

The Promotion of “Atheism” in Soviet Society and its Consequences

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Abstract: Based on archival data and periodical press sources, this article analyzes the repressive atheistic policy carried out by the Soviet state against religion and believers in the late 1920s and 1930s, as well as its consequences in the Uzbek SSR. Furthermore, the article reveals the brutal methods of the Soviet government—such as banning religious holidays, the mass closure and repurposing of mosques and churches into secular cultural facilities, and the persecution of believers as “class enemies”—demonstrating the severe spiritual and social damage inflicted upon society.

Keywords: Soviet society, atheist politics, Association of Atheist Fighters, “Atheists” magazine, “Bezbojnik” newspaper, religious persecution, collectivization, class enemy, atheism museum, mosques, churches, religious ceremonies and holidays



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Introduction

The history of Soviet society in the late 1920s and 1930s is characterized by a dramatic intensification of the atheist movement. The All-Union League of the Godless, which emerged during this period, conducted its propaganda and agitation activities broadly: it sought to prove the “falsity” and “groundlessness” of holy places among the working and peasant masses in villages; it condemned believers as supporters of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie; it accused them of being enemies of socialism; it insisted that visiting the shrines of revered saints was impermissible; and it widely promoted the idea that religious ceremonies were harmful—all of this was disseminated among the general public through articles published in the Soviet press.[1]

The All-Union League of the Godless, established in the former Soviet Union in January 1925, served as the primary propaganda and agitation organ of the Soviet government against religion. It was the leading organizer of atheist policy directed against religious institutions and organizations.

At the II Congress of the All-Union League of the Godless, held on June 10–11, 1929, in Moscow, the capital of the USSR, it was decided to establish branches of the organization in the Center and in all republics of the Union, and to rename it the “League of Militant Atheists” [2].

This organization became the primary disseminator of the Center’s atheist ideology in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By the late 1920s, the All-Union League of the Godless had acquired 18 publications in 14 languages dedicated to anti-religious propaganda. The weekly newspaper “Bezbozhnik” (“The Godless”), as well as central journals such as “Antireligioznik”, “Derevenskiy

bezbozhnik” (“The Rural Godless”), and “Yuniy bezbozhnik” (“The Young Godless”) were also published. The journal “Militant Atheism” also became one of the press centers for “exposing” religion [3].

In addition to the central atheist journals mentioned above, newspapers and journals in the local languages of other nationalities were published in a number of Union republics, as well as special bulletins promoting anti-religious propaganda. For instance, in the Ukrainian SSR, newspapers and journals with identical names were published in Ukrainian under the title “Bezvernik” (“The Faithless”), and in Tatar as “Sgushshan allasizlar” (“Militant Atheists”); in Yiddish as “Anikuyres” (“The Godless”), and in Armenian as “Anastvas” (“The Godless”)—all published monthly, with 12 issues appearing regularly throughout the year [4].

Methodology

During this period, regular propaganda and agitation activities calling for atheism were also conducted among Red Army soldiers and officers. In 1929, military aircraft were named “Atheist Airplane,” and from June 1931, a tank was named “Militant Atheist”, along with a submarine in the Baltic Fleet named “Militant Atheist”. In addition, airplanes named “Ukrainian Atheist”, “Georgian Atheist”, and “Birobidzhan Atheists”, as well as a tank column named “Ural Atheist”, were in service—all transformed into symbols of anti-religious militant atheism in the army [5].

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, in order to prove that the central government's ruthless anti-religious policy was a vital necessity, state and government leaders, intellectuals, and the academic community—and if needed, the entire laboring masses—were broadly engaged in atheist propaganda. Those who refused to participate in this movement were coerced through violence and pressure, threatened with the loss of their reputation and positions, and forcibly drawn into blind anti-religious struggle.[6]

According to available data, the number of correspondents, peasants, workers, and active members of the “League of the Godless” in the Soviet Union stood at 100,000 in 1920, grew to 700,000 in 1929, and reached 5.5 million by 1932. More than 2 million young people were drawn into the organization. These figures demonstrate that anti-religious propaganda was conducted on a massive scale by Soviet ideologues, particularly among the youth.[7]

Result and Discussion

The astronomical growth in the membership of the “League of the Godless”, with its ranks expanding year by year, bears witness to the massive scale of the propaganda and agitation efforts conducted in this regard.[8]

During those years, the publishing house of the “Atheist” and “Bezbozhnik” newspapers and journals published books and pamphlets in 1,700 titles with a total print run of 40 million copies. By 1932, the monthly circulation of the “Bezbozhnik” newspaper reached 500,000 copies, while the circulation of the journal of the same name reached 200,000 copies. The circulation of these publications continued to grow steadily until the end of the 1930s [9].

The “Atheists” (“Xudosizlar”) journal began to be published in Uzbekistan on February 1, 1929, in the Uzbek language using the Latin script. Special attention was paid not only to distributing this journal among urban and peri-urban rural populations but also to reaching the most remote villages of the republic. Party, Komsomol, and trade union employees, as well as high-ranking officials, were made to subscribe to the “Xudosizlar” journal on a mandatory basis. In order to ensure the journal’s wide distribution, its price was set lower than that of other press organs in the republic. Its price was 35 kopecks, and from 1930 onward, this price was almost never raised [10]. The subscription prices of journals and newspapers published for atheist propaganda purposes were set very low with the aim of achieving wide distribution among the population.

The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan also specifically noted, in its press organs published from 1929 onwards, the need to intensify propaganda against religion and believers. In particular, starting from February 1, 1929, 11 newspapers and 7 journals in the Uzbek, American Journal of Education and Evaluation Studies

Tajik, Uyghur, and Jewish languages were put into regular publication in Latin script across the Uzbek SSR. Among these journals, “Kommunist”, “Mushtum” (15,000 copies), “Yangi qishlok” (4,000 copies), “Maorif va o‘qituvchi” (4,000 copies), and “Xudosizlar” (4,000 copies) placed special emphasis on intensifying anti-religious propaganda [11].

Since 1929, campaigns had been systematically organized to intensify anti-religious propaganda precisely during religious holidays—Eid al-Adha (Qurbon Hayit) and Eid al-Fitr (Ro‘za Hayit)—explaining to ordinary people that these celebrations were harmful. This policy was adopted in part because, on the eve of the collectivization campaign in the Soviet countryside, the authorities recognized the strong influence that believers and religious figures held among the population, and so sought to discredit them—also using the pretext of confiscating their land.

The “Xudosizlar” journal repeatedly noted that peasants who had joined collective farms were almost no longer participating in these religious ceremonies. In one article, it was written: “Muslims across our Union celebrate Eid al-Adha from April 28 to May 3. Fifty-six percent of peasant households in Uzbekistan have been collectivized... Religion is one of the vestiges of the old ways. If one million livestock are slaughtered during Eid al-Adha, why wouldn't class enemies benefit from it?” [12]. This reveals how the Soviet government treated religion and believers as it would class enemies.

Numerous issues of the journal described how “godless” correspondents and propagandists should lead efforts to strike decisive blows against believers and clergy during religious holidays, and how agitation activities should be reinvigorated at precisely such times. This issue was repeatedly conveyed through articles in other press organs as well.

In the second half of the 1920s, dozens of cells of the “League of the Godless” were established for the purpose of waging struggle against religion. As early as 1924, dozens of cells of the “League of the Godless” were set up in To‘rtko‘l (Karakalpakstan). By 1929, there were 4 cells, and by 1938 their number in Karakalpakstan had grown to 115. In To‘rtko‘l district alone, 144 atheist activists conducted anti-religious propaganda [13].

According to the 1939 annual reports of anti-religious propagandists in the Uzbek SSR, nearly 5,000 lectures and reports on atheist topics were delivered, 3,000 study and debate evenings were held, and approximately 300,000 people participated in these events. It was also noted that 112,000 activists were working in 3,300 local organizations of the republic’s “League of the Godless” [14].

Events organized by the “League of the Godless” were conducted under the slogan “We will eliminate religion soon!” By the late 1930s, although it was nothing but wishful thinking, the Soviet government employed every available means to “sweep believers out of society”. Large amounts of funding were allocated to material expenditures, mass media, and employees of cultural-enlightenment institutions working in this direction. The aim was to purge religious concepts from the minds and hearts of the people, to completely put an end to religious ceremonies, and to firmly establish an atheist ideology.

In June 1934, Resolution No. 586 was adopted under the signature of Fayzulla Kho‘jayev, Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Uzbek SSR. In accordance with this resolution, an “Atheism Museum” was established in Tashkent. It was specified that 17,000 soums from the state budget would be allocated for renovating the building assigned to the museum. It is evident that the Soviet authorities, in their struggle against religion and in their effort to eliminate religion’s ideological influence on the population, did not shy away from any base action or expenditure of funds.

Thousands of religious institution buildings across the republic’s provinces and districts were forcibly transferred to Soviet institutions such as atheist clubs, “red teahouses” (qizil choykhona), collective farm clubs, cinemas, libraries, and collective farmers’ houses. According to literature produced in subsequent years, by 1939 only 6 mosques continued to nominally operate in Bukhara [15].

In the city of Andijan in 1938–1939, there were 71 mosques, 1 Russian Orthodox church, and 3 Jewish synagogues, and various obstacles were placed in the way of performing religious rituals in all of them. The efforts of the local population to collectively raise funds in order to preserve their religious values and Islamic institutions were interpreted by government agencies as “ulema propaganda”. This became yet another fabricated pretext for persecuting believers.

During the period under review, the guidance provided by the “League of Militant Atheists” in completely eradicating the activities of religious institutions and organizations at the behest of the Soviet government left a deeply detrimental imprint on society.

Conclusion

As a result of the brutal atheist policy of the “League of the Godless” in the 1920s and 1930s, the activities of all religious institutions throughout the former Soviet Union, including Uzbekistan, were brought to such a deplorable state that they could not recover. Not only religious scholars and religious bodies, but society as a whole, suffered from this policy.

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