ISSUES IN SOVIET ANTI-RELIGIOUS CAMPAIGNING
A CASE STUDY OF THE SMOLENSK REGION DURING THE 1920s

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Up to now, anti-religious propaganda has not attracted the special attention of ethnographic organizations, and that is why it has been conducted in a very unorganized, unsystematic, and often absolutely improper manner.

From a letter of May 26, 1925, issued to all volost5 committees of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) and of the Russian Leninist-Communist Youth League in the Smolensk Guberniya®

The evidence of the Smolensk Archive® suggests that anti-religious campaigning ranked as one of the least organized of all Communist Party activities during the 1920s. Secret communiques, interdepartmental reports, official directives, and the protocols of a variety of Party organizations all point to the scattered and uncoordinated nature of the Soviet regime’s “assault on heaven.”® To be sure, some of these allegations may be dismissed as nepot, the usual complaints of overburdened and understaffed agencies, or as exaggerated attempts to stimulate greater activism on the local level. However, explicit expressions of dissatisfaction are not the only indications of a lack of planning and organization along the so-called anti-religious front. The oft-alluded “weaknesses”®

1 This paper was written before the following monograph could be incorporated. William Hubbard, “Godless Communists’ adoption and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932” (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).

2 National Archives and Records Administration, “Records of the All-Union (Russian) Communist Party, Smolensk District, Record Group 1054, WPK 390, I: 49

3 The Smolensk Archive consists of 536 cases extracted from the Gengia® and then by the Americans during the Second World War. It contains approximately 200,000 pages of documentary evidence on Communist Party activity in the Smolensk Guberniya and Western Oblast® from 1917 to 1938. The Archive is preserved on rolls of microfilm (series T87) at the National Archives (int. IL). College Park, Maryland.


5 In general, the files dealing specifically with anti-religious activity are less organized and less complete than the records kept by Party organs such as the Komissariat. For example, the proceedings and decisions of meetings of the Bureau of the Ogumetsu Central Committee for the Western Oblast® (WPK 40) are accompanied by a typed list of contents, complete with dates and campaigning, which tend to include such items as scrap paper and the discarded drafts of prepared speeches. In fact, the better organized materials touching on this subject are found not in the files kept by anti-religious organizations themselves, but in the records of other Party committees and organizations (e.g., Gokholm, Ukon, Komissariat). See WPK 40, 44, 438-461.


7 Often, 430, 4.

8 There is, of course, an ongoing debate concerning the strength of the Russian peasant’s attachment to Orthodox Christianity. In this paper, however, the concern is not so much the actual documents, but rather the perception conveyed by contemporary anti-religious propaganda. A variety of documents indicate that the peasantry did convey the impression of holding strongly to Orthodoxy. See, for instance, WPK 430, 5. See also Peter Kenez, The Birth of the Propaganda State
minority of the population, and consequently Passover was as much a target of springtime anti-religious campaigning as was Easter. Moreover, "sectarianism" -- that is, evangelical or Protestant Christianity -- had emerged as a dynamic competitor in the "nale of the Bolshevik Revolution. With the preferential status of the Orthodox Church abolished, Baptists and Old Believers alike experienced newfound freedom to worship as they chose and to pursue new beliefs. According to a report of November 17, 1925, Old Believers outnumbered sectarians nearly five to one in the Smolensk Governorate but was the latter who often fascinated and disturbed atheist activists with their "concealed emulation of Bolshevik codes and rituals in order to compete with them."

Each of these groups -- Orthodox Christians, Jews, sectarians, and Old Believers -- received separate treatment in official surveys and descriptive reports. Later, we shall consider whether the anagnostiists were able to develop specific, practical means of countering their various activities based on this information.

What was the condition of the enemy -- or enemies -- in the eyes of communist activists? How did the latter form these impressions of the population's attachment to religion and of the prospects for "correcting" the situation? What sources of information did they have at their disposal, and how did they transform this into propaganda?

The process of information gathering, as might be expected, began ahead of the introduction of anti-religious campaigning. Throughout 1922, the Cheka establishment in Rostov organized Party Headquarters in Smolensk with top-secret reports that included information about the district's religious situation. These reports indicate that support for the Church was rather high, even though the institution itself had recently split into two antagonistic camps (legyevy). Both priests and workers opposed the confiscation of Church valuables, which had been decreed on February 23, 1922, considering it a base instigated by greedy Jews. Attempts at confiscation provoked stiff resistance and outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence.

Peasants were particularly vehement in clinging to and defending their religion. In his report of April 30, 1922, Bureau Chief Kravtsov wrote that the majority were hostile to the Communist regime, and he cited the confiscation of Church valuables as the principal cause of their discontent. Workers were more concerned with economic matters, but they were suffering from a severe pay shortage and doubted that "Communist Power" had much to offer them. As a result, they too were susceptible to the Church's "counter-revolutionary" ideology.

In 1924, however, a general survey of the political and economic situation of the entire Smolensk Governorate painted a much rosier picture. With ill-concealed delight, the Party noted that the Church schism had intensified. Happily, it seemed that both sides were too busy fighting one another to put up much resistance to Communist rule. The Orthodox believers left were "old women, old men, former bureaucrats [chekovskiy], and so on." On the other hand, sectarianism was admittedly on the rise in the Smolensk, Rostov, and Dnepropetrovsk Oblasts, where it had an estimated three thousand adherents. However, since ecclesiastical sects drew their converts principally from the ranks of the Orthodox Church, the latter (in its two manifestations) had mounted an "intensified struggle" against them. Thus, with the Orthodox Churches "exposing the tricks of sectarianism," and vice versa, it seemed that the Party could simply wait for religion to destroy itself.


The anti-Passover campaign of 1920 was designed to culminate on the last days of the Jewish Passover holiday (April 19-20) with special rallies on the theme of "Religion as a hindrance to the building of socialism." The campaigners sought to prevent the observance of religious holidays on the part of both Christian and Jewish believers. WKP (b) 40, 1: 1.

The Jewish population of the Western Oblast was given as 94,445 in the census of 1926. Fainz, 460.


11 WKP (b) 458, 1: 188.

12 Stines, 121; see also Lewis H. Siegelbaum, Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918-1929 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 163.

13 In 1922 the Church split with the belief of Pnvushch Tishok ("Theophanes"), who sought to follow a policy of uncompromising resistance to the Soviet regime, and those of Bishop Antim ("Renovator"), who adopted a more conciliatory stance.

14 WKP (b) 273, II: 140, 141, 410.

15 WKP (b) 272, II: 1975.

16 WKP (b) 272, II: 1-101, 40, 248, 356, etc. See also Fainz, 156-157.

17 The Guberniya Party Committee had appointed a special commission "to photograph the actual condition of the Smolensk countryside" with respect to five areas of concern. The fourth of these categories was "Hospices of the countryside, such as: churches, monasteries, the use of rural darkness and ignorance [apokynon derevenky, snizheni s涅zvvedenosti]." WKP (b) 278, I: 28.

18 WKP (b) 278, I: 32.

19 WKP (b) 278, I: 32.
circles remained for the most part inactive and therefore useless, like the many village "reading huts" (obyy-chal'sh) which lacked basic reading material. Such considerations prompted Divenkov to stress, in concluding his description of the religious situation in Yaroslav Uезд, "To close one's eyes, (or to say) that things have turned out well for us, must not be done. By their numbers they (the religiousists) reveal our weakness. There are more priest than communists in the villages." 25

Apparently Divenkov's warnings had some effect, for soon afterwards the inauguration and Propaganda (Agitprop) section of the Smolensk Guberniya Party Committee (Smolgoskom), in conjunction with the representation of Friends of the Newspaper Brezhovsk (ODGB) and the Communist Youth League (komkomsomol), decided to conduct a thorough survey of religious and sectarian activity throughout the region. Local officials received instructions to begin collecting information "about priests and their" in early July of 1923. To underline the importance of this work, the relevant directives specified that it should occupy the leading anti-religious activists from local komkomsomol cells, trade unions, and non-party organizations. 27

The survey itself was entitled "Questionnaire concerning the Investigation of the Ecclesiastical-Sectarian Front and of Anti-Religious Work." Its sixteen questions were designed to provide the central administration with a basis for evaluating the strength of religious forces and how best to counter them. The main component was a chart summing up information about eleven categories of religious personnel: priests, deacons, paid sacristans (cházovnik), members of church councils, bishops, Old Believers, radicals, synagogue ministers, and believers of other faiths. Each group was to be classified by social background, sex, age, level of education, degree of economic prosperity, and a few other characteristics. Thus, for instance, one particular volost reported having eight priests, seven of whom were over forty years old. In the same volost, there were two deacons, six sacristans, fifty-five members of church councils, and eighty-five evangelicalists. 28 Of the evangelicals, forty-three percent had completed some form of higher education, more than half were women, and more than sixty percent had not reached their fortieth birthday. Clearly, then, the so-called

place in April 1923. It is therefore possible, but not necessarily probable, that two thirds could boast thirty-five members by May 1923, when Divenkov delivered his report.

25. WKP 459, doc. 1, 1, 7.
26. The Dzerzhinsky Uecd Committee issued the appropriate directive to all subordinate volost committees on July 8, 1923. The original deadline for completion and delivery of all investigative work was August 1, but this was later extended to October 1. WKP 458, B. II, 2.
27. WKP 458, B. II, 2-4.
28. Accompanying sheets listed by name each of the 155 religious workers included in the survey. In this volost, at least, there was no simple fulking to avoid the process of investigation.

Yet this was not the whole story, if indeed it was anything but mere wishful thinking or ungrounded propaganda. On May 27, 1923, L. Divenkov, the official responsible for propaganda in Yaroslav Uезд and an anti-religious enthusiast, filed a detailed report in which he described the situation as "DANGEROUS. 20 He reiterated one point from the 1924 survey, stating that few besides the elderly bothered to attend church any longer. By his count, average attendance in most Orthodox parishes had fallen from about three hundred to only fifteen or twenty. Consequently, many priests were experiencing financial difficulties; one had allegedly stated that he received only eight kopays per month. 21 But the remainder of Divenkov's report was a ringing denunciation of the complacency which apparently prevailed at the Guberniya Party Headquarters in Smolensk.

According to Divenkov, the Yaroslav Uезд had a population of 173,000 and contained fifty-seven Orthodox churches. Thirty-nine of these were Resurrectionals, and the remainder Tikhvinite in orientation. Although attendance had declined severely, the churches remained by far the largest and most powerful of all religious-and anti-religious organizations in the area. Divenkov noted that the overwhelming illiteracy rate (eighty percent) worked in favor of established religion, which alone possessed the extensive organizational structure necessary for reaching the masses on a personal level. 22

So much, then, for the alleged disintegration of the Orthodox Church. Next Divenkov turned his attention to "ever more dangerous and long-lived enemies-that is, the sectarians of every hue (vokrest' polyes'nye i zhelemnchy perch'i - otro sokhvat'nykh strany)." By his account, there were some two hundred sectarian believers, mainly evangelicals, in the city of Yaroslavl alone, and others scattered throughout the area. He had also learned of the existence of a society of Seventh-Day Adventists, about twenty in number, in Demidov Uезд. To judge from his statistics, sectarianism was almost certainly more prevalent than Judaism in Yaroslav, where there were only two synagogues serving an unknown number of practitioners. 23

Against this impressive array of religious activity and organization in Yaroslav, Divenkov could point only two anti-religious circles of thirty-five members each. 24 These
sектаризm had encountered some success in their conscious attempt to appeal across social boundaries to people of all strata and backgrounds.29

The remaining sections of the questionnaire inquired about the earnings of religious personnel, the topics of their sermons, and the activity of Party members and cells of the OGPU. The answers to such questions were typically laconic; when asked for the historical origins and causes of sectarism in his volost, one respondent wrote simply “nevizvestno” (‘not known’). Yet even laconic answers could be quite revealing at times, as when the same respondent recorded that since 1921 sixty-nine individuals had converted to sectarism whereas only one renounced it.30

The accumulated results of this survey produced a more sober evaluation of the enemy’s strength in the guberniya than had been propagated in 1924. The official data ran as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orthodox churches</th>
<th>Sectarian Believers at least 2,300 (sic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>priests</td>
<td>736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renovations</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tikhvin</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconverted</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Belief churches</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believers</td>
<td>11,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synagogues</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer houses</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The report containing these figures, which was dated November 17, 1925, also included exploratory remarks concerning each of the four major religious groupings. The authors argued that although the majority of the population was ostensibly Orthodox, in reality the “protestant” segment of the citizenry had adopted a critical attitude toward this “ecclesiastical cult.” Yet because they remained impervious to atheism and communism, many fell under the influence of sectarism. The ethnographers considered that pacific evangelical sects were particularly successful because they attracted young men who wanted to escape service in the Red Army. All told, the sectarians were growing at a rate of about two hundred a year. As for the Old Believers, they remained “fanatic” and “intolertant” as ever, in many cases refusing to send their children to school with “tobacco-smokers” and “brontoklyashchik (those who think differently).” The party thus conceded the tremendous strength of Old Belief, but it did not seem overly concerned about the possibility of its growth. Finally, it remarked that Judaism was intimately bound up with questions of material welfare, to the extent that “the struggle

with the Jewish religion should be first of all founded on the defense of the economic interests of the Jewish masses from the robbery of its religious clique.”31

Whether or not these judgments were accurate, they do show that by late 1925 the Communist Party leadership in Smolensk was making clear distinctions between various enemies on the “anti-religious front.” Its evaluation of those enemies stemmed from a serious, concerted, guberniya-wide process of data collection possibly brought on by the internal dissent and carried out by local officials and activists. It remains to be seen what practical use, if any, the region’s anti-religiousists were able to make of this newfound information.

Strategies and Tactics

Following the formulation of Maksim Gorky, Richard Sacks has characterized the dilemma of anti-religious campaigning as the choice between Godkilling and Godbuilding. Advocates of the first strategy aimed to liquidate religion; proponents of the second sought to substitute a new, socialist religion for existing faith structures. Anatoli Lunacharski, the head of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), was the most prominent Godbuilder, while the central figure of Godkilling was Emelian Yavlinskii (né Mitei Izrailevich Gubelman), founder of the journal Bezbozhnik (The Godless).32

The strategy of choice in the Smolensk Guberniya during the 1920s was Godkilling. Notwithstanding that the vast majority of peasants could not read, the official policy of Smolensk Agitprop stated: “The journal Bezbozhnik should play a colonial [promolnitsa] role in the proliferation of the ideas of godlessness among the masses of backward peasants.” A position paper of 1925 on “Contents, Organizational Forms, and Methods of Anti-Religious Propaganda in the City and Countryside” asserted that all anti-religious circles and clubs in the guberniya fell under the authority of the regional branch of Yavlinskii’s Society of the Godless (Obshchestvo Bezbozhnikov). Similar statements abounded in other documents of the Archive. Clearly, then, those concerned with anti-religious campaigning in the Smolensk region belonged to

29 WKP 458, II, 5-11. See Sacks, 121.
30 WKP 458, I, 7b.
31 WKP 458, II, 58-59.
33 WKP 458, I, 27.
34 WKP 459, doc. 7, 1.2.
35 In 1925, for example, local leaders in the Smolensk Guberniya received a number of materials designed to help in the struggle against religion. Virtually all of them made mention of the Union of the Godless and its leading role on the “anti-religious front.” The primary practical means of struggle was to be the establishment of new cells of that society. WKP 458, II, 20-36.
Yaroslavskiy's grouping; that is to say, they were propagandists opposed to religion in any form.

This choice of strategy dictated tactics. Rather than seeking to provide the peasantry with an attractive spiritual substitute for religion, anti-religious activists in the Smolensk region aimed to eradicate religious belief by "exposing" God and the Church, or by "proving" the superiority of science over faith. The principal means of accomplishing these ends were lectures, debates, sacrilegious plays, and "tallies of an anti-religious character [nasledstvi antireligionnogo khloristora]." Ironically, however, these actions served to establish an alternate ritual of sorts, insofar as the anti-religious calendar essentially mocked the religious one. It was during religious holidays that the godless gathered themselves to smite religion, and hence the main events in a typical activist's year were the anti-Christmas (narebniestveniki) and anti-Paschal (nanipaskal'nye) campaigns.26

The archival records of such campaigns fall into two basic categories: documents written in 1923-25 and those produced in 1929-30. As expected, the former describe a rather disorganized, unsystematic, and unsuccessful application of Goddabling techniques, while the latter portray a much more regularized and effective program of work. Unfortunately, there are no records of the transition period between these two phases of anti-religious activity.27 However, the source base does permit a comparison of five important campaigns: the anti-Christmas campaign of 1923-24, the anti-Paschal campaign of 1924, a campaign against Judaism in the fall of 1929, the anti-Christmas campaign of 1929, and the anti-Paschal campaign of 1930. These suffice to illustrate the evolution of anti-religious tactics and methods in the Smolensk region during the 1920s.

The first anti-Christmas campaign in the country had taken place in December 1922 and January 1923. Komzomol members burst into God with fury, mocked priests, read out inflammatory lectures, chained sacrilegious singers, and otherwise managed to offend the sensibilities of virtually everyone but themselves. The overwhelmingly negative popular reaction to these antics prompted anti-religious leaders to rein in their subordinates and to be more cautious in the future.28

26 A report of 1925 entitled "On Anti-Religious Propaganda in the City and Countryside" termed Komzabol'stva (Komzomol Christmas) and Komzabol'stvo (Komzomol Easter Passover) the two "fundamental campaigns" of anti-religious activity. WKP 459, doc. 11, 11. See also WKP 278, l. 82, Young, 90-103; Konet, 183-184.
27 In 1924, the foremost anti-religious activist, Eyman Sokolovskiy (see above, p. 81), chose to distance himself from Komzabol'stvo and Easter festivals. The holidays were revived only in 1928-29. Since their initial campaigns formed the cornerstone of anti-religious activity in rural regions such as Smolensk, evidence of "godless work" in the interwar years is almost entirely lacking. See Young, 108-109.
28 The first Komzabol Christmas gained such notoriety that as late as 1930 the Rues Komzabol leadership was still remembering its membership: "Without tolerating either the shadow of tolerance or of consciousness toward religion, it is necessary at the same time to remember that there is a dangerous approach to the struggle with religion, meaning that exaggerations and excesses in this matter lead to a kindling of religious fanaticism." Another document of the time stressed the necessity of carrying out all aspects of anti-religious campaigning "with special tact [s ostrogo spetsial'nogo]." WKP 219, l. 15; 460, l. 4. See also WKP 219, l. 16; "Materiale po Komzabol'stvo, Komzabol'stvo. Pis'ma za 1920-1922 gody," AOK 27, 1920; 31, 1923. Informatsiya ob evropeiskom iskusstve (in Russkaya gazeta, 1917-1918). Doklady i izvestiya (Moscow: BIBLIOTHECA, 1965), 171; Young, 100-101; Stolitsa, 109, 109.
29 Journals as displayed were referred to as "street papers" or "wall newspapers." For a visual example, see Young, 120.
30 Such lists of recommended reading were quite common, particularly for the young. See, for example, WKP 396, l. 4-5.
31 WKP 277, l. 4-7.
32 WKP 277, l. 4.
33 See Young, 275. It is interesting to note that relevant documents refer to "anti-religious Christmas" and "anti-religious Easter/Passover" as well as to "anti-Christmas campaigns" and "anti-Paschal campaigns." The basic meaning is the same in both cases, but the first formulation seems to me to be an indication of the extent to which the Bolsheviks, despite their strategy of Godkilling, nonetheless incorporated some of the elements of religious belief into their own godless program. See WKP 277, l. 7, 10a.
Komsomol, but no specific instructions or expectations were mentioned. A subsequent report affirmed that the campaign had in fact taken place and that libraries in the union had participated by hanging up newspapers. Again, however, there was no indication of additional activity or results. The near-total absence of specific information concerning the anti-religious campaign allegedly carried out in striking in such a detailed report.

A survey taken in advance of the XIIIth Smolensk Guberniya Party Conference (May 10, 1924) provides further evidence that the “anti-religious front” did not particularly concern Agitprop at the time.62 None of the survey’s nineteen questions inquired specifically about religious or anti-religious activity.63 In such an overwhelmingly rural region still recovering from the Civil War, Agitprop’s true function remained “Agitprop” rather than “revolution.”

Nonetheless, there was some effort to increase the number of anti-religious discussions and gatherings during the “off-season” (i.e., between religious holidays). This was listed as a goal in the Agitprop plan of May 1, 1924, and in fact two of the department’s seventeen meetings in subsequent months were devoted to the question of anti-religious propaganda.64 On a local level, up to five hundred people participated in seven different anti-religious assemblies, while in the city of Smolensk itself an “excursion concerning the anti-religious question” attracted an additional one hundred. Anti-religious activity remained relatively minor in comparison with other aspects of Agitprop’s work—during the same period, the international political situation merited fifty-one conferences, gatherings, and rallies, and the women’s movement, thirty-nine—but at least some intensification had taken place. The movement even gained a bit of momentum: in August and September of 1924, the union’s reading halls held twenty-four discussions on the anti-religious question, in addition to thirty-eight each on agriculture and international politics. They also staged eighteen performances, some of which may have been “of an anti-religious character.”

The bottom line, however, was that this modest upsurge in anti-religious activity had very little effect on the population of the district. The Agitprop report for the period of June to October, 1924, stated: “Notwithstanding a whole series of questions raised in the countryside concerning this issue, anti-religious propaganda in essence yields insignificant results.” Apparently the majority continued to prefer its “religious way of life” (religioznyy byt) to the new, socialist way of life (novyi byt).65

A more interested party, but one possessing fewer resources than Agitprop, was also setting up its anti-religious shop in the Smolensk region in the mid-1920s. The Organization of Friends of the Newspaper Zebra (ODGB) and its successor, the Union of the Goddess (SB), sought to establish cells throughout the guberniya in 1924 and 1925. The ODGB, according to its charter, was a “voluntary” society dedicated to “active struggle for the complete emancipation of the laboring masses” from spiritual slavery.66 The ODGB insisted that all anti-religious campaigning be carried out under its banner, and it succeeded in convincing the Komsomol leadership to adopt this refinements as well. However, from the frequent complaints it seems likely that hardly anyone paid much attention to this demand.67

Be that as it may, the ODGB and SB came to dominate anti-religious campaigning, since they supplied virtually all of the materials used by local activists. Firstly, as mentioned, they distributed the journal Bazaarkhod, the literary cornerstone of the struggle against religion. Yet in Yarasevo Uzel, despite Divenosov’s best efforts, only seventeen people had subscribed by February 1, 1925.68 However, activists used materials from the ODGB and SB for other materials as well, in particular the texts of anti-religious lectures and assorted propaganda. The associations of Godfellers distributed a number of reports and “informational letters” with such titles as “How to Cure the Disease of Faith with Science,” “The Christian Holiday [Called ‘The Birth of Christ’ and its Origin],” and “An

Predictably enough, the plug ended in a jay of Komsomol members indicated that their condemnation of this ‘Bible.’” WKP 491, L. 73-75.

Since in late 1924 dramatic clubs were the most prevalent type of “circles” (kruglyz) in the Smolensk used—the district could boast of seventeen such clubs, in comparison with twelve agricultural, five journalistic, and four anti-religious circles—one is tempted to speculate that such societies collaborated with the reading halls in presenting stereotypes related to the latter’s topics of discussion. I did not find any conclusive proof of this, however. See WKP 477, 32b.

51 WKP 277, L. 45b.

52 WKP 277, L. 5th, 47b.

53 WKP 396, L. 50. Cf. the charter of the Union of the Goddess, which contains exactly the same words: WKP 458, L. 34-35.

54 See, for instance, WKP 396, L. 49.

55 WKP 459, doc. 1, 11.1.

56 Anti-religious propaganda was not always entirely consistent. For instance, the author of this treatise asserts that the existence of Christ was unproven and in all likelihood a pure fiction. In “A

64 WKP 277, L. 2b.

65 This was the periodic report of Smolensk Agitprop for the period from April 1 to October 1, 1924. WKP 277, L. 10-1.

66 It will be recalled that a compliant attitude toward religion apparently prevailed at Party Headquarters in Smolensk at the time. See above, p. 4.

67 WKP 277, L. 34a-34b.

68 See Faintos, L. 17-18, 20-22; WKP 277, L. 1oth.

69 WKP 277, L. 36b, 44a, 47a.

70 WKP 277, L. 32b, 44a. Some examples of the kinds of things put up by anti-religious activists may be found in the files of the Gorkh Komzonal section. One play, entitled “A Trial of the Bible,” was used during the anti-Christmas campaigns of 1923 and 1924. It featured a rather insecure and idiotic character who proved unable to answer such simple questions as his own age.
Agronomist on the Anti-Religious Front," and "Anti-Religious Work of the Teacher in School and Outside of School."57 While some of these experts appear laughable (and many were greeted with jeers by assembled crowds), others were detailed, quasi-scholarly inquiries concerning real issues in the history of religion. In either case, these documents served as ammunition for activists like Divenkov, and anti-religious campaigning could not have been carried out without them.

Some of the available anti-religious literature focused specifically on sectarianism. Yet, in his 1920s, a more radical anti-religious strategy had not yet evolved to the point of developing specialized tactics for use against different enemies.

This was to change toward the end of the 1920s. Already in the first half of the decade, though, Jews had been treated somewhat differently than other religious groups, due to the formation of Evreiskiya, the Party's Jewish wing. In 1924, for instance, the Smolensk Uezd Evreiskiya recorded its intention of closing down two religious schools (shkederiy) and replacing them with secular Jewish schools.58 But there is no record in the archive of a specialized campaign directed exclusively at Jewish holiday observances until 1929.

According to official Komsomol documents, in fact, specialized anti-religious work of this type commenced after that organization's First Western Oblast' Conference is August 1929.59 The first campaign directed specifically against the Jewish High Holy Days took place between October 1 and 24, 1929. Its primary purposes were to expose the "counter-revolutionary essence" of Judaism and to ensure 100 percent attendance at work during the holiday period. The Komsomol leadership in Smolensk issued specific instructions about how the campaign was to be conducted, including the following:

In no case should the campaign be restricted to work among youth, but Komsomol organizations should unfold [their] work broadly among the Jewish population... The anti-religious campaign should also have its reflection in the work among youth of other nationalities... During the days of the holiday, Komsomol cells should be the most active participants in organizing mass evening gatherings... providing for this [purpose] a strong anti-religious and artistic unit.60

The mention of an artistic unit (khudozhestvennoe chest') is noteworthy, for anti-religious tactics and Soviet propagandists in general had long recognized the great potential of artistic forms.61 However, early anti-religious art was so offensive that it was counter-productive, and hence the Komsomol leadership felt the necessity to warn its membership that "all artistic propaganda should be concentrated on elucidating in a lively and understandable form the hostile role of religion as an obstacle to the Five-Year Plan, but in no case should it assume the character of a crude mockery of the religious feelings of believers."62 Tactics may have been similar to those of the first half of the 1920s - lectures, rallies, posters, and so on. But by the end of the decade anti-religious campaigning included a great deal more preparation and circumlocution. Goals were more clearly defined, and there was more cooperation between the Party itself, the Komsomol, and the Society of the Midwest Goddess (SVB).63

This conclusion is borne out by the documents related to the anti-Christmas and anti-Passchal campaigns of 1929-30. Resolutions concerning these campaigns designate specific tasks to be accomplished; for instance, demonstrations against abstentions from work, recruitment of workers and peasants into the SVB, advertisements in newspapers, or even organization of new kolkhozy.64 They include detailed instructions about when to take certain preparatory steps and when to sponsor meetings on pre-selected topics.65

Yet the greater attention paid to anti-religious work at the end of the 1920s went hand in hand with greater quantities of vacuous rhetoric. In announcing its anti-religious campaign, the Smolenskobkom now felt obliged to denounce religious organizations repeatedly as "warmongers" (perevdoloevoe voino) and "allies of the kulak and the neptain."66 Furthermore, higher levels of systematization, however desirable, had the adverse side effect of producing formulaic approaches to anti-religious campaigning. It is thus uncertain whether the "acceleration" of anti-religious activity over the course of the

57 WKP 219; II. 35-40.
59 WKP 219; I. 1.
1920s actually induced people to abandon their faith, or simply provided an outlet for a small minority of atheist enthusiasts.67

The Role of the Komsomol

Much of historiography attributes a leading role in Soviet anti-religious campaigning to the Communist Youth League. This is particularly true of the works of pro-Church historians, who have tended to see the manipulation of youth as one of the more pernicious aspects of the Communist regime. The evidence of the Smolensk Archives confirms that members of the Komsomol were often the only personnel available for anti-religious campaigning, but it also tells a different story — one of lack of interest in anti-religious activity and failure to comply with the wishes of the League of the Militant Godless (SVB). For most of the period under consideration, it is clear that only the bezkhristny considered anti-religious campaigning to be a priority of the Komsomol. The Komsomol leadership itself did not, nor apparently did the overarching political authority.

Beginning in August 1929, the Komsomol did seek to promote anti-religious campaigning as one of its main activities. Nevertheless, there is evidence that local cells continued to resist cooperation with the SVB and often failed to comply with instructions to engage in anti-religious activity.44 In February 1925, the Komsomol Secretariat had complained bitterly about the utter lack of responsiveness on the part of its subordinate organizations:

Already more than a month has passed since the execution of the Komsomol Christmas campaign, and from that time until now not a single violent committee has submitted information on the results of the campaign in its volost. The Komsomol Christmas campaign is of exceptionally great significance in the anti-religious work of our village cells.69

Almost exactly four years later, the Komsomol leadership still found itself in precisely the same situation, despite its new emphasis on anti-religious campaigning. After receiving no response concerning the anti-Christmas campaign of 1929-30, it was forced to extend the deadlines for submission several times.70 In the end, the department actually did receive some response to this demand for information. An obilag

Komsomol secretary in Sel'chakovskii Raion filed a handwritten report which mentioned ten anti-religious lectures, a carnival involving one hundred Komsomol members, ten additional subscriptions to Bezhuchok, and similar events.71 However, judging from the statements of central organizations and from the contents of the Archive itself, this was a highly exceptional occurrence. In most cases, local leaders did not even bother to submit reports on the campaigns they were supposed to have carried out. Consequently, used and gubernaia committees could not even be sure that the "absolutely essential" campaigns had truly taken place throughout the region.

With Stalin urging "warfare" in the countryside, the Komsomol leadership moved to rectify the situation described above. An official commissar from Stakhanovshchina, the head of anti-religious activity in the Eastern Oblast, laid out new tasks for youth sections. As before, they were to distribute anti-religious journals, hang up posters, and participate in atheist rituals. Yet they were also charged with policing all other activities and residents during holiday seasons; that is, they were ordered to conduct raids (venets) on stores (to verify the absence of Christmas presents), clubs and workplaces (to check on the preparation of anti-religious propaganda and materials), and a variety of other establishments. Subsequent directives expressed dissatisfaction with the state of anti-religious campaigning and ordered local Komsomol cells to form brigades of "Light-Cavalry" in order to "check up on the fulfillment by local organizations of the existing directives of the highest organs."72

In such a situation, it is not surprising that incidents of violence increased. The struggle against religion came to be seen as part and parcel of the collectivization campaign, and hence a veritable battle which warranted stronger tactics.73 As Peter Kenez points out, military vocabulary had saturated the discourse of the new regime from its inception, and this could not but have some effect on the mentality of the population. He believes that the constant use of terms such as "storming," "beseiging," and "war" in words of unintelligible meaning. In his words: "These sentences were not meant to be understood but incited. Soviet propaganda had substituted meaningless verbage for discussion of issues facing society."74

There is undoubtedly a great deal of truth to this perspective. Yet at the same time, it must be recognized that the militarized language of the new regime facilitated the

67 See Kenez, 254.
68 See WKP 219, II. 2.
69 WKP 396, I. 2.
70 WKP 219, I. 5.
71 WKP 219, II. 19a-19b.
74 Kenez, 255-256.
militarization of society by eliminating the conceptual boundaries that divided ideological conflict from armed struggle. By 1930, a generation of youth had been raised to equate patriotism and revolution with physical means to be "liquidated." In such a situation, precise little separated the liquidation of religion from the liquidation of religious leaders. Words had not completely lost their meanings; rather, their meanings had been extended far beyond proper limits.

In the end, then, the Komsoomol did play the role assigned to it by historiography; namely, that of liberal counterrevolution against religion and religious leaders. However, the records of the Komsoomol Archive reveal that this was not always the case. Throughout most of the 1920s, Komsoomol participants frequently disappointed anti-religious leaders through their lack of dedication to the struggle against religion. Only when a younger, thoroughly indoctrinated generation entered its ranks did the Communist Youth League begin to take on religion with a vengeance.

Conclusions

The outstanding feature of Soviet anti-religious campaigning during the 1920s was a vacillating between means and ends. Especially in rural regions such as the Smolensk Guberniya, Communist Party offices were understaffed and overburdened. Not only were leaks between local and regional offices weak, but directives might be passed down a long chain of command before reaching the ground level—where there was often no one to carry them out. This lack of resources manifested itself in all areas of work. In 1922, for instance, the Roslav' Cheka typed its top-secret biweekly reports on the backs of old train schedules, leftover questionnaires, and, in one case, a sign reading "flammable." Faced with the same problem in 1930, the highest organ of the Komsoomol in the Western Oblast' had to issue directives on French cigarette papers. The situation was not unlike that faced by the old Muscovite chancelleries, whose officials sometimes wrote diplomatic correspondence on the reverse of old wedding programs.

Despite such embarrassing setbacks, however, anti-religious campaigning did take place in the 1920s. The evidence suggests that it was carried out primarily by enthusiasts like Divenkov, similar to the way in which anti-clerical zealots during the

French Revolution provoked and directed the campaign of de-Christianization. Without a doubt, some people had ardently committed themselves to the eradication of religion, and they struggled against enormous odds to achieve their goals. In Divenkov's case, this even meant taking on the Smolenskobukh, the ruling body of the region.

It was very difficult to evaluate the success of anti-religious campaigns during this period. Most of the archival traces are hortatory in nature—consisting of white papers, official directives, and the like. There are precious few indications of actual implementation, and still fewer of popular response. However, the documents do permit some conclusions about the choice of strategy and tactics. The anti-religious activists in the Smolensk region were Godfathers, but their methods were inadequate to bring about the destruction of religion. Lectures on the wondrous powers or electricity or the manufacturing of agricultural machinery were unlikely to sever peasants from their belief, however much such speeches "proved" the superiority of science over faith. Other anti-religious events, such as mock trials, carnivals, and concerts might have captured the popular imagination had they not so often deteriorated into blasphemy-insults. But the Godfathers were blasphemers; their ideology did not permit any criticisms to religion. Hence, their most powerful weapon was intimidation, not persuasion.

The changing political context at the end of the 1920s placed this weapon at their disposal and completely altered the balance of power on the anti-religious front. By making the latter a front instead—an arena of actual combat. Many of the Godfathers, no doubt, sincerely believed that they were waging a just war against the forces of "darkness and ignorance."

The mirror image of Christian ideology supports Stalin's proposal that anti-religious campaigning represented a "subversive-messianic crusade." It

76 WKP 273, II 101, 140, 197b, 248, etc.
76 WKP 210, II 11, 15-16. The impetus on these sheets reads "PAPIER A CIGARETTE / EXTRA FIN A MALINE / ORGINAL DE MALINE."
76 The principle figure of de-Christianization was Joseph Fouché, an ex-priest who had turned wholesale against his former religion. I have been unable to determine whether any of the leaders of anti-religious campaigns in the Smolensk region came from clerical backgrounds, but for the de-Christianization, see A. A. Ash, Christianity and the French Revolution, Paris, Lady Frans (New York: Howard Fertig, 1970), Christopher Dowris, The Gods of Revolution (New York: New York University Press, 1972), William Day, The Oxford History of the French Revolution (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), Patrick de la Gruze, Histoire religieuse de la Revolution francaise, 75-80; McManus, The French Revolution and the Church (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1969), and other works of a similar nature.
81 See Koz, 234.
81 WKP 278, 1. 58.
81 See Stalin,
also helps explain why the youth who received their "political education" during the 1920s proved so willing to lift up the sword against religion, whereas their immediate predecessors had been unenthusiastic at best.

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