the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD).

Yet what the statistics of church closures obscure—but what was of course evident to the Bolsheviks—is the fact that religion continued to mobilize popular resistance. The Bolsheviks had few illusions that religion had been exorcized from Soviet life. Ethnographers studying rural life, such as N. M. Matorin (1898–1936) and V. G. Bogoraz-Tan (1865–1936), produced studies of "lived religion" (*zhivaia religiia*) and "folk Orthodoxy" (*narodnoe pravoslavie*) that attested to the continued religiosity of the countryside throughout the 1920s and 1930s.[126] The results of the 1937 Soviet census also made clear that religion was a social fact.[127] The census, which was developed by Soviet ethnographers and curated by Stalin personally, included a question on "Religion" (*Religiia*), added to the final draft on Stalin's initiative.[128] As the instructions to the census officials clarified, the question was intended to indicate belief rather than confessional belonging, and the results revealed that of the 98,412 people surveyed, more than half (56.17 percent) identified as believers, and this proportion rose to two-thirds in the countryside. The official response to the census was to blame the poor state of antireligious work and annul the results, but the Bolsheviks could not ignore the fact that more than half the country still felt an allegiance to religion, and continuing antireligious policies would alienate this base from the Soviet project.[129] Another census, conducted in 1939, tried to circumvent the problem by removing the religious question but actually further underscored the cost of antireligious policies when some answered the question "Citizen of which state" with "Christian" or "Orthodox."[130]

In some ways, popular resistance to being assimilated into the Soviet project arose because the Bolsheviks, in proclaiming their plan to transform the world, positioned Soviet Communism as the antithesis of the traditional order, which for many made it suspect. An anticollectivization pamphlet cited by Lynn Viola in her study of peasant rebellion under Stalin illustrates the peasants' perception of collective farms and Soviet power as fundamentally evil:

> In the [collective farm] there will be a special branding iron, [they] will close all the churches, not allow prayer, dead people will be cremated, the christening of children will be forbidden, invalids and the elderly will be killed, there won't be any husbands or wives, [all] will sleep under a 100-metre blanket. . . . Children will be taken from their parents, there will be wholesale incest: brothers will live with sisters, sons with mothers, fathers with daughters, etc. The [collective farm]—this means beasts in a single shed, people under a single blanket.[131]

Another telling example of popular attitudes is the rumor that Soviet passports, which were being introduced in the cities, had the mark of the Antichrist. In the popular imagination, the Soviet order was an antiworld that was governed by an inverted moral code.

On the eve of the Second World War, the Bolsheviks faced a complex situation. They had nearly destroyed the church as an institution—of the more than fifty thousand Orthodox churches on the territory of the RSFSR in 1917, fewer than a thousand were left in 1939.[132] But they had neither broken the people's ties with Orthodoxy nor created a compelling atheist narrative that reached beyond public life, into the home. Even as the political elite was having conversations about the prospects of a country free of religion, it was also signaling another course. In 1936, Article 124 of the new Stalin Constitution affirmed the rights of Soviet citizens to "observe religious cults" (*otpravliat' religioznye kul'ty*), which, given the devastation of the recent antireligious campaign, was read by some clerics and believers as a sign of better times ahead.[133] Stalin also signaled a new course to the Soviet political establishment. In 1937, historian Sergei Bakhrushin (1882–1950) published a revisionist article titled "On the Issue of the Christianization of Rus'" in the journal *Marxist Historian* (*Istorik-Marksist*), arguing that Grand Prince Vladimir's adoption of Christianity, rather than a tool of oppression, was a savvy political decision that consolidated the state.[134] In his article, Bakhrushin criticized existing narratives of the Christianization of Rus' in 988, which, he argued, falsely privileged the psychological element of Vladimir's conversion or attributed the event to the efforts of foreign missionaries. Instead, he presented the adoption of Christianity as a conscious political decision made by Rus' political elites that should be seen as part of the history of Russia's state formation. Though presented in the narrow framework of academic history, Bakhrushin's article was an ideological departure in that it presented religion as a progressive historical factor that facilitated the consolidation of the state. Bakhrushin's article emerged in the aftermath of a government commission convened to formulate rules for writing high school history textbooks, which had decided to bring religion back into the historical narrative by positing that "the introduction of Christianity was progressive in comparison with pagan barbarism."[135] The Bolsheviks' reconsideration of religion's historical role speaks to the broader shift observed by the historian David Brandenberger, within the ideological establishment of the "propaganda state."[136]

Over the course of the 1930s, governance began to compete with ideology in directing Stalinist religious policy. In order to consolidate society and promote Soviet patriotism for the coming war with capitalist imperialism that Stalin thought inevitable, the party receded from the ideological iconoclasm of the cultural revolution, and returned to traditional values and a populist idiom.[137] In part, this shift took place because the institutional power of the Orthodox Church had been broken, and religion was no longer perceived as a serious political threat. But it also came because the antireligious campaign had proven to be a fiasco, undermining social stability while achieving little to advance the atheist mission. The Cult Commission, which had been formed

in April 1929 to implement the new law on religion, spent its time not just on taxing and closing churches, confiscating religious property, and persecuting clergy, but also on trying to contain the disorder that resulted from these policies.[138] The atheist apparatus, meanwhile, was a bureaucratic chimera, a "Potemkin village of atheism," to borrow the phrase of the historian Daniel Peris, the influence of which did not extend far beyond sloganeering.[139] The league boasted a membership of over five million "godless" (a figure greater than that of the Bolshevik Party itself), but its loud propaganda campaigns and inflated membership statistics masked its inefficacy and thin presence on the ground.[140] But perhaps the more important issue is that its message was not so much *atheist* as antireligious and, more specifically, anticlerical. As Peris notes, "A distinction needs to be made between the regime's effective and brutal suppression of external religious manifestations and the league as an agent of atheism."[141] On the whole, the Bolsheviks devoted much more energy to debating how to eradicate religion than to producing a positive atheist program.[142]

At the same time, at end of the 1930s, the party came as close as it ever would to eradicating religion, and although its efforts had not been successful, it did manage to neutralize the church as a political institution and, in the words of Shkarovskii, "create the appearance of a godless state."[143] It was an illusion, however, that the Bolsheviks soon realized was too costly to maintain.

## *The Church Patriotic*

When the war finally came to the USSR, Stalin faced a decision: whether to continue the antireligious status quo, or turn to the Orthodox Church and deploy it for the benefit of the Soviet state. Several factors made the benefits of partnership with the church appear to outweigh the costs. First, wartime allies were alienated by Soviet religious repression. Second, in the occupied territories, German forces were effectively using religion against Soviet power, currying favor with local populations by opening churches. Third, there was also a noticeable religious revival among Soviet citizens, even in unoccupied territories, evident in their increased petitions to open local churches.[144] The Orthodox Church's active support of the Soviet war effort offered proof of its political loyalty as well as its use to Soviet power. Indicative of the new course is the limited reentry of the church into public life. For instance, following the Nazi invasion on June 22, 1941, the Soviet people were addressed by Metropolitan Sergii before they were addressed by Stalin. In his radio address, Sergii stressed the church's historical role in mobilizing the Russian people against "the pitiful progeny of the enemies of Orthodox Christianity, who are trying again to bring our people to our knees before untruth, and to brutally force them to sacrifice the welfare and wholeness of the motherland." Sergii

reminded the people that even though their ancestors had been through even worse trials, their spirits had not fallen because they thought not about their own safety and profit but rather "their sacred duty to the motherland and the faith—and they emerged victors."[145] Shortly after, in summer 1941, churches began to be reopened on Russian territory. Throughout the war, the church held prayer services for Soviet victory and raised money for the defense, including funding its own Dmitri Donskoi tank division.[146] For Stalin, the church's wartime mobilization was proof of not just its loyalty but also its potential value to the Soviet state. After destroying the Orthodox Church as an institution and political actor, Stalin decided to reverse course.[147]

In 1943, when it seemed likely that the Soviet Union would survive the war, and that it would also keep the western territories it had annexed in 1939, Stalin introduced a new model for managing Soviet religious affairs. On September 4, 1943, he called a meeting at his summer residence outside Moscow, attended by Georgii Malenkov (a member of the Party Secretariat), Lavrentii Beria (head of the NKVD), and Georgii Karpov, an NKVD colonel who had been in charge of counterintelligence operations, including those that concerned religion. The meeting turned out to be Karpov's interview for a new position. During their conversation, Stalin asked Karpov about the history and contemporary state of the church as well as its connections with religious organizations abroad. He also inquired about the character of several Orthodox metropolitans, asking about their political loyalties, material circumstances, and authority within the church.[148] Stalin then informed Karpov that a special organization was being established to manage church-state relations—to be called the Council on the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC)—and appointed Karpov to lead it. He told Karpov to call Metropolitan Sergii and invite him, along with Metropolitans Aleksii (Simanskii) and Nikolai (Iarushevich), to a meeting at the Kremlin. The meeting took place later that evening, attended by the metropolitans, Karpov, Vyacheslav Molotov, and Stalin himself. Stalin informed the church hierarchs that the patriarchate was being restored and that the church could now count on the state's support.[149] Finally, Stalin instructed Karpov to begin the process of establishing CAROC, but also warned him first, that the council should not undermine the image of the church's autonomy and independence, and second, that Karpov's new position did not make him into a new overprocurator of the Holy Synod, the powerful government institution that managed church-state affairs under the imperial autocracy.[150] By all accounts, no one—including the NKVD and Orthodox Church hierarchs—anticipated Stalin's reversal on the religious question.

On September 8, 1943, the Orthodox Church convened a council composed of nineteen bishops, sixteen of whom had just been released from prison camps, and elected Metropolitan Sergii as the patriarch of the Russian

Orthodox Church. On September 14, 1943, two days after the patriarch was enthroned, the Council of People's Commissars (Sovet narodnykh komissarov, or Sovnarkom) established CAROC. On May 19, 1944, CAROC was followed by the creation of the Council on the Affairs of Religious Cults (Sovet po delam religioznykh kul'tov, or CARC), which was tasked with managing relations with non-Orthodox confessions. Shortly after being established, CAROC and CARC began the work of reopening religious spaces and registering religious communities.[151]

It is worth noting that the councils were established as advisory organs within the government rather than the security apparatus. Even though the KGB's oversight of the councils' work was tacitly acknowledged at home and openly decried abroad, the councils' position as a government organ communicated a shift in Soviet religious policy from an extralegal to a legal foundation. This is noteworthy because, between the disbanding of the Cult Commission in 1938 and the establishment of the councils, the security organs were the only organization that managed religious affairs. The political significance of the new framework was underscored by the effort to make a visible wall between the councils and the KGB. On July 7, 1945, the KGB issued a secret order clarifying to its local branches that with the establishment of "special organs" to manage religious affairs, the functions of the security apparatus were to be "limited to the interests of intelligence and counterintelligence work."[152] Local cadres were instructed on the division of labor between their work and that of the plenipotentiaries of CAROC and CARC. KGB officers were not to confuse the activities of the two organizations, discuss the work of the councils with their informants, or share work spaces with CAROC and CARC plenipotentiaries. In one instance, a KGB cadre was reprimanded for using "internal channels" to forward a letter from his informant to Karpov, since by doing this he "underscored in the eyes of the informant the connection of the NKGB with the Council of the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church."[153] Cadres were also reminded that the councils did not report to them but rather to the Council of Ministers, and that "the open and direct use of the institution of the plenipotentiary for one's own goals can lead to the undesirable conviction among the *tserkovniki* that [the councils] are filial branches of the NKGB organs."[154]

The fact that the decision to bring religion back into Soviet life came from Stalin personally suggests that he perceived the political threat of religion to be effectively neutralized.[155] This opened the way for religious institutions to become partners in reconstruction and governance after the war. Moreover, with the annexation of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Moldova, and the western regions of Ukraine and Belarus—none of which had gone through either the militant atheist campaigns or the collectivization to which the rest of the Soviet Union had been subjected in the 1920s and

1930s—the Soviet Union now had thousands of new churches, clergy, and believers within its expanded borders. Whereas the number of open churches in the unoccupied territories of the RSFSR had been reduced from 3,617 (in 1936) to around 950 (in 1939) before the war, after the annexations there were 8,279 Orthodox churches inside Soviet borders as well as thousands of communities belonging to other confessions—Roman Catholics, Ukrainian (Eastern Rite, or Greek) Catholics, and sectarians—whose loyalty to the Soviet regime Stalin questioned.[156] Stalin found himself with a new religious problem at home, and he saw the Orthodox Church as a tool for regaining control over the western borderlands, where Soviet power was most tenuous, and even buttressed it to weaken the locally dominant confessions, such as Lithuanian Catholics and Ukrainian Greek Catholics.[157] To this end, Stalin dissolved and outlawed the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and transferred its property to the Orthodox Church shortly after the war. Stalin also saw the Orthodox Church as a foreign policy tool on the world stage, a counterweight to the Vatican's influence in Europe and a diplomatic tool in the emerging Cold War.[158]

The new Soviet model of church-state relations had more than a family resemblance to church-state relations under the imperial order. Indeed, Ivan Polianskii, a KGB colonel and the new chairperson of CARC, explicitly referenced what he understood to be the Orthodox Church's traditional relationship as a junior partner to the state, with no political ambitions of its own. As he reported to the party's Department of Propaganda and Agitation in 1947,

> The overwhelming majority of the religiously inclined citizens confess Orthodoxy and therefore are under certain influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, which due to its historically evolved doctrine, never laid claim and does not lay claim to a role of the first-rate political player, but always followed in the trail of state politics. The hierarchical organizational structure of the Orthodox Church is more perfect than the structure of any other cult, which allows us to control and regulate its internal life with greater flexibility and effectiveness.[159]

Following the incorporation of the Orthodox Church into the Soviet state, Stalin pursued a similar strategy with other confessions. Just as he had restored the Orthodox patriarchate in order to create a centralized and hierarchical governing body for Russian Orthodoxy, he also created an analogous institution for Islam, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan in 1943.[160] He also allowed the establishment of the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists in order to bring the Baptists out of the underground and under CARC control, in the process producing a schism between those who were willing to exist legally within the framework of the state, and those who chose to remain unregistered and underground.[161]

## *All Quiet on the Atheist Front*

Was Stalin's wartime rapprochement with the Orthodox Church and shift on the religious question more broadly a rupture in the party's understanding and management of religion? Certainly, the new framework lent itself to multiple interpretations among contemporaries, and disoriented both ordinary Soviet citizens, who drew diverse conclusions about the place of religion in the postwar order, and party cadres, who saw the new status quo as a betrayal of ideological purity.[162] In his study of wartime religious revival, Peris notes that many of the religious interpreted Stalin's reversal as a return to the "natural" order of affairs. "The religious, long accustomed to a state which claimed responsibility for all spheres of activity and thought, now believed that the care for their Orthodox souls fell under the state's purview." Indeed, some interpreted CAROC as a revived Holy Synod, and addressed their appeals to both the patriarch and Karpov, using "a mix of pre-revolutionary and Soviet terminology suggesting a union of church and state."[163] As Peris writes, "Stalin's comment to Karpov at the September 1943 meeting that [Karpov] was not to become the church's over-procurator . . . rang hollow. Almost overnight, many elements of the pre-Revolutionary relationship between church and state were established."[164]

The "activist core" of the party, on the other hand, felt alienated by the new status quo.[165] To party cadres who had spent the 1930s closing churches, repressing clergy, and ferreting out underground religious communities, the sanctioned return of religion alongside the virtual disappearance of atheism was disorienting.[166] Indeed, Shkarovskii notes that many officials expressed their discomfort about the "drawing closer" (*sblizhenie*) of state and church.[167] But ideological puritans made up a relatively small cohort, since most party cadres did not have a deep mastery of Marxist or Leninist theory. Stalinist ideology, moreover, had already undergone major shifts in the 1930s as the party struggled to formulate an official narrative that remained within the parameters of Marxism-Leninism, while also appealing to an audience broader than its most devoted followers.[168] Most party cadres therefore were relatively untroubled by the return of religion and disappearance of atheism. As Peris observes, they "assumed that a resurgent church would occupy its 'natural' position as a subordinate unit of the state."[169]

Some scholars have emphasized continuities with early Soviet policy, noting that the Bolsheviks were consistent in privileging politics over ideology on the religious question. The historian Arto Luukkanen, in his study of the Cult Commission, argues that Soviet policy was always dictated more by political exigencies than by ideological motives.[170] Shkarovskii sees in Stalin a political pragmatist whose contradictory religious policies masked his consistency in prioritizing effective governance and security above other concerns. Shkarovskii observes a process of the "statization" (*ogosudartsveleniia*) of the

Orthodox Church between 1943 and 1948, as the state mobilized it for both foreign and domestic objectives. All this suggests that Stalin prioritized politics over ideological commitments. As Shkarovskii writes, "Both in atheism and in religion [Stalin] saw social phenomena that had to serve his system, each in its own way."[171]

Stalin's abandonment of atheism in the same period would support this analysis. The wartime religious revival on both the territories occupied by the German army and those that remained under Soviet control revealed that militant atheism was a thin veneer that could be easily shed.[172] Indeed, by the end of the 1930s, official support for militant atheism was gone, though atheists themselves did not yet seem to realize it. In 1939, Fedor Oleshchuk, a priest's son and the deputy head of the league, published an article in the party journal *Bolshevik* calling for an intensification of militant atheism. "Every priest, even the most Soviet one, is an obscurantist, reactionary, and an enemy of socialism," wrote Oleshchuk, and the party could not rest until Soviet people were "made into atheists."[173] But while lone atheist voices continued to proclaim their commitment to the atheist mission, the new political climate did not bode well for militant atheism. In fact, even before Stalin formalized the new church-state partnership by restoring the patriarchate and creating CAROC to manage church-state relations, he made several decisions that signaled a course that privileged governance over ideology. With the start of the war, atheist periodicals and publishing houses were shut down, most antireligious museums were closed, and most of the institutions charged with atheist work were dissolved. Indeed, when Iaroslavskii died in 1943, one could say that militant atheism died as well.

After the war, Stalin was much more concerned with effectively managing religion—using the councils and the KGB—than with spreading atheism. The party never explicitly renounced atheism, but to the frustration of its most ideologically committed cadres, it no longer invested it with political value or resources.[174] Eventually, atheists understood the party's signals and receded into the background.

## *Conclusion*

In the early Soviet period, the Bolsheviks engaged with religion above all as a political problem. This prioritization of the political threat posed by religious institutions and clergy helps make sense of oscillations in Soviet approaches to religion and atheism before the war. The Bolshevik Party's multiple objectives—modernization and governance, ideological mobilization and cultural revolution—produced antireligious policies that often worked against each other and rarely produced the intended results. The meaning and importance of atheism, as a field of ideological work distinct from the regulation and repression of religion, was contested over the course of the 1920s and 1930s,

but atheist work as such remained secondary to political concerns, which decided the fate of both religion and atheism.

That religion was taken seriously above all when it posed a threat to Bolshevik power is most clear from the fate of the Orthodox Church under Lenin and Stalin. Lenin considered the church, as the confession of the majority of Soviet citizens with deep roots in Russia's history and culture, a serious threat to Bolshevik power, which remained tenuous through the 1920s. Stalin's consolidation of power throughout the 1930s, however, secured Bolshevik rule and broke the political power of the church. As priorities shifted during the war, the church became increasingly attractive as an ally, both in mobilizing patriotism at home and as a diplomatic vehicle for the Soviet state's ambitions abroad. CAROC and CARC, as bureaucracies whose task was to manage relations between religious organizations and the state, were intended to serve as the neutral face of Soviet legality that masked the state's control over religious affairs—a point underscored by the effort to make a visible wall between the work of the councils and extralegal activities of the NKVD. The fate of the Orthodox Church also highlights the main distinction between the Leninist and Stalinist approaches to religion: to preserve Soviet power, Lenin expelled religion from politics and public life, whereas Stalin recognized that its political power could be used to serve the state.

On the religious front, Stalin's last decade in power—from 1943, when the new model of church-state relations was introduced, until his death in 1953—was a period of relative stability in church-state relations and even a limited religious revival in Soviet society. Atheism, on the other hand, disappeared from public life until Stalin's successor, Khrushchev, opened the door for atheism's return.