

КУЛТУРА ПОЛИСА
УДК 27-87(47+57):316.75
ОНР

DARKO GAVRILOVIC

Филозофски факултет

Нови Сад

Факултет за европске правно - политиче студије

Сремска Каменица

THE LEAGUE OF GODLESS AND USING THE FORMER CLERGY FOR THE CREATING THE NEW SPIRITUAL LIFE IN SOVIET RUSSIA

Summary: This article will show how the Bolsheviks used the former Orthodox clergy in political propaganda during the governmental attack on religious lives of Russians in the 1920's and 1930's. Also it will be shown the reasons why did the former clergy accept it and participate in it.

Key words: The League of Godless, Bolsheviks, Russia, Soviet, former clergy, propaganda

Intro

When the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia in 1917, party leaders understood well that a thorough social transformation lay between them and the full realization of long-term revolutionary objectives. The seizure of political authority and even a proposed redistribution of economic goods and services would not themselves create citizens of a new type, nor would they spontaneously recast the quality of Russian life. Yet party behavior on the road to revolution had done little to communicate any precise plan for reshaping society.

On the contrary, Bolshevik political militancy, tactical brassness, glib sloganeering, and the lack of a well-defined, comprehensive program all understandably caused contemporaries to question not only the politics of the party but also its grasp of the complexities of social reform. Once in office, however, the Bolshevik leadership did not hesitate to begin promoting a new society and new spiritual life. Although unequivocally committed to fundamental political change, the men and women who led the October Revolution made it clear that they did not aspire only to power in a raw, hegemonic sense. Their mission also included a reconfiguration of „culture,” a term leading Bolsheviks, having emerged from the Russian radical intelligentsia, understood not as something manifested but as something attained. In other words, one achieved a level of culture and tried to impart it to others.¹ Thus, it was the announced intention of the party, just as it had been an ideal of the prerevolutionary intelligentsia, to raise the „dark masses” to higher levels of consciousness and behavior and to create a new spiritual life.

Also, of considerable value for an evaluation of the spiritual life in Soviet Russia are the reports of some Orthodox priests from the West who managed to penetrate into territories of the Soviet Union occupied by Germany during the last war. Their opinions are almost unanimous: a very great part of the population flocked into the churches as soon as they became open and the intensity of their confessions and their practices of faith surpassed all expectations. The persecutions and anti-God propaganda, during the 1920's and 1930's in many instances only hardened their beliefs and their inner attachment to Christ. On the other hand, there is little doubt that an important part of the Russian population forgot Christ and the Church and became either anti-religious or simply non-religious. There is hardly any way to determine statistically how many of the Russian people remained faithful to the traditional ideas of piety and how many of them are temporarily or permanently lost as members of the Church.¹

¹Vasily V. Zenkovsky, *The Spirit of Russian Orthodoxy*, Russian Review, Vol. 22, No. 1. (Jan., 1963), pp. 38-55.

The league of godless

The traditional beliefs of all classes in Russia combined diverse elements in unequal measures: a common predisposition to expect regular supernatural intervention in daily affairs; religious and quasi-religious rituals associated with childbirth, marriage, and death, as well as with extensively utilized practices of folk medicine; religious rationales for perpetuating existing constructions of gender; and a calendar crowded with religious holidays, some of which occasioned several days of seemingly secular and even pre-Christian modes of celebration. This posed special problems for those who intended to turn society atheist, and nothing in the early Soviet period generated more elemental, emotional resistance than Bolshevik antagonism toward the sacred. Russian Orthodoxy was more than the state religion of the former tsarist empire and the leading denomination in most ethnically Russian territories. Deeply embedded in Russian culture, it also shaped rituals of celebration, rites of passage, and the ordering of social routines. Orthodoxy helped inform popular wisdom and folklore, and it provided a symbol of national identity even for those who were lax about religious observance.²

In March 1922 (in the very heat of the campaign to confiscate Church valuables), L.D. Trotskii sent a memorandum to the Politburo, arguing that the „proletarian revolution had finally reached the Church”.³ Indeed, it had: Over the next few years, The Russian Orthodox Church would undergo tremendous convulsion and intense internal conflict.

When the Bolsheviks took power in November 1917, they openly proclaimed their commitment to a secularized Russia. This meant, above all, combating both the Russian Orthodox Church as an institution and popular Orthodox beliefs and practices. Within months, the regime revoked the laws granting the Church privileged position in

² William B. Husband, Soviet Atheism and Russian Orthodox Strategies of Resistance, 1917-1932, *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 70, No. 1. (Mar., 1998), pp.74-75.

³ Tsentr khrazeniiia sovremennoi dokumentatsii, fond 89 (Kollektssia rassekrechennykh dokumentov), perechen 49, delo 17, lysti 4/5

the Russian Empire. Seized its property and for all intents and purposes prohibited religious education out of home. Leading churchmen were imprisoned and executed during the campaign to „separate” church and state, as consequence of the civil war.⁴ On its own, however, the suppression of the Church proved insufficient to achieve the regime’s stated goal of creating an atheistic society. This realization led the Communist party in the mid -1920s to launch a broadly based, antireligious propaganda campaign.⁵ The group charged with the task was the party-controlled but nominally independent League of the Militant Godless. Formally created in 1925, the League claimed to have over 5 million members in the early 1930s.

However ironic, it might see in the first glance, former Orthodox clergy and those from clerical backgrounds were employed by the League at all levels. Indeed such individuals played key roles in the League’s creation and its central apparatus, and they were visible as lower level activist throughout the League’s nationwide network. Most clergymen were not from the noble and economic privileged background and after the revolution their material conditions declined dramatically.⁶ These individuals perceived as having definite skills desired by the regime that offset the possible dangers involved in employing them. Their employment underscores the importance of considering not only the regime’s radical goals but how these were implemented, and how the backgrounds of the regime’s agents of modernization shaped its effort to create a new culture. The employment of former clergy was also exceptional for the Bolsheviks because these cadres were to work in an ideologically sensitive area. While the leading Bolsheviks never claim to have military expertise, advance scientific training or even industrial management experience, as members of revolutionary party they were certainly expected to be competent in matters of ideology. Despite a sojourn into forms of Christian socia-

⁴ For the most recent accounts of Bolshevik depredations against the Church see Olga Vasileva, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov, I sovietskaia vlast, v 1917-1927 godakh*, *Voprosy istorii*, no.8. 1993, :40-55.

⁵ See Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens, The Soviet League of the Militant Godless and Bolshevik Culture in the 1920’s and 1930’s*, Ph.D., diss, University of Illinois at Urbana Campaign, 1994.

⁶ For the prerevolutionary clergy see Gregory L. Freeze, *The Parish Clergy in 19th century Russia: Crisis, Reform, Counter-Reform*, Princeton, 1993.

lism by some Russian Marxists early in the century,⁷ bolshevism as it was generally understood by its leaders in the 1917 was clearly intent on destroying religion in Russia. Those specialists from backgrounds permanently tainted according to Bolshevik ideology, were admitted to this ideological inner sanctum was a striking concession to the need for such cadres.⁸ As a consequence, the supposed avant-garde of this campaign against religion, the League, found itself turning to former clergy for assistance.

On the other hand it has to be notified that the Bolshevik persecution of the clergy after the revolution was certainly decisive for many others.⁹ Also parish clergy were faced with prohibition of their pastoral duties and many of them had no sources for living. Given these circumstances, many clergy quietly leaved their profession.¹⁰ The pressures on the clergy increased tremendously after 1928 when regime redoubled its attack on religion. In 1924 were organized a nationwide, volunteer, antireligious propaganda organization „Bez-bozhnik”, reconstituted the following year as „Soiuz bezbozhnikov” (League of the Godless). Ex priest Mikhail Gorev, who was among the first priests who left religion, served as the League's deputy chairman until 1 April 1926, when the League's executive bureau, for reasons still unclear, removed him from all position in the League.

Until the mid-1920s the regimes full-time antireligious propaganda was small and concentrated in Moscow; in the late 1920s, however, the League of Godless grew tremendously in size and became nominal vanguard of comprehensive effort to create and atheistic society. In these very different circumstances, former clergy also found the role in the League's expanding local networks. After 1928, the archival sources generally reveal the extent to which former clergy were used by virtue of their removal from the League's ranks. In 1929

⁷ Christopher Reed, *Religion, Revolution and the Russian Intelligentsia*, New York, 1979, 57-94.

⁸ For the parallel but limited compromise in the regime's ideological training apparatus, see Michael Fox, *Political Culture, Purges and Proletarianization at the Institute of the Red Professors, 1921-1929*, *Russian Review* 52, no.1. (Jan.1993.): 23-24.

⁹ For collection of temporary newspapers reports see, A.A. Valentinov, *Chernaia kniga*, Paris, 1925.

¹⁰ I.Ia. Trifonov, *Raskol v russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi (1922-1925)*, *Voprossy istorii*, no.5, 1972, :66-67, 77.

S.I. Prudovskii from the village of Saponovo, Kamenetskii district, Tula *oblast*, was fired from his job as a schoolteacher; a former priest, he had renounced his ordination in 1926 and was part-time propagandist for the League district council.¹¹ This was not the only case. The same were happened in the other districts and even in 1930's. These examples were happened in Ukraine too. Another former priest, N.S. Voinov from Ukraine, applied for employment at the Glukhov district League council, „but three months have already passed, and I have heard nothing.”¹²

Having experienced its greatest period of activity and growth from 1928 to 1931, the League rapidly declined thereafter until nearly moribund by the mid-1930s. But the clergy who joined the League were not the only one who ruined the spirituality in 1920's. Even beside that, there were much more communists who join the League and were the main force of the League's attack on religion. The creation of the League of Godless in 1925 certainly did not alleviate the cadres' shortage: indeed it provided a means through which this dearth of personnel was regularly articulated. As the League entered its greatest period of visibility in 1929 and 1930, the personnel problem at the regional and provincial levels became somewhat less pressing, but in district councils and throughout rural areas the shortage of cadres remained severe. The Communist Party was aware of the League's predicament and repeatedly contributed its own resolutions at the local and central levels on the need for the skilled propagandists.¹³ Given the frequency of such League and party statements, one may assume that they went unheeded.

Despite the growing need for cadres in the late 1920s as the League expanded, the central authorities generally frowned on allowing former priests to be used as antireligious propagandists. Because of that, in the middle of 1929 in speech to party antireligious activists, Iaroslavskii also spoke of using former clergy only in exceptional cases.¹⁴

¹¹ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Moscow, f. R 5407, op. I, d. 45 l.29.

¹² GARF, d.348, II. 18-19.

¹³ Otchet Iaroslavskogo Gubernskogo Komiteta VKP(b) ya period ianvaria – noiabria 1927 (Iaroslavl', 1927), 75.

¹⁴ Em. Iaroslavskii, *Antireligioznaia propaganda v sisteme partstroitel'stva*, *Kommunisticheskaia revoliutsiia*, no. 13, 1929: 40-41.

With or without central approval, local League organizations regularly employed former clergy. The extent of their employment was revealed in part by the freshening winds of ideological vigilance during the cultural revolution. Following the arrest of the Shakty engineers in Marc 1928, the purge of the Soviet and party bureaucracies in spring and summer 1929, and the beginning of the general movement of the „bourgeois specialists” in all fields, the League to began to distant itself from the activists with clerical past. This process was neither consistent not uniform: in many places former clergy were retained or newly hired as result of the League’s rapid expansion. Even beside that, the Leagues Central Council and Central Committees antireligious commission condemned the local councils who gave support to the former clergyman who worked on antireligious propaganda and explicitly criticized its use of former clergy as propagandists.¹⁵

At the end, the employment of former clergy as antireligious activists clearly illustrates that the specialist issue was not limited to ostensibly non-ideological, technical and administrative fields. Whereas a role for former Imperial Army officers and factory technicians was self-evident in light of challenges facing the young Soviet state, the role for former clergy was expanded by certain ideological stances consciously taken by the regime in NEP period. These stances not only provided opportunities for former clergy but also had profound consequences for the League of the Godless itself. By acknowledging religion as distinct phenomenon, the regime committed itself to recruiting and maintaining trained cadres familiar with religion. The demands on these activists would be all the greater because they were charged not only with justifying separation of church from state, or even achieving a gradual secularization of society, but with disseminating an extreme ideological package, militant atheism, that entailed a complete rejection of an integral element of inherited popular culture, especially in rural areas.

The need for cadres was only a half of story, because we have to ask ourselves what motivated former clergy for such step. Definitely, a social and economic pressure on lower – level clergy, loosely organization, desperate for cadres and at last The League was less ideologi-

¹⁵ GARF, f. R-5407, op. 1, d. 14, l.71

cal exclusive than Komsomol. The League also represented at least in theory, an educational approach to antireligious propaganda that was presumably more appealing to former clergy that direct intervention preferred by Komsomol.¹⁶

According the official Bolshevik rhetoric, religion has been defeated in the 1930’s; The League was no longer necessary and quickly collapsed. Without doubt, Bolshevik antireligious propaganda consciously mimicked many of the forms and structures of Orthodoxy and transferred them to the new Soviet state and its leaders. Russian Christianity today, often purified by the fire of persecution, is more traditional, more liturgical than ever. All attempts at compromise on spiritual, dogmatic, and liturgical grounds have been refuted without hesitation not only by the clergy but, also, which is more important, by the overwhelming majority of the believers themselves. They are the only Christian people who pray for their country as an holy entity. This serves to show the end the Russian soul seeks to attain, that of the transfiguration of Russia.¹⁷

¹⁶ On the different approaches by various institutions to antireligious propaganda see Alekseev, Shturm nebes otmeniaetsia, and Peris, The 1929 Congress of the Godless.

¹⁷ Vasily V. Zenkovsky, *ibidem.*, p.55.