PART I

Introduction
A survey of Soviet religious policy

PHILIP WALTERS

The first 70 years of Soviet power saw a sustained offensive against religion on a scale unprecedented in history. Millions suffered and died. There is a great deal of descriptive and anecdotal material about these sufferings readily available, and I do not propose to reproduce much of it here. My task in this chapter is to present the frame of reference within which the anti-religious offensive took place, showing what the legal and constitutional situation was, what was actual policy at any given time (the two only rarely match), or (more often) the failure of the various strategies and tactics.

The CPSU has always been dedicated to promoting the disappearance of religion, but the formation and execution of a religious policy has usually been subordinate to, and influenced by, other constantly changing political, economic, and social considerations. Any attempt to subdivide Soviet religious policy into successive chronological phases tends, therefore, to be contentious, since exceptions to the general norm at any date are always to be found, and within any chosen phase there are policy modifications and even reversals. Nevertheless, just this kind of chronological approach is what I propose to attempt. Within each chronological section I shall first consider official policy towards religious institutions and towards individual believers, showing where toleration ended and discrimination began; and then I shall look at what efforts were being made in the field of anti-religious education and propaganda.

Before moving on to the chronological survey, however, I shall briefly consider some of the basic motives which have influenced those responsible for shaping Soviet religious policy, and the institutional framework within which such policy was developed. As archives begin to open up in the Soviet Union, there will soon be a wealth of hitherto inaccessible material to shed new light on all aspects of this complex subject. Good work has already been done by scholars including
Professor Bohdan Bociurkiw. Most of what follows in this introduction is a summary of his findings.1

A fundamental tenet of Marxism–Leninism is that religion will ultimately disappear. If it began to seem unlikely to do so, the authorities would naturally adopt measures to promote its disappearance, since its continued presence was a rebuke to the claims of the ideology. The above impulse was reinforced when the system developed into full totalitarianism (in the USSR, from the late 1920s): the internal compulsion of such a system demanded the liquidation of any social institution (not just religious) which was not under its complete control.

Within this general context, there were two basic, and to some extent conflicting, trends amongst those responsible for formulating specific policies. The ‘fundamentalists’ were found primarily in the Party’s Agitation and Propaganda organisation and in the Komsomol; and the ‘pragmatists’ amongst those in the party and state executive apparatus, and also in the secret police, who generally realised that religious believers could be more easily controlled when allowed a (limited) legal existence rather than being driven underground. Each trend held sway at different times; and their policies were further modified by considerations of the changing party line in such fields as internal and external security, agricultural and industrial policy, policy towards the nationalities, and foreign affairs.

What of the institutional structure within which decisions were made and implemented? It can be assumed that major policy decisions were taken at the level of the Party’s Politburo and the Council of Ministers; but the information on which such decisions were based would have surfaced through a variety of institutions which would have made their own interpretations, selections and recommendations. Let us look at some of these institutions.

From 1918, the implementation of religious policy was divided up amongst various agencies. Within the Commissariat of Justice, a subdivision which later became known as the Department of Cults was charged with overall supervision. The Commissariat of Internal Affairs was charged with more direct administration. The Cheka – the first in a series of secret police organisations – was made responsible for combating possible subversion by surveillance and infiltration. A special department in the Commissariat of Enlightenment, under the guidance of the Party’s Agitation and Propaganda department, was made responsible for anti-religious propaganda. Ad hoc bodies were also set up to see particular projects through – for example, the 1922 committee on the confiscation of church treasures.

In 1922 a standing Commission, known informally as the ‘Antireli-
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... was established at Central Committee level. Headed by Emel'yan Yaroslavsky, it was to function as an overall coordinating body throughout the 1920s.

In 1924, the Department of Cults was abolished. Its successor, the Secretariat (later Permanent Commission) for the Affairs of Cults, involved a more active role for the OGPU and later the NKVD (successors to the cheka, i.e. the secret police) throughout the 1930s.

In 1925 Yaroslavsky was appointed head of a new mass atheistic organisation set up under the auspices of the Agitation and Propaganda department of the Central Committee: the League of Atheists (in 1929 renamed the League of Militant Atheists). This body was quietly dissolved early in the Second World War, to be replaced after the War by the Znanie Society.

With the reversal of religious policy at this time, two new bodies were set up: the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC) in 1943 and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) in 1944. They had all-Union powers and their purpose was officially to facilitate contacts between the churches and the government. In fact they turned out to be well adapted to facilitating both direct infiltration of church structures by the security organs, and the authorities' control over church activity. This became their chief function under Khrushchev. In 1965 the two Councils were merged into the single Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), which continued to play the same role well into the Gorbachev era.

1917–1920

This was a period of acute crisis: would the fledgling Bolshevik state survive? There was revolution and civil war, and, in response, War Communism, with all its privations. There was also real revolutionary zeal amongst the Bolsheviks and those they inspired. One element in this was a genuine hostility towards religion, particularly as institutionalised in the Russian Orthodox Church. For decades before the Revolution, the progressive intelligentsia had been alienated from the church, and during the last years of the Empire churchgoing had actually been declining, particularly in the cities. In the immediate post-Revolutionary years, it was indeed the conscious policy of the Bolsheviks to direct their anti-religious activity virtually exclusively against the Orthodox Church; but this did not mean that other denominations and confessions were immune from sporadic attacks by anti-religious enthusiasts.2

The priority for the Bolsheviks at this time, then, was to seize the
wealth and possessions of the Orthodox Church and to remove all public institutions from its sphere of influence. The Decree of 23 January 1918 deprived the Orthodox Church of its status as a legal person, of the right to own property, and of the right to teach religion in schools. The Constitution of the same year deprived clergy of the right to elect, or be elected to, any Soviet organs of government or administration, and allowed them to own land only after the claims of agricultural workers had been satisfied. This determined effort to disestablish and dispossess the Orthodox Church was a total success. The immediate result was that the church’s wealth and material resources were available to the new government.

The above measures were accompanied by bloody terror against Orthodox clergy, which began promptly after the October seizure of power, and which impelled Patriarch Tikhon, a few days before the Decree of 23 January 1918, to anathematise the Bolsheviks. Further terror followed. Dozens of bishops and thousands of priests, monks, nuns, and laymen were arrested or murdered. There were many pretexts: alleged collaboration with the enemy during the Civil War; anti-Bolshevik comments in sermons; resistance to the nationalisation of church property. As has been noted, non-Orthodox believers also suffered, but as it were incidentally, as part of the general Red Terror: while the campaign against the Orthodox was centrally co-ordinated, measures against believers of other denominations were, by and large, local initiatives.

If party zealots believed that a few months of violent persecution would serve to turn religious believers away from the faith, however, they were soon proved wrong. Similarly unsuccessful, from the point of view of the authorities, was the effort to combat religious ideas by means of education and propaganda.³

Anti-religious propaganda was quickly centralised under party control. The People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment, set up in November 1917, produced a special department, the Chief Administration for Political Enlightenment (Glaspolitprosvet), which in 1920 became part of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Party. It based its work on Article 13 of the Programme of the RCP, adopted at the 8th Party Congress in 1919. This article called for anti-religious propaganda in addition to a simple separation of church and state; but it also warned against insulting believers’ feelings and thereby encouraging their fanaticism – a sign that some at least in authority were realising that persecution was counter-productive. One of the recurrent features of subsequent Soviet religious policy was to be that periods of anti-religious violence would regularly
be followed by warnings similar to the above heralding periods of relative moderation.

The first professional Soviet atheist journal, *Revolyutsiya i tserkov'*, appeared in 1919. Like other types of anti-religious endeavour, anti-religious literature was aimed at the Orthodox. Protestants tended to be portrayed as hardworking and loyal; although lacking the correct ideological equipment, they were nevertheless held to be contributing objectively to the building of socialism. Muslims too were depicted as essentially loyal to the new Soviet state.

From the earliest years the authorities made efforts to undermine traditional cultural ties with religion. They tried to persuade citizens to observe secular holidays and festivals rather than religious ones, and to substitute secular civil ceremonies for religious rites of passage: religious baptisms, marriages, and funerals were deprived of legal significance.

At this time it was still legal to conduct religious as well as anti-religious propaganda. Public debates took place in which atheist spokespersons pitted themselves against religious apologists. These encounters normally did more harm than good to the atheist cause, and the authorities began to discourage them from 1921 (although they were not actually illegal until 1929).

By 1920, a rise in churchgoing amongst ordinary citizens was being noted. While the institutional attack on the Orthodox Church had been a success for the new regime, the accompanying effort to dissuade people from belief was already turning out a failure.

**1921–1928**

At the end of the Civil War the Bolsheviks judged it essential to provide an opportunity for economic and social recuperation. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched at the 10th Party Congress in March 1921 and continued until 1928. A degree of private enterprise was allowed, the arts flourished, and citizens enjoyed a freedom of expression not to be repeated until the Gorbachev era.

During this period it became apparent that the government's religious policy had not yet resolved itself into one generally accepted strategy. The fluctuations in policy reflected not only genuine disagreements about the effectiveness of particular tactics, but also aspects of the power struggle amongst the Soviet leaders which Trotsky eventually lost.4

The 10th Party Congress in 1921 issued a resolution calling for a comprehensive programme of anti-religious propaganda amongst the
workers, using the mass media, films, books, lectures, and similar instruments of enlightenment. In August 1921 a plenary meeting of the Central Committee issued an eleven-point instruction on how to interpret and apply Article 13 of the Party Programme adopted in 1919. It made a distinction between uneducated and educated believers. The former could be admitted to the Party if, despite being believers, they had proved their devotion to communism. Anti-religious work was conceived as a long-term educative process rather than as ‘destructive and negative’. The instruction was clearly in line with the general ideology of NEP, and reflected the views of such men as Emel'yan Yaroslavsky, who at the 10th Party Congress in 1921 was appointed a member of the all-powerful Central Committee Secretariat (already under the control of Stalin, who a year later became its General Secretary), rather than those of Trotsky who tended to dismiss religion as a matter of superstition, and who held that a few sharp shocks administered against religious institutions would soon persuade the masses to embrace atheism. It was Trotsky who in 1921 was in favour of having Patriarch Tikhon shot, against the advice of Lenin who feared the danger consequent on creating such a prominent martyr.

It was also Trotsky who termed the religious policy which did in fact theoretically prevail an ‘ecclesiastical NEP’. It was necessary to make concessions to private enterprises which would ultimately have no place in a socialist economic order; in the same way, although religion was still said to be ideologically incompatible with communism, it was necessary to conciliate practising believers.

At least at the start of this period, the government’s anti-religious activity was still directed primarily against the Russian Orthodox Church. Two separate strategies were pursued: the first was the so-called ‘church valuables’ campaign, and the second was the promotion of the Renovationist schism.

The ‘church valuables’ campaign was a struggle with the church on ground of the government’s own choosing. The authorities required churches to hand over their valuables to be sold to aid those starving in the widespread famines which followed the Civil War. Church leaders, priests and laity were in general willing to do so, but resisted when consecrated vessels were in question.

Early 1922 saw the campaign in full spate. Figures have been quoted to demonstrate that the government expected to raise at best only a tiny proportion of the total sum to be used to aid the starving from the sale of the seized church treasures. The campaign was as much as anything else the exploitation by the government of a chance
to make an example of the church. The authorities expected resistance from the faithful, which would in turn give them an opportunity to visit heavy penalties on the resisters. In the course of searches in churches and monasteries, items could be discovered, or be said to have been discovered, which would discredit or incriminate the faithful.\(^7\)

It was actually Trotsky who was in charge of effecting church policy at this time, and the ‘church valuables’ campaign bears some of the characteristics of his ‘short, sharp shock’ mentality. Certainly the campaign can hardly be said to have corresponded to the spirit of the instruction of August 1921. Incidentally, it should be noted that Lenin himself had no scruples about using violence against believers when he was convinced the effects would be positive – witness his secret instruction relating to unrest in the town of Shuya in March–April 1922.\(^8\)

Intensified campaigns against heterodoxy in many areas of endeavour made themselves felt during 1922. Responsibility for these has been ascribed to Trotsky and other ‘left’ communists who were afraid that the spirit of NEP might endanger the whole revolution. Amongst other efforts, there was an intensive anti-religious propaganda campaign which began in the spring of 1922. Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s wife, has been quoted as deploring the excesses involved – tearing crosses off children’s necks, shooting at ikons.\(^9\)

It is clear, then, that there were differences at the highest level over anti-religious strategy, and that the onset of NEP made these differences more manifest.

A number of legislative measures further restricting religious activity were introduced at this time. In December 1922 church sermons were subjected to censorship. At the same time religious organisations were restricted to performing religious services, and were prohibited from organising mutual aid funds, co-operatives, or youth and women’s groups. In 1923 private religious instruction for children, permitted in the 1918 legislation, was restricted to groups of no more than three minors at a time.

It was in 1922 that the government began co-ordinating the second part of its strategy to defeat the Orthodox Church: the promotion of a schism.\(^10\) In May 1922 a group of self-styled church reformers, known collectively as the ‘Renovationists’, were able to stage a coup and take over the leadership of the church. Some of the Renovationists were self-seeking careerists, and some were men of pure ideals; but all of them were ready to give positive endorsement to the political and social aims of communism, and at this particular juncture were
prepared to use the issue of church valuables to oppose and supplant the Orthodox Church leadership.

It has been suggested by some that the renovationist coup was Trotsky’s idea; others have doubted that he was behind the strategy, since it seems hard to reconcile it with his disdain for subtle long-term policies in the field of religion. It is arguable, however, that it offered something to the advocates of both short- and long-term anti-religious strategies. The short-term strategists would be relying on the continuing effectiveness of the church valuables purge, and would be prepared to accept the help of a group of ‘renovationist’ clergy in pursuing it; while the long-term strategists would welcome the chance of putting in place a church leadership which had expressed its positive support for the Soviet experiment, and would therefore presumably find it difficult to offer coherent resistance to a long-term programme of atheist education and institutional attrition. It may be symptomatic of the tactical manoeuvring going on amongst the Soviet leadership that responsibility for seeing the coup through to a successful conclusion was transferred from the Commissariat of Justice to the GPU.

Patriarch Tikhon was by this time under arrest, and the Renovationists were able to set up a High Church Administration (VTsU). One particular group of Renovationists, the ‘Living Church’ (Zhivaya tserkov’) group led by one Vladimir Dmitrievich Krasnitsky, soon achieved prominence. Krasnitsky’s aim was to secure the rights, both political and economic, within the church of the ‘white’ parish clergy. His writings are couched in combative terms reminiscent of much contemporary secular revolutionary propaganda. The ‘Living Church’ group set about attacking ‘counter-revolution’ in the parishes and dioceses. The methods employed included denunciation, and shortly opponents of the ‘Living Church’, both lay and clerical, began to experience arrest and exile. In all this the ‘Living Church’ co-operated closely with the GPU.

The long-awaited trial of Patriarch Tikhon was announced for 11 April 1923, but did not take place. The new date was 24 April; but this too passed without developments. The Renovationists held a Council (Sobor) between 29 April and 9 May, which was judged a triumph. Finally on 26 June came devastating news: Tikhon had been released, and had renounced his former anti-Soviet stance. Obviously there had been a change in government policy over the previous two months.

The persecution of the Orthodox Church, and in particular the treatment of Patriarch Tikhon, had for some time been attracting critical comment from abroad. The ‘Living Church’ was being widely dismissed by foreign observers as a tool of the Soviet government. On
8 May 1923 the Curzon Ultimatum formalised the misgivings of the British government, noting persecution of religion as one of the factors hindering the establishment of proper relations between Britain and the USSR.

The Curzon Ultimatum was not of course the direct cause of the change in anti-religious tactics, however. From the very beginning of May a significant reduction in anti-religious propaganda had already been noticeable: this was particularly striking after the hysterical anti-Christmas and anti-Easter propaganda campaigns. The central press virtually stopped publishing anti-religious articles. Directives from the Central Committee during May and June were concerned with putting a brake on the arbitrary closure of churches.

The cause of all these developments is to be found in the deliberations of the 12th Party Congress of 17–25 April 1923. The Congress had considered a background document on the work of the Central Committee in the field of anti-religious propaganda, which noted both the success of the campaign to seize church valuables and the effectiveness of the ‘Living Church’ in confounding reactionary clergy and winning over the believing masses. The positive tone of this document contrasted sharply with the tone of the opening report by Zinoviev on the work of the Central Committee on 17 April. ‘We have gone too far,’ he asserted, ‘much too far . . . We need serious anti-religious propaganda, we need serious preparation in schools and appropriate education of young people.’

The background document is Trotskyist in tone. Since January 1923, however, Trotsky had been increasingly isolated in the Politburo; and, in late 1922, according to Trotsky, Stalin had succeeded in appointing Yaroslavsky as Trotsky’s deputy in the department of anti-religious propaganda. Now at the 12th Party Congress, those who followed Zinoviev in urging the necessity to conciliate the peasantry were also expressing their opposition to Trotsky.

A special section of the resolutions of this Congress was devoted to anti-religious agitation and propaganda. The resolutions pointed out that the conditions which Marx identified as giving rise to religious feelings had not yet been eradicated, and that therefore propaganda must continue, but that crude methods and coarse mockery which would offend believers and increase their fanaticism must be avoided. Increasing economic difficulties were making themselves felt – they led to strikes during the summer of 1923 – and it was now seen as essential to work to strengthen the ‘link’ between the proletariat and the peasantry in the interest of NEP, and to rally and unite rather than estrange and divide. By now, the Soviet authorities had had time to