





GODLESS UTOPIA

ROLAND ELLIOTT BROWN

FUEL

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FOREWORD

MARTIN ROWSON

In the summer of 1976, on the streets of Moscow in the depths of the Brezhnev Great Stagnation when the Soviet experiment was stumbling into its long, lingering death throes and where, by mid-morning, you were obliged to step over the drunks sleeping on the pavement, I was given a badge. More precisely, in exchange for a packet of Wrigley's Spearmint gum a small boy gave me a metal badge in the form of a red pentacle, with at its heart a portrait, in silver relief, of the Infant Lenin.

I still have it, over forty years later, now pinned to the front of my Prince Henry cap (named after the Kaiser's brother and popularised by the afore-mentioned V.I. Lenin) as a satirical act of homage to Jeremy Corbyn, who I always draw wearing this particular item of millinery. Anyway, back in 1976 I was on a school trip to the Soviet Union, finally visiting a place that had beguiled and enchanted me for as long as I could remember.

This was partly because my father, a research virologist, had made several trips to the USSR and its satellite states in the late 1950s and 60s (including during that brief period when Stalin's mummified old corpse shared his Mausoleum with Lenin, which my father saw shortly before the old monster was turfed out and dumped in a grave below the walls of the Kremlin). This meant I was aware from a very early age of the existence of a Somewhere Else, a fabulous, almost wholly unreachable Other, which wasn't only incomprehensibly exotic but also 'The Enemy', the appalling alternative it was worth blowing up the world to avoid according to the Manichean mindset of our masters.

Of course, that mindset in itself had been bequeathed to the men who own and rule England by nearly two millennia of Christianity, particularly in its corrupt form once it became the state religion of the Roman Empire and thereafter its successor entities, including both the British Empire and Tsarist Russia. At the same time as my dad was drinking Georgian champagne with commie virologists, I was getting my portion of that legacy in an extremely High Church Anglican prep school in the North London suburbs, endlessly colouring in maps of the Holy Land as creepy men in black dresses lied to us about the Truth of the Gospels, one of them eventually, aged eighty, being sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for half a century of molesting small boys.

Irrespective of the paedo priest, any inkling of faith they tried to browbeat into me failed to take hold, and as I grew into my teens, another attraction of the Soviet Union, and another captivating aspect of its otherness, was its atheism. I considered this to be a comforting endorsement of my own fierce lack of faith even though, by then, I was far less starry-eyed about Soviet Russia: I'd read Orwell, genned up on the history of the

October Revolution and the serial betrayals that came in its wake, working backwards from Trotsky's isolation and exile by Stalin to Trotsky's own suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion, which was led by the same soldiers and sailors who'd been the vanguard of the Revolution and who now revolted against the Bolsheviks' instinctive authoritarianism.

Nonetheless, when I finally got to go there, aged seventeen, even though I now approached the place as a friendly sceptic rather than a pilgrim, I was still shocked by its shabby squalor, the ridiculous lies of the smooth young trusties we were permitted by the authorities to meet as they buttressed the crumbling ruins of the Revolution. Frankly, having come from London in the ferment of the first days of punk, I'd never been anywhere less rebellious, even though it was there that Soviet Russia's natural appeal lay for gobby teenagers like me, relishing the shock factor of talking about Karl Marx to maiden aunts and tight-arsed teachers: in short, all the things that guided me to be a satirical cartoonist, railing endlessly against the boring conformity of those in power who think they're somehow better and wiser than you and me. But even worse was the reality of Soviet atheism, which sank almost to Anglican depths of official, respectable dullness. Worse still, Soviet atheism – itself almost like a kind of reverse miracle – turned out to be no such thing.

Throughout history, atheism has been an insult hurled by those in power at any dissident who dares question their assertion that their power is bestowed by higher, non-human factors and is therefore unquestionable. Therein lies a great deal of its potency, although as often as not in the political sphere atheism turns out to disguise differing degrees of anti-clericalism, that eternal struggle against the spiritual lackeys who prop up the Power with their higher lies. In the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381 they beheaded the Archbishop of Canterbury, but that was because he'd introduced the poll tax which triggered the uprising. John Ball, one of the Revolt's leaders, was himself a priest. Four hundred years later, Robespierre happily guillotined Catholic priests but also cultivated his weird cult of the Supreme Being. Indeed, his last speech to the Assembly before he was arrested and guillotined in his turn was a furious attack on the militant atheists who'd been daubing on the walls of Parisian cemeteries the fantastic slogan 'Down With Eternal Sleep!' And the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War who put religious statues in front of firing squads were the same people who were tracked down for liquidation by Stalin's henchmen, more concerned with maintaining Orthodoxy than with fighting fascists.

In a way, Bolshevism had always owed more to Russian mysticism than to the Marxism it claimed to espouse. And that political philosophy itself, which presumed to apply to history the rigours of science, was also riddled with the attenuated Hegelian mysticism of German Romanticism. (You could argue that German Romanticism, in its various mutations, reached its apotheosis in May 1945 in the streets of Berlin, as its two dominant post-Hegelian strands, Stalinism and Nazism, dispatched yet more ghosts to evaporate in the roaring air above Hitler's bunkers as the sincerest homage to Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.)

Claiming to be egalitarian, Bolshevism was rigidly hierarchical, being almost entirely a cult centred round Lenin; from the beginning it replaced the struggle for equality with the imposition of uniformity; its deeper mysteries, like those in the catechisms of Dialectical Materialism, were satisfyingly impenetrable. It was inevitable, therefore, that in practice Bolshevism turned into a new kind of Tsarism, propped up by state atheism as opposed to a state church. This time, personal rule was invested in Stalin, who encompassed infallibility, complete power and the kind of capricious murderous intensity normally reserved for gods. Even after Stalin's temple was desecrated by Khrushchev, the structures of the religion were too intertwined with the whole Bolshevik enterprise to dismantle as well, so – as is often the case with religion, where temples to the goddess Diana turned effortlessly into shrines to the Virgin Mary – the failed god was simply replaced with the old god of Lenin.

Hence my little badge. Hence, to a large extent, the ultimate failure of Bolshevism: the new religion laid over the old one turned out to be unsustainably ridiculous, unlike the Russian Orthodoxy it sought to replace. After nearly seventy years of deeply uncomfortable cohabitation and collaboration with the Bolsheviks, the Orthodox Church now thrives again under their successors, mostly former operatives of the Soviet security state who've effectively used a compliant church as a beard (deliberate pun) to distract the people from their wholesale plunder of the assets of the former Soviet state.

I visited Moscow again in 2016, forty years after my first trip. It had changed a lot, not least in the way the onion domes of Moscow's churches had all been freshly gilt with the money stolen by Putin's client oligarchs. Of Soviet atheism there was hardly a trace, but the continued presence of Lenin's relic, unrotting in its temple, sort of suggests it was hardly ever there in the first place. Beyond, that is, being a brutal tool of public control, which from my point of view is more or less the function of religion anyway.

As to the little badge, obviously you can now buy one anywhere. Just like pieces of the True Cross.





ATHEISM IN THE SHADOWS

Moses the Raven in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is the most famous Russian priest in English literature. Orwell presented his avian analogue for the Russian Orthodox Church as 'a clever talker', 'a spy and a tale-bearer', and the 'especial pet' of the cruel farmer Mr. Jones. Most of the animals in the novel resent Moses because he does no work, but he holds them in thrall with a story they want to believe: that somewhere, beyond the clouds, is a paradise called Sugarcandy Mountain where long-suffering animals find happiness. When a charismatic old pig persuades the animals to seek happiness on Earth by overthrowing Mr. Jones instead, Moses flees. But his flight is only temporary. After the vicious Berkshire boar Napoleon and his clique of corrupt pigs betray the revolution, Moses returns to meet the animals' growing doubts about their dream of a better life.

Orwell began writing *Animal Farm* in 1943, the year Joseph Stalin summoned three senior Orthodox clergymen to a late-night meeting in the Kremlin and rewarded their commitment to the Soviet war effort against Nazi Germany. He allowed churches and seminaries that had been closed since the Russian Revolution to reopen and cast into limbo the vision of a godless utopia that Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and his Bolsheviks had imposed in 1917.

'A thing that was difficult to determine,' Orwell wrote in *Animal Farm*,
was the attitude of the pigs towards Moses. They all declared contemptuously
that his stories about Sugarcandy Mountain were lies, and yet they allowed
him to remain on the farm, not working, with the allowance of a gill of beer
a day.¹

Orwell's story paraphrased Karl Marx's critique of religion as 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world ... the spirit of a spiritless situation'² in terms ordinary English readers would find familiar. Describing Moses as a 'tame raven' would remind them of the fattened ravens kept at the Tower of London in honour of the Victorian superstition that, should the carrion-birds ever flee the ancient site of torture and murder, the monarchy would fall.³ And whether he knew it or not, he also echoed Emelian Yaroslavsky, the Soviet Union's chief atheist propagandist who, during the early days of the revolution, had taunted the Russian clergy by calling them 'doomed black ravens'.⁴

Both *Animal Farm* and Orwell's 1949 dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, appeared during a strange interregnum in the Soviet Union's anti-religious project, at a time when some disappointed socialists could see that Marx's promise of a world so good it wouldn't need religion had given way to a terrifying, sulphurous new religion with Stalin

GODLESS
Collective farms deal the black ravens a deathblow

Sign: Collective farm under construction

Godless magazine, Issue 7, 1931



as its One True God and the highest-ranking clergy as his quivering supplicants. Orwell put a particularly fine point on the matter in his 1946 essay, *The Prevention of Literature*:

A totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy, and its ruling caste, in order to keep its position, has to be thought of as infallible.⁵

Nineteen Eighty-Four, in which a corrupt English socialist party rules what's left of post-war Britain, resembles Soviet Russia in that its churches belong to a half-forgotten era and have been re-purposed or destroyed. Winston Smith, the novel's doomed protagonist, struggles to remember the names of the London churches in the children's rhyme, *Oranges and Lemons*. His lover Julia leads him to secret trysts in the tower of a derelict country church in a bombed-out landscape before they both fall victim to the regime's Inquisition. Their inquisitor, O'Brien, tells Winston what the new regime really believes in:

The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake ... We are the priests of power.⁶

All of this might strike contemporary readers—who live at a time when the radical left has abandoned its case against religion writ large—as somewhat arcane. And yet the popularity of Orwell's anti-Soviet satires has preserved for his readers one of the great lost subjects of the 20th century: the Soviet effort to efface religion across a sixth of Earth's landmass.

Orwell was neither the first nor the last memorable 20th-century figure to pronounce on the phenomenon. From the earliest years of the Soviet experiment, people saw that the Soviets were in the business of human souls. The novelty of a vast atheist state fired the imaginations of statesmen, philosophers, writers, demagogues and, naturally, clergy.

Winston Churchill, addressing the House of Commons as secretary of state for war in 1919, described Lenin as the 'high priest and chief' of 'the most formidable sect in the world'.⁷

Bertrand Russell, who travelled to Russia to write about the revolution in 1920, reported in *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* that the Bolshevik ideology 'combines the characteristics of the French Revolution with those of the rise of Islam' and was in itself a religion with 'elaborate dogmas and inspired scriptures'. He described Lenin as 'too opinionated and narrowly orthodox' but strengthened by 'religious faith in the Marxian gospel, which takes the place of the Christian martyr's hopes of Paradise'.⁸

H.G. Wells, who visited Russia the same year to write his book *Russia in the Shadows*, saw the Bolsheviks struggling to improvise solutions to practical problems for which 'Marx the Prophet and his Sacred Book' provided no guidance. His account of the religious atmosphere in Moscow did not predict the triumph of atheism:

The ten thousand crosses of Moscow still glitter in the afternoon light ... The churches are open, the kissing of icons is a flourishing industry, and beggars still woo casual charity at the doors. The celebrated miraculous shrine of the Iberian Madonna outside the Redeemer Gate was particularly busy. There were many peasant women, unable to get into the little chapel, kissing the stones outside ... Just opposite to it, on a plaster panel on a house front, is that now celebrated inscription put up by one of the early

Halos (left to right): Jewish God Jehovah,
Christian God the Father, Mohammedan
God Allah

Magazine title: Godless

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Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 4, 1923



revolutionary administrations in Moscow: 'Religion is the Opium of the People'. The effect the inscription produces is greatly reduced by the fact that in Russia the people cannot read.⁹

But that was Soviet atheism in its infancy. Within just a few years, the new regime had launched both mass repression of the clergy—marked by the show trials and organised shootings of priests in 1922—and the mass production of vivid anti-religious posters and illustrated atheist magazines. 1929 saw the mass arrest and exiling of village priests as part of Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture as well as the crystallisation of a new Stalinist style of atheist propaganda that showed the clergy as saboteurs and friends of fascism.

From 1933, the Nazi regime in Germany made the most of the communist spectre. In his 1935 speech *Communism With the Mask Off*, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels dismissed the comparisons between Nazism and Bolshevism then appearing in the British press by portraying the Third Reich as a bulwark of Christendom. He blamed Jewish Bolsheviks—and by extension Jews in general—for the Soviet Union's bloody anti-religious campaigns and a great deal else besides.¹⁰ His speech exemplified the 'Judaeo-Bolshevik' myth—part of the conspiratorial ideology that ultimately underpinned the Holocaust.¹¹

In 1937, Pope Pius XI issued a lengthy encyclical condemning 'Bolshevistic and atheistic communism', which he said was upsetting social order and undermining the foundations of Christian civilisation:

This modern revolution, it may be said, has actually broken out or threatens everywhere, and it exceeds in amplitude and violence everything yet experienced in the preceding persecutions launched against the Church.¹²

(The pope had begun in this vein with his 1930 'crusade of prayer' against Soviet atheism and was now balancing out his recent encyclical lamenting the Nazis' betrayal of their 1933 concordat with the Vatican, which had failed to protect Catholics or anyone else.)¹³

When Stalin's own 1939 non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany collapsed with the massive German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941—Hitler called it 'Operation Barbarossa' for Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa¹⁴—US President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw a chance to pressure Stalin over religious liberty. The next day, his administration sent the USSR a sharp message:

Freedom to worship God as their consciences dictate is the great and fundamental right of all peoples. This right has been denied to their peoples by both the Nazi and Soviet governments. To the people of the United States this and other principles and doctrines of communistic dictatorship are as intolerable and as alien to their own beliefs, as are the principles and doctrines of Nazi dictatorship. Neither kind of imposed overlordship can have, or will have, any kind of support or sway in the mode of life, or the system of government, of the American people.¹⁵

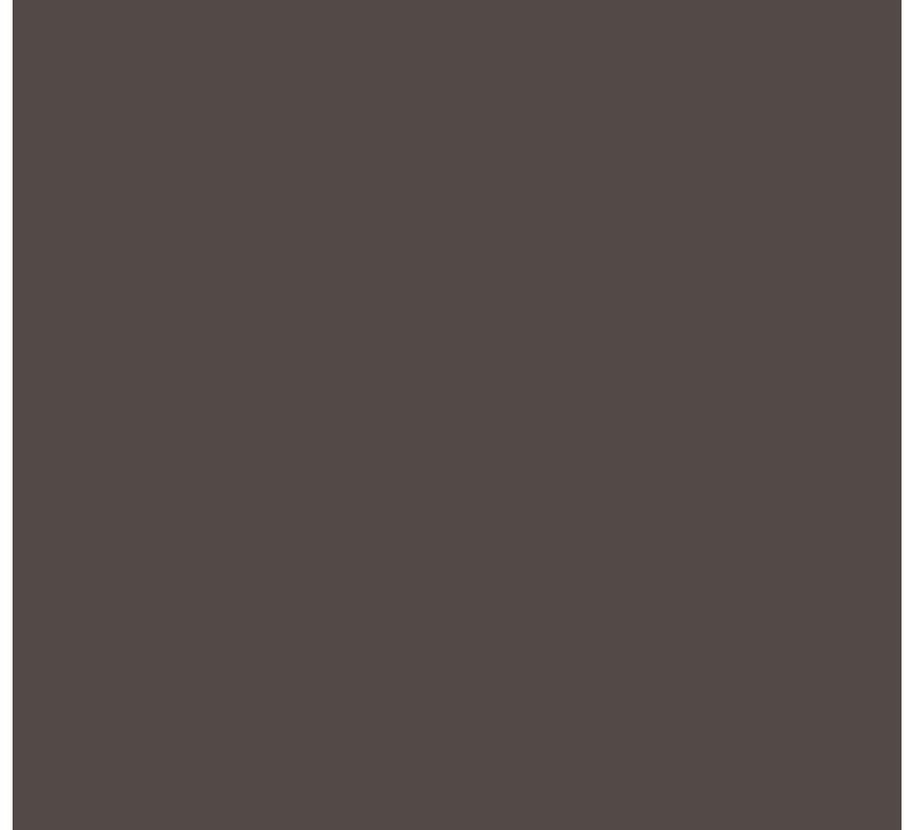
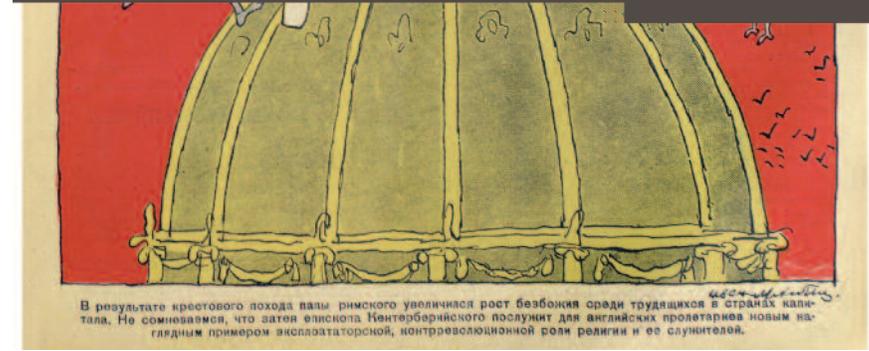
After the war, the sentiments of the Roosevelt administration's statement made their way into the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose authors

As a result of the Pope's crusade, godlessness has increased among the working people in the capitalist countries. We have no doubt that the Archbishop of Canterbury's endeavour will provide the English proletarians with a clear new example of the counter-revolutionary role of religion and its servants.

On the scroll: For God and capital against the godless USSR

FOLLOWING THE POPE'S EXAMPLE
On 7 July in England, a conference of bishops will be held at which the question of 'religious persecutions in the USSR' will be raised. (From the newspapers).

Godless at the Machine, issue 12, 1930



TWO GENERATIONS

Text in the child's painting reads: **RELIGION IS THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE**

Across the bottom: The situation inherited by the worker-peasant authorities in 1917 was a grave one: illiteracy, darkness, and the crippled way of life of the workers. It was advantageous for the landowners and capitalists to keep the working masses ignorant; the illiterate are easier to exploit. Orthodox and Catholic priests, rabbis and mullahs have always supported the bourgeoisie, befogging the consciousness of the masses and exhorting them to hardship with patience.

Of course, this suited the clergy. According to the 1905 survey, the church's landholdings amounted to 2,571,635 hectares. The 'Holy Synod' alone had over 60 million roubles in the banks. The archbishop of Novgorod received 300,000 roubles a year. The metropolitan of Petersburg—259,000 roubles. Many millions of roubles went into the pockets of the clergy. To the workers they promised, in place of their beggarly existence, 'the heavenly kingdom'.

Under the leadership of the Communist Party, the proletariat and the poor- and middle-peasantry smashed all the White Guard gangs, restored the national economy and, realising the socialist Five-Year Plan, took up the rapid liquidation of illiteracy and semi-literacy for the socialist restructuring of life. The Five-Year Plan of great works is the immovable foundation of the cultural revolution.

The USSR has introduced compulsory education. There has been a groundbreaking expansion of the system of collective farm youth schools; more than 14 million children are enrolled in the primary schools of the Soviet Union. The rising generation of young Bolsheviks is gaining momentum. In 1922, there were just forty thousand Young Pioneers; in 1931, there are already over three million. The peasantry has not only changed its antiquated methods of farming, but has also established a new cultural way of life. On the basis of total collectivisation, the final capitalist class, that of the kulaks, is being liquidated. The icon is being replaced by the book, by the radio, by studies. Pioneers—young fighters for culture, for a new communist way of life—are actively turning out for the struggle against ignorance and religious intoxication.

The Pioneer in a peasant family is the fighter for a new, socialist way of life.

Poster: 1932

ДВА ПОКОЛЕНИЯ



Тяжелое наследство досталось рабоче-крестьянской власти в октябре 1917 г. — неграмотность, темнота и изуродованный быт трудящихся. Помещикам и капиталистам было выгодно держать трудящиеся массы в неведении — неграмотных легче эксплуатировать. Попы, священники, раввины, мullahы всегда поддерживали буржуазию, затуманивая сознание масс, призывая терпеливо сносить лишения.

Конечно, духовенству это было выгодно. По переписи 1905 г. земельные владения церкви составили 2 571 635 га. Один лишь «святейший синод» имел «запасных» денег 60 млн. руб. Новгородский архиепископ получал в год 300 тыс. руб., петербургский митрополит — 259 тыс. руб. Немалые миллионы рублей переходили в карманы духовенства. Трудящиеся же выжили из нищенского существования поля обещали «царство небесное».

Пролетариат и беднотно-среднее крестьянство, под руководством коммунистической партии, разбили все белогвар-

дейские банды, восстановили народное хозяйство и, осуществляя социалистическую пятилетку, вступили за скорейшую ликвидацию безграмотности и малграмотности, за социалистическую перестройку быта. Патристичный лозунг великих работ — мощная база культурной революции.

В СССР введено обязательное обучение; значительно расширилась сеть школ колхозной молодежи, свыше 14 млн. детей обучается в начальных школах Советского Союза. Растет юная большевистская гвардия: в 1922 г. насчитывалось 40 тыс. пионеров, а в 1931 г. их насчитывается уже свыше 3 млн. Крестьянство не только меняет свои производственные способы ведения хозяйства, но и создает новый культурный быт. На основе основной колхозной ликвидацией помещичьего, капиталистического класса — кулачества. Иконы заменяют книги, учены, радио. Пионеры — юные борцы за культуру, за новый коммунистический быт — активно выступают на борьбу с невежеством и религиозным мраком.

Пионер в крестьянской семье — юный борца за новый, социалистический быт.

put forth what might be called a utopian vision of human liberty at the UN General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948.

Article 18 asserted a global standard for religious freedom:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19 set a standard for freedom of expression:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.¹⁶

The Soviet Union, wary that endorsing such civil and political rights would invite foreign interference, refused to sign the declaration, as did several other communist states, along with South Africa and Saudi Arabia.¹⁷

In those post-war years, many Americans really did fear that Soviet ways would win sway over the American mode of life. Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy exploited that fear by presenting himself as the man who could flush secret communists out of the US government. Combining conspiracy-thinking with eschatology in 1950, he warned a Wheeling, West Virginia audience that these traitors within could swing the balance of the Cold War in favour of the Soviets' godless utopia:

Karl Marx dismissed God as a hoax, and Lenin and Stalin have added in clear-cut, unmistakable language their resolve that no nation, no people who believe in a god can exist side by side with their communistic state ...

Today we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity. The modern champions of communism have selected this as the time, and ladies and gentlemen, the chips are down—they are truly down.¹⁸

After Stalin's death in 1953 and the ensuing political and cultural 'thaw' under general secretary Nikita Khrushchev, western readers began to catch glimpses of Soviet religious life in Russian literature. The thaw was not so mild that Boris Pasternak felt free to publish his humanistic epic *Doctor Zhivago*—he had it smuggled into Italy in 1957—but he nevertheless dared to publish a novel with overtly religious themes while living in the USSR. Confronting the legacy of Stalin-era 'socialist realism' in fiction, Pasternak had his orphan-hero's Uncle Kolia recommend the New Testament as a source of timeless, unfettered narrative:

It has always been assumed that the most important things in the Gospels are the ethical maxims and commandments. But for me the most important thing is that Christ speaks in parables taken from life, that He explains the truth in terms of everyday reality. The idea that underlies this is that communion between mortals is immortal, and that the whole of life is symbolic because it is meaningful.¹⁹

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, by contrast, managed to publish his semi-autobiographical Gulag novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*—in which he subtly revealed the

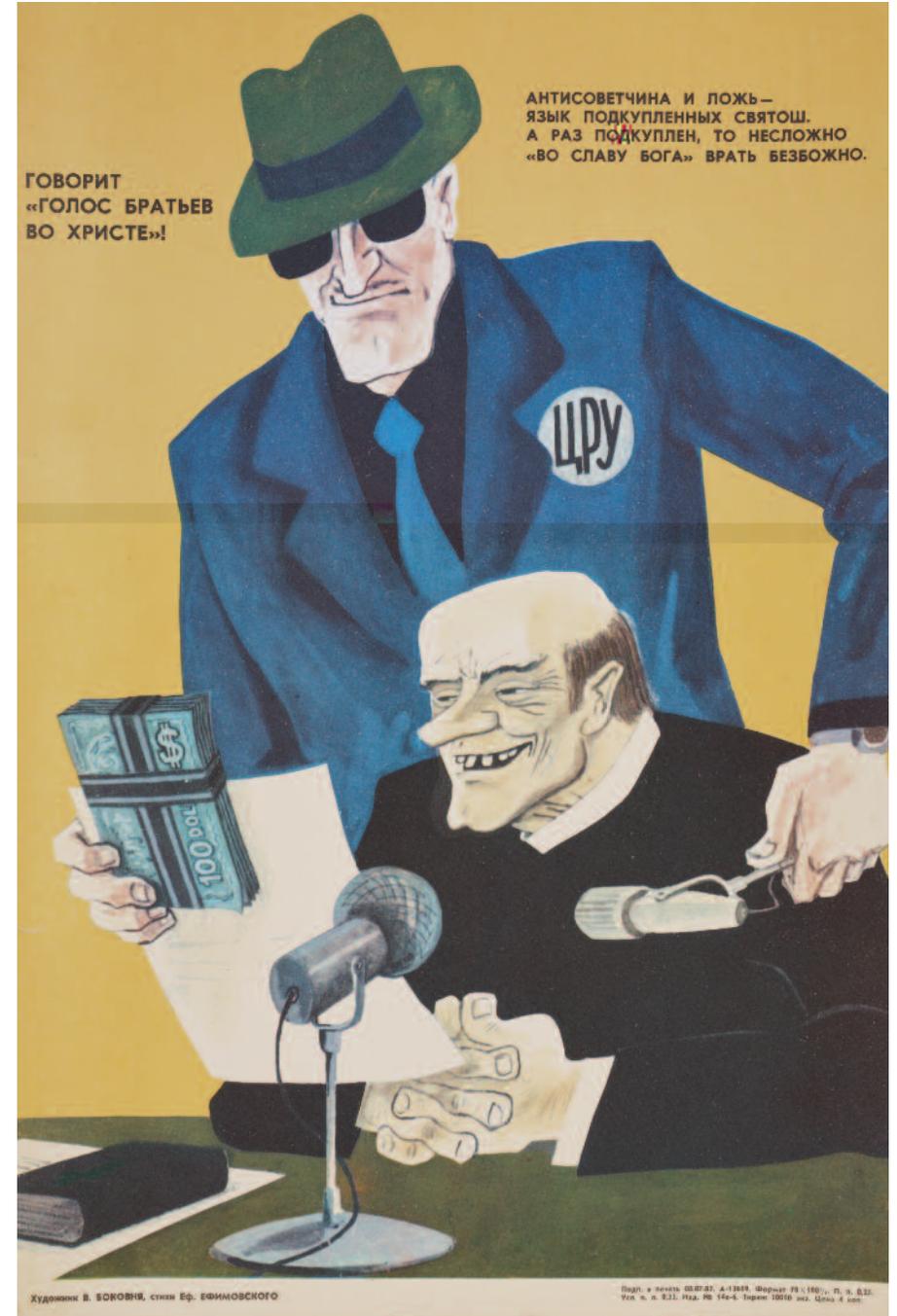
Anti-Sovietism and lies are the language of these bribed saints. Once bribed, it's not difficult to lie godlessly 'for the glory of God'.

Badge: CIA

[Press revelations in 1967 regarding covert CIA involvement in US government-supported broadcasting beyond the Iron Curtain provided Soviet propagandists with a recurring theme.]

This is 'The Voice of Brothers in Christ'!

Poster, 1982





SYMBOL OF CHRISTIAN AMERICA - electric chair, religion, and police

Godless magazine, issue 22, 1931

The electric chair - an accomplishment of Christian culture

[This image is based on a photograph of the execution of the murderer Ruth Snyder at Sing Sing Prison, New York State, in 1928. Taken surreptitiously during the execution, it had appeared in the *New York Daily News* that year]



Godless magazine, issue 14, 1928

religious life of Stalin's labour camps—with Khrushchev's blessing in 1962.²⁰

Even so, the Khrushchev era brought renewed anti-religious campaigns, which meant new legal controls on religious life and the mass closure of churches. In America, these repressions proved a rhetorical gift to the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who used them to illustrate the US civil rights struggle for an audience preoccupied with the Cold War. In his 1963 *Letter from Birmingham Jail*—a riposte to American church leaders who had criticised him for breaking the law to demonstrate for racial equality in Alabama—King wrote,

If I today lived in a communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate breaking that country's anti-religious laws.²¹

From the 1960s on, western sympathisers with religious people in the USSR treated their situation—and especially that of religious minorities—as a civil and human rights matter. In 1969, the British priest and scholar Michael Bourdeaux founded Keston College for the study of religion in communist countries. He and his colleagues began to needle the KGB by accurately documenting the changing legal and political circumstances of Soviet religious believers.²²

In 1975, international security negotiations in Finland between the US, the Soviet Union, and most European countries led to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, a landmark human rights document, whereby all participating states promised to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.²³

That year, the dissident physicist Andrei Sakharov, best-known as the father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, won the Nobel Peace Prize for promoting human rights.²⁴

In 1977, Sakharov wrote US President Jimmy Carter an open letter, which was published in the *New York Times*. The Soviet government, he said, still did not respect freedom of conscience or belief and was 'incapable to engage in an honest competition of ideas.' Although Sakharov was personally ambivalent about religion, he asked the president whether he knew about the 'humiliated situation' of religious communities in the USSR.²⁵

Carter, in turn, counted Soviet godlessness as a point against Moscow after Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. Addressing Americans on television, he told them,

It is a deliberate effort of a powerful atheistic government to subjugate an independent Islamic people.²⁶

In Poland that year, Karol Józef Wojtyła—the recently-elected Pope John Paul II—opened a new front against Soviet-backed atheism in Eastern Europe when he told a Polish crowd,

Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe.²⁷

Even as these struggles unfolded, the 'free world' was growing less observant. In 1966, *Time* magazine ran a vivid black and red cover asking 'Is God Dead?'²⁸ In 1971, John Lennon's hit song *Imagine* romanticised Marx for the masses.²⁹ In 1979, Monty

An authentic American scene: good Christians lynch a negro. This is how the American bourgeois carry out the commandment, 'love thy neighbour'.

Godless magazine, Issue 6, 1929





The lynching of negroes: this is the most vile and completely disgusting manifestation of racial hatred arising from the soil of the Christian religion, exploitative and misanthropic to the core. For the bourgeois and the priests, lynching is the highest form of culture and Christian morality, an action pleasing to the Lord God.

In the book: **Come unto me, all ye that labour, and I will give you rest.**
In the country of the 'Lord God', i.e. the United States

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 17-18, 1930

This is who my father worshipped!

[The child wears the red scarf of the communist Young Pioneers.]

[Early atheist propagandists emphasised that the major religions of the USSR were just as 'absurd' as those revolving around idols or fetishes (see pages 78-79). Drawing on racist imagery from Western Europe's 'civilising missions' in Africa was a way of showing that the Bolsheviks were carrying out their own 'civilising mission' at home.]

Godless magazine, issue 23, 1928



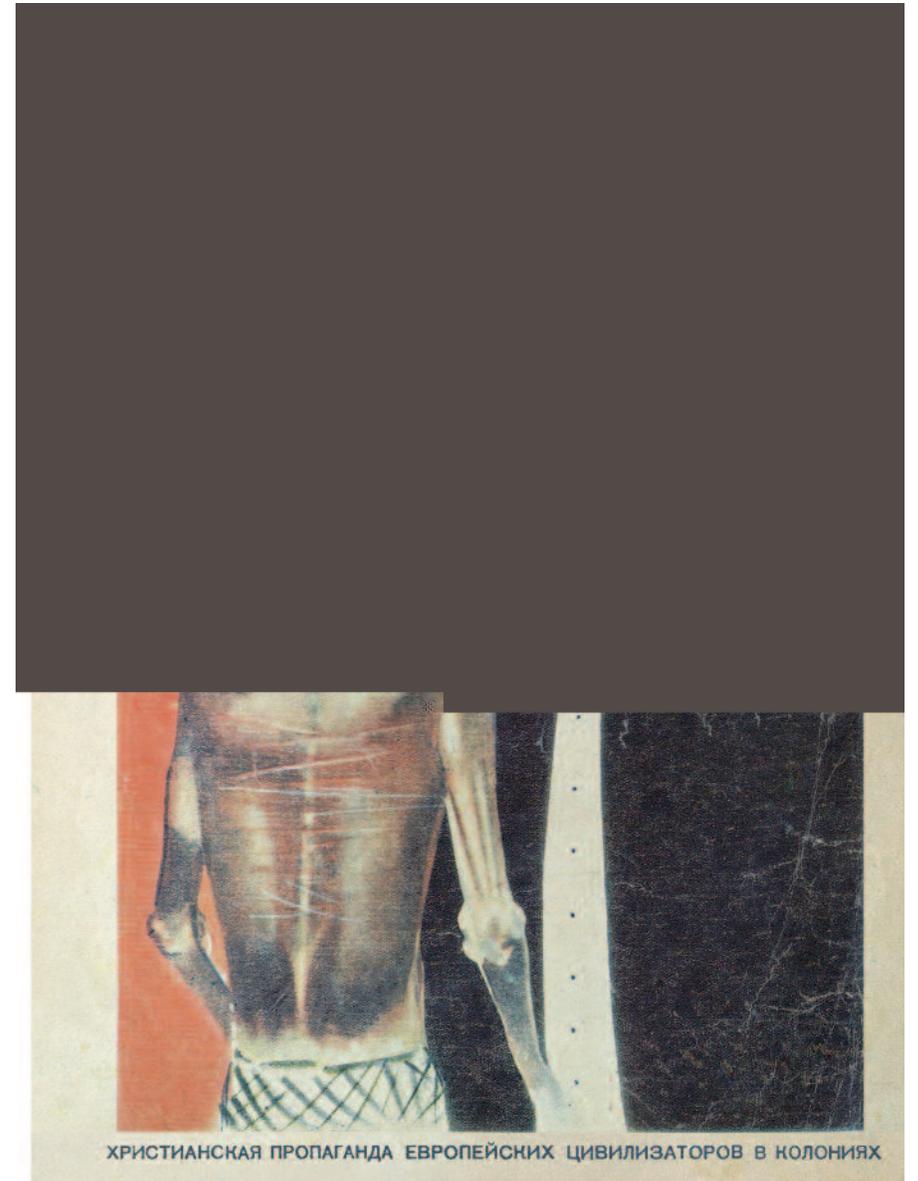


...by cross and by lash...

Godless magazine, issue 10, 1928

The Christian propaganda of European civilisers in the colonies.

Godless magazine, issue 22, 1931



Python's religious satire *The Life of Brian* outraged Christian conservatives and proved the most successful British film screened in North America.³⁰

American Christian conservatives took alarm at the increasingly godless atmosphere and, in 1980, the Republican Moral Majority movement helped bring Ronald Reagan to the White House.³¹ In March 1983, Reagan took aim at both American secular hedonism—exemplified by 'attempts to water down traditional values'—and Soviet atheism in his 'Evil Empire' speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida.

Early in his speech Reagan quoted William Penn, the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania, who said,

If we will not be governed by God, we must be governed by tyrants.

Then Reagan attacked the foundations of the Soviet state:

As good Marxist-Leninists, the Soviet leaders have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognise is that which will further their cause ... I [am] quoting Lenin, their guiding spirit, who said in 1920 that they repudiate all morality that proceeds from supernatural ideas—that's their name for religion—or ideas that are outside class conceptions. Morality is entirely subordinate to the interests of class war and everything is moral that is necessary for the annihilation of the old exploiting social order and for uniting the proletariat. Well, I think the refusal of many influential people to accept this elementary fact of Soviet doctrine illustrates an historical reluctance to see totalitarian powers for what they are.³²

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, living in exile since his expulsion from the Soviet Union over publication of *The Gulag Archipelago* in 1973, pressed the conservative horror of godless communism much further in his May 1983 Templeton Prize speech in London:

While I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened. Since then I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.

But whereas Reagan had emphasised the moral divide between the US and the USSR, Solzhenitsyn saw both countries swept up in a historical nightmare dating back centuries. A 'tide of secularisation' had swept the West since the Middle Ages and had reduced the meaning of life to 'the pursuit of happiness'. This transparent dig at the American founder Thomas Jefferson, who had added those words to the Declaration of Independence, showed his distaste for the secular Enlightenment values underpinning American liberty.

For Solzhenitsyn, 'forgetting God' was the main vice of the 20th century. Even *The*

Cover of poster collection *Light Against Darkness*, 1981

On the buildings: House of Pioneers, University, Cinema, Institute

LIGHT AGAINST DARKNESS



Life of Brian was part of that dire picture:

If a blasphemous film about Jesus is shown throughout the United States, reputedly one of the most religious countries in the world ... what further proof of godlessness does one need? When external rights are completely unrestricted, why should one make an inner effort to restrain oneself from ignoble acts?³³

The 'Evil Empire', it turned out, was in ill health. Within a few years, the new general secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, was negotiating with the US over nuclear disarmament and giving amnesties to imprisoned religious activists. The Soviet press, operating under new terms of *glasnost*, or openness, began to criticise official atheism.

Orwell's ravens began to flock around the Kremlin. In 1987, Mother Teresa turned up first in Moscow, and then outside a recently irradiated Chernobyl. In 1988, the Russian Orthodox Church celebrated its thousandth anniversary in the Bolshoi Theatre. In 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini, having founded an Islamic state in Iran ten years earlier, wrote to Gorbachev to tell him communism was finished and that he should study Islam.

And yet, with the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, the story of Soviet atheism quickly became an obscure element of Russian history. In his 1995 book *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, the historian and sometime Reagan adviser Richard Pipes criticised his fellow Russia scholars for neglecting a major part of their subject:

In histories of the Russian Revolution, religion receives little if any attention ... Such lack of interest can only be explained by the secularism of modern historians. And yet, even if historians are secular, the people with whom they deal are overwhelmingly religious: in this respect, the inhabitants of what became the Soviet Union—Christians, Jews, Muslims alike—may be said to have lived in the Middle Ages. For them, culture meant religion—religious belief, but especially religious rituals and festivals: baptism, circumcision, confirmation, confession, burial, Christmas and Easter, Passover and Yom Kippur, Ramadan. Their lives revolved around the ceremonies of the religious calendar, because these not only glorified their hard and humdrum existences but gave the humblest of them a sense of dignity in the eyes of God, for whom all human beings are equal. The Communists attacked religious beliefs and practices with a vehemence not seen since the days of the Roman Empire.³⁴

Paradoxically, it was the enthusiastic secularism of some western intellectuals that brought the story of Soviet atheism—partially at least—out of the shadows. The zeitgeist following the election of US President George W. Bush—who was willing to erode the Jeffersonian separation of church and state—and the horrifying spectacle of Islamist terrorism on 11 September 2001—primed western publishers for renewed critiques of religion writ large. They came, in quick succession, in the form of bestselling atheist manifestos from authors Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.

The first three authors came from science backgrounds and had little to say about

Who prevails over whom?

[While early Soviet illustrators sometimes depicted the gods of all major religions—usually in an even-handed manner—they avoided showing the Muslim prophet, Muhammad. Cartoons about Islam typically depicted foolish mullahs or the oppression of women]

Loudspeaker: **Neither God nor tsar nor hero / We will achieve liberation / By our own hands.**
[From the *Internationale*]

Godless magazine, Issue 15, 1928



the Soviet experiment. But Hitchens, a Washington, D.C.-based journalist and a British-Trotskyist-turned-Jeffersonian-patriot, had built his career observing Reagan-era politics. He anticipated that his conservative critics would raise the spectre of the Soviets' godless utopia to undermine the popularity of the group's anti-religious arguments. In a pre-emptive chapter of his book *God is Not Great*, he revived Russell and Orwell to argue that the Soviet state had itself been a religious entity. 'Anti-religious propaganda in the Soviet Union,' he wrote,

was of the most banal materialist sort: a shrine to Lenin often had stained glass while in the official museum of atheism there was testimony offered by a Russian astronaut, who had seen no god in outer space. This idiocy expressed at least as much contempt for the gullible yokels as any wonder-working icon ... Communist absolutists did not so much negate religion, in societies that they well understood were saturated with faith and superstition, as seek to *replace* it.³⁵

He might have added that it was Vladimir Lenin's ancient namesake who showed that such a coup was possible, if it was accompanied by the appropriate degree of shock and awe.

RELIGION IS POISON
Protect the children

On the building: School

Poster, 1930





They've turned to Christ and locked themselves in darkness!

Poster (undated)



The sacred duty of honest people is to save children from the darkness of the church.

Poster, 1977



ПЕРЕШАГНИТЕ
ЗЛОВЕЩУЮ ТЕНЬ—
К ЛЮДЯМ, В КИПУЧИЙ И РАДОСТНЫЙ ДЕНЬ!

Защитный художник РСФСР Е. ЖЕЛОВ
Степа В. АЛЕКСАНДРОВА

Buildings:
Theatre, Club, House of Pioneers,
Planetarium

In his pocket: Bible

Step across the ominous shadow
and join the crowd in the joyful
bustle of the day!

Shadow: Religion

Poster (undated)

THE FORMIDABLE SECT

In 988, Prince Vladimir of Kiev baptised ancient Rus at sword-point. ‘Whoever does not turn up at the river tomorrow,’ he warned, ‘be he rich, poor, lowly, or slave, shall be my enemy.’ Vladimir’s men smashed the city’s pagan idols—revered figures of Norse, Slavic, Finnish, and Persian origin that stood on a hill above the city—and dragged the idol of the thunder god Perun behind horses, beat it with rods, and threw it in the Dnieper River. When his priests tried the same in the northern city of Novgorod, people rioted.³⁶ But according to the 12th-century *Russian Primary Chronicle*,

There was joy in heaven and upon earth to behold so many souls saved.³⁷ [1]

When Mongol armies swept through the ancient Russian princedoms in the 1230s, they overawed the inhabitants with spectacular, sacrilegious atrocities. According to an account of the sack of Suzdal,

They plundered the Church of the Holy Virgin and burned down the prince’s court and burned down the Monastery of St. Dmitri, and the others they plundered. The old monks and nuns and priests and the blind, lame, hunchbacked, and sick they killed, and the young monks and nuns and priests and priests’ wives and deacons and their wives and their daughters and sons—all were led away into captivity.³⁸

The triumph of the Golden Horde, as the occupiers came to be known, was for centuries the central trauma of Russian history. But in time the clergy made their peace with the Horde, winning exemption from tribute in exchange for their prayers.³⁹ The princes of Rus, by contrast, had to pay tribute and humiliate themselves in rituals of *chelobitnaia*—‘beating the forehead.’⁴⁰ Throughout the Mongol era, Russian monks colonised the forests, setting up remote habitations that attracted followers and grew into new monasteries.⁴¹ With the princes’ power fragmented, the clergy spoke for Rus as a whole.⁴²

After the Horde departed in the 1400s, the church encouraged the dependency of successive princes and tsars. The habit continued into the early modern era. In 1666, after provoking a destabilising schism over changes in church ritual, the Patriarch Nikon told Tsar Aleksei,

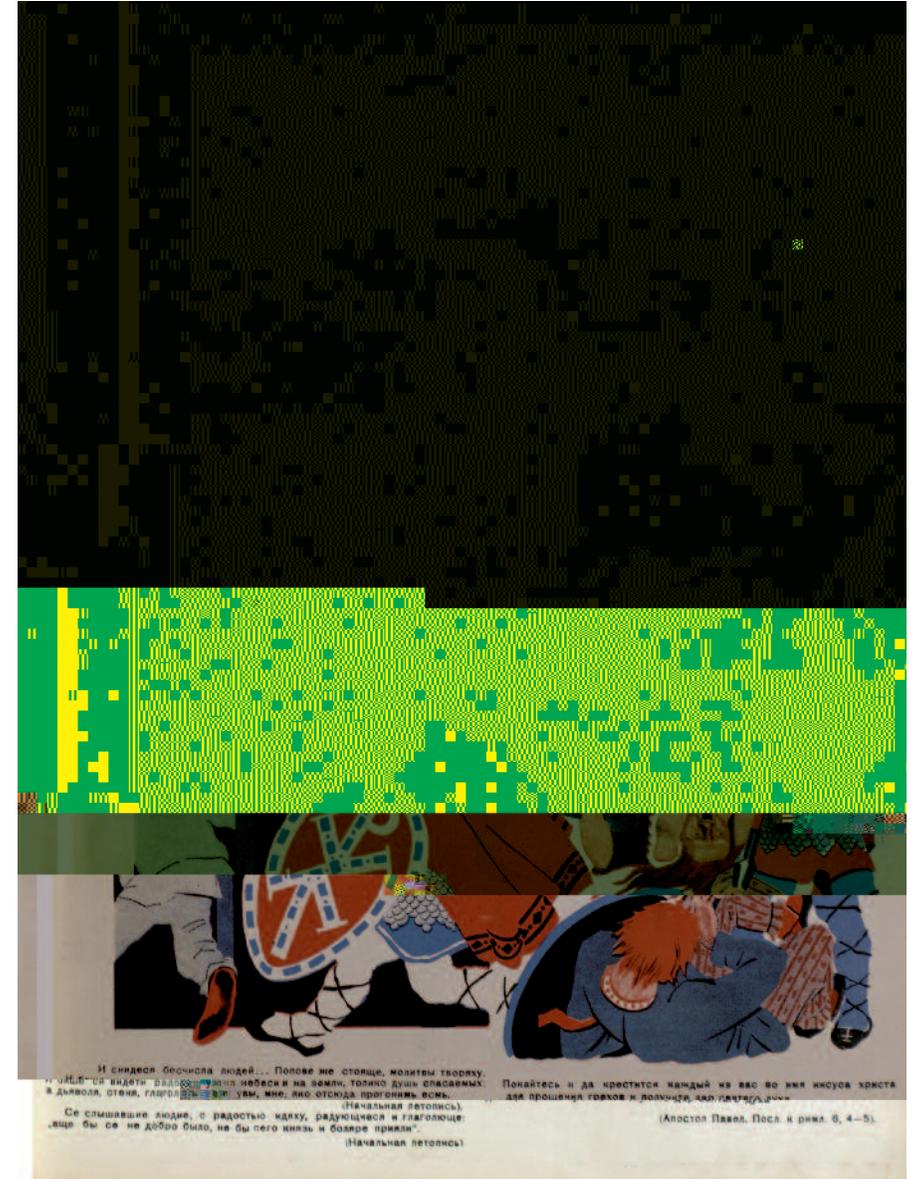
Hast thou not learned ... that the highest authority of the priesthood is not received from kings or emperors, but contrariwise, it is by the priesthood that rulers are appointed to the empire? Therefore it is abundantly plain that priesthood is a very much greater thing than royalty.⁴³ [2]

Aleksei’s son Peter the Great, Russia’s modernising, west-facing tsar, resented the

The Baptism of Novgorod

A countless multitude assembled... The priests stood by and offered prayers. There was joy in heaven and upon earth to behold so many souls saved. But the devil groaned, lamenting, ‘Woe is me! how I am driven out hence!’ (Primary Chronicle) When the people heard these words, they wept for joy, and exclaimed in their enthusiasm, ‘If this were not good the Prince and his boyars would not have accepted it.’ (Primary Chronicle) Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Christ for the forgiveness of sins and receive the gift of the holy spirit. (Apostle Paul. Romans 6, 4-5) [Misattributed. These lines come from Peter in Acts 2:38]

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 9, 1925



clergy and relished blasphemous spectacles at court. On returning from a European journey in 1698, he forcibly cut the pious beards from the faces of the men around him and imposed a nation-wide beard tax, which traumatised religious peasants. At one of his drunken 'Mock Synods' the following year, his jolly pagan blasphemies shocked even foreign guests. According to Johann-Georg Korb, secretary to the Austrian ambassador,

He that bore the assumed honours of the Patriarch was conspicuous with vestments proper to a bishop. Bacchus was decked with a mitre and went stark naked to betoken lasciviousness to the lookers-on. Cupid and Venus were the insignia on his crozier lest there be any mistake about what flock he was pastor of ... After dinner the Mock-Patriarch began to give toasts. He that drank did so on bended knee to revere the sham ecclesiastical dignitary and beg the favour of his benediction which he gave with two tobacco pipes in the shape of a cross. Only the Austrian ambassador withdrew furtively, saying that the sacred sign of our Christian faith was too holy to be involved in such jests. [3]

Korb recalled these festivities against the background of Peter's capacity for terrifying violence—in this case his ongoing mass execution of the Streltsy, infantrymen who had participated in an uprising. In the quiet days after the bacchanalia, Korb recalled seeing Peter's men unstringing the dead from their gibbets and pile their bodies in the street for burial.⁴⁴

When Patriarch Adrian died on Peter's watch in 1700, Peter left his office empty. Twenty-one years later, he replaced it with a state bureaucracy called the Most Holy Synod, a rookery of spies and pets. Henceforth, priests would look out for the state. By Peter's order,

If during confession someone discloses to the spiritual father an uncommitted but still intended crime, especially treason or rebellion against the Sovereign or the State, or an evil design against the honour or health of the Sovereign or his Family, and in declaring such evil intent shows that he does not repent of it ... then the confessor must not only withhold absolution, but must promptly report him to the appropriate place.⁴⁵

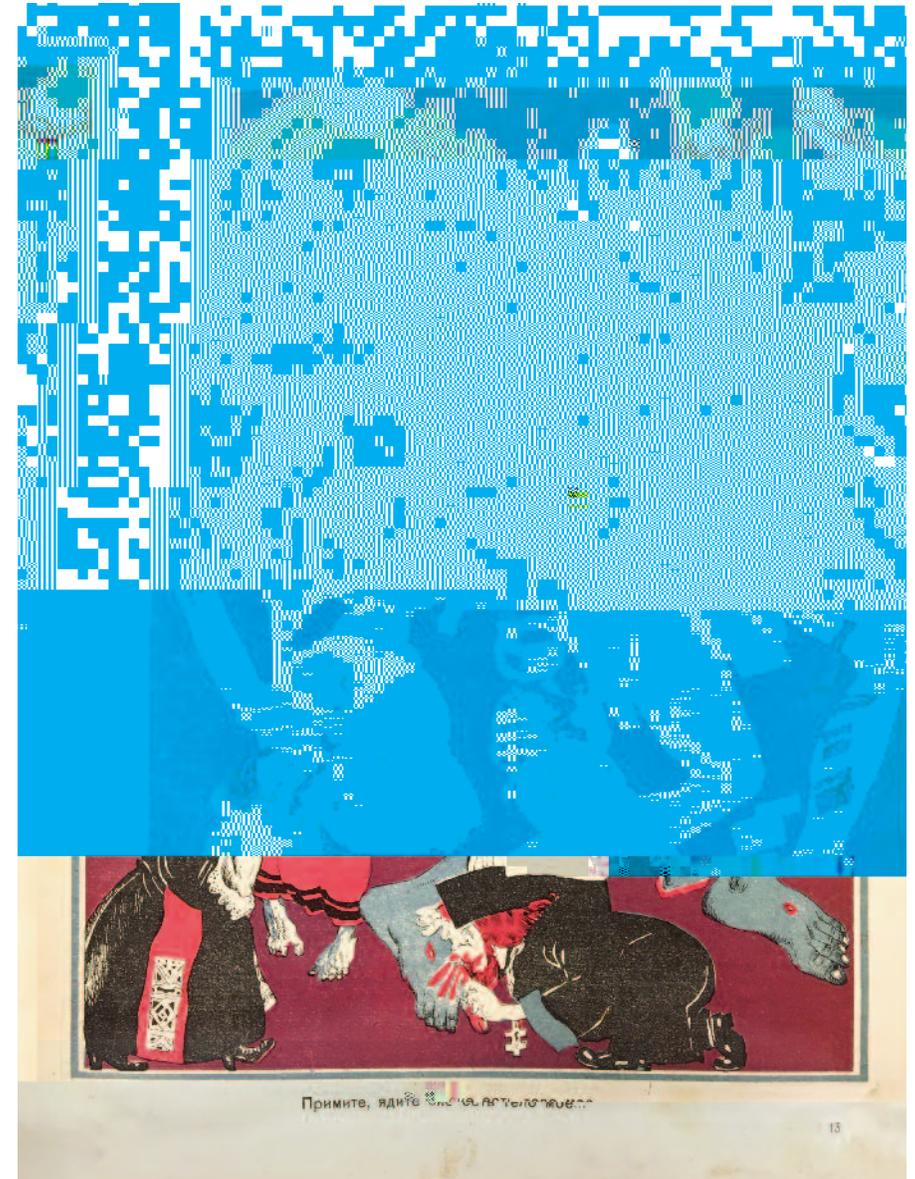
Peter's legacy was, as his propagandists put it, to drag Russia, 'from darkness to light'.⁴⁶ He cracked down on fraudulent miracle workers, confronted the 'parasites' in the monasteries, founded the Russian Academy of Sciences, and opened a cabinet of curiosities—the *Kunstkamera*—where malformed foetuses were displayed as objects of scientific study rather than—as many Russians saw them—Satanic omens. To the 'dark' part of Russia, he was the Antichrist.⁴⁷

The utter subordination of the Russian Orthodox clergy freed successive Russian rulers to explore the European Enlightenment as and when it suited them—the Prussian-born Catherine the Great corresponded with Voltaire and the *encyclopédiste* Denis Diderot⁴⁸—but the violent spectacle of the French Revolution and the rise of the Enlightenment warlord Napoleon Bonaparte caused Russia's rulers to retreat into old ways. [4]

In 1806, Tsar Aleksandr I demanded that the church anathematise Napoleon as the

Take, eat, this is my body...

Godless magazine, Issue 1, 1923



Antichrist, only to reverse course a year later, in time for an ill-fated pact with Napoleon at Tilsit. After Russia drove the French army from its territory in 1812, the tsar pressed the other European victors to join a 'Holy Alliance' to fight what he saw as the twin threat of godlessness and revolution.⁴⁹

It was that same Holy Alliance that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels mocked in the opening lines of their 1848 *Communist Manifesto*:

A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre.⁵⁰

Marx was not the main influence on Russian atheism in the 19th century, although many Russians of his day shared his enthusiasm for the radical critiques of religion coming from German universities.⁵¹ Chief among these was Ludwig Feuerbach's 1841 work, *The Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach argued that mankind, unwilling to take responsibility for itself, projected such virtues as love, justice, and mercy onto a mythical deity.⁵² [5]

But in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, a young Marx faulted the philosopher for not seeing 'religious sentiment' as a product of a particular form of society—namely, an unjust one.

Marx expressed his own critique of religion most memorably in his 1844 *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. [6] Religion, he argued, was man-made, a product of the state and society, and an expression of the pain caused by intolerable circumstances:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people [7] ... the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.

His famous phrase, 'the opium of the people', was not meant to humiliate religious believers, but called for them to act rather than suffer:

Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation, but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower.⁵³

Feuerbach made an impression, too, on a generation of Russian intellectuals that had grown up under the iron rule of Tsar Nicholas I, with his austere ethos of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality'. Among these were Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Nikolai Dobroliubov, both priests' sons and seminarians who had escaped the hitherto-closed caste of priests' children to study at St. Petersburg University. They went on to become leading contributors to Russia's main literary magazine, *The Contemporary*, where they made their mark as the first Russian writers to deny the existence of God in print. To them, atheism was a precondition for Russia's salvation from its political torpor.⁵⁴ [8]

Marx and Engels came to praise both writers.⁵⁵ Also among Chernyshevsky's admirers was a young Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov—later known as Lenin—who became an anti-tsarist radical after his elder brother Aleksandr was hanged in 1887 for his role

As the proverb rightly says: 'Priests are all of a piece! Without exception, they all preach 'teachings' alien to communism. Don't give in to priestly deception - free yourself from religious intoxication!

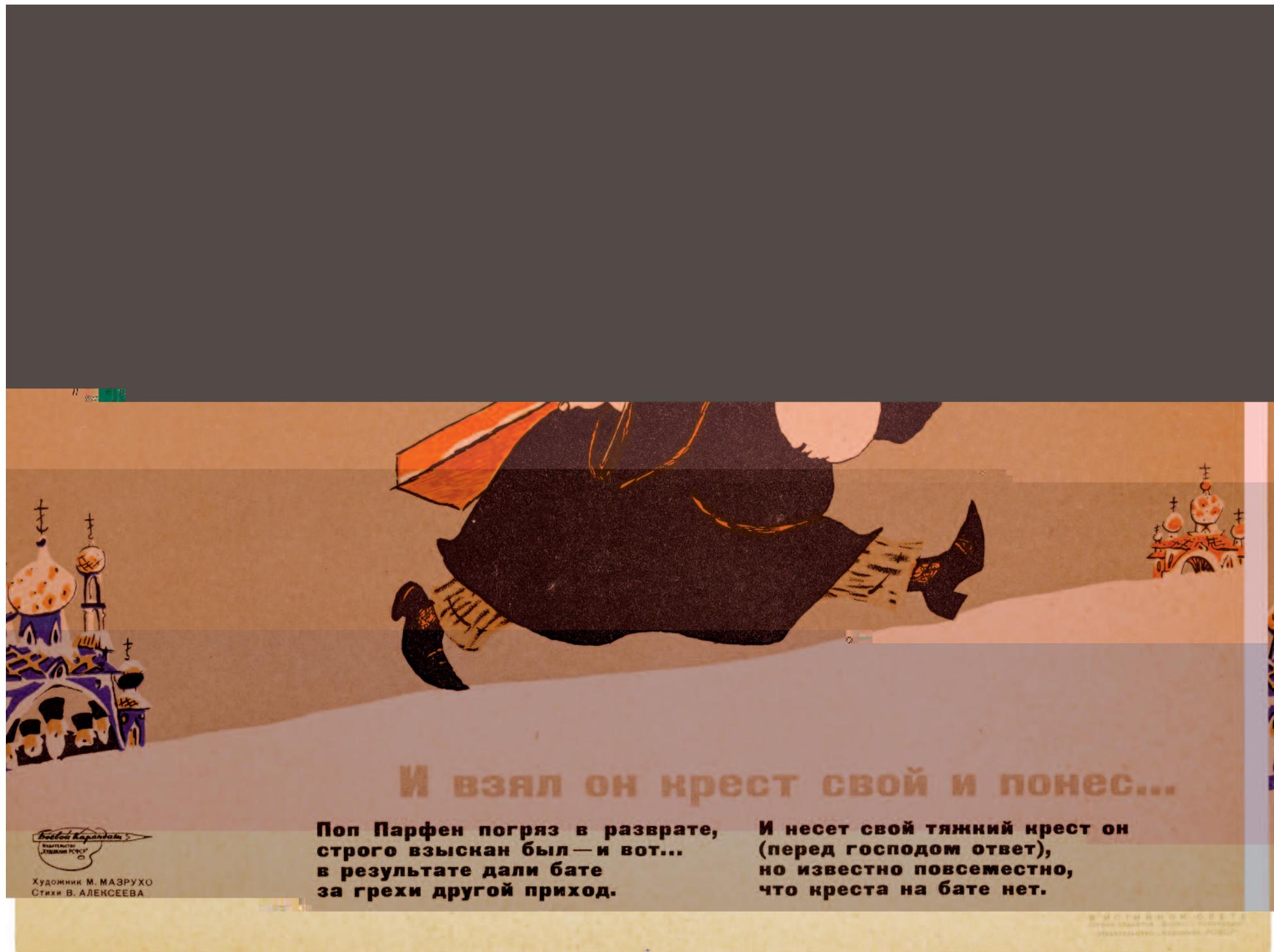
Under the puppets: Priest, Sectarian Preacher, Mullah, Rabbi

Poster (undated)



in a failed plot to kill Tsar Aleksandr III. Lenin encountered Chernyshevsky long before
he r

To consider the life of Pavel Nevmerzhitsky, or, church-style, Father Parfeny, is to learn of many facts that testify to a tumultuous existence. Cast out of Tobolsk for debauchery, hooliganism and causing affray, he set himself up as head of the Church of the Epiphany in the Vilegodsky district of the Arkhangelsk region. There, Father Parfeny and his live-in lady, Tatyana Onshina, embezzled all the money from the parish and got hammered. And when they transferred him to the Sergiev prayer house, Father Parfeny 'cleansed' the holy church, taking with him everything of value.
(From the newspaper, *Rural Life*)



And he took up his cross and bore it...

Priest Parfeny, besmirched with vice / was strictly penalised; in the end... / They gave him another parish for his sins.

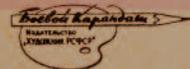
A heavy cross he bears / (In answer before God) / But everybody knows / he's no man of the cross.

Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962

И взял он крест свой и понес...

**Поп Парфен погряз в разврате,
строго взыскан был — и вот...
в результате дали бате
за грехи другой приход.**

**И несет свой тяжкий крест он
(перед господом ответ),
но известно повсеместно,
что креста на бате нет.**



Художник М. МАЗУХО
Стихи В. АЛЕКСЕЕВА

programme, and not to carry on an active struggle against religion.

Yet within established socialist circles, Lenin would not tolerate religion or any idea he understood to derive from it. Castigating his friend Maxim Gorky in 1913 for his leading role in a new socialist creative movement called ‘God-building’, he wrote:

All religious ideas, all ideas about any little god, even of flirting with a little god, are an unspeakable abomination.⁶²

When the Bolsheviks seized power from the fragile post-revolutionary Provisional Government in November 1917—October by the old Julian calendar—their supporters carried out spontaneous rituals of desecration and anti-religious violence. Bolshevik forces shot up icons in the mediaeval Kremlin cathedrals⁶³ and murdered priests and monks.⁶⁴

In January 1918, Aleksandra Kollontai, the new commissar for social affairs, sent sailors from the Kronstadt naval base to seize the Aleksandr Nevsky Monastery in Petrograd. The monks fought back, ringing their bells to rally reinforcements. [11] The sailors killed a monk and wounded several local people.⁶⁵

At the funeral of a murdered priest in Tsarskoe Selo, a Bolshevik Red Guard gestured to the nearby cathedral domes and taunted those present,

If you chop those down, might God jump out?⁶⁶

The will to build a godless utopia was now in plain view. The Bolsheviks had Prince Vladimir’s legacy in their sights. As the Orthodox philosopher Vasily Rozanov wrote in his religious pamphlet, *The Apocalypse of Our Time*,

‘Former Rus’—How can one say this? But it is already being said ... What happened to bring down the kingdom? It just fell one day. Just an ordinary weekday, like any other day: not a Sunday, or a Saturday, or even a Muslim Friday. God just spat and blew out the candle.⁶⁷

And yet most Russians bearing arms for the Bolsheviks were not atheist ideologues. They were more likely to have understood their actions in the context of popular anticlericalism directed at the church’s vast landholdings,⁶⁸ or of anger over the kind of clerical corruption and hypocrisy shown in well-known 19th-century paintings like Vasily Perov’s *Easter Procession in a Village* (1861)⁶⁹ and Vasily Purikev’s *The Unequal Marriage* (1862).⁷⁰

The Bolsheviks delivered their first doses of religious policy by decree in the months after they seized power, nationalising church lands and secularising the registration of births, deaths and marriages.⁷¹ Then, on 23 January 1918—just days after the sailors’ assault on the Nevsky Monastery—they issued their defining decree, *On the Separation of Church from State and School from Church*. Its main effects were to remove the church’s status as a legal entity, forbid it from owning property, and to ban formal religious education.

It was in places a progressive, secular document that put believers of all denominations and none on equal footing, but elsewhere, as in article 5, it bore a dictatorial edge:

Religious performances may be carried on freely in so far as they do not disturb the public order or encroach upon the rights of citizens of the Russian Republic. Local authorities have the right to take the necessary

Understand, ye pagans!

Down, down, with the monks, / rabbis, and priests /
We'll climb into heaven / and send all the gods running!

On the hat: Aurora [A blank shot from the battleship
Aurora launched the 1917 October Revolution]

Godless magazine, Issue 1, 1928



measures to preserve order and safeguard the rights of citizens.⁷²

An early draft included the provision,

Religion is the private affair of every citizen of the Russian Republic.

But Lenin removed it.⁷³ [12]

And if the Separation Decree he signed carried a threat, it was mild compared to the hatred that poured from his own pen. In his essay, 'How to Organise the Competition?'—an invocation to break pre-revolutionary habits and get workers and peasants contributing to the revolution—he explicitly dehumanised those he deemed enemies of his vision. He wrote of

purging the Russian land of all kinds of harmful insects.

An 'insect' could be a rich man or a slow worker, but, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn later put it in *The Gulag Archipelago*,

The church parish councils were made up almost exclusively of insects, and it was insects, of course, who sang in the church choirs. All priests were insects—and monks and nuns even more so.⁷⁴

And yet if the Bolsheviks expected trouble from the clergy, they were not mistaken. In the days before the revolutionaries had shot up the Kremlin cathedrals, leading clerics had gathered within the Kremlin walls to restore the very patriarchate Peter the Great had abolished.⁷⁵ The new Patriarch Tikhon, who took office just in time to witness the bloody atheist revolution, met the Separation Decree with an anathema against the new regime.

'The open and concealed enemies of Christ,' he wrote, were 'sowing seeds of malice, envy, and fratricidal war' and killing innocent people with impunity. He addressed the men and women he called 'monsters of the human race' and 'godless rulers of darkness':

Think of what you are doing, you madmen! Stop your bloody reprisals. Your acts are not merely cruel, they are the works of Satan for which you will burn in hellfire in the life hereafter and be cursed by future generations in this life ... By the authority given me by God I forbid you to partake of the Christian Mysteries. I anathematise you if you still bear a Christian name and belong by birth to the Orthodox Church.

He called on the faithful to defend the church with their lives and closed by quoting Jesus from the Book of Matthew:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.⁷⁶

'Doomed black ravens' like Tikhon, said the Moscow Military Commissar Emelian Yaroslavsky, could not 'save the bourgeois class from peril.'⁷⁷ Yet Tikhon had no plans to fly away. As the country descended into civil war and anti-Bolshevik 'White' forces fielded 'Jesus Brigades' and 'Holy Virgin Regiments',⁷⁸ he won a reputation for high principle. He refused to take sides or to bless one of the White generals.⁷⁹ When he visited Petrograd in May 1918, kneeling crowds lined his route from the railway station.⁸⁰

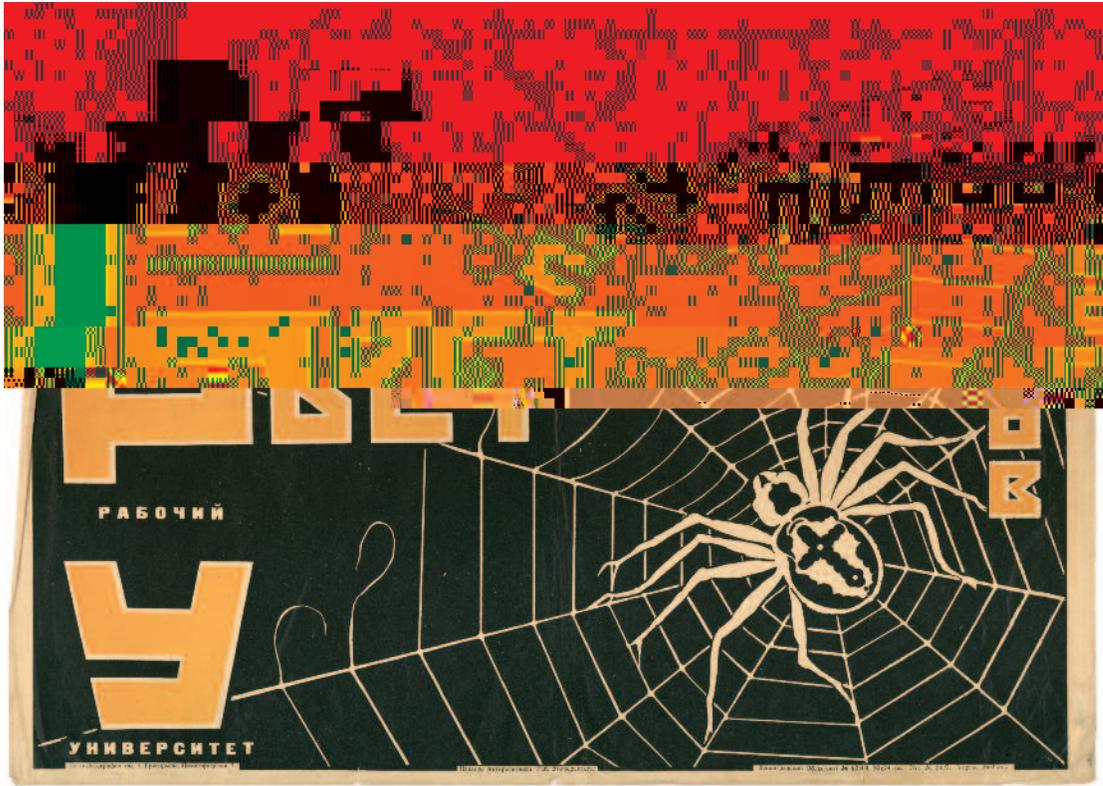
But the Bolsheviks, encouraged by their sudden rise to power, signalled their confidence with their new constitution of July 1918, which promised that

the right of religious and anti-religious propaganda is accorded to every citizen.⁸¹ [13]

All this filth and vileness is subject to extermination in accordance with any conscientious sanitary standard. Godless people, fight for this standard!

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 18, 1931





The Anti-Religious Workers' University tears down the web of the priests and the gods

Poster (undated)



Right:
The face of imperialist war

Godless magazine, Issue 14, 1931

What the Bolsheviks may not have fully recognised was that ‘propagandists’ like Tikhon enjoyed a rhetorical advantage: they could draw upon the familiarity of scripture. When the regime unleashed ‘Red Terror’ in retaliation for a failed assassination attempt against Lenin that summer, Tikhon quoted the gospels of Luke and Matthew. If the Bolsheviks refused to release political prisoners and establish the rule of law, he said,

all the righteous blood you shed will cry out against you and with the sword will perish you who have taken up the sword.⁸²

Even if Marx provided a rival scripture, the Bolsheviks lacked such ready interpretations. The young Marx who had coined ‘the opium of the people’ had also written of the ‘abolition of religion’ as a precondition of revolutionary action. But the middle-aged Marx of *Capital* had written that humanity’s ‘religious reflex’ would vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to nature.⁸³

In 1919, the Bolsheviks hammered out their own approach to the problem, which split the difference between younger Marx and contemporary Lenin. According to the programme they set out at their party conference in Moscow that March, the revolutionaries were now

guided by the conviction that only conscious and deliberate planning [14] of all the social and economic activities of the masses will cause religious prejudices to die out. The Party strives for the complete dissolution of the ties between the exploiting classes and the organisations of religious propaganda, facilitates the real emancipation of the working masses from religious prejudices and organises the widest possible scientific, educational, and anti-religious propaganda. At the same time it is necessary carefully to avoid giving offence to the religious sentiments of believers, which only leads to the strengthening of religious fanaticism.⁸⁴

Two leading Bolsheviks, Nikolai Bukharin and Yevgeny Preobrazhensky—both of whom were later expelled from the Party and executed under Stalin—set out a lasting vision of the Party’s anti-religious mission for a wider audience in their 1920 book, *The ABC of Communism*:

‘Religion is the opium of the people,’ said Karl Marx. It is the task of the Communist Party to make this comprehensible to the widest possible circles of the labouring masses.

At stake was a moral and intellectual landscape hospitable to communism:

Communism is incompatible with religious faith. The tactic of the Communist Party prescribes for the members of the party definite lines of conduct ... The moral code of every religion in like manner prescribes for the faithful some definite line of conduct ... in most cases there is an irreconcilable conflict between the principles of communist tactics and the principles of religion.

Communists would fight religion on two main fronts:

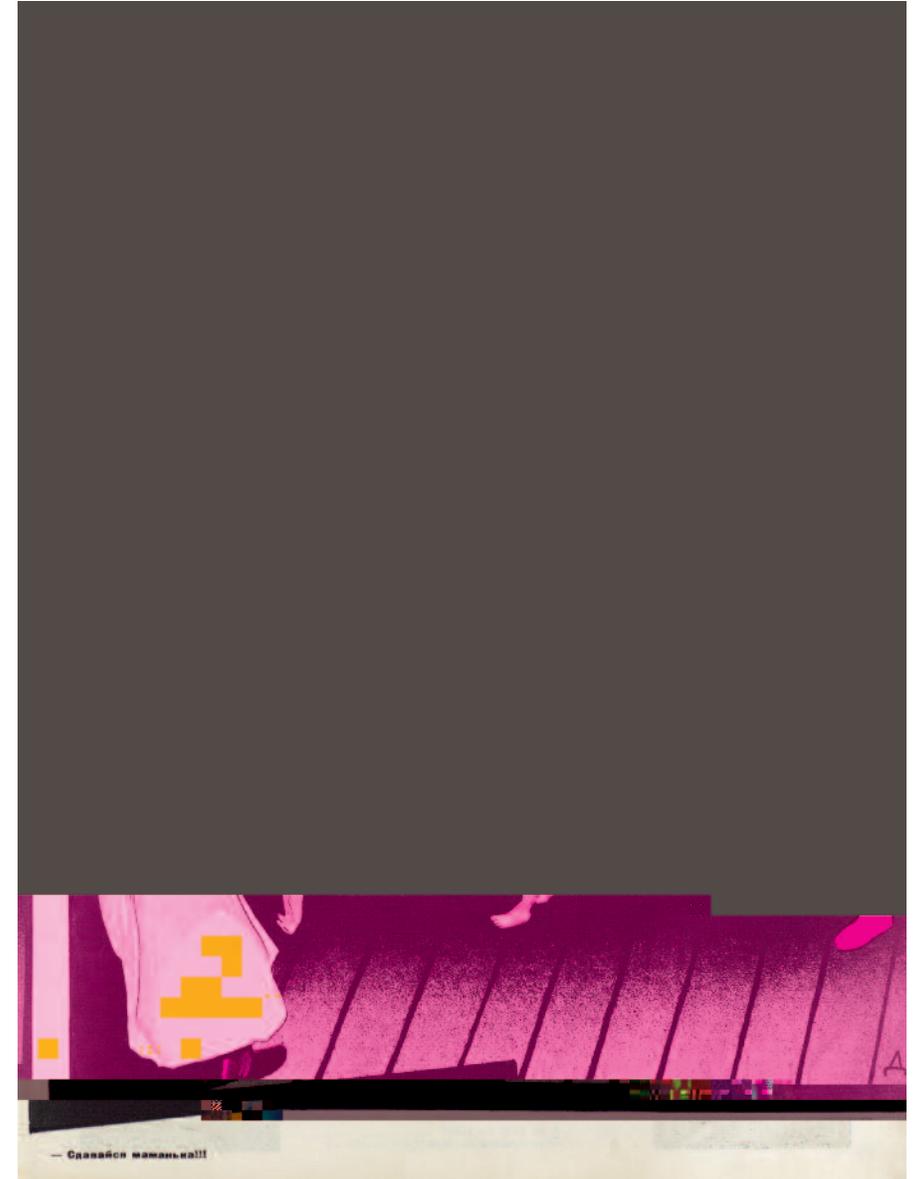
On the one hand, we have the struggle with the church, as a special

Family Fronts

Magazine in the girl's hands: *Godless*

Surrender, mummy!!

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 11, 1926



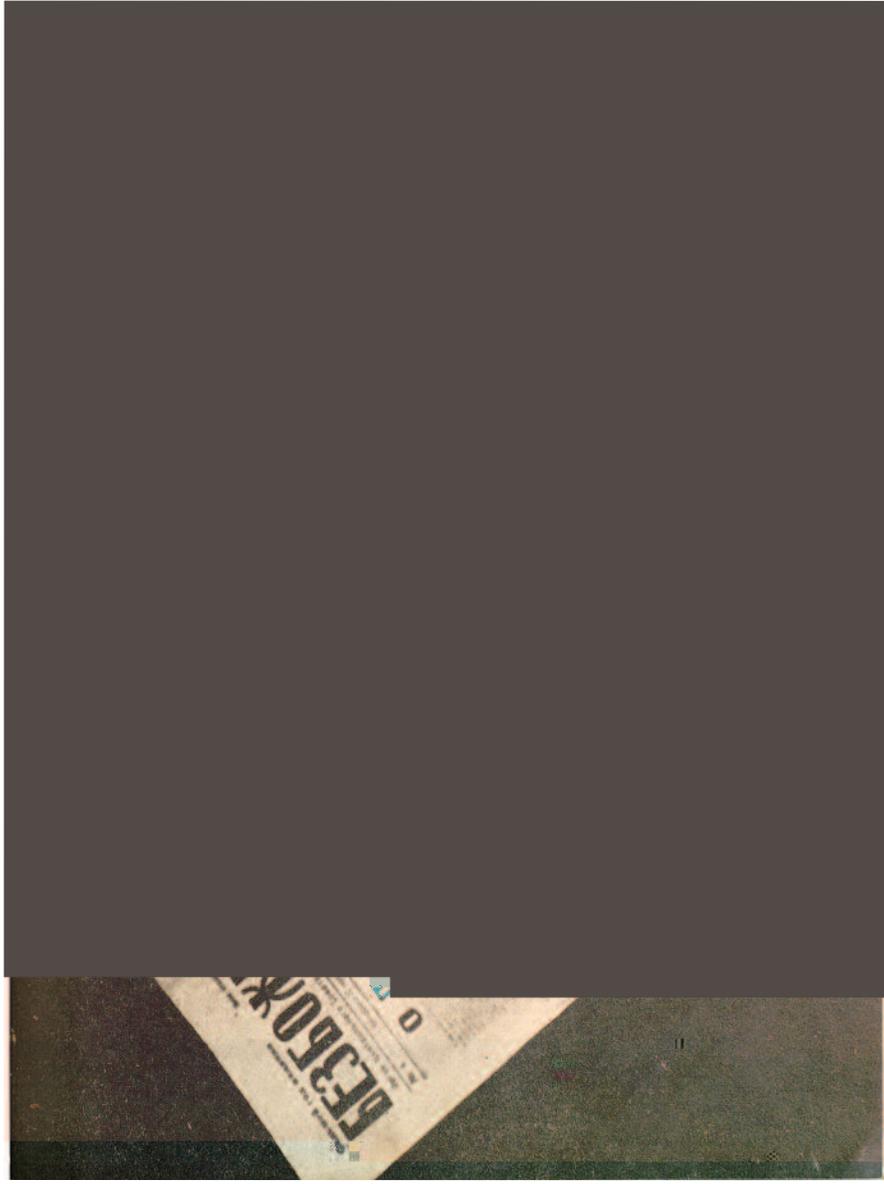


1924 год.
 Нью-Йорк, 25 декабря (радио) Рождество, рождество, рождество! Новое! Оригинальное! Высшее достижение человеческой культуры! **СОВЕРШЕННО НЕПОРОЧНО!** Американский империализм (давай, роди, роди, роди) **СВЯТЫЙ МИРАКУЛИДЖ!** Эммануил Коулidge! Да сбывается речение от господи: «Се дела родит сына и нарекут имя ему Коулidge (Эммануил) (Исаия 7, 14)»
„Слова и вышние Богу и на земле мир“ (во имя ангелов). **ПРОЧНОСТЬ МИРА ГАРАНТИРОВАНА!** Это нам обойдется недорого.
 New York, 25 December (radio): He is born, born, born! New! Original! The greatest achievement of human culture! **UTTERLY IMMACULATE!** American Imperialism (The Virgin): He is begotten, begotten, begotten, **THE SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD COOLIDGE!** Immanuel Coolidge! May the words of the Lord be fulfilled: Behold, a virgin will give birth to a son and shall call his name Coolidge (Immanuel) (Isaiah 7:14) 'Glory to God the highest and peace on Earth.' (Song of the Angels): **THE STABILITY OF THE WORLD IS GUARANTEED!** It won't cost you much.
 [Calvin Coolidge was known as America's first 'radio president' because of his effective use of the new medium]

Godless at the Machine magazine,
 Issue 11, 1924

Title of the newspaper: **GODLESS**
 Newspaper headline: **On Lenin**

Godless magazine, Issue 12, 1929



organisation existing for religious propaganda, materially interested in the maintenance of popular ignorance and religious enslavement. On the other hand we have the struggle with the widely diffused and deeply ingrained prejudices of the majority of the working population.

The turning of children against religious families was also an urgent matter:

One of the most important tasks of the proletarian state is to liberate children from the reactionary influence of their parents ... we must see to it that the school assumes the offensive against religious propaganda in the home, so that from the very outset the children's minds shall be rendered immune to all those religious fairy tales which many grown-ups continue to regard as truth.

They held that building a socialist system would 'deal religion an irrecoverable blow' but that this 'must by no means be taken to imply that we can sit down at our ease, having prophesied the decay of religion at some future date.' Since the church 'has now definitely become a counter-revolutionary organisation,' it was time to 'wage with the utmost vigour the war against religious prejudices':

Our aims can be secured by the delivery of special lectures, by the holding of debates, [15] and by the publication of suitable literature; also by the general diffusion of scientific knowledge, which slowly but surely undermines the authority of religion.⁸⁵

Another, peculiarly Russian strategy the Soviet government ordered that year came to symbolise the anti-religious struggle of the early 1920s: the forcible exposure of mummies and dummies in the tombs of Orthodox saints, where human 'relics' were believed never to decay.⁸⁶ This, according to *The ABC of Communism*, was

an excellent weapon in the fight with the church ... This served to prove to the wide masses of the people, and precisely to those in whom religious faith was strongest, the base trickery upon which religion in general, and the creed of the Russian Orthodox Church in particular, are grounded.

But while these exposures appealed to the atheistic imagination, it is not clear that Russian peasants understood the 'incorruptibility' of their saints as a falsifiable claim. One old peasant who witnessed such an exposure told an American visitor,

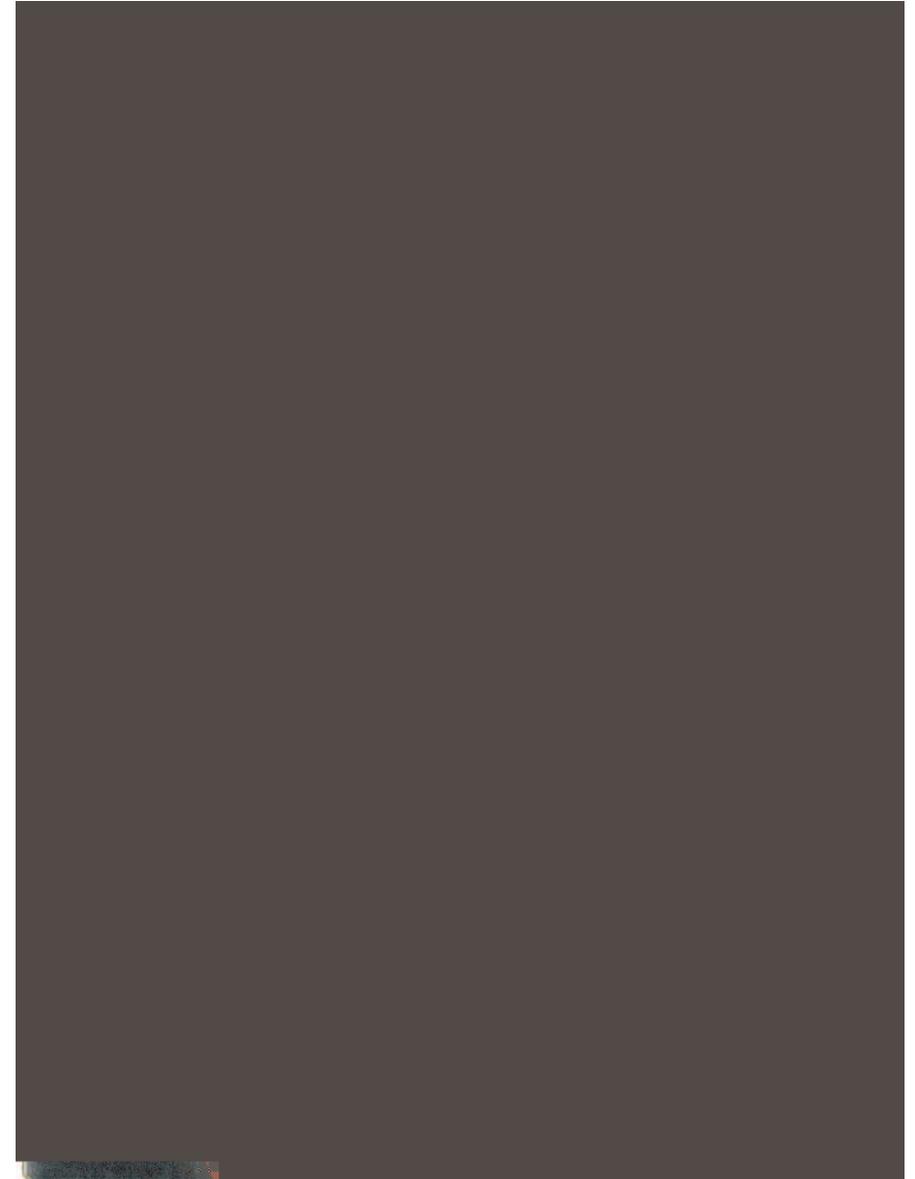
Our holy saints disappeared to heaven and substituted rags and straw for their relics when they found that their tombs were to be desecrated by nonbelievers. It was a great miracle.⁸⁷

Whereas Orthodox believers were set in ancient habits, the Bolsheviks had anxiously to build their own ethic based upon what Marx had left them. Lenin's address to a congress of young communists that year, in which he tried to crystallise a communist morality, inadvertently provided Ronald Reagan with the basis of his 'Evil Empire' speech sixty-three years later:

In what sense do we repudiate ethics and morality? In the sense that it is preached by the bourgeoisie, who derived ethics from God's commandments. We, of course, say that we do not believe in God, and know perfectly well that the clergy, the landlords, and the bourgeoisie spoke in the name of

Red handwriting: I'm Godless

Godless magazine, Issue 5, 1931



God in pursuit of their own interests as exploiters ... We repudiate all morality derived from non-human and non-class concepts.⁸⁸ [16]

The country, meanwhile, was in a desperate state. Beyond the cities, poor Russian peasants felt the grip of all four proverbial horsemen of the apocalypse: War—the civil war; Famine—caused in part by Bolshevik grain requisitioning; Pestilence—typhus; and Death—of thousands of sick and hungry peasants fleeing the state-forsaken villages.

Soviet power, too, was in danger. In March 1921, sailors at the Kronstadt naval base—revolutionaries who had helped seize the Nevsky Monastery—rose up against the regime and accused it of betraying the revolution, before being crushed by the Red Army.

Spooked by Kronstadt and the fear of ‘losing’ the countryside during the civil war, the Bolsheviks introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) which loosened economic controls. But, as if to compensate for ideological backsliding, they cracked down politically.⁸⁹

As famine crippled the Volga region that summer, a civic organisation called *Pomgol*—an abbreviation of the Russian for ‘help to the starving’—stepped in to solicit help from the recently-established American Relief Association. Tikhon, too, offered up some of the church’s non-consecrated valuables and appealed to foreign organisations for help.

But in January 1922, Red Army Commissar Lev Trotsky sent Lenin a private memo proposing a dishonest scheme to seize church valuables on the pretext of helping the starving (the more pressing matter for the Bolsheviks being the settling of foreign debts at the impending Genoa Conference). The Central Committee of the Communist Party duly ordered local Soviets to seize objects made of gold, silver, and precious stones—thus provoking clashes all over Russia.⁹⁰

The Soviet press prepared the public mood with headlines like
THE STARVING ARE DRAGGING CORPSES FROM THE GRAVEYARDS
TO EAT THEM.

Now, the religious class enemy could be exposed before the nation: in Petrograd, ten thousand Orthodox Christians turned out to stop the seizure of treasures from the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood.⁹¹ There were outbursts of anti-Semitism—Orthodox nationalists had a habit of painting the Bolsheviks as ‘Jewish-Masonic slave masters’⁹²—and Lenin was quick to link religious resistance to the ‘Black Hundreds’, anti-Semitic nationalists once favoured by Tsar Nicholas II. [17] In Smolensk, believers filled the cathedral to obstruct seizures. In the town of Shuya, angry villagers drove the Bolsheviks away, but the communists returned with a machine gun and shot to death at least four resisters.

For Lenin, Shuya was a propaganda opportunity. In a top-secret memo to the Politburo, which did not come to light until an émigré journal published it in 1970, he wrote,

I believe that here our enemy commits a major blunder, trying to engage us in a decisive struggle when for him it is especially hopeless and especially inconvenient ... It is now and only now, when in the regions afflicted by the famine there is cannibalism and the roads are littered with hundreds if not thousands of corpses, that we can (and therefore must) pursue the acquisition of valuables with the most ferocious and merciless energy, stopping at nothing and suppressing all resistance. [18]

Deceiving the working people, the ‘holy fathers’ squeeze money from gullible believers, promising in exchange the nonexistent ‘kingdom of heaven’. The bishop Sergei Larin, for example, used church money to buy himself a dacha in Kislovodsk and organised a bunch of drunken orgies.
(From the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*)

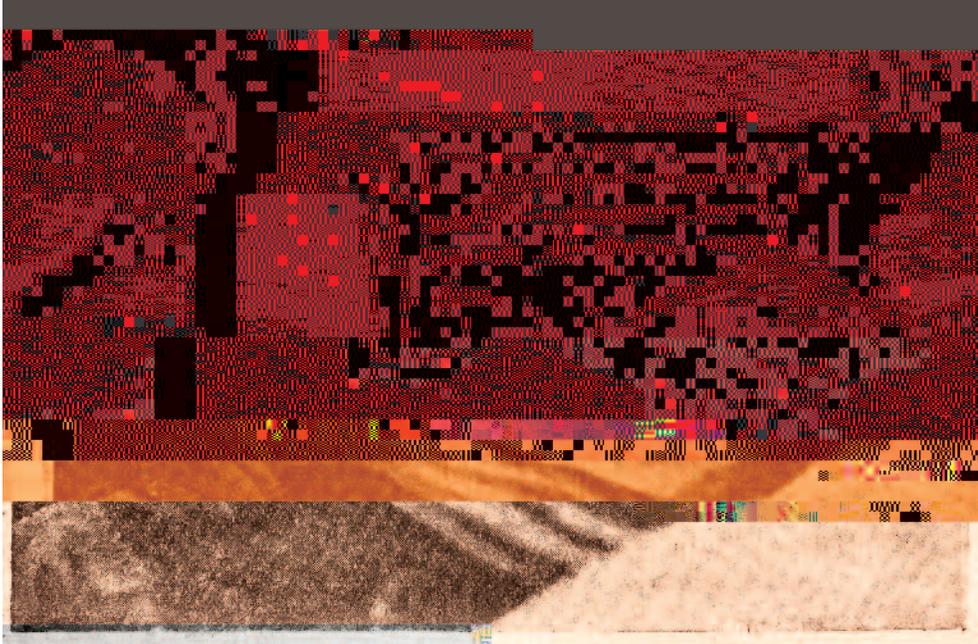
The peal of church bells all round the world / brings the priests the sound of jingling coins.

At the bottom of the bell: Every little bit helps

MANNA FROM HEAVEN

Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962





Sign on relic reads: **The mummified corpse of Joasaph of Belgorod, canonised under Nikolai Romanov**
Godless magazine, Issue 3, 1925

Right:
The Imperishable Ones

God the Father: You've let me down, my minions. I'm ashamed to be seen on Earth now!

Names from top left: **Yefrosinia Polotskaya, Pavel Obnorsky, Mstislav the Daring, Simeon the Righteous, Tikhon Zadonsky, Bishop Nikita, Prince Vladimir, Isaiah Rostovsky, Prince Gleb**

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 1, 1924



Царь Владимир. Свисток тишины. Тихон Задонский.
Отец! Подвели вы меня, угодники. Студно теперь на землю позаваться!

He called for mass arrests, show trials, and the shooting of 'a very large number of the most influential and dangerous Black Hundreds of Shuya.' In Shuya, three people were ultimately sentenced to death; in Moscow, eleven; in Petrograd, the Metropolitan Veniamin and three other resisters were executed in secret. In May, Tikhon was put under house arrest.⁹³ By 1923, Russia had seen over a thousand clashes over church valuables. Nearly eight thousand priests, monks and nuns were killed.⁹⁴ The confiscated wealth was never used for food aid, and the American Relief Association reported that there was more food backed up in Russian ports than the Russian transportation system could handle.

Running in parallel with the church valuables campaign was a Trotsky-backed scheme to foment a schism in the church hierarchy. In May, a group of religious reformers and opportunists called the Living Church visited Tikhon while he was under house arrest and pressured him to give up his authority. Against his wishes, they replaced the new patriarchate with a 'Higher Church Administration' under the supervision of the GPU, a precursor to the KGB. The Living Church said the Soviet government was trying to create 'the ideal Kingdom of God.' Tikhon anathematised the new entity as 'the work of the Antichrist'. The authorities used the schism to damage the church, then abandoned it.⁹⁵

In April 1923, the GPU ordered Tikhon to be transferred to one of its prisons in Moscow's Donskoi Monastery.⁹⁶ [19] Prosecutors prepared a show trial for the 'counter-revolutionary pope', which would end in 'the highest measure of punishment'—death. But Tikhon's persecution attracted foreign condemnation—notably from British Foreign Secretary George Curzon—and he found a 'saviour' in the anti-religious agitator Emelian Yaroslavsky. Yaroslavsky convinced the Politburo that a public confession from the patriarch would better undermine international agitators and White émigrés. No one knows what happened inside that GPU prison, but Tikhon emerged to publicly denounce his record of 'hostility' towards the Soviet authorities to vow loyalty to the Soviet state.

Yaroslavsky owed his rise as the face of Soviet atheism to an ominous event: the Georgian Bolshevik and former Nationalities Commissar Joseph Stalin [20] becoming general secretary of the Communist Party in 1922. Stalin's job, which he received just a month before Lenin suffered his first stroke, was to trim party bureaucracy. But with Lenin on the sidelines, he had ample room to intrigue, and one of his early schemes—at least according to Trotsky—was to insert Yaroslavsky as a deputy in the Anti-Religious Commission that Trotsky supervised. He then established a new Commission of Anti-Religious Propaganda without Trotsky that October, of which Yaroslavsky would eventually become chairman.⁹⁷ [21]

Shortly before his stroke, and as the church valuables campaign was reaching its height, Lenin wrote an article called 'On the Significance of Militant Materialism', which would amount to his last will and testament on atheist propaganda. He confessed that the failures of atheist propaganda since the revolution showed that

it is much easier to seize power in a revolutionary epoch than to know how to use this power properly.

Sign: They shear and shave the goats and sheep

Well, this artful rogue / fleeces five sheep at once.

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 2, 1925



Part of the problem was working out how to reach the widest possible audience without boring them:

It would be the biggest and most grievous mistake a Marxist could make to think that the millions of the people (especially the peasants and artisans), who have been condemned by all modern society to darkness, ignorance and superstitions—can extricate themselves from this darkness only along the straight line of a purely Marxist education. These masses should be supplied with the most varied atheist propaganda material, they should be made familiar with facts from the most diverse spheres of life, they should be approached in every possible way, so as to interest them, rouse them from their religious torpor, stir them from the most varied angles and by the most varied methods, and so forth.

To this end, he recommended the European philosophers of old:

The keen, vivacious and talented writings of the old eighteenth-century atheists wittily and openly attacked the prevailing clericalism and will very often prove a thousand times more suitable for arousing people from their religious torpor than the dull and dry paraphrases of Marxism, almost completely unillustrated by skilfully selected facts, which predominate in our literature and which (it is no use hiding the fact) frequently distort Marxism ... The most important thing—and it is this that is most frequently overlooked by those of our Communists who are supposedly Marxists, but who in fact mutilate Marxism—is to know how to awaken in the still undeveloped masses an intelligent attitude towards religious questions and an intelligent criticism of religions.⁹⁸

Yaroslavsky took up the project at the end of 1922 as editor of the new Anti-Religious Propaganda Commission's black and white illustrated newspaper, *Godless*. The Moscow Party activist Maria Kostelovskaya upstaged him in January 1923 with a magnificently illustrated colour magazine, also called *Godless*, which she was forced to rename *Godless at the Machine* after Yaroslavsky tried to have her publication merged into his.⁹⁹ Her first issue bore a striking print by the illustrator Dmitri Moor, which showed a hammer-wielding worker climbing a ladder into heaven to smash the gods. It carried the slogan,

We've finished the earthly tsars and we're coming for the heavenly ones!¹⁰⁰

When Lenin died on 21 January, 1924, he was in immediate danger of being sainted. His widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, made a solid Marxist case against 'outward veneration of his person,'¹⁰¹ but the Politburo had already, throughout the later stages of his illness, begun planning special rites of veneration. At one meeting, Stalin is said to have observed that,

Certain comrades believe that contemporary science offers the possibility, by means of embalming, of preserving the body of the deceased for a long time.¹⁰²

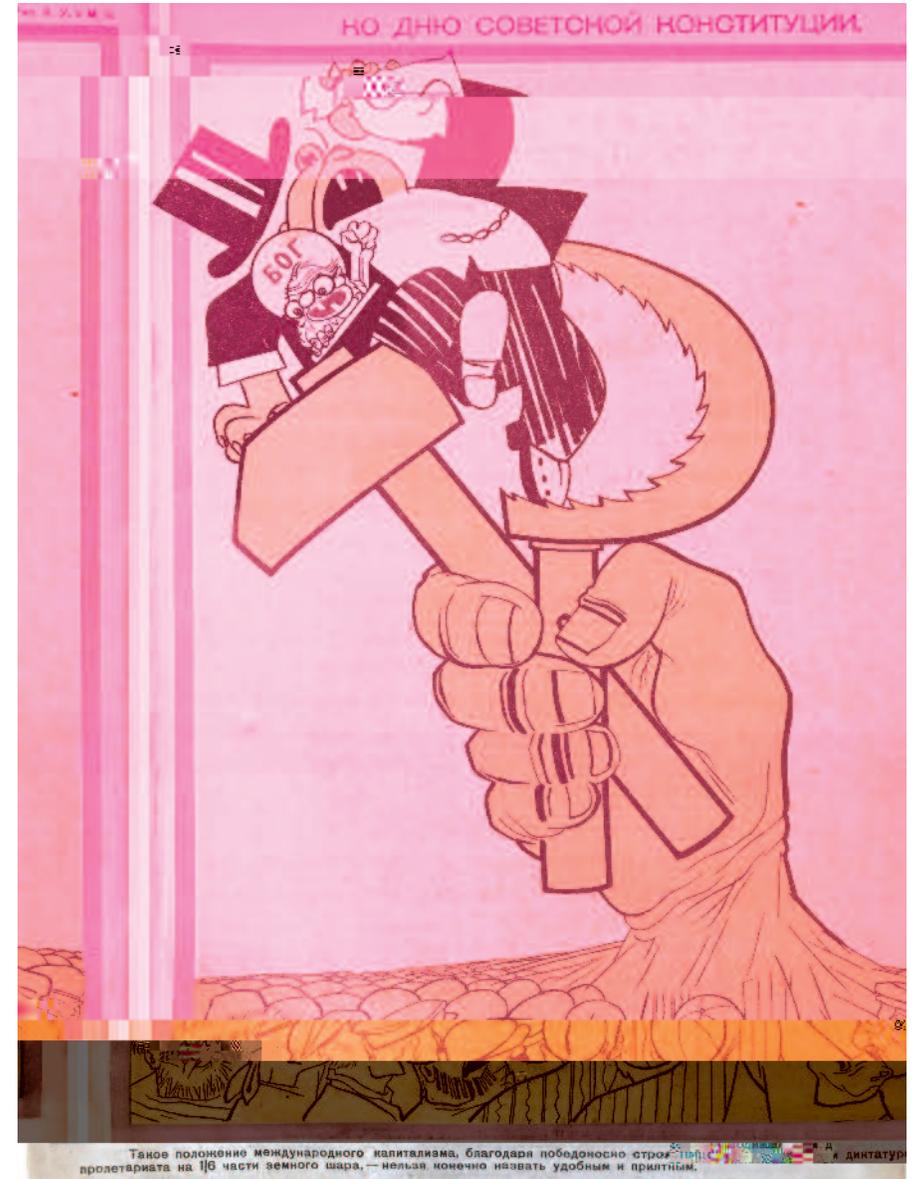
Stalin co-chaired Lenin's Funeral Commission and Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the GPU, assembled a state-of-the-art team of modern mummifiers called the Immortalisation Commission. Lenin's successors, as if guided by some infernal sense of humour, turned the founder into one more un-decaying Russian saint for the masses to revere.¹⁰³

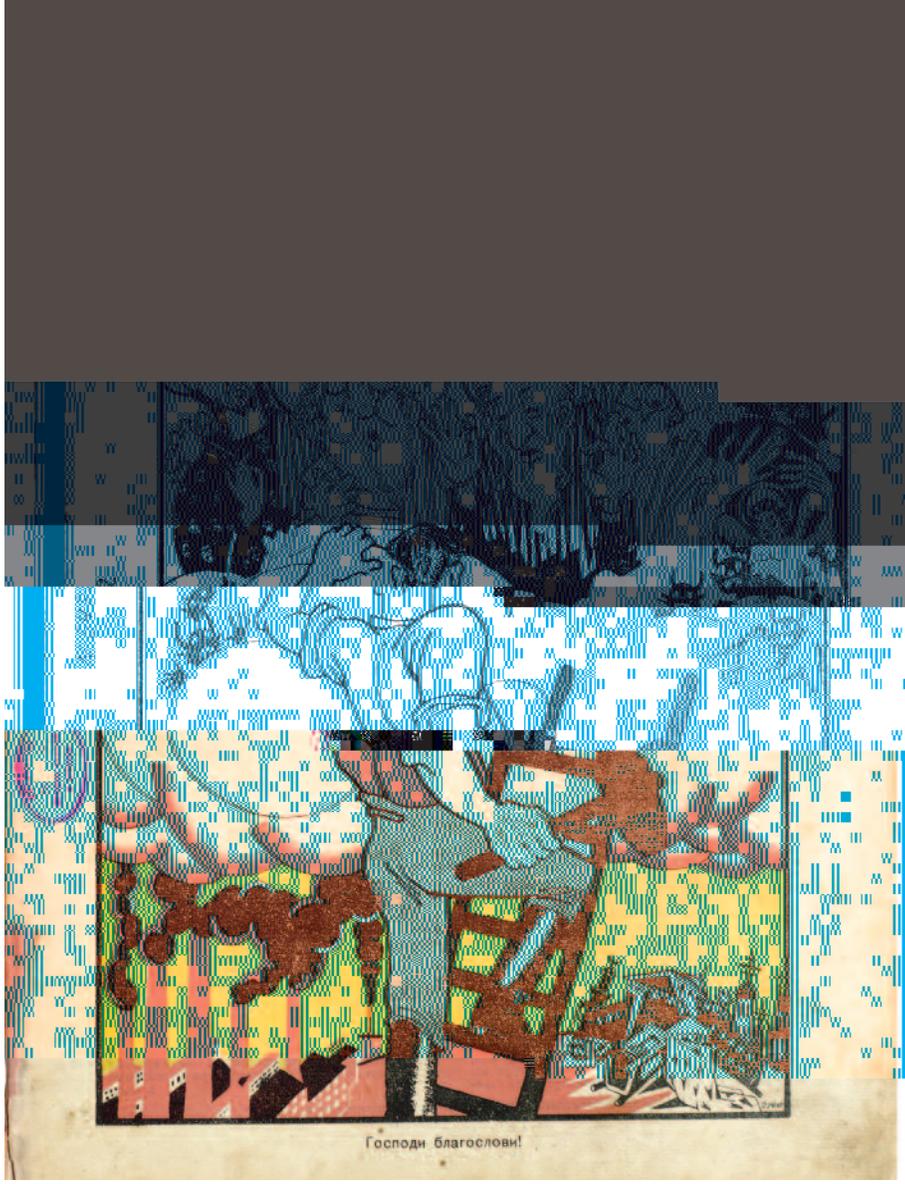
The position in which international capitalism finds itself, thanks to the victory of the dictatorship of the proletariat in building socialism across a sixth of the globe, cannot, of course, be called comfortable or pleasant.

Halo: God shirt: International Capitalism

To the day of the Soviet Constitution.

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 13, 1931





God Bless Us!

We've finished the earthly tsars and we're coming for the heavenly ones.

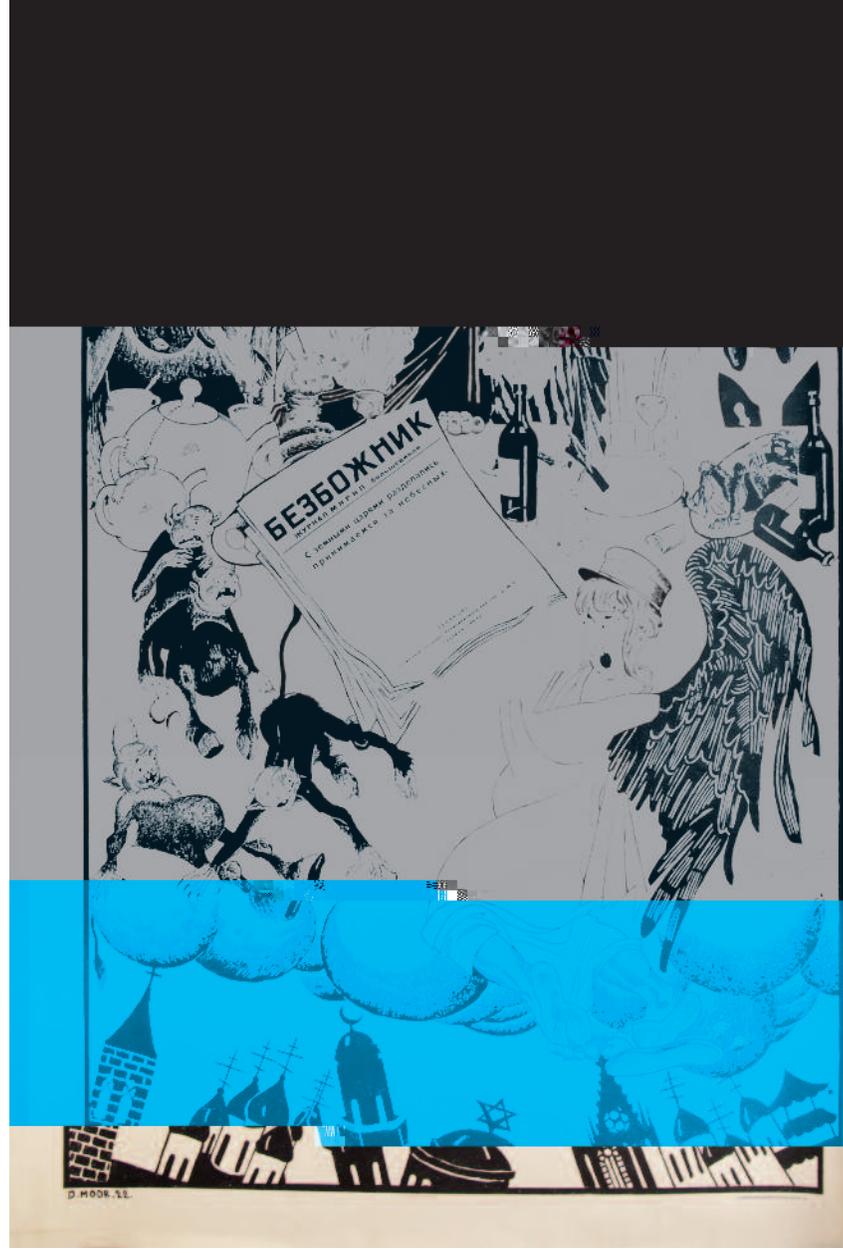
Godless magazine, Issue 1, 1923

Hat: Courier of the red artel
 On the day... the archangel Gabriel was sent to the city... to the virgin... and on the way back he grabbed ten copies of God/less for heavenly information.

Newspaper: **Godless, the magazine of the Moscow Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks). We've finished the earthly tsars and we're coming for the heavenly ones!**

Top left: **God's secretary Halos**
 (left to right): **Allah** (on the wall), **Jesus Christ**, **God the Father**, **Jehova**, **The Arab God**

Advertisement for
 Godless magazine, 1922



The congress of celestial healers

What's all this noise and shouting? These are the faces of all the heavenly doctors. You can't escape God's wrath whether you go right or left, and if God wants to save you, you won't die whatever you do. It is not a tale yet* – don't yawn now, honest people.

There at the top is the praesidium of the congress of healers, the heavenly docs. Attention, now! First on the left is the Devil, a well-known gentleman – from him you can get sick or recover handsomely. The second figure is Nicholas – he's not Nicholas II, but he did most of his work during that time. The two of them must have been on the same side! The third, John the Warrior, is worthy of all praise: he guards worldly goods, watches over property and slaves, and sends runaway servants back home – now there's a faithful guardian of bourgeois power. In the middle is the ringleader – Uncle God, who's both merciful and severe. He'll inflict a sickness and then cure it. He's in the habit of getting things wrong. Christopher, a foreign delegate, has a pleasant personality. When it comes to curing illnesses, he's a man of many talents. Of Our Lady of Kazan, there's not much to say – she helps with the eyes. Saint Panteleimon is meek and well-loved – he's of the same type as Christopher, a man of all works. He cures all ailments with a single spoonful.

And now let's take a look at the whole picture and decipher the lower half. Number one here is the Sorcerer – a swindler, healer and enchanter. Second is Ivan the Forerunner who cures eye illnesses. Further on is Saint Ekaterina, plump as a featherbed, who helps with the birth of daughters and sons; Saint Martinian heals the sores of lechery; Simeon the God-receiver treats diarrhoea in children. And here's Saint Paisios, when you die, pray to him; Saint Maruthas will protect you from evil spirits; bony-legged Baba-Yaga cripples and heals by herself, working not unlike Uncle God; Cyprian will protect you from malicious spells. Pray to Florus for protection from cattle die-off; those whose faces are free of pockmarks have evidently been praying to Father Conon the God-Bearer; Vasily will soothe your fever; Nikita will cure your baby's fits; and if you've got a toothache, pray to Saint Antipius, he'll help you. Roman – a man of great nobility – treats childlessness and barrenness. Artemius Rizhy will cure your hernia; Varvara will keep you from a stroke; Vlasy will keep your cattle healthy; and as for what Moses the Black will cure, just look at his mug - it's clear. Last up is Grishka Rasputin, and his affairs are well-known.

What an assembly of people this is! Just one thing left to say: farewell, goodbye.

[*This is a typical opening of Russian tales and legends.]



The halos read (top table, left to right): Devil; Nicholas; John the Warrior; God the Father; Christopher; Our Lady of Kazan; Panteleimon. Bottom table (from top left, anti-clockwise): Sorcerer; John the Forerunner, on his bag: for ocular diseases; Ekaterina on her bag: for difficult labours; Martinian on his case: for getting rid of wanton desires; Simeon on his paper: for healthy babies; Paisios on his paper: protection against torment for those who have died without repenting; Maruthas on his box: protection against cunning spirits; Baba Yaga; Cyprian on his paper: protection against malevolent spells; Florus on his box: protection against equine die-off; Conon on his

bowl: for the pox; Vasily on his box: for fever; Nikita on his paper: for babies' convulsions; Antipius on his paper: for tooth conditions; Roman on his paper: for childlessness and barrenness; Artemius on his box: for hernias; Varvara on her paper: for sudden death; Vlasy on his paper: for cattle die-off; Moisei Murin (Moses the Black) on his paper: for excessive wine consumption; Grishka Rasputin.

Godless at the Machine: Issue 6, 1924



Sabaoth: Only you, comrade Buddha, have yet to face the pillory.
 Allah: Go merrily, please, go
 Jehovah: Alez marche! Not unto us, but to thine own name. You
 are welcome to shave.

Halos (left to right): God the Father; Buddha;
 Allah; Jehovah

Godless at the Machine, Issue 2, 1924



Against festivals, absenteeism, and drunkenness. For the shock-pace of labour.

Poster, 1930

PRIEST OF POWER

Mikhail Bulgakov's great novel of Stalin-era Moscow, *The Master and Margarita*, begins with a debate between two atheist propagandists. The older, more learned Berlioz is lecturing a crude young poet, who goes by the pen-name 'Homeless', about the failure of his latest submission. Homeless has depicted Jesus as a villain, but this, Berlioz says, is not the point. Since Jesus never existed, Homeless ought to show how the myth of Jesus evolved from the myths of even more ancient gods like Osiris and Mithras. Into their conversation steps the devil himself, in the guise of a weird tourist, and enquires whether both men are atheists. Berlioz gives him the party line:

In our country atheism doesn't surprise anyone. The majority of our population consciously and long ago ceased believing in the fairy tales about God.¹⁰⁴

Bulgakov, who wrote his novel in secret during Stalin's Terror in the 1930s, had picked up on the quarrel that began between atheist propagandists around the time of Lenin's illness and death. The two leading anti-religious magazine editors of the era, Emelian Yaroslavsky and Maria Kostelovskaya, despised each other and fought to dominate atheist publishing. Yaroslavsky—a 'culturalist' interested in the mythological and social roots of religion—was ostensibly the more learned of the two, although in practice, they covered very similar territory.¹⁰⁵ Following their clash over use of the title *Godless*, Yaroslavsky opened a new front against Kostelovskaya by releasing his own illustrated magazine, *Godless*, in 1925.¹⁰⁶

One can imagine Ivan Homeless publishing his work successfully in one atheist magazine only to come up against what passed for the rival philosophy at another. Bulgakov suggests that Homeless is unfamiliar with religion, and hints that he is perhaps typical of the naive atheists who grew up after the revolution. He bears no resemblance to the seminarians-turned-atheists who influenced the Russian Marxists, and his threadbare *nom de guerre* suggests the previous generation of revolutionaries has already taken all the best names. The Georgian ex-seminarian Ioseb Jughashvili, for example, took 'Stalin,' or 'man of steel'.

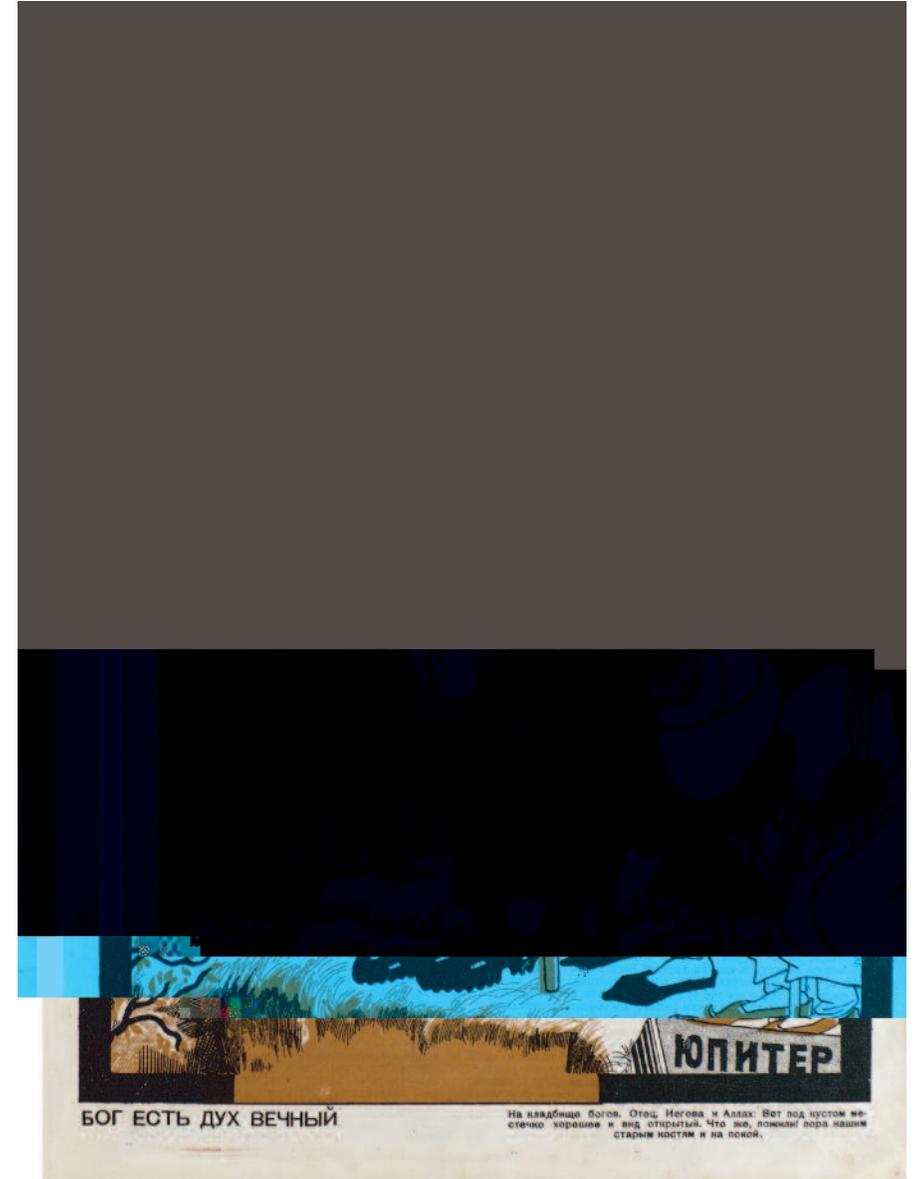
Stalin's native Georgia was home to an ancient Christian civilisation whose conversion predated Russia's by hundreds of years. Its vulnerability to two Muslim empires—the Ottoman and the Persian—had forced it to accept Russian domination. Russia had dissolved Georgia's ruling dynasty and replaced its independent Orthodox patriarch with a Russian. Stalin, born in 1878, went to a church school and sang in a choir. At sixteen, he entered the Tiflis Theological Seminary, where tsarist monks' efforts to efface Georgian culture stoked nationalist resentment.

GOD IS SPIRIT ETERNAL

In the cemetery of the gods. The Father, Jehovah, and Allah: here under the bush is a nice little plot with a good view. What a life we've lived! Time to rest our old bones.

On the gravestones from top left: Huitzilopochtli; Agni; Mithras, God rest his soul; Osiris and Isis both passed away on one day (the wife did not survive the husband); Jupiter; Zeus, father of the gods (his life lasted eighteen centuries).

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 6, 1923



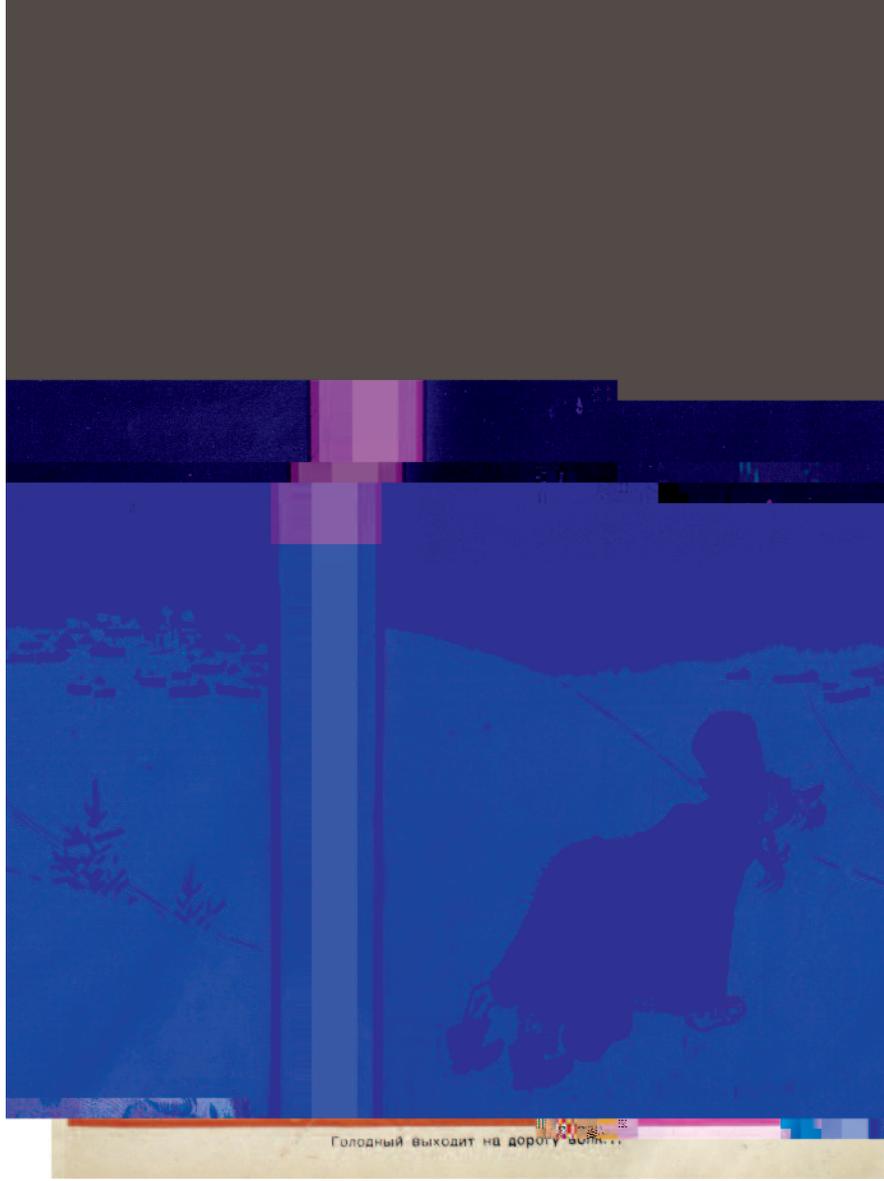
Circular Dance

A scarlet dawn brightens the east. / A little demon runs out of the woods with no trousers on: / He's hurrying to a gathering. Beside him is Christ, / With a modest parting in his fair hair. / 'Where are you going? To the meeting?' 'Of course! And you?' / The demon quietly nodded toward the bushes. / 'I'm just going as a spectator. Beelzebub himself / Is coming.' At this point, Christ sighed / Regretfully. 'And what if Satan suddenly / Starts tempting me like he did in the desert?' / 'Are you afraid?' the demon asked, giggling and twisting / His tail coquettishly. 'There's no fast on now, is there? / It's no sin to be tempted just once during myasoyed* / With a Samaritan woman. Isn't that so?' / 'Begone, evil one! You've stolen into my soul / Like a thief! Don't you dare recall that.' / In the meantime, the gods all gathered, / Forming an intimate circle in the meadow / The cultured, the savage, the tree-stump gods / To which fools prayed in the forests. / One gets what he deserves. Does it really matter, / What people believe in: In a piece of iron, or a log, / Or a nothing-spirit? The more benighted the people, / The weaker their reason, the stronger their faith.

[*The period between Christmas and Shrovetide when meat can be eaten.]

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 1, 1924





A hungry wolf sets out on the road...

Godless people, protect the collective farms!

Godless at the Machine magazine, issue 21, 1930



Through socialist construction we will deal with religion and the clergy

Godless magazine, Issue 5, 1930

Shortly before Stalin joined, another student had murdered the rector with a Caucasian dagger. The students circulated secret newspapers and banned European novels—Victor Hugo was a favourite—and formed secret discussion groups. The young Stalin, a nationalist poet [22] with some talent, made an enemy of David Abashidze, a Georgian monk who was even more contemptuous of Georgian culture than the Russians were. Abashidze ran a monastic surveillance regime and sent Stalin to a punishment cell for possessing banned books. Stalin later recalled the monks' 'spying, penetrating into the soul.'

Although Stalin spent four years there, he never graduated. He fell under the influence of a local priest's son and rebel named Lado Ketskhoveli, who had been expelled from the Tiflis seminary for leading a student strike, and from another one in Kiev for possessing banned books. Ketskhoveli joined a group of Marxists and became a typesetter for their press. From around 1898, Stalin began to idolise Ketskhoveli and kept a portrait of him in his seminary cell. He then joined the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party when it formed that year. The seminary, he later claimed, expelled him for 'Marxist propaganda.'¹⁰⁷

Historians have used Stalin's seminary background to foreshadow his ascent as a dictator. Describing his role at Lenin's funeral, Richard Pipes writes,

Stalin delivered a funeral speech with a 'pledge' in which, using religious cadences he had learned in the seminary, he vowed in the name of the Party faithfully to carry out Lenin's commands.¹⁰⁸

Explaining how Stalin used his position as general secretary of the Communist Party to sideline rival Bolsheviks after Lenin's death, Geoffrey Hosking writes,

He had a crude but lucid mind, which sorted out people and political tendencies into unambiguous dualities, right/wrong, progressive/reactionary, for us/against us. He deployed his arguments like a seminarian his catechism, by question and answer and by accumulation of evidence, until he could sweep away the 'wrong' side of each duality with overwhelming logic.¹⁰⁹

Even before Lenin died, the main effect of anti-religious spectacles had been to demonstrate that the 'propaganda' struggle between religion and atheism was to be one-sided and that the Communist Party was well and truly in charge. As the newspaper *Izvestia* reported on an anti-Christmas parade in Moscow, in January 1923 [23]

God-fearing Moscow philistines saw an unprecedented spectacle. From the Sadovaya to the Square of the Revolution there stretched an unending procession of gods and heathen priests... Here was a yellow Buddha with contorted legs, giving the blessing ... And the Babylonian Marduk, the Orthodox virgin, Chinese bonzes and Catholic priests ... A Russian priest in his typical stole, offering for a small price to remarry anybody. And here is a monk sitting on a black coffin containing saints' relics: he, too, praises his wares to the undemanding buyer.

As former socialist-turned theologian, G. P. Fedotov, reported on a similar Easter procession in Tiflis that spring:

The population, and not only the faithful, looked upon this hideous carnival

Book: Constitution of the USSR

God's slaves / Masters of life

Godless magazine, issue 9-10, 1940



with dumb horror. There were no protests from the silent streets—the years of terror had done their work—but everyone tried to turn off the road when they met this shocking procession ... There was not a drop of popular pleasure in it.¹¹⁰

Politically, the Bolsheviks had cornered the church. When Patriarch Tikhon died compliant in 1925, the clergy did not dare to elect a new patriarch. But the placeholder, Metropolitan Sergei, pledged loyalty to the USSR in 1927 as

our civic homeland, whose joys and successes are our joys and successes and whose setbacks are our setbacks.¹¹¹

Stalin defended the crushing of the church to foreigners. Meeting a delegation of American trade unionists in late 1927, he contrasted Soviet ‘freedom of anti-religious propaganda’ with

cases such as recently occurred in America in which Darwinists were prosecuted in court.¹¹²

He was referring to the 1925 Scopes ‘monkey’ trial, in which a high school teacher, John T. Scopes, had faced charges for breaking a Tennessee law against teaching evolution. Scopes was fined \$100, but the state supreme court overturned the verdict on a technicality.¹¹³ Since the Communist Party stood for science, Stalin said, such cases ‘cannot occur here.’ [24]

More substantial—and ominous—was his appeal to class warfare:

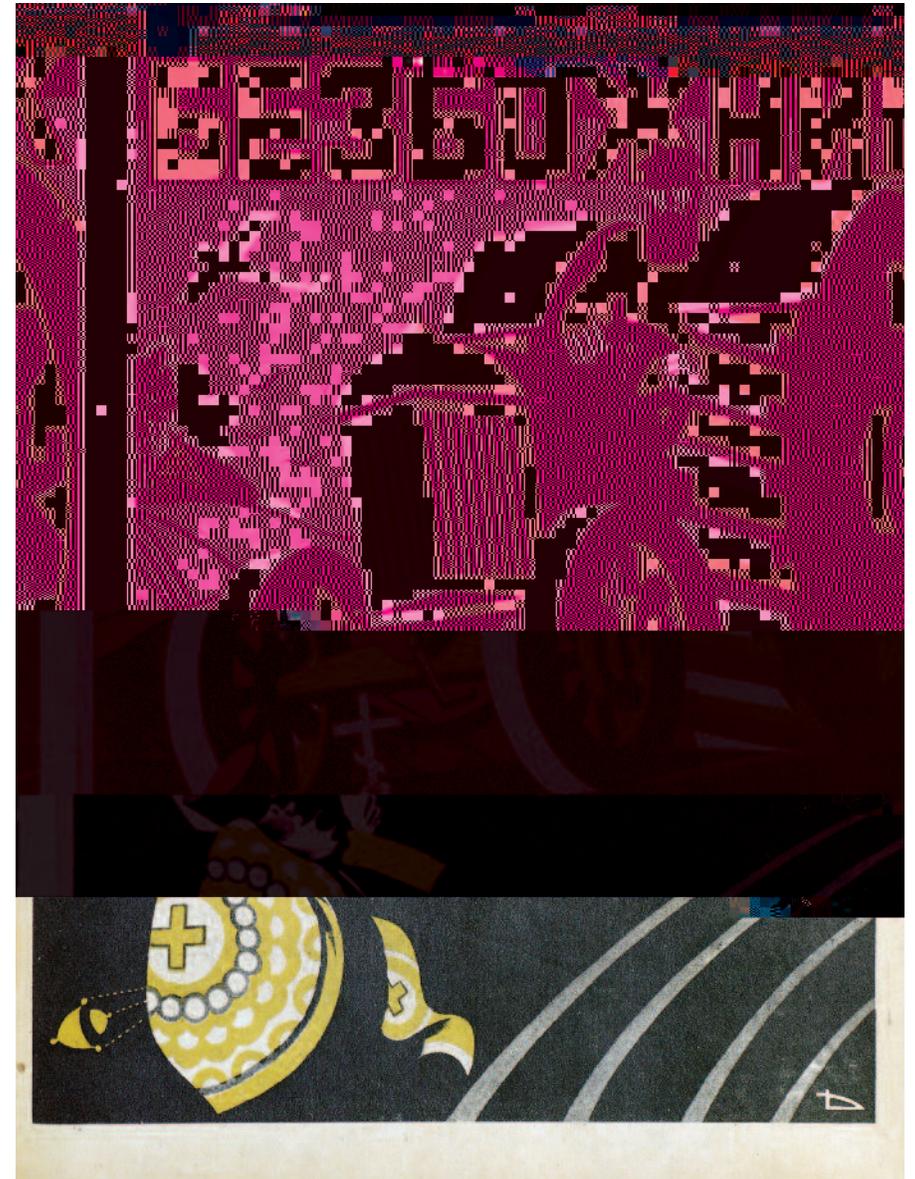
The Party cannot be neutral towards the bearers of religious prejudices, towards the reactionary clergy who poison the minds of the toiling masses.

Have we suppressed the reactionary clergy? Yes, we have. The unfortunate thing is that it has not been completely liquidated.¹¹⁴

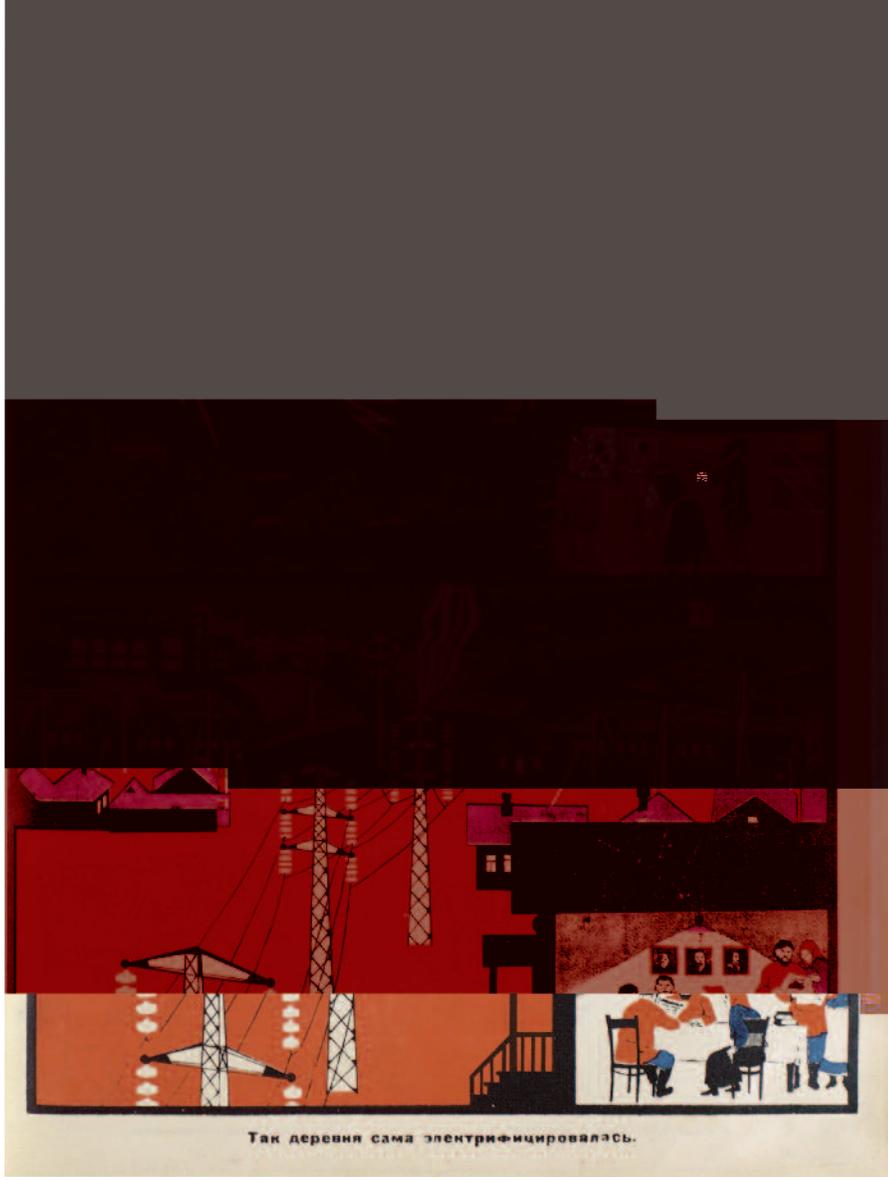
His answers to the Americans—and his omission of the right to ‘religious propaganda’ mentioned in the constitution—prefigured the new, Stalinist style of state atheism.

At the same time, Marxist-Leninist prophecies were failing to come true. There had been no successful communist uprisings in industrialised Europe to provide the USSR with powerful allies, and the advanced European powers remained enemies. As early as 1925, Stalin settled upon the goal of ‘socialism in one country’ and succeeded in wrenching the revolutionary project away from the emphasis on world revolution dear to Lev Trotsky—whom he expelled from the Party in 1927.¹¹⁵ But if the Soviet state was to fortify itself for long-term isolation, it needed to industrialise fast, because, as Stalin later said, ‘those who fall behind get beaten.’ To do that, it needed grain to feed the cities and export for cash.¹¹⁶

Stalinist atheism took shape on the ‘grain front’. Responding to food shortages in 1928, the government began to seize grain. When the peasants rebelled, the regime blamed ‘kulaks’—more prosperous peasants—and, in 1929, unleashed class war in the countryside. The plan was to divide the peasantry by setting the majority of ‘poor’ and ‘middle’ peasants—against the kulaks. They would press the first two groups, along with their assets, onto state-controlled collective farms. They would dispossess and exclude the kulaks, exiling those they deemed ‘malicious’ on cattle wagon journeys to remote regions, which often led to their deaths.¹¹⁷



Godless magazine, Issue 12, 1928



How the village electrified itself.

[In his 1920 speech, *Our Foreign and Domestic Position and Party Tasks*, Lenin said, 'Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country.']

How God electrified the village.

Godless at the *Machine* magazine, Issue 8, 1924

Everybody understands that where work is being done -
the priest and the drunk are both doing harm.

Poster, 1930



The countryside was God's country. Most villages had a church and a priest, and—even if the higher clergy were now submissive—the authorities feared rural clergy would foment rebellion.¹¹⁸ When Party activists descended on a village, they would often begin by closing the church and arresting the priest.¹¹⁹ They also pulled down church bells, which rebellious peasants might use to rally reinforcements. In theory, these bells could be used to provide non-ferrous metals for industry, although it seems many were turned into coins.¹²⁰ [25] In some villages, collectivisation resulted in anti-religious carnivals, with young communists dressing animals in priests' vestments or burning villagers' icons on a pyre.

For the peasantry, collectivisation was right out of the *Book of Revelation*. As Geoffrey Hosking writes,

A persistent and resourceful rumour mill—some called it the 'kulak agitprop'—insinuated that all women were to become 'collective property' and sleep together under the 'collective blanket', or, more realistically, that famine and devastation were imminent, and that the reign of Antichrist would soon follow. In the North Caucasus, it was said that someone calling himself Jesus Christ was wandering the villages bearing a document from the Virgin Mary calling on everyone to quit the collective farms before Judgment Day. In other areas, too, warnings circulated that those who joined the [collective farms] would be stamped on the head with the seal of the Antichrist, to mark them out for damnation at the second coming.¹²¹

Meanwhile, the Soviet government revised its laws on religion. In April 1929, a new law on 'religious associations' forced religious groups to register with the state, forbade religious charity, and limited religious activity to church services inside a church. A new Central Standing Commission on Religious Questions, or 'Cult Commission', would carry out the Party's orders on religious matters. The following month, the government removed the constitutional right to carry out 'religious propaganda' and replaced it with 'freedom of confession'. That November, the Politburo declared all religions 'legally functioning counter-revolutionary forces' and set the long-term goal of eliminating religion completely—an end that was to be achieved by seizing church revenue, closing churches, arresting clergy, and often sending them to the Gulag.¹²²

Anti-religious propagandists subordinated their efforts completely to the Stalinist agenda. That year, Yaroslavsky re-styled his League of the Godless—a society of activists associated with his publications since 1925—as the League of the Militant Godless—atheistic cadres devoted to collectivisation and industrialisation. The League's anti-religious propaganda took on ever-more agricultural themes, agitating for spring planting and the fumigation of barns.¹²³ *Godless* cartoonists drew priests and kulaks looking aghast at enormous new factories and dams, sabotaging honourable labour on behalf of Moscow's enemies, and, in the case of Catholic priests in Europe, agitating for war against the peace-loving USSR.¹²⁴

Dmitri Moor—the main artist at *Godless* (into which *Godless at the Machine* merged in 1931) saw his influence as a Stalinist illustrator of posters and magazine pull-outs in the following terms:

The chimneys send their smoke into the blue sky... / To God we give soot and fumes. / Like a golden toadstool among the oaks, / The clumsy cathedral slumbers among the chimneys.

The factories are ours. Ours are the plants! / These are the tools of proletarian freedom! / The power of electricity, the thunder of lightning / We create this here with our own hands!

We have no need of God, and religion is rubbish: / Only fools still believe the priests. / Whoever looks in this direction from the proletarian outskirts / Will have this entire view to behold.

Godless at the Machine magazine, issue 2, 1924





Not a single absentee during the days of Easter
 [The constructivist Derzhprom or 'State Industry' building in Kharkiv, Ukraine was finished in 1928.]

Godless magazine, Issue 6, 1931

The Radio Tower.

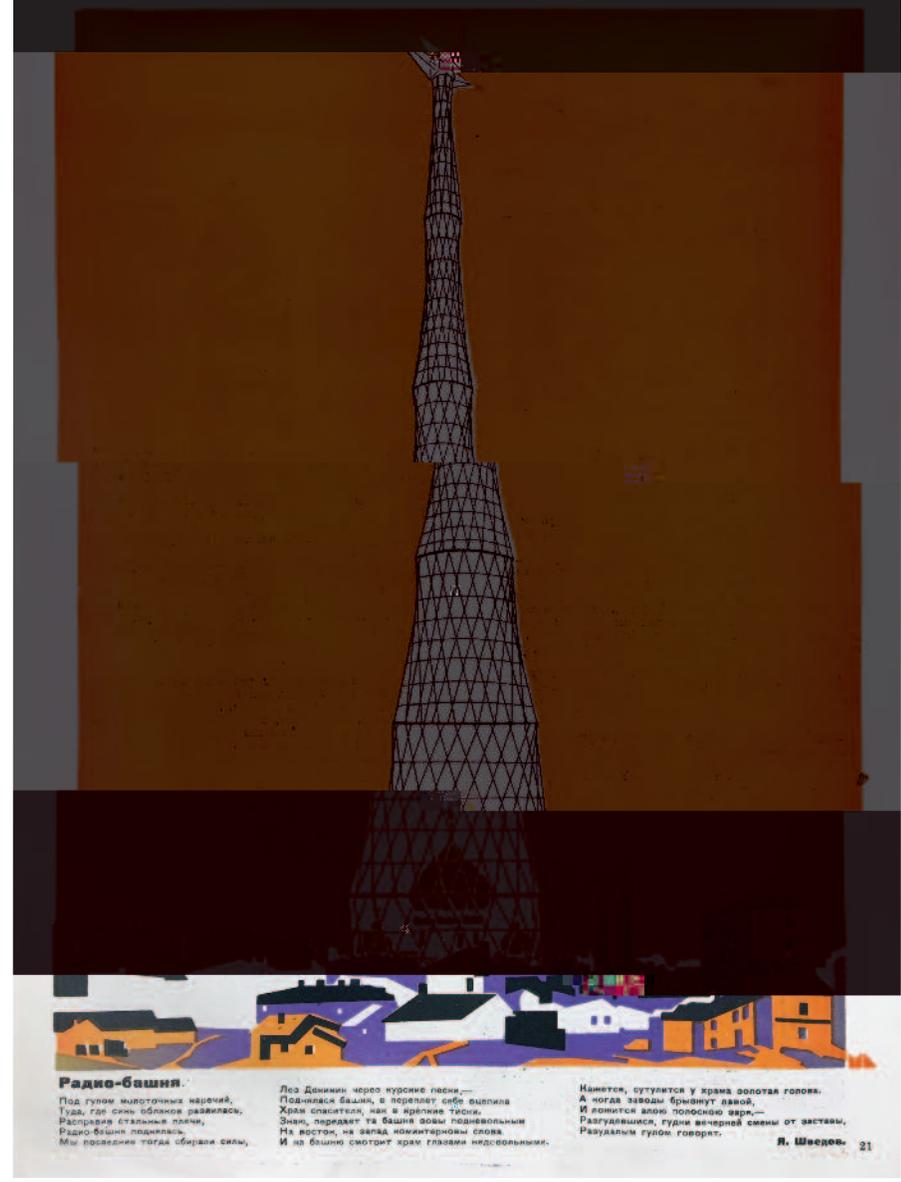
Against the backdrop of thrumming hammers,
 / The radio tower flexed its steel shoulders /
 And soared skywards into the blue. / We were
 gathering our last strength back then, / Denikin
 was making his way across the Kursk sands. /
 The tower rose up and gripped / The Cathedral

of Christ the Saviour* in its vice-like diagrid. /
 The tower, I know, broadcasts appeals to the
 unfree people in the east. / And the words of
 the Komintern to the west. / The church gazes
 disconcertedly at the tower, / And its golden
 head seems to droop. / And when the factories
 spit lava, / And twilight falls in a scarlet silver, /

The whistle for the evening shift / Speaks in
 daring tones at the factory gates.

[The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was the largest
 church in Russia, but was dwarfed by the Shukhov
 Radio Tower, built between 1920 to 1922.]

Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 9, 1924



Радио-башня

Под гулом миллионов наречий,
 Там, где синь обильно развилась,
 Расправив стальные плечи,
 Радио-башня поднялась.
 Мы посвятили тогда небеса силы,

Лео Деникин через курские саваны,
 Поднялась башня, в перелет себе выплыва
 Хлеб оплываеи, как в крапиво тисно,
 Звон, перекает та башня зовы подпольными
 На восток, на запад коминтерновы слова
 И на башню смотрит храм глазами недо-вольными.

Нанеется, сутулится у храма золотая голова,
 А когда заводы брызнут лавой,
 И загорится вном лавоскою зари,
 Разбульвавшись, гудит вечерней светом от заставы,
 Разудальным гулом говорит.

Л. Шедоо. 21

Everywhere the poster powerfully demands attention and speaks to the topic of the day. It bristles, castigates, illuminates, carries to action, reveals the task at hand and the widest horizons of socialist construction. The poster activates the builders of socialism and infuriates the class enemy.¹²⁵

In his 1932 pamphlet *Religion in the USSR*—one of very few Soviet atheist publications to be translated and sold abroad—Yaroslavsky linked his atheist project explicitly to Stalin's five-year industrialisation scheme:

The Five-Year Plan, which maps out our economic construction, is riveted to another and a concurrent Five-Year Plan designed to tear up the roots of religion. This vast army of exploiters and priests of all the religious creeds all over the world will realise that the day when the earth will tremble beneath their feet is drawing near.¹²⁶

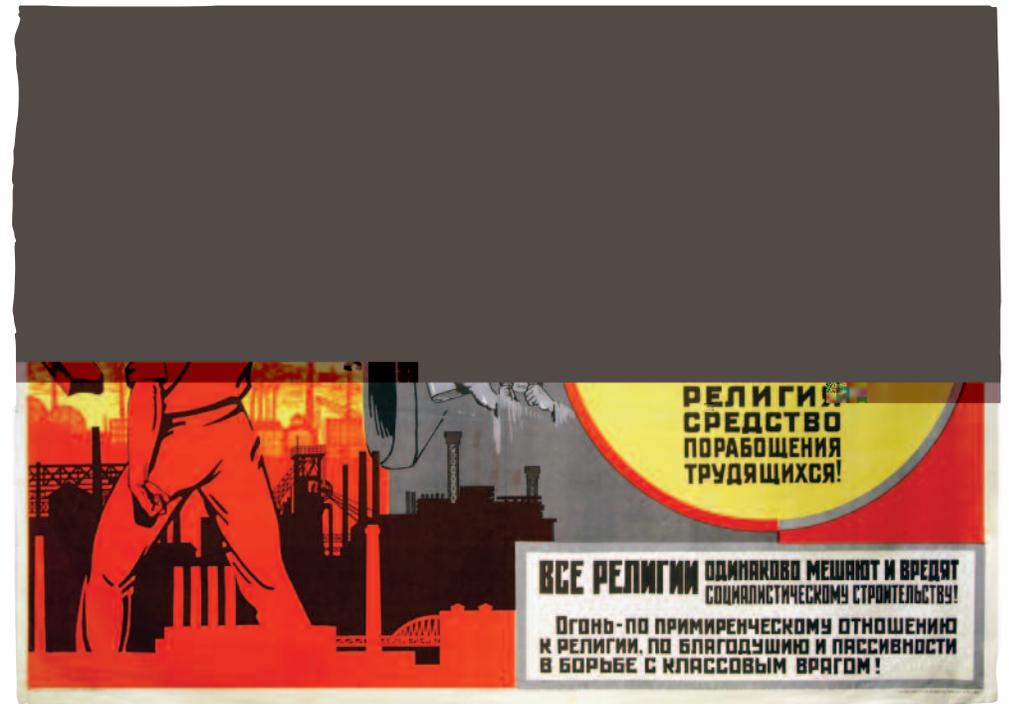
The speed and scale of Soviet industrialisation was both extraordinary and brutal. Whereas Soviet industry had failed throughout the 1920s to reach even pre-revolutionary levels, the Five-Year Plan united society in a collective project that expanded industry by fifty per cent. But the inevitable hitches and industrial accidents led to the scapegoating of mythical 'saboteurs' and 'wreckers'. This did not stop millions of peasants from fleeing the villages to find work in the cities, and the USSR proclaimed full urban employment.¹²⁷

Stalin began to reshape Moscow—the city Russian Orthodox Christians had long revered as the 'Third Rome' [26]—in line with Soviet propaganda about gleaming, godless cities of the future. To this end, in 1931, demolition crews dynamited the massive white marble edifice of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, the largest church in Russia, which had been built between 1839 and 1883 to honour Russia's defeat of Napoleon.¹²⁸ [27]

It was during the years of the first Five-Year Plan, too, that authorities turned other religious sites—such as Moscow's Donskoi and Strastnoi monasteries and Leningrad's Kazan and St. Isaac's cathedrals—into anti-religious museums designed to strip religious relics of their holy aura and explain them according to a Marxist reading of history.¹²⁹ This meant exposing clerical trickery and the economic origins of religion, and presenting science in opposition to superstition. In the basement of Kazan Cathedral, visitors could find a vivid waxwork display revealing the mediaeval torture methods of the Spanish Inquisition.¹³⁰ [28]

The Inquisition, as it happened, took on new layers of meaning in the 1930s. As Stalin consolidated power in the wake of his chaotic and costly collectivisation and industrialisation campaigns—which had caused deep resentment and misgiving both within the Party and outside it—he had the NKVD carry out its own Soviet Inquisition.

The 'Great Purge', as it became known, led to the execution of hundreds of thousands of people, including ninety-eight members of the central committee of the Communist Party, many of them leading Bolsheviks.¹³¹ Among these was Nikolai Bukharin, co-author of *The ABC of Communism*, whom Stalin put through a humiliating show trial along with several high-profile colleagues in 1938. Facing death for his imaginary participation in a non-existent Trotskyist plot to prepare an imperialist attack on the USSR, Bukharin was morally and spiritually undone. As he said at his trial,



Religion drags down the Five-Year Plan!

Down with religious holidays!
Everyone join the Society of the Militant Godless!
Religion is a means of enslaving the workers!

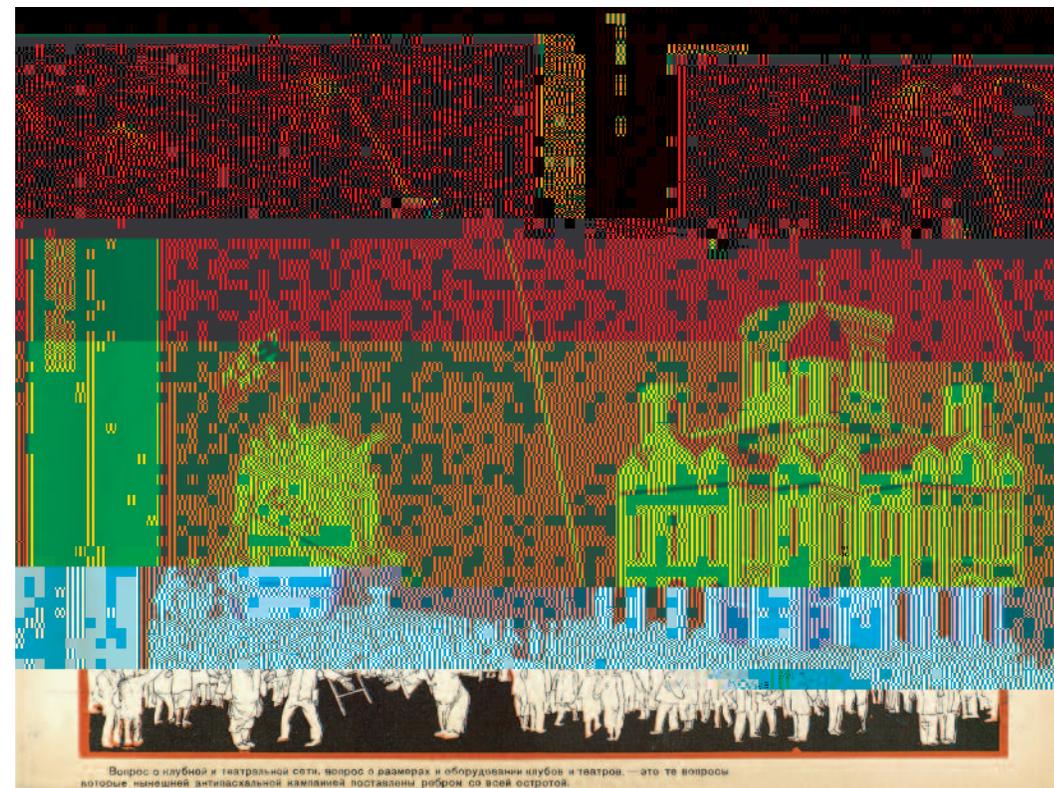
All religions alike hinder and harm the construction of socialism!

Fire! on conciliatory attitudes toward religion, on complacency and passivity in the fight with the class enemy!

Poster (undated)



The destruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow, December 1931



Вопрос о клубной и театральной сети, вопрос о размерах и оборудовании клубов и театров, — это те вопросы которые нынешней антихристианской кампании поставлены ребром со всей остротой.

Flag: **No room**

Tin can: **Club** crossed out: **Astrakhan herring**

The question of the club and theatre network, the question of the size and facilities available to clubs and theatres – it is these questions that the current anti-Easter campaign has put most forcefully.

A significant proportion of adult white- and blue-collar workers who attended church did so not at all because they are believers, but because there turned out to be no room in the clubs, theatres, or cinemas.

Godless magazine, Issue 10, 1929

When you ask yourself 'If you must die, what are you dying for?' an absolutely black emptiness suddenly rises before you.¹³²

Before he was shot, he wrote to his wife, Anna Larina, marvelling at his helplessness in the face of

an infernal machine that seems to use mediaeval methods, yet possesses gigantic power, fabricates organised slander, acts boldly and confidently.¹³³ [29]

At the very height of this Inquisition, Stalin took a close interest in the development of religious life in the USSR. In 1937, he added a question about religion to the USSR's first large-scale official census. There was, not surprisingly, a degree of popular apprehension on the subject. As one of the enumerators sent to Soviet homes that January reported,

There were all sorts of provocative rumours flying about. An old woman asked whether it was true that the authorities were planning to expel religious people from Moscow ... Some of the people I questioned were religious. They discussed this openly, though they wanted to know why such questions were being put ... There was a Christmas tree in almost every apartment.

Information about enduring religious life was unwelcome. Stalin suppressed the census and persecuted the census-takers because it revealed the scale of his Terror.¹³⁴ That year alone, authorities closed more than eight thousand churches and arrested thirty-five thousand clergy, effecting the virtual destruction of outward religious life.¹³⁵

Although Stalin's Inquisition might have secured his position at home, his purge of the military—including the torture and execution of several generals and the removal of about a half of the officer corps—left the USSR ill-prepared to face the rising threat of Nazi Germany. Adolf Hitler had described the Soviet state as a Jewish empire, and Bolshevism as 'Christianity's illegitimate child' because 'both are inventions of the Jew.' He intended a war to subjugate Slavic peoples as 'born slaves who feel the need of a master'.

Stalin, unable to reach collective security arrangements with Britain and France, tried his luck at peace with Germany, and on 23 August 1939, signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Even though the USSR and Germany had 'poured buckets of filth' over each other, he told German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop in Moscow, he was prepared to toast Hitler. The agreement bought him twenty-two months.

Operation Barbarossa, the German surprise attack on the 22 June 1941, was the largest land invasion in history. Stalin, who had dismissed several credible warnings ahead of the attack, met it with denial and, for a time, lost his nerve. It was Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov who addressed the Soviet people to tell them war had begun.¹³⁶

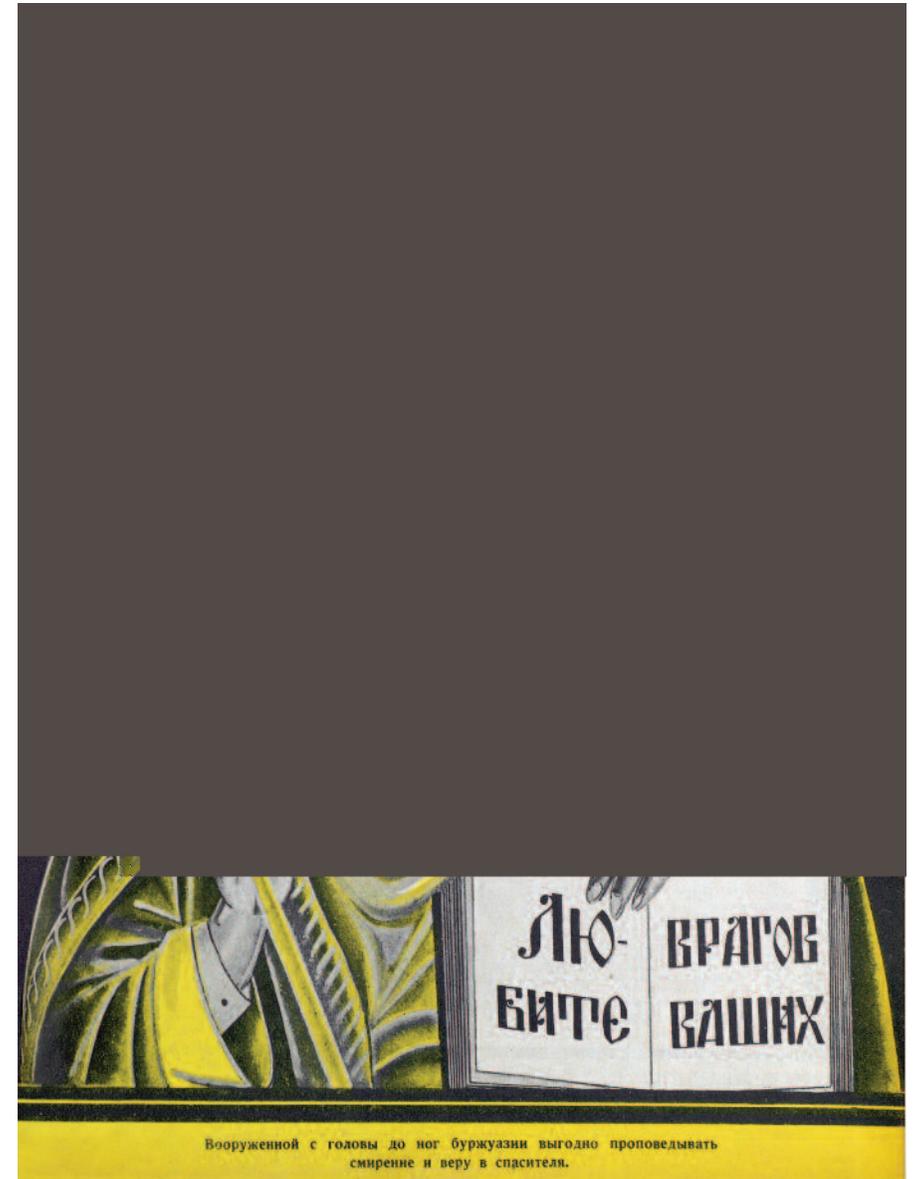
Metropolitan Sergei, who had already declared the Orthodox church's loyalty to the Soviet state, gave a patriotic call to arms:

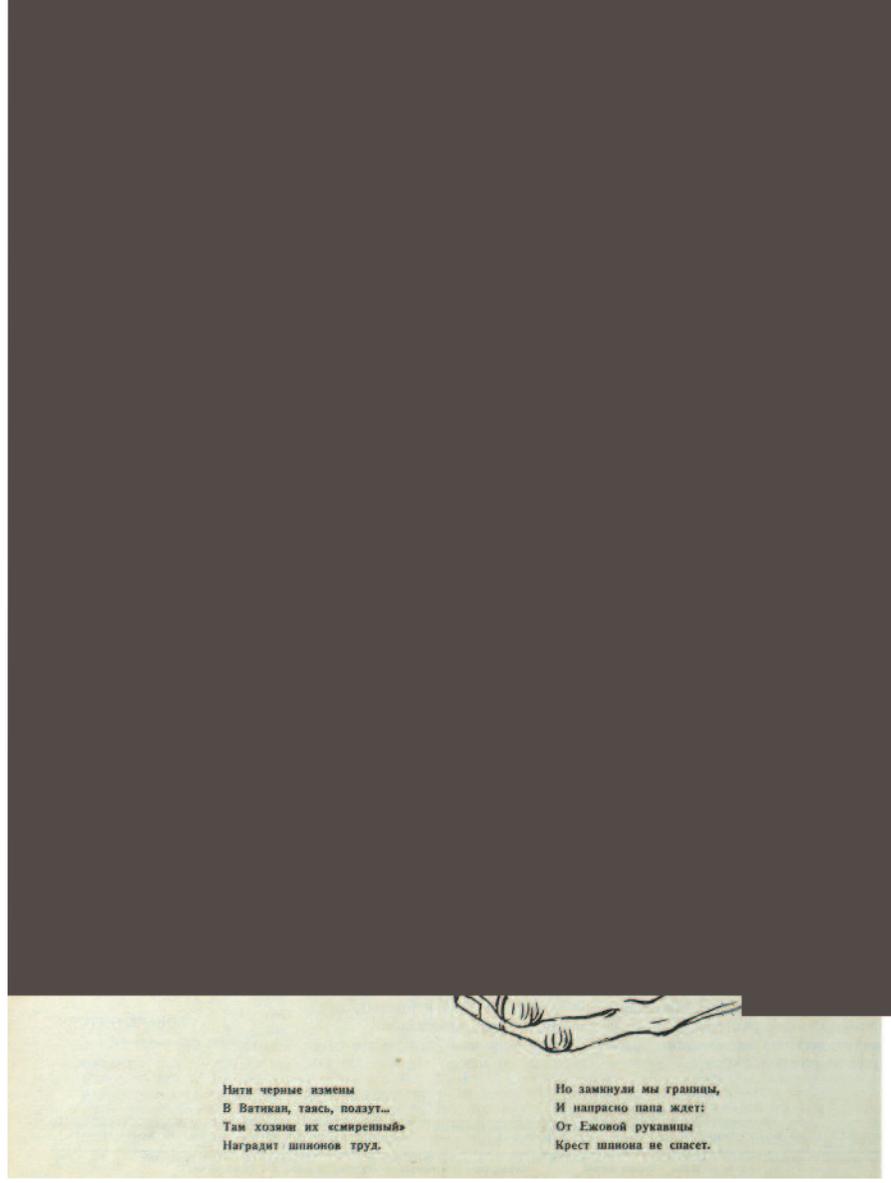
We, the residents of Russia, have been cherishing the hope that the blaze of war, which has nearly engulfed the whole globe, would spare us. But fascism, which recognises only the law of naked power, and is accustomed to mocking the demands of honour and morality, is true to itself. Fascist

In the book: **Love your enemies**

It is expedient for the bourgeoisie, armed from head to toe, to preach humility and belief in a saviour.

Godless magazine, Issue 24, 1928





The black threads of treason / creep furtively to the Vatican / And the Pope waits in vain: / There, the 'humble' masters / Reward spies for their work

But we have closed the borders / And the Pope waits in vain: / The cross cannot save a spy / From Yezhov's* iron grip

Sign: **USSR** sleeve: **NKVD** (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) [*Nikolai Yezhov was head of the NKVD from 1936 to 1938; the worst years of Stalin's Terror.]

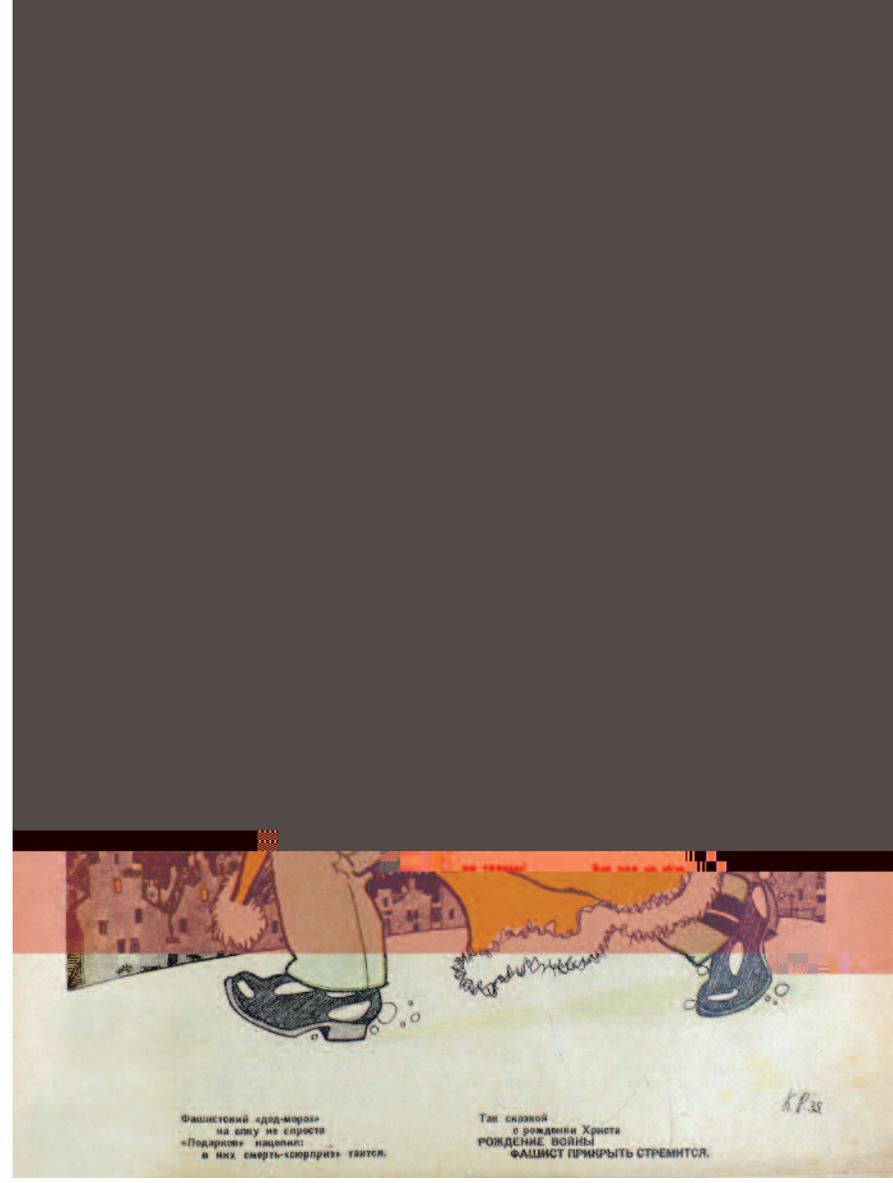
Godless at the Machine magazine, issue 3, 1938

This Fascist 'Santa' / has not hung the tree / with 'presents' so innocently / Within them lurks a death-'surprise'

By means of a fairytale / about the birth of Christ / **THE FASCIST AIMS / TO CONCEAL THE BIRTH OF WAR**

Christmas: fascist-style

Godless magazine, issue 11, 1935



robbers have attacked our homeland. Defying all contracts and promises, they suddenly fell upon us, and now the blood of peaceful citizens is already irrigating our native land.

He invoked Christian Russia's historical memory of non-Orthodox invaders who had tried to 'put our people on their knees before untruth', from the Mongol khan Batu to Napoleon. He wrote,

Our Orthodox Church has always shared the destiny of the people. Together with them she has borne both trials and successes. She will not leave them now ... The Church of Christ blesses all the Orthodox to defend the sacred borders of our homeland. Lord grant us victory.¹³⁷

At street level, religious life resurfaced. As one female war veteran later told the journalist Svetlana Alexievich,

'War!!!' I remember how people wept. As many as I met outside, they all wept. Some even prayed. It was unusual ... people in the street praying and crossing themselves. In school they taught us that there was no God.¹³⁸

Yaroslavsky's *Godless* ceased publication that month. The back cover carried a defiant cartoon diptych. On the left, a priest—apparently in Western Europe, tells a congregation, 'War teaches us to pray.' On the right, workers hoist a bilingual Marxist slogan onto a wall in a benighted European city. They answer him, 'And us it teaches to fight.'¹³⁹

But most wartime propaganda owed more to Metropolitan Sergei's message than to Marx. Its tone is best captured by poet Vasily Lebedev-Kumach's words for composer Aleksandr Aleksandrov's thudding wartime dirge, *The Sacred War*:

Arise, vast country
Arise for the deadly fight
Against dark fascist forces,
Against the cursed horde

Let noble wrath
Boil over like a wave
This is a people's war
A sacred war!¹⁴⁰

Stalin, following Sergei's lead, turned to Orthodox heroes of old, though he added Lenin into the mix. As he told the armed forces on the anniversary of Bolshevik rule,

The whole world is looking upon you as the power capable of destroying the German robber hordes! ... May you be inspired in this war by the heroic figures of our great ancestors, Aleksandr Nevsky, Dmitri Donskoi, Minin and Pozharsky, Aleksandr Suvorov, Mikhail Kutuzov. May you be blessed by great Lenin's victorious banner!¹⁴¹ [30]

Appealing to Orthodox heroes was one way to contend with Nazi church policies in now-occupied territory. In his message on the day of the invasion, Sergei had warned Orthodox believers against 'sly considerations on the other side of the border'¹⁴² where

PRIESTLY RHETORIC IS AN ENEMY WEAPON

Lord, Capital, reign over us forevermore / And, strengthening your throne of finance / Hearken to our voice of prayer!

Our god is capital and his command / Is that we attack the Soviet Union!

[Demyan Bedny or 'Demyan the Poor' was probably the inspiration for 'Ivan Homeless' in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.]

Comrade! If all of these utter bastards / Try to put fear into us / We will answer their 'crusade' so / all that remains of them is ashes!

DEMYAN BEDNY

Our anti-Soviet front is united / And Orthodox priest, and rabbi, / And the high priest of Catholicism / We are all apostles of capitalism!

Poster, 1932



the Germans were prepared to exploit popular resentment against Soviet atheism.

From its rise to power in 1933, the Nazi regime had paid close attention to church policy since, as Hitler put it in *Mein Kampf*,

in all previous historical experience, a purely political party has never succeeded in producing a religious reformation.

The Nazis set 'the moral feelings of German race'—a euphemism for Nazi Party power—against the liberty of German churches, and said they stood for 'positive'—meaning compliant—Christianity. They sought and secured a concordat with Pope Pius XI within months of taking power, though they betrayed its spirit with impunity, arresting clergy and closing Catholic publications and organisations as it suited them. They controlled Protestant pastors through a parallel process of co-optation and terror.¹⁴³

Less well known is the strange closeness between Nazi ideologues and Russian Orthodox émigrés in Germany after 1917. Alfred Rosenberg, the leading ideologue of the nascent Nazi Party in Munich in the early 1920s, was a Baltic German. He had been born in Reval (modern-day Tallinn), had studied architecture in Riga and Moscow, and had fled the Russian Revolution in 1918. Rosenberg blamed Jews for Bolshevism and helped to establish the Judaeo-Bolshevik myth in Germany.¹⁴⁴ In those years, Rosenberg met ultranationalist Russian émigré monarchists who hoped to build up an alternative priesthood for a post-Soviet Russia through a rebel Russian Orthodox Church council called the Karlovci Synod, which had formed in Karlovci, Yugoslavia during the Russian Civil War.

In the late thirties, the Nazis built an Orthodox cathedral in Berlin and financed the renovation of existing churches. In 1939, Metropolitan Anastasy of the Karlovci Synod wrote Hitler a sycophantic thank-you letter containing his vision of a post-Soviet Russia:

We see the special hand of providence in the fact that just at this time, when churches and national shrines are being trampled down and destroyed in our fatherland your constructive policy includes the building of this church. As one of many omens, the creation of this church strengthens the hope that our long suffering fatherland has not reached the end of its history, and that He who governs the destiny of all will, in the same way as He sent you to the German people, send to us a leader who, having resurrected our fatherland, will restore it to its national greatness.

The Nazis named a certain Archbishop Serafim—not a Russian but a German who had converted in Russia—as the head of the Orthodox diocese of Germany. After the invasion, he became 'Leader of all the Orthodox in the Third Reich and the territories it controlled.'

In those territories, people spontaneously re-opened churches en masse, and the Wehrmacht, or regular German army, provided assistance. But there was no clear church policy. Wehrmacht leaders tended to see anti-communist Russians as potential allies against the Soviet system, whereas Rosenberg, now Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, focused on firing up rebellious Soviet minorities. Hitler saw Slavs as subhuman, perhaps to be exploited, but never to be allies.¹⁴⁵ But as the German war effort foundered from 1943, the argument for recruiting troops from the

Books on the fire: Marx, Lenin, Darwin

THE TRUE FACE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Godless magazine, Issue 6, 1934



east became ever more compelling. Around 650,000 Soviet citizens ultimately fought for Germany, including Cossacks, Georgians, Armenians, Caucasian Muslims, and Buddhist Kalmucks.¹⁴⁶

As part of the war effort, Stalin began increasingly to integrate the Russian church into Soviet life and propaganda. In 1942, he gave it the recently-disused printing house of the League of the Militant Godless to publish its own propaganda volume, *The Truth About Religion in Russia*, in foreign languages for consumption abroad. The book presented an image of complete religious freedom in the USSR and even praised the late Tikhon without mentioning his anathematisation of the Bolsheviks. By accident, one edition carried the old publisher's mark, 'Anti-Religious Press of the USSR'.

In January 1943, Metropolitan Sergei wrote to Stalin for permission to open a bank account for the funds it was raising for the war effort. Although the church was not a legal entity and was forbidden to engage in charitable activity, Stalin agreed in writing and even thanked the church for its efforts. The church raised hundreds of millions of roubles over the course of the year and established a tank column named after the mediaeval hero-saint, Dmitri Donskoi.¹⁴⁷

Stalin, who faced ongoing diplomatic pressure from the Roosevelt administration over religious freedom, and needed as much American war materiel as he could get, finally upended Soviet atheist ideology ahead of the November 1943 Tehran Conference with Roosevelt and Churchill.¹⁴⁸ That September, Stalin invited the three Orthodox Metropolitans—Sergei of Moscow and Aleksei and Nikolai of Leningrad—to a late-night meeting at his study in the Kremlin. Stalin began, according to one account, with a black joke about the priests killed in the Terror of the thirties:

Why don't you have cadres? Where have they disappeared to?

Sergei answered with another:

There are all sorts of reasons why we have no cadres. One of the reasons is that we train a person for the priesthood, and he becomes Marshal of the Soviet Union.

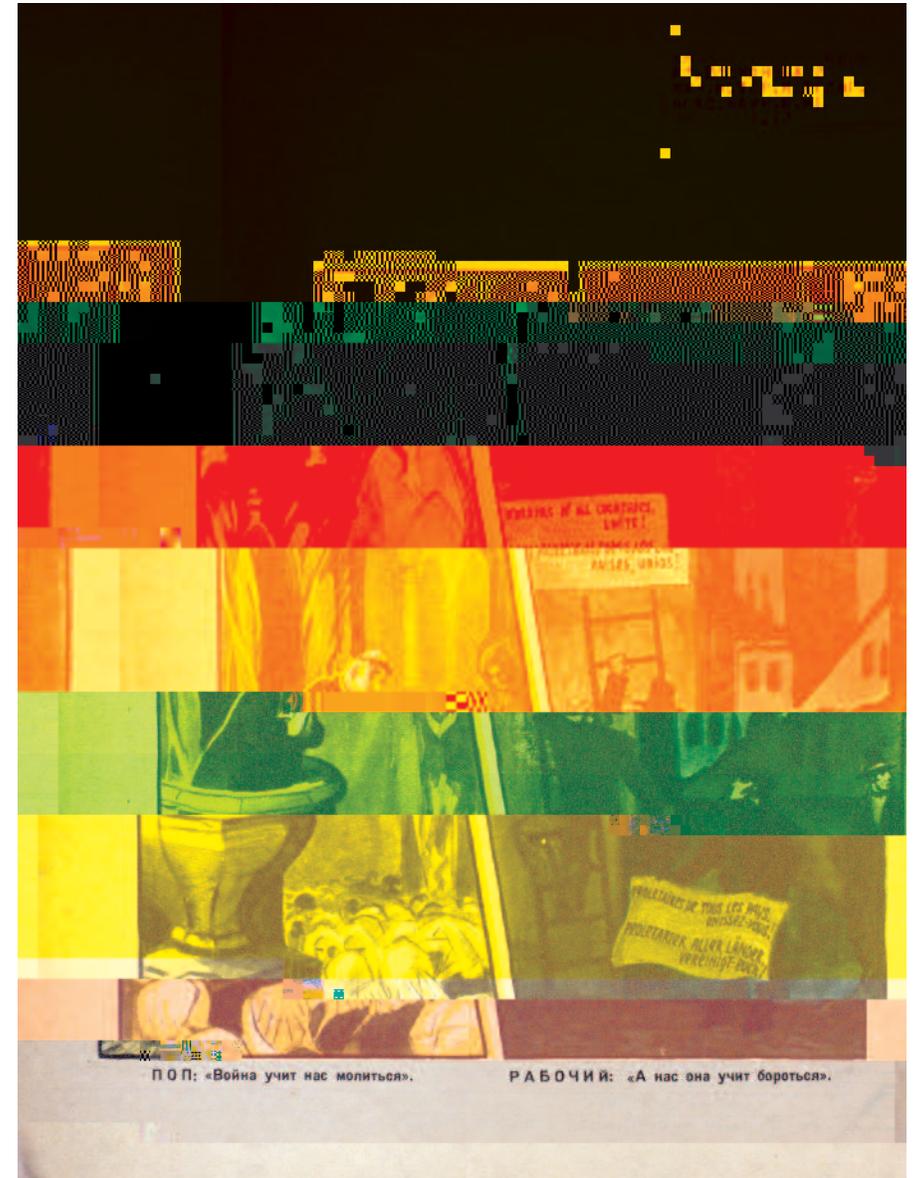
Stalin, the story goes, smiled and took the priests on a tour down memory lane that lasted till three in the morning. Within days, the church held its long-dreamed-of *sobor* and elected Sergei patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church. Seminaries and churches, many of them dormant for decades, began to reopen.

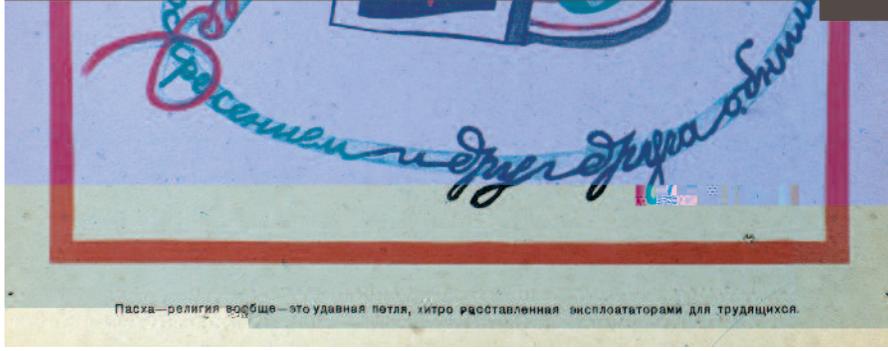
That November, Sergei held a liturgical service in honour of 1917, the re-taking of Kiev from German forces, and 'the God-protected country of ours, and for those that govern her with the God-given leader at the helm.'¹⁴⁹

Yaroslavsky died that December.

PRIEST: 'War teaches us to pray.'
WORKER: 'And it teaches us to fight.'
[This was the final cartoon to appear in *Godless*.]

Godless magazine, Issue 6, 1941

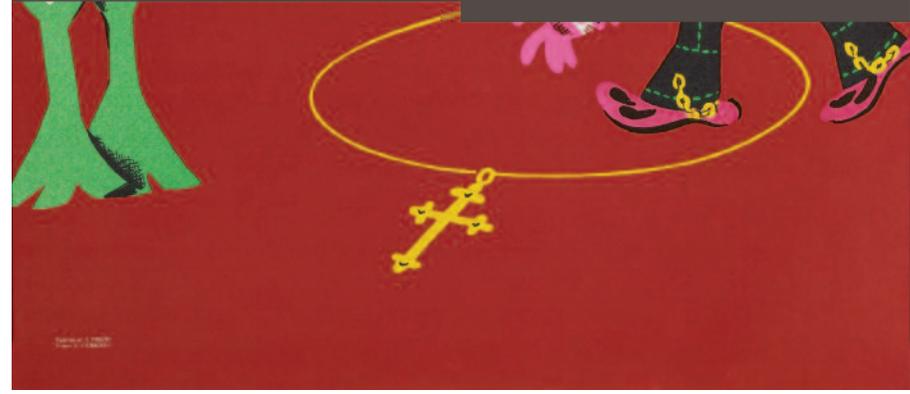




Easter — and religion in general — is a constricting
snare, cunningly set by the exploiters for the workers.

'Rope': Easter. Christ is Risen! Let us forgive everything for
the sake of the resurrection, embrace one another, and cry
out, Christ is Risen!
Eggs: Christ is Risen

Godless Issue 7-8, 1932



A peacock has found some church junk / A new fashion
has swept him up! / You're setting out on a slippery path /
That snare might just reel you in!

Poster, 1977

NIGHTMARES AND SPACEMEN

Stalin came to a horrific end. Alone in his dacha in late February 1953, he suffered a stroke and a cerebral haemorrhage. His guards did not check on him until the following evening, and he died a slow, painful death over several days.¹⁵⁰ His daughter Svetlana later recalled the nightmarish scene at his bedside:

His face altered and became dark. His lips turned black and his features unrecognisable. The last hours were nothing but a slow strangulation. The death agony was terrible. He literally choked to death as we watched. At what seemed like the very last moment he suddenly opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room. It was a terrible glance, insane or perhaps angry and full of the fear of death and the unfamiliar doctors bent over him. The glance swept over everyone in a second. Then something incomprehensible and terrible happened that to this day I can't forget and don't understand. He suddenly lifted his hand as though he were pointing to something above and bringing down a curse on us all. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace, and no one could say to whom or what it might be directed. The next moment, after a final effort, the spirit wrenched itself free of the flesh.¹⁵¹

The capricious judge and executioner was gone. Yet for Soviet citizens, there was another side to Stalin. He had personified Soviet communism and projected the image of a caring father. News of his death left the country in shock.¹⁵² Everywhere, people wept—even in the Gulag. Among the thousands of mourners at his funeral in Red Square, around a hundred were crushed to death.

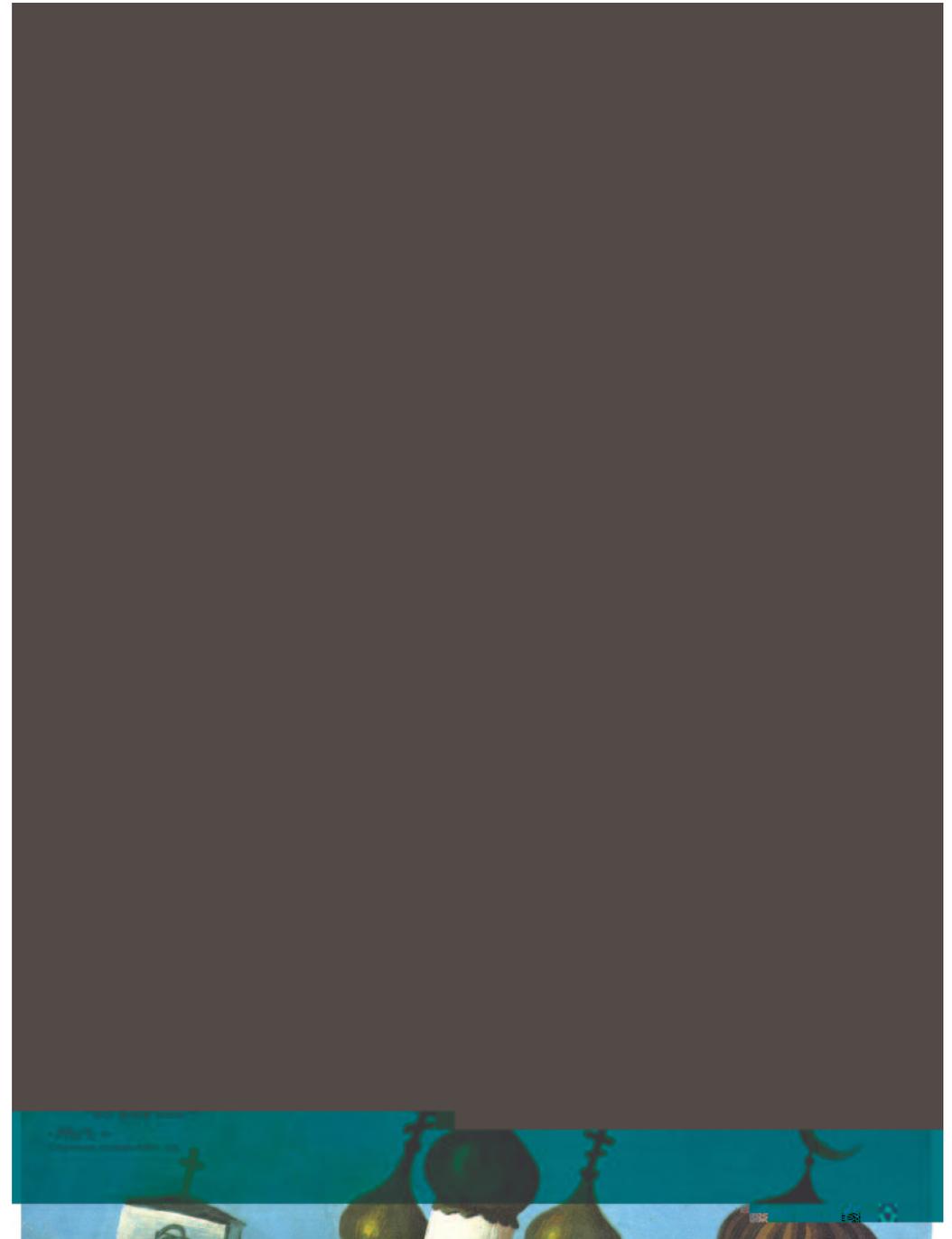
Nikita Khrushchev, then leader of the party secretariat, said he 'wept sincerely' over Stalin's death. But there was relief, too.¹⁵³ Amid new talk of 'collegiality' and 'collectivity', Khrushchev found himself part of a ruling triumvirate along with Georgy Malenkov, the head of government, and Lavrenty Beria, the secret police chief.¹⁵⁴

Beria, the most blood-soaked member of Stalin's inner circle, initiated the first post-Stalin reforms, including an amnesty that freed over a million Gulag prisoners. He began to curse Stalin's name.¹⁵⁵ Khrushchev, growing anxious about an emerging alliance between Beria and Malenkov, won the latter over by exploiting his fear of Beria's police powers. He then denounced Beria before the Party as a phoney communist. Beria was arrested, held in a secret underground bunker, and shot at the end of the year. Khrushchev became head of the Party, and the face of a new Soviet government focused on ending Stalinist terror.¹⁵⁶

[The most prominent cosmonaut-atheist was Gherman Titov, whose flight in August 1961 followed Yuri Gagarin's that April. In 1962, he told the audience at the Seattle World's Fair that he had seen no gods or angels in space, and that he believed in mankind's strength and reason.]

THERE IS NO GOD!

Poster, 1975



People spoke of the post-Stalin moment as a 'thaw'. But as Khrushchev later wrote, We were scared—really scared. We were afraid that the thaw might unleash a flood, which we wouldn't be able to control and which could drown us ... We wanted to guide the progress of the thaw so that it would stimulate only those creative forces which would contribute to the strengthening of socialism.¹⁵⁷

Religion was not among those forces. And yet the country—due in part to Stalin's agreement with the church and to the nationalistic feelings the war had stirred up—was experiencing a religious resurgence. The number of churches in the USSR had grown from a few hundred before the war to nearly fifteen thousand, many of which were in newly-annexed western territories that had not experienced atheist campaigns before the war.¹⁵⁸

The decade between Stalin's rapprochement with the Orthodox Church and his death had been one in which the attitude of the Party towards religion was difficult to determine.

In 1946, Stalin's last church-smashing campaign had targeted Ukrainian Uniate churches, whose three million members looked to Rome. He loosed NKVD terror upon them before forcing the survivors under the authority of the compliant Moscow Patriarchate.¹⁵⁹

He also established two special bureaucracies—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, to manage the majority and minority religions, respectively. These were responsible for re-opening churches, and, though overseen by the KGB, afforded believers some administrative distance from the touchy security organs.

In 1947, the tepidly-named Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge—known as *Znanie*, or 'Knowledge' for short—filled the void left by Stalin's abandonment of Yaroslavsky's League of the Militant Godless.¹⁶⁰

The Orthodox clergy dutifully demonstrated their usefulness as propagandists. Speaking about the Korean War at the USSR Conference for Peace in 1949, Metropolitan Nikolai—one of those present at Stalin's late-night meeting in 1943—denounced the US as 'the rabid fornicatress of resurrected Babylon'. The Americans, he said, were neo-fascists bent on racial extermination, vicious criminals who mutilated women, experimented on prisoners, executed Korean intellectuals, and used bacteriological warfare to spread the plague.¹⁶¹

Late Stalinism also brought an anti-Jewish campaign levelled at 'cosmopolitanism' and culminating in the 'Doctors' Plot'—a conspiracy theory about mostly-Jewish doctors plotting medical murder on behalf of foreign enemies. In the months leading up to his death, Stalin had proposed deporting Soviet Jews to the Far East.¹⁶²

The massive expansion of convict labour that Stalin's successors now sought to reverse had sent twelve million people to the Gulag between 1945 and 1950.¹⁶³

These frozen camps gave rise, in turn, to a new landscape of religious opposition. In his monumental 1973 study, *The Gulag Archipelago*, the former communist and war veteran Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn argued that it was stolid, quietly religious convicts who



- What were you thinking when you built this apartment block?
- We thought that this little church was an ancient monument...

Krokodil magazine, Issue 10, 1961

best endured the acute moral degeneration or ‘soul mangle’ brought on by constant fear and hunger:

Those people became corrupted who before camp had not been enriched by any morality at all or by any spiritual upbringing ... Camp corruption was a mass phenomenon, but not only because the camps were awful, but because in addition we Soviet people stepped upon the soil of the archipelago spiritually disarmed—long since prepared to be corrupted, already tinged by it out in freedom.

It was those spiritually-armed individuals, Solzhenitsyn wrote, who showed a moral fortitude, while members of the (presumably secular) intelligentsia suffered worst of all.¹⁶⁴

Khrushchev was no member of the intelligentsia, but he was personally anti-religious. A poor peasant from the village of Kalinovka near the Ukrainian border, the Christianity of his youth had meant being christened in the local church, receiving basic reading lessons from a priest, and watching bare-knuckle fist fights on Christmas and Epiphany. Village ways left him contemptuous of what Karl Marx had once called ‘the idiocy of rural life.’

His early biography contains accounts of both atheistic influence and atheistic action.

In the first instance, a freethinking teacher named Lydia Shevchenko became a heroine of his tsarist-era youth. She was an atheist who never went to church and ‘for this,’ Khrushchev later recalled, ‘the peasants of the village never forgave her.’ Shevchenko gave him banned books and pamphlets and encouraged him to get an education.

In the second, Khrushchev scandalised Kalinovka himself: when, as a Red Army soldier, he returned from the front during the Russian Civil War and discovered his first wife Yefrosinia dead of typhus, he aborted his family’s plans for a church funeral and demanded that her coffin be passed by hand over the cemetery fence rather than being carried in the usual way through the church. The villagers, his third wife Nina later told their children, ‘still shake their heads disapprovingly.’¹⁶⁵

Under Khrushchev’s leadership, Party members began to complain about atheist backsliding. As a July 1954 Central Committee resolution put it,

many party organisations are providing inadequate leadership of scientific atheist propaganda amongst the population, as a result of which this important aspect of ideological work is in a neglected condition. At the same time the churches and religious sects have revitalised their activities, strengthened their cadres and adapted flexibly to modern conditions, thus reinforcing their influence on some sections of the population.

A short-lived press campaign attempted to draw lessons from everyday events: a *Pravda* report ridiculed the dual belief system of some drunken party officials in Omutninsk who turned up at a priest’s house in the middle of the night demanding a baptism, but, when the Party found out, blamed their mothers-in-law. Another paper told the horror story of a young woman who unwittingly married a Baptist, who in turn crushed her educational prospects and murdered her. The piece said that the ‘dark forces’ behind the crime—his religious beliefs—‘remained unexposed’.

Religiosity is a heavy yoke. / A yoke like a personal prison. / Perceive the yoke and throw it off — / It won't fall off by itself.

On the pillory. Superstition / Prejudice

Poster, 1981



IN TRUE LIGHT

Logo: **Fighting Pencil**

On the bottle held by the babushka: **Holy Water**. On the newspaper under the arm of praying man: **Watchtower, Kingdom of Jehovah**. On the bottle held by the priest: **Vodka**. On the tall bottle by the man on his knees: **Holy tincture**. On the smaller bottle: **Top quality cognac**.

Album-exhibition
'Artist of the Russian Soviet Federative
Socialist Republic'
Leningrad, 1962.

Cover of poster collection:
In True Light, 1962



But after a few months of such scattershot material, Khrushchev signed a decree acknowledging ‘errors’ in the campaign, and the Party put the project back on ice.¹⁶⁶

There was, in any case, a more pressing ‘religious’ matter—the unreckoned-with deification of Stalin. In his courageous ‘secret speech’ at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, Khrushchev denounced Stalin for establishing a ‘cult of personality’ in the USSR. Marx and Engels, Khrushchev told the Party, had rejected ‘the superstitious worship of authority’ but ‘Stalin ... using all conceivable methods, supported the glorification of his own person.’ Stalin had even published a holy book starring himself:

One of the most characteristic examples of Stalin’s ... lack of even elementary modesty is the edition of his *Short Biography*, which was published in 1948 ... This book is an expression of the most dissolute flattery, an example of making a man into a godhead, of transforming him into an infallible sage, ‘the greatest leader’, ‘the sublime strategist of all times and nations’. Finally no other words could be found with which to lift Stalin up to the heavens.

Rejecting Stalin’s legacy was a matter of saving the revolution. Khrushchev called on the Party ‘in a Bolshevik manner to condemn and to eradicate the cult of the individual’, to ‘restore completely the Leninist principles of Soviet Socialist democracy’ and to ‘accomplish the great task of building communism’.¹⁶⁷

Khrushchev was going to bring Bolshevism into the future. It was perhaps a testament to the incredulity this caused abroad that, when Khrushchev spoke to the American press between the launches of the Sputnik 1 and Sputnik 2 satellites in 1957, they drew him into one of his relatively few public statements about religious life in the USSR:

We still have people who believe in God. Let them believe. To believe or not to believe is a personal affair for each individual, a matter for his conscience. All this does not, however, prevent the Soviet people from living in peace and friendship. And it often happens that there are believers and atheists in one family. But those who believe in God are becoming fewer. The vast majority of young people growing up today do not believe in God. Education, scientific knowledge and study of the laws of nature leave no room for belief in God.

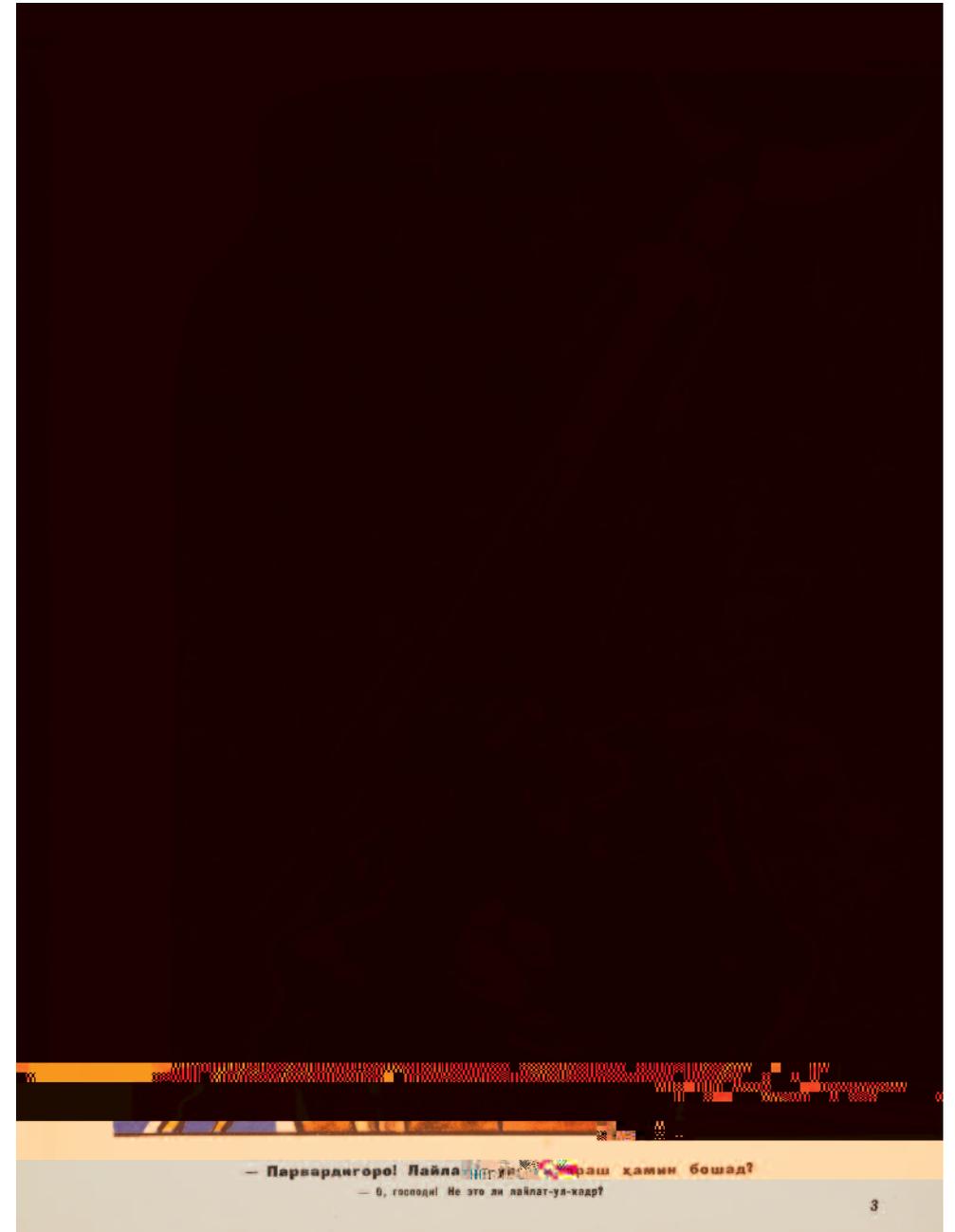
But within the Party, attitudes were never quite so relaxed. Even as Soviet satellites orbited the Earth, Soviet sociologists reported that a new generation of charismatic priests was influencing young people, while older people, benefitting from a new pension system, could go to church without worrying about whether it would lead to discrimination at work. By 1958, there was a new push within the Party to bolster atheist propaganda and obstruct religious life.¹⁶⁸ In 1959 a new anti-religious campaign gained momentum.¹⁶⁹

That year, the Knowledge Society launched its flagship atheist journal, *Science and Religion*, which was the first major atheist magazine since *Godless* had folded. *Science and Religion* was black and white and mostly text-based, although the articles were illustrated with photographs and cartoons that recalled the style of Yaroslavsky’s publication. The cover of the first issue advertised a new article about Marx’s forerunner Ludwig Feuerbach. It also carried a piece on the French *encyclopédiste* Denis Diderot—this an apparent nod to Lenin’s recommendation of eighteenth-century Enlightenment

Oh Lord, isn't it Laylat al-Qadr?

[Muslims consider Laylat-al-Qadr, which marks the beginning of the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad, the holiest night of the year. For this religious man, it is no time for noisy rocket launches. But for the Soviets, nothing is holier than scientific progress. The text is presented in both Tajik and Russian.]

Poster, 1969





These are not the olden times — / We keep pace with science, / We declare: everything is from God, / Even... the particle accelerator.

'This, too, is from God!'

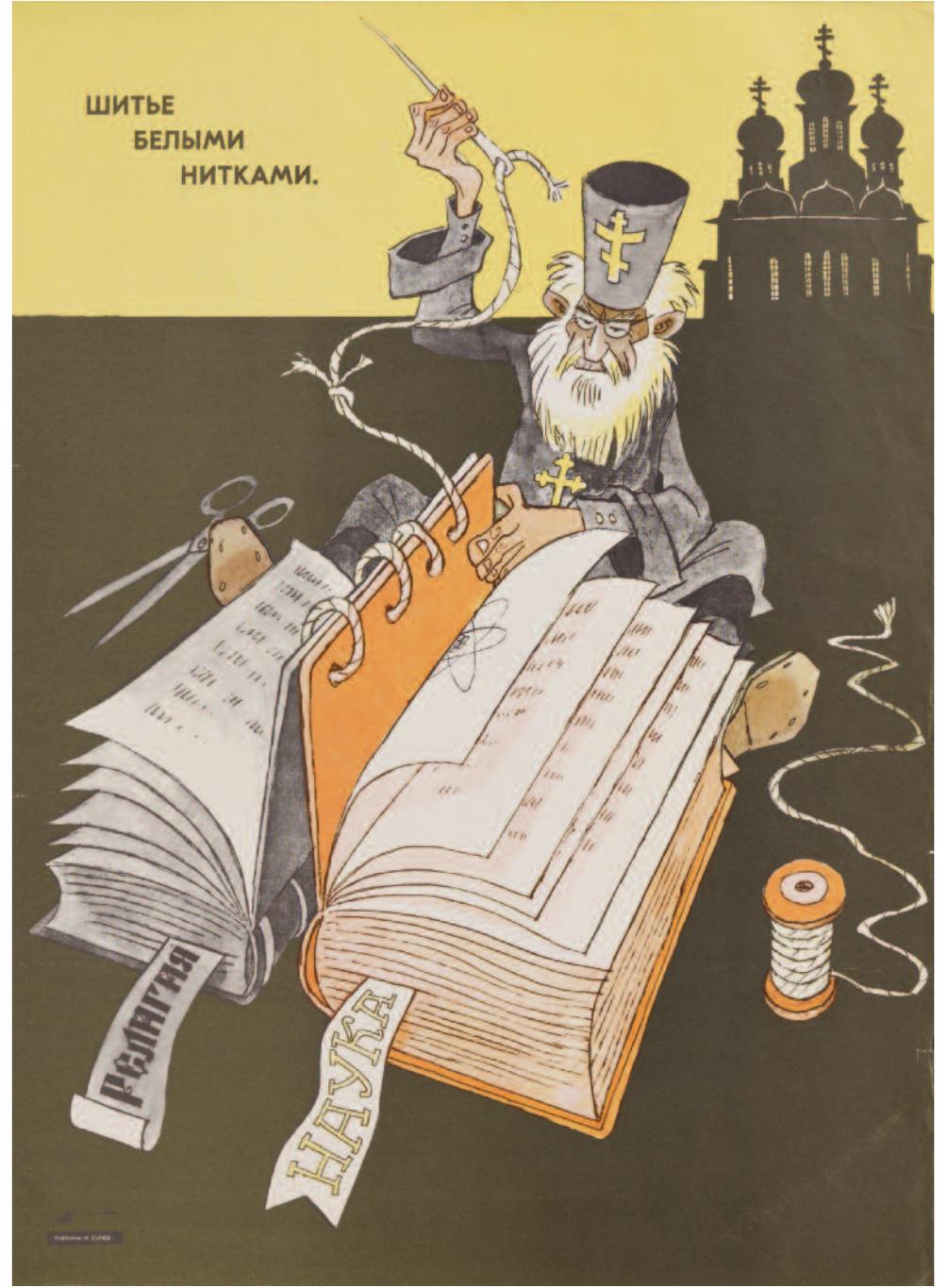
'From God, too, is this!'

Poster, 1984

Bookmarks: RELIGION (left) SCIENCE (right)

An obvious stitch-up.

Poster (undated)



philosophers—and a translation of Bertrand Russell’s pamphlet, *Why I Am Not a Christian*.¹⁷⁰

The Party press also deployed a new propaganda tactic, running articles by priests who had abandoned the church. The most prominent priest-defector, Aleksandr Osipov, published a *Pravda* article called ‘Rejection of Religion—The Only Correct Course’. It began,

Yes I, Professor of Old Testament and Classical Hebrew at the Leningrad Theological Academy and Seminary, formerly Inspector there, Master of Theology and Archpriest, have broken with the church and with religion. I have publicly professed my atheism, attained logically by study of the scientific method after considerable protracted and inward struggle and a complete reconsideration of my outlook on life. I have abandoned my former world, which I now believe to be one of illusions, of retreat from reality, sometimes even of conscious deceit for the sake of financial gain.¹⁷¹

Michael Bourdeaux, the young Oxford theologian who would go on to found Keston College and play a leading role in the documentation of anti-religious repression in the USSR, turned up in Russia that year. When he attended an Osipov lecture in Leningrad, he heard hostile listeners throw the charge of venality right back at the ex-priest, taunting,

Judas received thirty pieces of silver. How much did you get?

He also took notes on the Stalin-era displays in the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism in Kazan Cathedral. Among them were texts observing that,

The ark Noah built could not have accommodated all the animals which then populated the earth, which disproves the legend of the flood.

and

A whale’s mouth is so constructed that it could not have let Jonah in, even if he could have lived three days inside the creature.

In Moscow, Bourdeaux visited the site of the dynamited Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, where Stalin had failed to erect the Palace of the Soviets, and where there was now to be a giant swimming pool, open all year round. Old ladies told him that the site was cursed.¹⁷²

As Bolshevik habits revived, Patriarch Aleksei began to echo some of the rebel spirit of the late Patriarch Tikhon, first by excommunicating the priest-defectors and ‘lay members of the Orthodox Church who have uttered public blasphemy against God’s name’, then by glorifying the Church’s role in Russian history at a conference on nuclear disarmament.

The Church, he told the audience gathered in the Kremlin, had from its earliest days helped to instil civic order in Russia, had established great monuments of culture in the form of its churches, had ‘pacified’ the Mongol khans, and had stood with Russia against all foreign invaders. As for the nuclear ‘peace’ movement, the Soviets could thank the Prophet Isaiah,

whom we Christians call an Old Testament evangelist, because he had foretold the birth of our Saviour of the World long before that event. Thus,

Poster, 1977

Book: SCIENCE

REASON AGAINST RELIGION



the Bible, which is a collection of sacred books of the Christian Church, proves to be the source of the idea of universal peace, which, because of the growth of the most dangerous weapons, should be recognised as probably the most important idea for humanity of our time. Yet, despite all this, Christ's Church, whose very aim is human wellbeing, is suffering insults and attacks from humans.

In the ensuing scandal, Metropolitan Nikolai, supposedly the author of Aleksei's speech, was forced to retire. 'The people listen to my sermons and like them,' he said, 'and that is exactly what our authorities find unacceptable. They want bishops who only perform solemn services. They cannot stand those who preach and struggle against godlessness.' He died a few months later. Aleksei, duly frightened, sank once again into quiescence. But this 'militant speech' proved to Soviet officials that Orthodoxy had not been tamed.¹⁷³

1961 marked the height of Khrushchevian atheism. That April, the Vostok 1 space mission carried Yuri Gagarin into Earth's orbit. *Science and Religion* ran an ecstatic stop-press insert headed 'Soviet Man in Space' with Gagarin's famous remarks:

Please report to the Party and the government and Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev personally that the landing went well and I feel fine.¹⁷⁴

The idea that a Soviet man should be first in space seemed like communist destiny. In the months ahead of Gagarin's flight, the magazine *Problems of Philosophy* had published an article by the mathematician Ernst Kolman, a Czech Bolshevik, who presented space flight as the ultimate triumph over nature. For that, communists—people strengthened by a collective spirit that eased their fear of abandonment—were ideally suited to face the 'cosmic horror' that might assail lesser men in the black emptiness of space.¹⁷⁵

On hearing news of the flight, Khrushchev was moved to tears that a 'once illiterate Russia' had, again, stormed the heavens ahead of its enemies:

Let everyone who's sharpening their claws against us know, let them know that Yurka [Gagarin] was in space, that he saw and knows everything.¹⁷⁶

The newspaper *Izvestia* made the religious connection:

Yuri Gagarin really has given a terrible headache to believers! He flew right through the heavenly mansions and did not run into anyone: neither the Almighty, nor the Archangel Gabriel, nor the angels of heaven. It seems, then, that heaven is empty! [31]

In that year of triumph Khrushchev promised, at the 22nd Party Congress in October, to deliver true communism within twenty years. But for that, old ways had to die:

The battle with capitalist survivals in people's consciousness that was begun by our revolution, the transformation of the habits and customs built up by millions of people over the centuries, is a prolonged and complicated task. Survivals of the past are a dreadful power that, like a nightmare, weigh on the minds of the living.¹⁷⁷

With the nightmare of Stalinism apparently vanquished, [32] the nightmare of the tsarist past had to be prevented from bubbling up:

Poster (undated)

This man is a scientist. But all the same, he blindly believes in every bad omen...





The grandfather can see from the example of his own grandson:
Science is pushing religion aside.

Grandpa, I drew the heavenly kingdom!

Poster, 1982



Let's swap: I'll give you my halo, you give me your helmet...

Krokodil magazine, Issue 9, 1965

Communist education assumes freeing the consciousness from the religious prejudices and superstitions which still hinder individual Soviet people from fully realising their creative potential.¹⁷⁸

The spectacle of space triumphs was to be mirrored on Earth by the visible collapse and erasure of thousands of churches. CAROC, the state body responsible for the Orthodox Church, pressured Patriarch Aleksei to change the Church Statute to allow the authorities to demolish at least the outward manifestations of the religious revival. It forced parish priests to hand all power over to a twenty-member 'parish community' run by a committee that could be shut down at the whim of the local Soviet, which was naturally made up of atheists. The Soviets received secret instructions to establish executive committees that would 'carry out our line.'¹⁷⁹

The new statute left the churches in a humiliated state, and often unable to carry out repairs, resist local schemes to close them, or reject the replacement of respected priests with corrupt ones.¹⁸⁰ Whereas Soviet propaganda from the 1920s on had portrayed collapsing churches and corrupt priests,¹⁸¹ the new church statute and secret laws helped bring those caricatures into being. Whereas there had been around fifteen thousand operational churches prior to Stalin's death, Khrushchev's space-age utopians broke up congregations and closed churches so effectively that by 1963 there were only eight thousand left.¹⁸²

Among the civilians who tracked the removal of priests and the closure of churches was Boris Talantov, a mathematician in the city of Kirov, who reported,

When liquidating places of worship there would be a show of brute force.

This would be carried out under the protection of the militia and auxiliary police, often at night. Believers would be forbidden to enter the church. The valuables would be removed without any inventory being made. In the Kirov region, when places of worship were liquidated, they would always be barbarically destroyed, icons and holy vessels burned and all the valuables stolen ... Thus in the autumn of 1962 the congregation of St. Feodor's Church in Kirov was, with the agreement of the clergy, merged with St. Serafim's Church. The building itself was then destroyed and [the rubble] thrown into the river Vyatka.¹⁸³

The later Khrushchev years also brought escalating Soviet agitation against monasteries, which were traditional places of pilgrimage where people could interact more freely with the clergy than they could in wider Soviet society. The authorities banned pilgrimages in 1961.¹⁸⁴ A *Science and Religion* article entitled 'Monastic Walls are Collapsing' depicted the monasteries as dens of rape, sexual licence, and venereal disease, wherein the bodies of the unwanted babies of 'holy fathers' and 'brides of Christ' could be found abandoned in the walls and toilets.¹⁸⁵ In the course of a harassment campaign against the Pochaev monastery in Ukraine, police beat up pilgrims. Two monks died in their custody.¹⁸⁶

Khrushchev's personal role in atheist campaigns has never been clear. His son Sergei later wrote that his father neither encouraged nor restrained militant atheists in the Party, but simply saw religion dying a natural death, and atheist activists as its gravediggers.¹⁸⁷

Poster, 1965

Logo: Both laughter and sin

Books: Chemistry, Astronomy, Physics, History

Useless labour



But Talantov noted that people had sent personal appeals to Khrushchev, and had been 'severely threatened' for doing so:

The facts ... demonstrated even to uneducated believers that this organised 'administrative pressure' against them was being organised with the knowledge of Khrushchev himself, who was using these means to 'root out' the Christian religion from the USSR.¹⁸⁸

In October 1964, a group of conspirators within the Party, led by Leonid Brezhnev, ousted Khrushchev. He spent much of the rest of his life under close surveillance and supervision.¹⁸⁹ He expressed numerous regrets in his memoirs, even as he upheld his utopian vision. As he put it in *Khrushchev Remembers* in 1971,

We communists believe that capitalism is a hell in which labouring people are condemned to slavery ... To use the language of the Bible again, our way of life is a paradise for mankind.¹⁹⁰

When he died in 1971, he became the only Soviet leader not to be laid to rest in Red Square.

The Soviet People are, with all determination, exposing the anti-people nature of the sectarians, no matter what god they may hide behind. For reasons of their own, sectarian preachers and their acolytes, cowering in remote and fetid holes, morally and physically deform people, tear them away from working and social life, and corrupt the youth.
(From the newspaper *Izvestia*)

Book cover: **Gospel**
Buildings: **Theatre, Cinema, Museum, House of Culture**

In 'holy' blinkers

Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962





This device—it never fails— / is simply constructed: / It pulls money from parishioners / with the help of the cross.

Poster, 1981

This old lady has profits every day /
And it's easy to see what kind: / The
old lady pays for tap water / And the
believers for holy water.

In the centre of Bataysk, Rostov region, the faith healer M. Golubeva opened her 'polyclinic'. She claims 'holy' water cures all illnesses. There still exist people who believe in this utter nonsense, will employ the services of a charlatan, and will pay generously for her 'works'. (From the newspaper Molot)

Poster from the collection
In True Light, 1962



DISSENTERS

Reflecting on decades of anti-religious shock and awe, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn damned the devastation in his 1963 prose fragment, *Along the Oka*:

When you travel the by-roads of central Russia you begin to understand the secret of the pacifying of the Russian countryside. It is in the churches ... wherever you wander in the fields or meadows, however far from habitation, you are never alone: from over the hayricks, the wall of trees, and even the curve of the earth's surface the head of some bell-tower will beckon to you ... But when you get into the village you find that not the living but the dead greeted you from afar. The crosses were knocked off the roof or twisted out of place long ago. The dome has been stripped, and there are gaping holes between its rusty ribs. Weeds grow on the roofs and in the cracks in the walls. Usually the graveyard has not been kept up, the crosses have been flattened and the graves churned. The murals over the altar have been washed by the rains of decades and obscene inscriptions scrawled over them.¹⁹¹

Khrushchev's successors had few designs on any utopia, godless or otherwise, although the Party had some successes to its name. Whereas Lenin had made his revolution in a mostly illiterate, agricultural country, Soviet leaders had created an urban, industrialised superpower and achieved the near-complete elimination of illiteracy. The new general secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, was not a Bolshevik, but a metalworker-turned Stalinist bureaucrat. Born in eastern Ukraine in 1906, he had joined the Communist Party at the outset of Stalin's collectivisation in 1929 and had begun his political ascent in 1937, the bloodiest year of Stalin's purges. A lesser sort of priest of power, he told his speechwriters to avoid Marxist jargon, remarking, 'Who is ever going to believe I read Marx?'¹⁹²

Looking back upon Khrushchev as a narcissist and a hothead, the newly-formed Council for Religious Affairs (into which the Stalin-era CAROC and CARC merged in 1965) began to examine accusations of the abuse of believers' rights under Khrushchev. The Soviet legislature acknowledged 'violations of socialist legality in relation to believers'. An article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* denounced the atheist 'storm tactics' of the past and—in spite of an emerging post-Khrushchevian ambiguity over Stalin's legacy—dismissed Yaroslavsky's League of the Militant Godless as an 'atheist sect'. Church closures, the author wrote, had only embittered believers and made religion more attractive.¹⁹³

Poster, 1977

Radio broadcast: Ave, Maria... Slander of the USSR, Anti-Sovietism, Our Father

Another gullible sectarian / is glad to hear prayers from 'over there'. / They are, as a rule, stained / With outright anti-Sovietism!



In the name of Jehovah, the international political organisation, 'The Society of Jehovah's Witnesses', has been deployed against communism. In our country the sect of the Jehovists exists illegally and carries out espionage activities on the directives of the USA.

(From the newspaper *Izvestia*)

Jehovah's Witness

Don't believe in his meekness, / he doesn't care about the soul. / Such a witness of Jehovah – / is a traitor to the Motherland, a spy!

Magazine: *Watchtower*, Kingdom of Jehovah

[The KGB regarded the Jehovah's Witnesses with great suspicion because the faith had been founded in the United States and its followers considered the Soviet state to be satanic.]

Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962



If anything fused the Brezhnev-era Party to official atheism, it was that their legitimacy derived from Lenin's legacy, of which radical atheism was among the more memorable signifiers. As a twenty-four-year-old communist told the Russian-born British journalist Alexander Werth when he visited the USSR in the late 1960s,

In the early years of the revolution, my father ... was in the Komsomol, and was tremendously active in the Godless League, doing anti-religious propaganda. It was crude and by our standards pretty offensive stuff. But Lenin *did* loathe the Orthodox Church and the priests as the backbone of the tsarist regime and as the most obscurantist and reactionary influence among the Russian people, including the working class.¹⁹⁴

All roads led back to October.

In the early Brezhnev years, the Party had to contend, too, with the literary forces Khrushchev had unleashed to counter Stalin's legacy. The last year of Khrushchev's rule had seen a particularly acid exchange between the young poet Joseph Brodsky—charged with 'social parasitism' [33]—and a Soviet judge:

Judge: What is your profession?

Brodsky: Translator and poet.

Judge: Who recognised you as a poet? Who has enrolled you in the ranks of poets?

Brodsky: No one. Who enrolled me in the ranks of human beings?

Judge: Did you study for it?

Brodsky: What?

Judge: To be a poet. Didn't you try to take courses in school where one prepares for life, where one learns?

Brodsky: I didn't believe it was a matter of education.

Judge: How is that?

Brodsky: I thought that it came from God.¹⁹⁵

The 1966 trial of the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, in which the two men faced charges of trying to subvert the Soviet system by publishing their stories abroad, brought two hundred of their supporters into Moscow's Pushkin Square. The demonstrators demanded that authorities hold an open trial and respect the constitution, before police and plainclothes KGB men arrested them. Accounts of the writers' trial circulated in secret and were smuggled to the West.¹⁹⁶

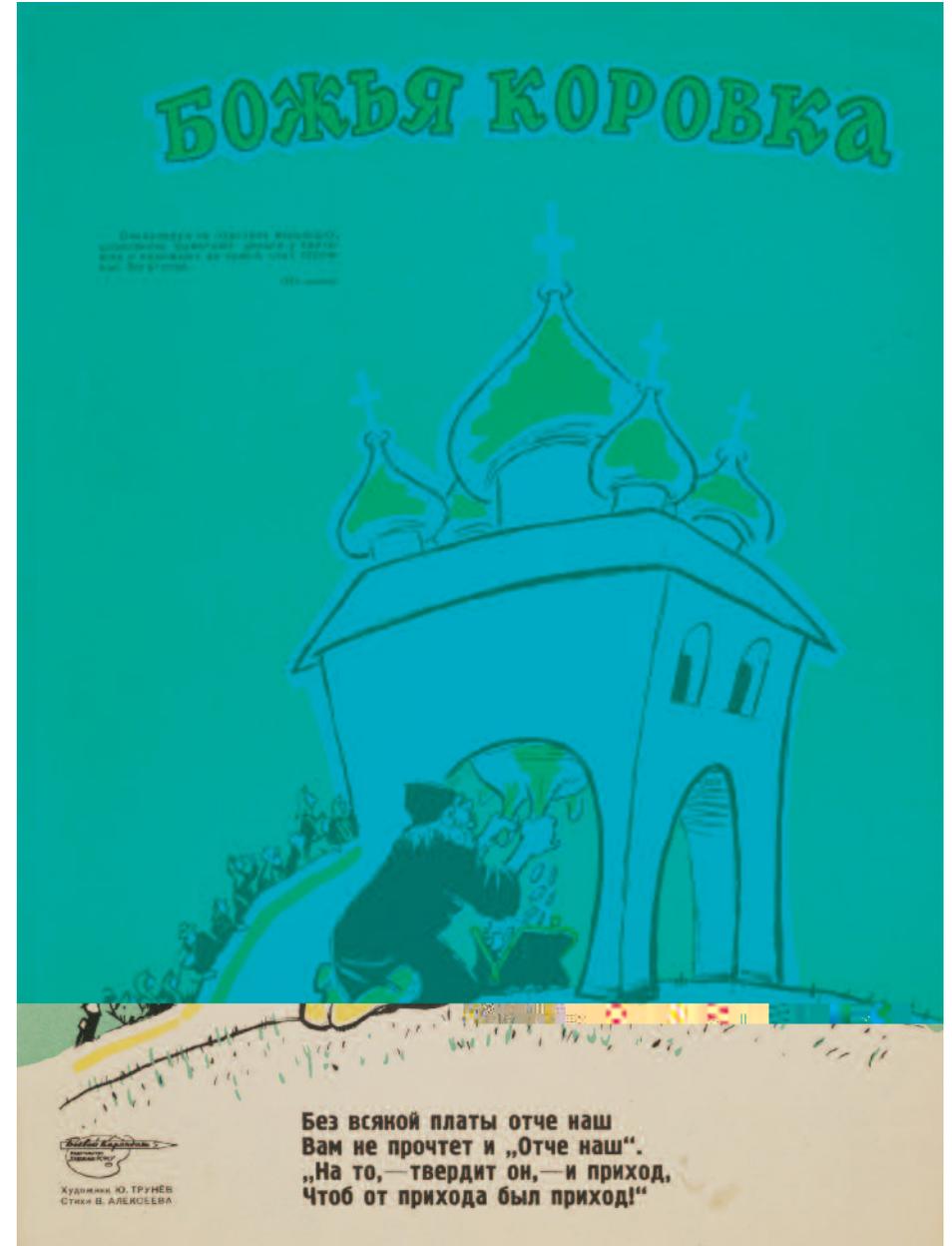
In parallel to this small literary opposition there also emerged a circle of young priests critical of the Moscow Patriarchate. It began with two friends, Gleb Yakunin and Aleksandr Men, who met on the train to their zoological institute outside Moscow when they were both teenagers in the 1950s. When the institute moved to Irkutsk, they moved with it. Yakunin, a self-described 'diehard atheist' with some interest in pre-revolutionary occult philosophy, became impressed with Men's knowledge of the Bible and literature.¹⁹⁷

Men, who came from a Jewish family, took inspiration in his youth from a priest, Father Serafim, who had survived Stalin's camps to become a member of the 'catacomb' or underground church, and had constantly to move to evade the authorities. Men knew he wanted to be a priest from the age of twelve. In his youth, he searched small shops in

God's Cow

Speculating on the feelings of the believers, the churchman squeezes money from his parishioners and amasses great wealth at the expense of others. (From the newspapers)

Without any payment our father / Will not deliver you an 'Our Father' / That's what — he insists — the parish is for: / 'So that from the congregation, there's an income!'



Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962



Dully and rather shabbily, / Another speaker dismissed God. / Everyone fled in the end / – God, after all, gave 'em legs.

Lectern: 'SCIENCE and RELIGION' lecture

[These cartoons reflect ongoing anxieties within the Communist Party over the the general lack of enthusiasm for 'atheist work' – on the part of both audiences and propagandists.]

Poster, 1982

Right:
In the Sortavala district of the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, scientific-atheistic propoganda among the population was neglected.
(From the newspaper, *Leningrad Pravda*)

Sign: ATHEISTS' CLUB. Announcement, today, 7

The shabby stand is crooked / There are no more lectures in the club. / No wonder the priest asks God / To grant its manager many years!

Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962



Художник В. ПЮННАП
Стихи В. АЛЕКСЕЕВА

В ИСТИННОМ СВЕТЕ
(серия плакатов «Доложь религию!»)
Издательство «Художник РСФСР»

the countryside, looking for discarded religious books by religious thinkers who had opposed the Bolsheviks.¹⁹⁸

In Irkutsk, Yakunin and Men encountered the ongoing legacies of Stalinism. From the home of the family with whom they stayed, they could see political prisoners being marched to work in the fields. They also had long conversations with a local parish priest, Father Vladimir, who had done time in the camps. Vladimir told them that the true church was the underground one that had rejected the Moscow Patriarchate.

After they both became priests in the Moscow area in the early 60s, they gathered around themselves a circle of like-minded priests—including Nikolai Eshliman and Dmitri Dudko—who all hoped to bring about a renaissance in the church.

In 1965, Yakunin and Eshliman, in collaboration with Men—who declined to be named—launched their challenge by way of two open letters: in one, to the Soviet government, they accused the state of abusing fundamental religious freedoms; in the other, to Patriarch Aleksei, they condemned the church's silence in the face of state power. It was not for such silence, they wrote, that

the glorious army of Russian saints stand in the church 'invisibly praying to God for us'; not for this did St. Sergius—the great servant of God—shine forth in the heart of Russia; not for this did the holy blood of Russian martyrs flow abundantly; not for this have the Easter bells rung out over Russia for a thousand years with such triumph as has never been heard elsewhere in the world. Are all those riches, this sacred treasury, this beauty and glory to be terminated by a pitiful bureaucracy, by a submissive agent of powers which are against the Church?

Aleksei suspended the two priests, calling them 'evil'. Eshliman went into permanent retreat, but Yakunin, a self-described 'fighter by nature', gathered his energy for future trouble.¹⁹⁹

Religious minorities also became more vocal. In 1965, two Baptist leaders, Gennady Kryuchkov and Georgi Vins, wrote to Brezhnev. They complained that Stalin's 1929 revocation of the right to 'religious propaganda' contradicted both Lenin's separation of church and state and article 19 of the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. The state retaliated with a renewed anti-Baptist press campaign and a wave of arrests.²⁰⁰

When the two men held a demonstration outside the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1966, they were arrested and subjected to a show trial. Before they were sentenced to three years in a special regime camp, Kryuchkov, exhausted from sleep deprivation, gave a defiant address on behalf of other Baptists:

I'm happy to stand before you as a Christian ... Those brethren who are in prisons and camps are suffering, not for having broken Soviet law, but for having been faithful to God and his church. They suffer for Christ, who called them to a new life. Among them are reformed criminals.²⁰¹

The Brezhnev-era trials of writers and religious figures gave rise to the Soviet dissident movement of the 1960s and 70s and brought secular and religious dissenters together.

In 1968, when the writers Yuri Galanskov and Aleksandr Ginzburg faced trial along with two friends accused of helping them release their work as *samizdat*, the Orthodox

He lives by lechery and lies, / A know-nothing
chancer and a drunk... / He's saved only by a
'miracle' / Since he bails just in time!

Miracle-Worker

Poster (undated)





This is how tourism is exploited: / From abroad there slithers contraband / with religious propaganda and anti-Sovietism.

Snake: Anti-Sovietism

Poster, 1982



Right:
'Cultural Exchange'

Mr. John is a big businessman! / He's got it all worked out precisely – / Both the value of Russian icons, / and the lowly demands of a lowlife.

Poster, 1984

priest Sergei Zheludkov wrote to one of their advocates, the physicist Pavel Litvinov:²⁰²

I have heard that you are an atheist. That in no way qualifies my admiration... I hasten to establish a common language with you: If everywhere that I pronounce the name of *Christ*, which is most sacred to me, you put the principle of spiritual *Beauty*, which is most sacred to you, this will be sufficient for our practical unity. For Love, Freedom, Truth, Fearlessness, Loyalty are all names of our Lord, whom you honour without knowing it.²⁰³

The Orthodox activist Anatoly Levitin was among those who helped establish the Initiative Group for Human Rights, the first human rights organisation in the USSR, in 1969. When Soviet officials accused him, at his 1971 trial, of slandering the Soviet system, he replied that it was his Christian duty to defend anyone who was oppressed:

The mission of Christianity consists of more than going to church. It consists of putting the behests of Christ into practice. Christ called upon us to defend all who are oppressed ... If convinced opponents of religion should someday be subjected to oppression, I shall defend them, too.²⁰⁴

These men were nothing like the higher-ups in the church. Whereas Marx had described religion as a source of doped-up passivity, Soviet authorities ensured that only the most passive clergy rose to the top. The Moscow Patriarchate exasperated dissidents by forever attributing the status quo to 'God's Will'. When Patriarch Aleksei died in 1970, he was replaced by Patriarch Pimen—a man known for his 'excessive fear'.²⁰⁵

Solzhenitsyn, increasingly out of favour in the official literary circles since Khrushchev's fall and labouring on his *Gulag Archipelago* in secret, challenged the new patriarch in his 1972 'Lenten Letter':

By what reasoning is it possible to convince oneself that the planned destruction of the body of the church under the guidance of atheists is the best way of preserving it? Preserving it for whom? Certainly not for Christ. Preserving it by what means? By falsehood? But after the falsehood by whose hands are holy sacraments to be celebrated?²⁰⁶

He then challenged the whole Soviet system in his 1973 *Letter to Soviet Leaders*. He spat on Soviet urbanisation and space missions—modern cities were 'cancerous tumours' and the space race had been a 'useless show'—and called for the abandonment of Marxism and state-sponsored propaganda:

This ideology bears the entire responsibility for all the blood that has been shed ... All I am suggesting is that you rescue yourselves from it. And rescue your state system and your people as well. *All you have to do* is to deprive Marxism of its powerful state support and let it exist of itself and stand on its own feet. And let all who wish to do so make propaganda for it, defend it and din it into others without let or hindrance—but outside working hours and *not on state salaries* ... In other words, the whole *agitprop* system of agitation and propaganda must cease to be paid for out of the nation's pocket. This should not anger or antagonise the numerous people who work in *agitprop*: this new statute would free them from all possible insulting accusations of self-interest and give them for the first time the opportunity

Papers: slander, slander, lies, rubbish

This is how life uncloaks / their arch-tricksterish tricks – / out-and-out anti-Sovietism / in religious packaging.

Arm: Customs

Poster, 1981





Father Georgy, a priest in the Kirsanov church in Tambov region, spends the money gathered from parishioners as it suits him. He drinks most of it up with his buddies.
(From the newspaper *Tambov Pravda*)

In the churches the priests spend all day / smothering the reason of the masses. / And once they have finished their 'work' / They godlessly stupefy themselves with vodka.

Beer mug: For the needs of the church

Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962



Since time immemorial, the servants of God / have scared people with tales of judgment in the afterlife. / Saving us from this phantom danger, / they stuff their purses with others' money. / Often enough, they laughingly go all out / And spend this money on sinful indulgences. / If there were a hell for sinners on this planet of ours, / That's exactly where these sinners would end up. / And it's now that frustration begins to gnaw at you / What a pity that neither God nor hell exist!

Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962

to prove the true strength of their ideological convictions and sincerity ... I myself see Christianity today as the only living spiritual force capable of undertaking the spiritual healing of Russia. But I request and propose no special privileges for it, simply that it should be treated fairly and not suppressed.²⁰⁷

When Solzhenitsyn published *The Gulag Archipelago* abroad at the end of 1973, he put before the world a near-encyclopaedic 'experiment in literary investigation' into the origins and operation of the Soviet prison camp system and implicated the Soviet government in the deaths of millions. The Soviet rulers, unable to bear his continued presence, revoked his citizenship and expelled him to the West.²⁰⁸

Another Orthodox voice rising in the USSR was that of Dmitri Dudko, of the Men-Yakunin circle, a former political prisoner who had spent eight years in the camps after being arrested in 1948 for writing a poem about the destruction of Russia's churches. In the 1970s, he became perhaps the most popular dissident priest in the Soviet Union, drawing thousands to his sermons, which were distributed in *samizdat* and published abroad as *Our Hope* in 1975. He faced constant KGB harassment; this probably included the suspicious ramming of his car by a truck in 1975, which left him with two broken legs.²⁰⁹

These challenges to Soviet authority came against the background of emerging US-Soviet diplomacy and detente that had begun with arms limitation talks in 1969 and culminated in a 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in Helsinki, Finland. According to the Helsinki Final Act agreed on 1 August, 1975, the parties committed to improve scientific and technological exchanges and confirmed Europe's post-war borders. They also agreed to Article VII, which promised respect for human rights.²¹⁰

That November, Yakunin and the physicist Lev Regelson staged a coup of sorts at the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, Kenya. The Russian Orthodox Church had joined the council at Khrushchev's behest in 1961 and, since Soviet and 'Third World' clergy together outnumbered their western counterparts, it tended to set an anti-colonial agenda. But that year, a Swiss delegate responded to Yakunin and Regelson's appeal with a resolution on 'Disarmament, the Helsinki Agreement and Religious Liberty':

The WCC is concerned about restrictions on religious liberty, particularly in the USSR. The Assembly respectfully requests the government of the USSR to implement effectively principle no. 7 of the Helsinki Agreement.

But a KGB agent within the WCC's drafting committee managed to bury the statement, whittling it down to a tepid assertion that

churches in different parts of Europe are living and working under very different conditions and traditions.²¹¹

In 1976, the dissident physicists Andrei Sakharov and Yuri Orlov established the Moscow-Helsinki Monitoring Group to track Soviet compliance with the Final Act and gather testimony from citizens who felt their rights had been violated. Gleb Yakunin, a friend of Orlov's, established a parallel Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights.



Let's imagine that God and a demon / Crossed paths one day amidst the Heavens, / And the All-Merciful One accepted / The following application from the fiend: / 'I want, O Lord, / To become a yes-man of yours. / How am I any worse than the spiritual fathers, / Who - just between you and me - are devilish sinners? / Their 'charitable deeds' / Have enraged Satan himself. / True to their sordid interests, / These sanctimonious religionists fawn like petty demons / In order to entice people into their church / And earn a pretty penny - to be spent on shameful

lechery. / These grasping hypocrisies, / These tuggish fanatics, / These rabbis and priests, / These pillars of sectarian brotherhoods - / I'd be a worthy replacement for any of them. / An old demon like me knows their worth! / And God answered: 'I'd be happy to make / Even a demon a member of Paradise's workforce. / Make for whatever parish you like - / There'll be a place waiting for you there.'

Poster from the collection *In True Light*, 1962



ЗАЩИТНИКОВ СЛЕЗЛИВЫХ СТАЯ
ГОРЛАНИТ, ВОЗДУХ СОТРЯСАЯ:
«В СССР КАРАЮТ СТРОГО
ВСЕХ ГРАЖДАН, ВЕРУЮЩИХ В БОГА!»

ЗАОКЕАНСКОЙ ЭТОЙ БАНДЕ
ДАДИМ РЕШИТЕЛЬНЫЙ ОТВЕТ:
—АНТИСОВЕТСКОЙ ПРОПАГАНДЕ
В СТРАНЕ СОВЕТСКОЙ МЕСТА НЕТ.

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The tearful defenders of the flock bawl, /
sending shockwaves through the air: / 'The
USSR severely punishes / all citizens who
believe in God!'

We'll give this overseas gang / an unflinching
response: / The land of the Soviets is no
place / for anti-Soviet propaganda.

Papers: Holy spies' instructions

Poster, 1981

One of the Christian Committee's early cases showed what it meant for an isolated individual to be forced to occupy the role set out for him by decades of state-sponsored caricature. In July 1976, Soviet authorities arrested a young Christian named Aleksandr Argentev over his participation in a Christian seminar group and sent him to a psychiatric hospital. [34]

In an open letter to Patriarch Pimen, Argentev reported the atmosphere of menace in the hospital, where he was kept medicated among sick and violent people who howled while tied to their beds. 'The attitude of the doctors,' he wrote,

has an even more oppressive effect on me. Completely ignorant of everything concerning religion, they insistently try to convince me that my religious feelings are a mental illness. The doctors assert that our Christian religion forbids believers to defend their homeland, that the progress of aviation and space travels testifies to the fact that there is no God, that priests only officiate for money, and that young believers are basically pathological idiots.

Pimen never responded.

The committee also took up cases involving religious minorities who wanted to leave the USSR. It documented the humiliation of M.M. Yurkev, a Pentecostal Christian who had sought permission to emigrate, only to be arrested and have his family made homeless, and of Yosif Begun, a Jewish teacher who was dismissed from his university for seeking to emigrate to Israel. Begun was arrested and sentenced to two years in internal exile for 'parasitism' after he had tried to get by teaching informal classes in Modern Hebrew.²¹² [35]

In 1977, the new, modified 'Brezhnev Constitution', which used ostensibly more liberal language, stated that freedom of conscience was now 'guaranteed' rather than just 'recognised' and replaced the Bolshevistic-sounding 'freedom of anti-religious propaganda' with the milder-sounding 'atheist propaganda'.²¹³ Even so, Party members were commanded to 'lead a decisive struggle vs. religion', while 'freedom of conscience' remained a contested concept—one that the more ideological Soviet authorities believed was used to bolster 'class interests' in the West, and which more security-minded ones feared western human rights groups would use to mask political designs against the Soviet system.²¹⁴

The KGB saw Yakunin's work in precisely this context. A report on him read, Yakunin and his associates are in practice engaging in a struggle with the existing order in the USSR ... proclaiming a national religious revival in Russia as an alternative to Marxist-Leninist ideology. The committee has an extensive network of correspondents among religious fanatics; they are the main suppliers of information about the situation of believers in the USSR to places abroad. In order to cause a schism in the Russian Orthodox Church and to set up a new Church organisation taking up anti-Soviet positions, the Christian Committee has launched a campaign to compromise clergy loyal to the Soviet state as unfit to defend the interests of the believers.²¹⁵

In the late 1970s, the KGB escalated their efforts to smash the dissident movement,

Is it possible to clarify, creator, when, in the end, the end will be? On their backs: Jehovah's Witnesses

Poster, 1977

END OF THE WORLD in 1914, postponed until 1925, postponed until 1958, postponed until 1975, postponed until...



starting with members of Sakharov's Moscow-Helsinki Group and then moving on to religious activists. They arrested Yakunin in November 1979, Regelson in December, and Dudko in January 1980, all in time for the early stages of the invasion of Afghanistan, and the Moscow Olympics that summer.

Once in custody, Yakunin held his nerve as he faced charges of 'p@

MILLENNIUM

In April 1986, an invisible poison, emanating about a hundred kilometres upriver from where Prince Vladimir had baptised the Rus in the Dnieper nearly a thousand years earlier, began killing and sickening Soviet citizens. There was a scientific explanation: a nuclear reactor had exploded at Chernobyl. But after decades of Soviet fetishisation of science—including the claim that Soviet reactors were so safe that one could be built on Red Square—confidence in science hit a new low. As the recent widow of a Chernobyl firefighter who had her stillborn, irradiated daughter taken from her in a hospital screamed,

You want to take her for science but I loathe your science! Loathe it! First, your science took him away from me, now it's back for more...I won't give her to you!

That was one of many shocking comments the journalist Svetlana Alexievich recorded during her time in the regions surrounding what became known as the 'exclusion zone'. Many people she met were ecstatic with eschatological speculation. One man told her,

If we turn to the holy pages, the Book of Revelation: 'and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood: and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter'. I'm trying to fathom that prophecy. Everything has been predicted, it's all written in the holy books, but we don't know how to read ... The Ukrainian word for 'wormwood' is 'Chernobyl'.

Another person told her,

What's written in the Bible is all coming true. It says there'll be a big leader with a mark on his forehead, and a great power will crumble to dust.²²¹

The big leader with a mark on his forehead—Mikhail Gorbachev—was a Russian, not a Ukrainian, but in his own native village of Privolnoe at the time of his birth, local folk belief had also held that birthmarks were a bad omen. Indeed, he had grown up in exactly the kind of benighted peasant setting that the Bolsheviks had sought to storm with enlightened atheism and collectivisation. The old folks in Gorbachev's family took him to be christened in secret. His family suffered as millions of peasants had suffered under Stalin: his paternal grandfather had been sent to a Siberian camp for failing to fulfil Five-Year Plan quotas and his maternal grandfather had barely evaded a charge of Trotskyism during Stalin's Terror. Famines caused by collectivisation claimed three members of his extended family.²²²

Under the shop window this weasel / Has set himself up nicely /
There's a foolish fashion that means / They'll snap his junk right up.
(Cultural Goods
Poster, 1984



The women in Gorbachev's family were his main religious influences. His maternal grandmother took him to church and hid the family's icons throughout the Terror. His mother, too, was religious, even if his schoolteachers were not.

When the American journalist Gail Sheehy visited Privolnoe for her 1989 biography of Gorbachev, his former chemistry teacher told her,

All the parents of our students were believers, but all the students themselves were atheists.

As Gorbachev climbed the ladder of local officialdom in southern Russia—he became a popular local party chief in Stavropol from 1970 to 1978—the churches remained open.

One of his university friends told Sheehy,

He's totally indifferent to religion, but he respects it. *œasants* were always more respectful of religion.²²³

Before he became general secretary in March 1985 at the age of 54, Gorbachev had witnessed the demise of three old Stalinists—first Brezhnev, aged 79, in 1982, his mentor and former KGB head Yuri Andropov, aged 69 in 1984, and, finally, Konstantin Chernenko, aged 73 that year. The Party arranged state funerals for all of them in Red Square, carried out to the sound of Chopin's *Funeral March*. These were international events, and, for a once-revolutionary nation that had always valued spectacle, remarkably drab and dreary shows.

The *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer, by then a prominent booster of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy, found polemical use for the funeral:

[What was] to me most chilling, was the open casket displaying Chernenko's (and Andropov's and Brezhnev's) powdered body drowning in a sea of fresh flowers. The open bier is a mere variation on a communist theme: the mummification of the great leader. In believing cultures, where there is some sense of a surviving soul, this pathetic attachment to the body is unnecessary. In fact, it is discouraged. In the great monotheistic religions, the redeemer—Moses, Jesus, Mohammed—has no earthly resting place at all. In the great materialist religions, Soviet and Chinese communism, the resting place of the redeemer, indeed his frozen body, becomes a shrine. The result is the ultimate grotesquerie: after death, a fantastic assertion of the final primacy of man, even after he has become nothing more than embalmer's clay ... Totalitarianism was once a truly crusading faith: messianic, hopeful, mobilised and marching. Now it is dead, burnt out.²²⁴

Official atheism was looking burnt out, too. Religious institutions were under state control, the press recycled familiar anti-religious themes, and around four hundred religious activists—many of them victims of the Brezhnev-era crackdown—struggled on in prison or exile.²²⁵ Soviet officials continued to see 'bourgeois' freedom of conscience as nothing more than a means of political assault on their country. And their country was, at least, unique in one respect. As Vladimir Kuroyedov, head of the Council of Religious Affairs, put it,

In not one of the bourgeois governments are there laws protecting atheistic points of view. In not one of the bourgeois countries are there words that

Poster, 1984

Kiss the icon: perhaps God will help you pass the exam!



underscore the right of citizens to be atheists and to conduct atheistic propaganda. The interests of millions of people who do not believe in God are completely ignored.²²⁶

Some of the post-Brezhnev persecutions had been literary, as in the case of the Christian poet Irina Ratushinskaya, who in 1983 was sentenced to seven years in a labour camp for ‘subverting or weakening the Soviet regime’.²²⁷ At the 27th Party Congress that year, Gorbachev condemned literary works that ‘idealise religious survivals’.²²⁸

Chernobyl changed everything. Soviet secrecy prevented full acknowledgment of the disaster and a timely evacuation. Gorbachev—who had kept silent about it for two weeks—lost whatever illusions he may have had about the infallibility of Soviet scientists. As he castigated Energy Minister Efim Slavsky:

We’ve been listening to you tell us that everything was reliable. You’ve been counting on us to regard you as gods.

Chernobyl, Gorbachev said, had resulted from Soviet habits of ‘bootlicking’, ‘the persecution of those who think differently’, and ‘putting on a good show’. It was an instance, he told the Politburo, of ‘stunning irresponsibility’. He later said his life could be divided into two parts: before Chernobyl, and after it.²²⁹

After Chernobyl, Gorbachev broadened his concept of *glasnost*, or ‘openness’—which had initially served *perestroika*, or his project of economic restructuring—to mean the loosening of restraints on a wide range of hitherto-subterranean discussions.

Where religion was concerned, Soviet media was still welded to a handful of clichés. A TV show called *Religion and Society*, which aired that spring, insisted religious persecution was a myth and emphasised the Russian church’s role in the peace movement.²³⁰ Academic journals contended in time-honoured fashion with a society grasping for spiritual novelty, and carried articles about how young people were going in for yoga and Hare Krishna, or focusing on New Age preoccupations like UFOs or talking to the dead.²³¹

In *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the prominent official atheist Iosif Kryvelev attacked the positive references to religion that were increasingly appearing in Soviet literature, and in particular in the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov’s latest novel, *The Scaffold*, which had been serialised in the journal *Novy Mir* that year. [36] He seemed exasperated:

Read the Bible. If you do so, what you will find is preaching of the most unbridled bloodshed ... The biblical precepts serve present-day Israeli soldiers as important material for the extermination of the Arabs.

His paper ran numerous anti-religious pieces that echoed the themes of Lenin’s letter to Gorky about flirting with ‘little gods’.²³²

But at the end of the Chernobyl year, a massive crack appeared in the press edifice. That December, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published a rejoinder to Kryvelev’s arguments by the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, an ‘official dissident’ of sorts who became a virtual spokesman for Gorbachev’s reforms.²³³ In his article, ‘Religion as a Part of Culture’, Yevtushenko depicted a Soviet society full of uncultured pseudo-intellectuals who could only pretend to understand a learned allusion to Pushkin or Hemingway. At the bottom of their ignorance was their unfamiliarity with a ‘great cultural monument’—the Bible.

He’d wear a half-pud kettlebell /
if fashion told him to, but for now /
/ this ‘oak’ wears a gold chain /
with a giant cross at the end.

[This cartoon parodies Aleksandr Ivanov’s painting *The Appearance of Christ Before the People* (1837-1857). It also alludes to Aleksandr Pushkin’s poem *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1820), which begins with a tale-telling cat bound to an oak tree with a golden chain. An ‘oak’ can also mean a dummy or a blockhead.]

‘Appearance’ to the People

Poster, 1975



Without knowledge of the Bible, our youth cannot understand much in Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. All the early works of Mayakovsky were showered with biblical metaphors. [37] The Bible costs a lot of money from second-hand booksellers and on the 'black market'. If atheists want everyone to become atheists, how can they do it without knowing the Bible?

Then he took on ideological atheism itself:

Religion, standing in the service of social oppression, was rightly called the opium of the people. But can we forget that during the war against fascism our church collected huge funds for a common victory? ... The primitive division of the world into believers and atheists, unclean and pure, by anti-religious extremists, does not stand up to any criticism, even on the basis of scientific materialism.²³⁴

Religious *glasnost* was out of the bag.

At *Moscow News*, one of the major newspapers supporting *glasnost*, the journalist Aleksandr Nezhny began to keep track of complaints from religious communities that were struggling for legal recognition.

In February, Gleb Yakunin received early release from exile, along with other freed religious prisoners,²³⁵ and was reinstated as a priest that May. Of Gorbachev, he told a news conference,

He's a real atheist. But he's also a real reformer, and whatever exists in the social life of society, he will use. The problem of changing the state's attitude to religion is a purely practical one for him.²³⁶

During a well-publicised visit to the Soviet Union in March—much of which was shown on television—British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher visited Patriarch Pimen in the monastery town of Zagorsk.²³⁷ She challenged Gorbachev on the progress of *glasnost*, expressing her wish that,

freedom of religious belief and worship will grow ever stronger here in the Soviet Union and throughout the world and that many of those people imprisoned for their faith will be freed.²³⁸

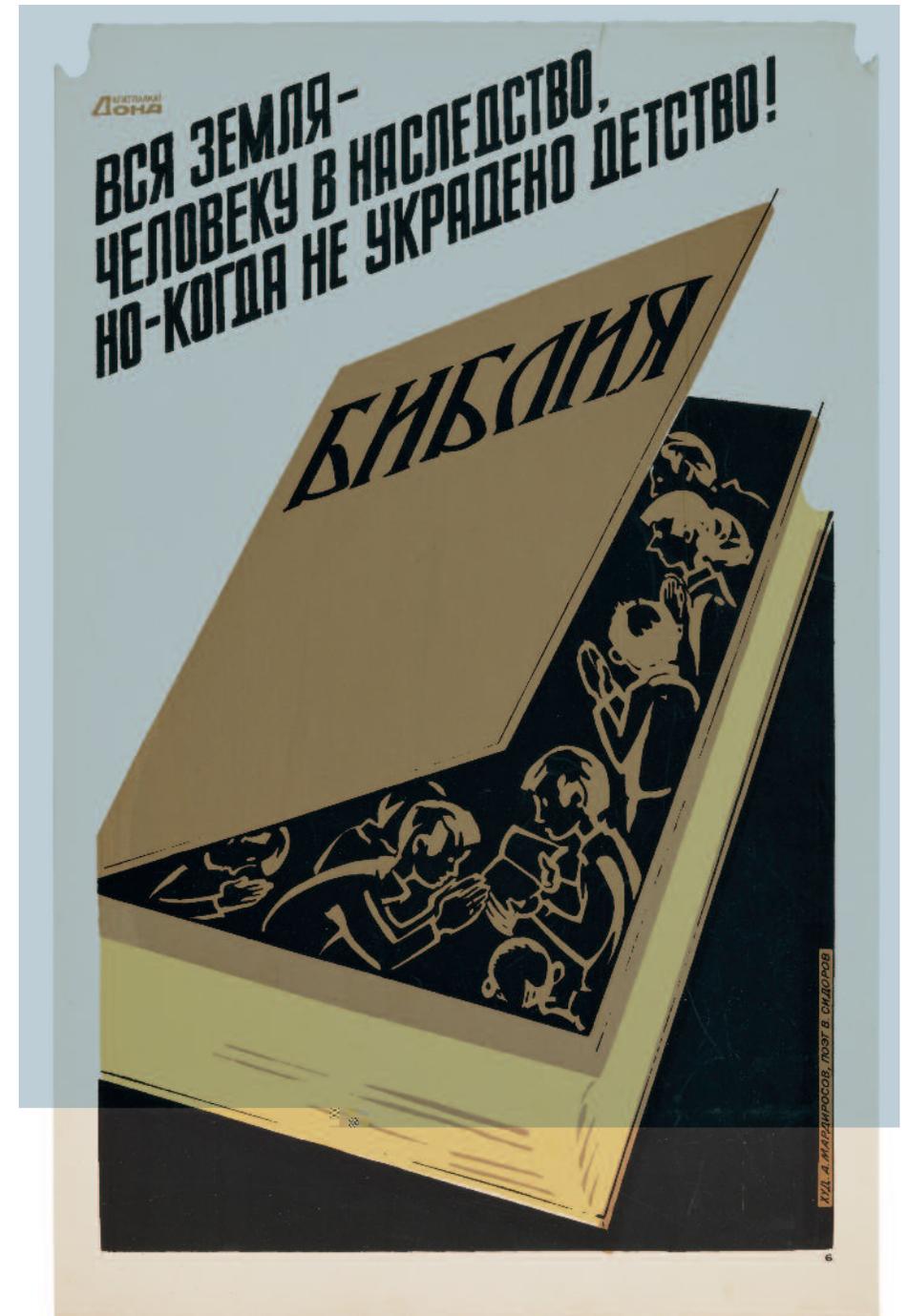
On the cultural front, a filmmakers' revolt against the Filmmakers' Union led to the sudden release of numerous 'arrested', or unscreened films, including the Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze's buried 1984 anti-Stalinist satire, *Repentance*. Abuladze's film, which the one-time Georgian party boss and now-foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze had lobbied Gorbachev to support,²³⁹ used the destruction of churches as a recurring symbol of misrule. The film won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival and was shown across the Soviet Union.²⁴⁰

That summer, the Albanian nun Mother Teresa turned up in Moscow sponsored by the Committee for the Defence of Peace, an organisation promoting Soviet policy on arms control. She dodged appeals from Christian dissidents, telling the press, 'I don't mix in politics' before moving on to Ukraine to meet Chernobyl refugees. Around the same time, 100,000 people flocked to the Ukrainian village of Grushevo, where a schoolgirl claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary on the anniversary of the nuclear disaster.²⁴¹

The tame and tepid Metropolitan Aleksei of Leningrad did his best to catch up with

Poster (undated)

Mankind shall inherit the whole Earth – but only when childhoods aren't snatched away.



the times, telling an interviewer,

It is sad when sometimes at local level, running counter to the basic principles of socialism ... believers are treated with a certain suspicion ... When atheist articles are written with an unfriendly tone and give quite unreliable information, this does not contribute to the creation of a healthy atmosphere for dialogue.

The Soviet Union's flagship atheist journal, *Science and Religion*, was ready for 'dialogue', too. At the end of the year, Viktor Garadzha, head of the Central Committee's Institute of Scientific Atheism, wrote an editorial stating that there was now no question of 'finishing off' religion; it was time to 'find a common language' with believers.²⁴²

All of this presaged an impending PR dilemma: in 1988, Russian Orthodox Christians would mark a thousand years since Prince Vladimir had smashed the pagan idols of Kiev. Gorbachev's solution was to stage-manage a new spectacle in Moscow. He prepared the ground by holding a meeting with Patriarch Pimen and five metropolitans—the first since Stalin's informal concordat of 1943—in the Kremlin on 29 April, 1988. Demonstrating a mastery of the passive voice and his adherence to at least one Soviet taboo, he implicitly blamed Stalin—but not Lenin—for the decades-long inferno of religious liberty:

Not everything has been easy and simple in church-state relations. Religious organisations were not free from being affected by the tragic developments that occurred in the period of the cult of personality. Mistakes made with regard to the church and believers in the 1930s and the years that followed are being rectified.

The point for Gorbachev—as Yakunin had pointed out—was that he needed support wherever he could find it. Religious believers were ripe for revival as a political constituency.

As he said at the meeting,

Believers are Soviet people, workers, patriots, and they have the full right to express their convictions with dignity. Perestroika, democratisation and openness concern them as well—in full measure and without any restrictions.

Pimen, ever-cooperative, offered prayers for the 'architect of perestroika'.

The Millennium celebrations ran from 5-12 June at the Cathedral of the Epiphany in Moscow, which had become the patriarchal cathedral after Stalin had dynamited Christ the Saviour in 1931. The church began by holding its fourth and most lighthearted *sobor* since the revolution. In a conciliatory gesture to Ukrainians, many of whom objected that celebrations were happening in Moscow and not Kiev, the Ukrainian Council of Ministers made a show of returning the title deed of the Monastery of the Caves—a site from the earliest days of Christian Rus, which Khrushchev's men had seized in 1961.

Then came the central spectacle, a star-studded piece of religious theatre in Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre on 10 June, which was televised across the Soviet Union. The fifteen hundred foreign guests left few tickets for ordinary Muscovites, some of whom dismissed it as a 'vulgar drama without substance'. But Michael Bourdeaux, who first visited the USSR as a student when Khrushchev's campaigns were beginning, and now received tickets from the patriarchate, gave it an enthusiastic review. He was impressed first by

From the anthology publication
Godless Ones, 1985

Book: LENIN

- Since when have you turned away from the holy book?
- Since I learned to read this book.



the actor and director Sergei Bondarchuk—best known for his 1966 adaptation of *War and Peace*—who read from the *Primary Chronicle* about the baptism of Rus—and then by the musical presentation:

Nowhere in the whole celebration did the Russians—church and state—better employ their sense of drama and their feeling for symbolism than at the close of this concert. The Bolshoi Chorus and Orchestra combined first to sing to the church the traditional paean *Mnogoye leto* ('long life'). Televised throughout the Soviet Union, this conveyed an astonishing message of hope to those who were, until very recently, being told that there was no place for them under the Soviet system; equally, the atheist cohorts must have felt on the retreat as never before. Even this was not the climax. The heavens—literally—were about to open to reveal a Christian future ... As the final cries of *slava* ('praise') resounded throughout the theatre, the blue sky above the stage set opened to reveal a carillon of real church bells which engulfed the Bolshoi in a peal of thunder. Before any audience this would have been a *coup de théâtre*. In a country where the ringing of church bells had been outlawed for decades, this was more than symbolism: it was a pledge of a new beginning.²⁴³

After that display, establishing the post-atheist order was a matter of a few formalities: new religious communities to register, new churches to open, a new law on religious liberty to draft, [38] an exchange of pleasantries with Pope John Paul II for Gorbachev to endure, and some sore old Stalinists to assuage ('Let them build churches in Poland, we won't!' Second Secretary Yegor Ligachev spat in response to plans to allow new churches in Moscow).²⁴⁴

There was, at last, the prospect of honest priests who had adhered to their principles coming to the fore. Aleksandr Men, the polymath who had inspired Gleb Yakunin and other idealistic young priests in the early 60s, had kept a low profile until perestroika, because he preferred to seed independence of mind in his parishioners rather than engage in political battles. But in the late 1980s, as Gorbachev pushed ambitious reforms and his allies in the press speculated darkly about the possibility of a coup against him, Men found himself in great demand. He gave public lectures in Moscow and spoke on the radio. Ardent young admirers traded his lectures on cassette tapes.²⁴⁵

But the final years of the Soviet experiment brought strange omens.

While Cold War divisions over religion were widely seen as a standoff between God-fearing America and the godless utopia in the east, it turned out that the religious standoff carried significance, too, in what was then called the 'Third World'—countries on the periphery of the Cold War struggle. Among these was Iran, where revolutionaries had overthrown a pro-American monarch in 1979 and established an Islamic government under the slogan 'Neither East nor West'. The Islamic Revolution's charismatic and severe figurehead, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was positively gloating over the spiritual void he saw opening up in the Soviet Union. In 1989, signalling the newfound confidence of militant Islam, he sent three Islamic scholars to Moscow bearing an invitation to Gorbachev to study Islam.²⁴⁶ Sounding ever-so-slightly like Solzhenitsyn

Poster, 1977

Newspaper: Women's Emancipation

The essence of his character is clear: / it operates on two levels. / Up above, he's showing off his paper, / Down below, he's true to Muhammad.



and offering an unwitting riposte to the visual metaphor in Dmitri Moor's first *Godless* cover, he wrote,

Mr. Gorbachev, reality must be faced. The main problem confronting your country is not one of private ownership, freedom and economy; your problem is the absence of true faith in God, the very problem that has dragged, or will drag, the West to vulgarism and an impasse. Your main problem is the long and futile war you have waged against God, the source of existence and creation ... Basically, the desire for eternal life that is inherent in every individual is proof of the existence of an Eternal World to which destruction cannot find its way.²⁴⁷

But Khomeini was no Solzhenitsyn. He had written his letter on the heels of his own secret mass murder and burial in unmarked graves of thousands of Iranian political prisoners—many of whom had been atheists and Marxists.²⁴⁸

In the USSR, political murder seemed to be in the distant past. And yet, maybe it wasn't. Early in the morning of 9 September, 1990, an unknown attacker split Aleksandr Men's skull open with an axe as he walked to the train station in the village of Semkhoz. After years of shunning publicity, Men had been about to begin a twice-weekly TV slot that could have reached millions. When the American journalist David Remnick turned up at his gravesite on the fortieth day after the murder, one of Men's tearful parishioners told him,

The murder of Aleksandr Men is a mystical event, not just a simple killing.²⁴⁹

Every violent act, the woman knew, ripples through the ages, and, as some might say, through the spirit.

A prison for heart and mind...

On the buildings: Cinema; Club; Theatre; Library

Poster (undated)



CODA: MOSES IN THE SHADOWS

George Orwell had a difficult time smuggling Moses across the Iron Curtain.

In 1949, as his health was failing, he received a letter in Russian from Vladimir Gorachek, the head of a Germany-based Russian-language publishing house called Posev, which served Russian-speaking displaced persons or ‘DPs’ in Europe after the Second World War. Gorachek had already serialised a translation of *Animal Farm* by Orwell’s friend Gleb Struve in a weekly newspaper and, as he later explained, had wrongly assumed that Orwell read Russian based on his ‘perfect understanding’ of Soviet history. Gorachek enclosed a copy of the Russian text he now wanted to publish in book form, and asked if Orwell would finance his Russian editions. He planned to sell a thousand copies in West Germany to pay for the smuggling of free copies into Soviet-controlled territory via Berlin and Vienna.²⁵⁰

Orwell was keen to reach readers with first-hand experience of life under Soviet rule. The DPs, he had written to the Hungarian ex-communist Arthur Koestler, were a godsent opportunity for breaking down the wall between Russia and the West. If our governments won’t see this, one must do what one can privately.²⁵¹

Producing a Russian edition would not be the first such effort. In 1946, Orwell had received a letter from an enthusiastic young Ukrainian reader, Ihor Ševčenko, who had been translating the novel aloud to Ukrainians in DP camps in Germany and wanted to produce a Ukrainian edition. Ševčenko explained that many of the DPs were people of socialist leaning—and later that many were former Bolsheviks—who were disappointed at the influence Soviet propaganda wielded in the West. They would value greater solidarity from western socialists, but were heartened that Orwell, at least, ‘knew the truth’.²⁵²

The American and British governments had made distasteful compromises because of their wartime alliance with Stalin. At the 1945 Yalta Conference, Roosevelt and Churchill had promised to repatriate Soviet refugees by any means necessary²⁵³ and this had led to terrible, desperate scenes that year, such as one reported by a witness in Kempton, Germany, where refugees had sought sanctuary in a church:

The soldiers entered the church and began to drag people out forcibly. They dragged women by their hair and twisted the men’s arms up their backs, beating them with the butts of their rifles. One soldier took the cross from the priest and hit him with the butt of his rifle. Pandemonium broke loose. The people in a panic threw themselves from the second

Within the ‘spiritual’ cover and binding they’ve hidden ideological poison!

Booklets: Orthodox affairs, Posev [émigré journal] Snake: Anti-Soviet writings

Incited by firebrand ‘fathers’, they can’t stop looking for holes in hearts and souls.

Poster, 1984



floor, for the church was in the second storey of the building, and they fell to their death or were crippled for life. In the church there were also suicide attempts.

Following complaints from appalled soldiers and officers, the western allies had suspended forcible repatriation,²⁵⁴ but not before they had sent back two million Soviet citizens, many to their doom.²⁵⁵

Orwell sympathised with the DPs and agreed to waive royalties for the Ukrainian edition, which was called *Kolhosp Tvaryn*, or 'The Collective Farm of the Animals'. He wrote a preface describing for the Ukrainians his time as a volunteer in a Trotskyist militia in the Spanish Civil War, during which he and his wife Eileen O'Shaughnessy had barely escaped a Soviet-led Inquisition that had consumed many of their friends. He also warned that the English public innocently accepted totalitarian propaganda and that 'the workers and intelligentsia' in England were reluctant to believe that the Soviet Union was now any different from what it had been in 1917. The health of the socialist movement in the West, he wrote, now depended upon the destruction of what he called 'the Soviet myth'.²⁵⁶

Although the myth was no longer strong enough to sustain the forced repatriations, US forces in Munich honoured one of their postwar agreements with Stalin by seizing a large part of the print run of *Kolhosp Tvaryn* and handing it to Soviet forces to be destroyed.²⁵⁷

But whereas Orwell had trusted Ševčenko, he knew much less about Gorachek and Posev. He feared Gorachek might cheat him, or that people tied to the old tsarist regime might use his writing for their own purposes. As he asked the German ex-communist Ruth Fisher,

I suppose the editors of this paper are bona fide people, and also not Whites?

Orwell sought funding and reassurance from the British Foreign Office's Information Research Department, a body set up in 1948 to counter Soviet propaganda. It refused to support *Animal Farm*, but vouched for Posev. So he sent money for the Russian edition.

His doubts proved well-founded. Posev were indeed Whites, representatives of the Christian identity-based National Alliance of Russian Solidarists, which had formed in Belgrade in 1930. Some of its members had fought in the Russian Liberation Army under German command during the Second World War. And, although Orwell did not live to learn of it—he died in January 1950—Posev censored his book. They removed his description of Moses as 'a spy and a tale-bearer' and 'a clever talker', and of the defeated animals' weary acceptance of Moses's renewed preaching about Sugarcandy Mountain:

Their lives now, they reasoned, were hungry and laborious; was it not right and just that a better world should exist somewhere else?²⁵⁸

Gorachek, it seems, had misgivings about Orwell's 'perfect understanding' of his country's history. Orwell had shown the animals' rejection of religion as the highest expression of their revolutionary idealism, whereas one can imagine that Gorachek would have seen his portrayal of Moses as little more than an atheist cliché out of Yaroslavsky's *Godless*.

The Soviet school is a school of militant godlessness

Book: Soviet school textbook

Let us revise the school textbooks and cleanse them of religious elements.

Godless magazine, Issue 21, 1931



That Orwell should uphold a Marxist view of religion appears to have struck his earliest Russian admirers as his most dangerous flaw, a fatal streak of naiveté. And that was, in part at least, because atheism and Bolshevism were so closely linked in their imaginations.

It is unclear whether Struve, who had served in the White Volunteer Army fighting the Bolsheviks in 1918,²⁵⁹ took part in the censorship. But in his translator's introduction to the Posev edition, he weighed the virtues of Orwell's 'talented and alive'²⁶⁰ satire against Orwell's 'idealisation of the first phase of the Russian Revolution' which meant that 'much of his outlook will be unacceptable for a large part of Russian anti-Bolsheviks.'²⁶¹

Nor were Posev the only custodians of Orwell's legacy to censor Moses. In 1954, the producers of a CIA-funded British animated film based on *Animal Farm* removed him almost completely.²⁶²

Moses did not make it to Russia until more honest admirers picked up on the deception during *glasnost*.²⁶³ Such was the all-consuming logic of the Cold War. Orwell was to be sainted as an anti-communist, but western propagandists superstitiously erased his atheism in order to wield him against the godless utopia. The Bolsheviks, they seem to have reasoned, had launched their struggle on the spiritual battlefield, and it was there that the West had to finish it.



Godless magazine, Issue 18, 1928



[1] Dual Belief

Pre-Christian beliefs in Russia were deeply rooted in nature and involved propitiation of spirits of the woods, fields, and rivers. After Prince Vladimir converted ancient Rus, these pagan beliefs endured alongside Christianity in a form of ‘dual belief’.²⁶⁴ In his 1921 story *The Wood Sprite*, Vladimir Nabokov imagined an ancient Russian spirit surprising a Russian émigré while on the lam from the Bolsheviks. ‘I am a former Forest Elf, a mischievous sprite,’ he tells the man. ‘And here I am, forced to flee like everyone else.’²⁶⁵

[2] Avvakum

Nikon provoked the schism by invoking the power of the state to force Russian Christians to adopt Greek practices, which meant, among other things, crossing themselves with three fingers instead of two and changing the spelling of ‘Jesus’. This led to mass resistance from ‘Old Believers’, who rejected the reforms, and from their hero, the fanatical Archpriest Avvakum,²⁶⁶ who incited the Old Believers to burn themselves alive in protest: ‘Burning your body, you commend your soul to God. Run and jump into the flames. Say, “Here is my body, Devil. Take and eat it; my soul you cannot take.”’²⁶⁷ Tsar Aleksei condemned Avvakum to Arctic exile. When Aleksei died, Avvakum wrote to his son Fedor III to say that his father was burning in hell. Fedor had Avvakum burned at the stake, but the archpriest told the crowd he was ready to ‘fly up to heaven like a happy little bird.’²⁶⁸ His autobiography, one of the classics of early Russian literature,²⁶⁹ helped make him Russia’s archetypal religious dissenter.

[3] Blasphemy

Irreligion in Peter’s Russia was not for the masses. In 1716, he made confession and communion mandatory for Orthodox Christians. He also demanded the investigation of blasphemers, who could be flogged or have their tongues pierced with a hot poker.²⁷⁰

[4] Atheism, Insanity, Despair, and Suicide

From the mid-eighteenth century, senior Russian clergy warned that reading western philosophical and theological texts could lead readers to a loss of religious faith and, in turn, to debauchery, insanity, despair, and suicide.²⁷¹

[5] Radical Critiques of Religion

Other influential works included *The Life of Jesus Theologically Examined* (1835) by the former Protestant pastor David Friedrich Strauss, and *Critique of the Gospel of St. John* (1840) and *Critique of the Synoptic Gospels* (1841) by Marx’s friend Bruno Bauer, a lecturer in theology.²⁷²

[6] Young Hegelians

When Marx moved to Berlin in 1836 to study law, he became enthralled with the work of the university’s recently-deceased philosophical giant, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel. He soon fell in with a radical clique known as the Young Hegelians, who combined Hegelian methods of inquiry with the 18th-century Protestant method of ‘higher criticism’, or deep historical and empirical examination of the Bible. ‘A curtain had fallen,’ Marx wrote to his father. ‘My most sacred had been torn apart [*sic*], and new gods had to be inserted.’²⁷³

[7] Nietzsche

In the very year Marx called religion ‘the opium of the people’, Friedrich Nietzsche was born. Nietzsche seems never to have engaged directly with Marx’s writing. His first description of the death of God appears in *The Gay Science* (1882):

‘Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace, and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!”—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed ... The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I ... God is dead.”’²⁷⁴ Nietzsche’s writing was suppressed in the Soviet Union.²⁷⁵ A case could be made that the burghers’ mockery predicts the tone of early Soviet anti-religious propaganda.

[8] Torpor

The disdain for ‘torpor’, later adopted by Lenin, was arguably an Orthodox concept—the sin of acedia or listlessness—which the priests’ sons smuggled into radical thought.²⁷⁶

[9] Alcohol

The link between alcohol and Christianity in Russia is ancient. According to *The Primary Chronicle*, Prince Vladimir rejected Islam because ‘Drinking is the joy of the Russes’.²⁷⁷

[10] Landmarks

On 9 January 1905, tsarist soldiers shot two hundred St. Petersburg workers as they took part in a labour demonstration under the guidance of a charismatic priest, Georgy Gapon. Many had carried icons and portraits of Tsar Nicholas II, but ‘Bloody Sunday’, as the day became known, undermined the idea of Orthodoxy as a force for reform. Instead, workers turned to anti-tsarist intellectuals for support.²⁷⁸ But among those thinkers opposed to tsarist autocracy, some doubted that their fellow intellectuals had anything approaching a credible vision for Russia’s future. In 1909, a group of reform-minded religious writers published *Landmarks*, an influential anthology criticising Russia’s radicalised, increasingly atheistic intellectuals. The lead contributor, Nikolai Berdyaev, a Marxist-turned-Christian, wrote that Russian intellectuals were bad philosophers who put ideology ahead of truth. They bore ‘a streak of unconscious religiosity’ that led them to worship an abstract notion of ‘the people’ and to treat science as an idol.²⁷⁹ Lenin expelled Berdyaev and several other *Landmarks* contributors from Russia in 1922. Historian Lesley Chamberlain has called them ‘the first dissidents from Soviet totalitarianism’.²⁸⁰

[11] Bells

Bells have a profound and storied history in Russia. From ancient times, villagers rang them to summon village assemblies. During conflicts between Russia’s mediaeval princes, the victorious prince would take down the defeated city’s bell. One legend tells of how, when Tsar Ivan the Terrible was carrying out an inquisition in Pskov in 1569, a ‘holy fool’—a special type of Russian religious eccentric—warned him to stop tormenting the city’s people or his horse would not carry him back to Moscow. When Ivan started to remove the bells from the city’s cathedral, his horse’s legs buckled and he returned to Moscow in fright.²⁸¹

[12] The Private Sphere

Lenin’s unwillingness to recognise the private sphere

had a precedent in the attitudes of the 19th-century intelligentsia. Because tsarist censorship prevented Russian thinkers from making many of their views public, intellectuals paid close attention to each other’s private conduct, drawing conclusions about a person’s views from their personal choices and actions.²⁸² Soviet censorship, presumably, would present a similar dilemma.

[13] Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith
The word ‘propaganda’ comes from the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, or Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, which the Roman Catholic Church established in 1622, in large part to communicate its message to Eastern Christians.²⁸³

[14] Conscious Planning

The idea of expanding conscious control into ever-widening spheres of life was something of a Bolshevik obsession. Lev Trotsky, for example, argued that communist man would eventually subordinate to reason and will such non-conscious physical functions as breathing, circulation, and digestion.²⁸⁴

[15] Debates

This series of public debates, which was first proposed by Commissar for Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, did not always go the Party’s way. The clergy were, as Orwell had put it, ‘clever talkers’ and the Bolsheviks struggled to find skilled debaters able to make ‘great preliminary, scientific-enlightenment preparations’.²⁸⁵

[16] Nechaev

Lenin owes this view to the 19th-century nihilist Sergei Nechaev, who wrote in 1871: ‘Everything that allows the triumph of the revolution is moral, and everything that stands in its way is immoral’.²⁸⁶

[17] Anti-Semitism

The Union of the Russian People or ‘Black Hundreds’ received moral and financial support from Tsar Nicholas II. Conspiratorial anti-Semitism was rife in the Russian Empire of the early 20th century. In 1903, tsarist secret police prepared a pamphlet called *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated account of a meeting between international Jewish leaders planning world domination. In 1903–1906 there were pogroms against Jews in the western part of the empire that, in total, left hundreds

dead and thousands injured. Although this violence was not part of a government policy, Nicholas personally sympathised with the people behind it. As he wrote to his mother, ‘The people became enraged by the insolence and audacity of the revolutionaries and socialists; and because nine-tenths of them are Yids, the people’s whole wrath turned against them’.²⁸⁷

[18] Propaganda Uses of Famines

This was not the first time Lenin had seen famines as a propaganda opportunity. During the 1891 Volga famine, he had opposed relief efforts on the grounds that mass starvation exposed the tsarist regime’s incompetence. ‘The famine, he said, ‘played the role of a progressive factor’.²⁸⁸

[19] GPU Monasteries

In 1923, the GPU acquired the Solovetsky Archipelago in the White Sea, the site of a major mediaeval monastery, along with other northern monasteries, for use as forced labour camps. The Solovetsky site entered prisoners’ lore as ‘the first camp of the Gulag’.²⁸⁹

[20] Stalin and Muslims

Some of Stalin’s earliest dealings with religious policy, in his early role as commissar for nationalities, concerned relations with Muslims. In his December 1917 ‘Appeal to the Muslims of Russia and the East’, he addressed Muslims as ‘comrades’ and ‘brothers’ whose ‘beliefs and customs have been trampled under foot by the tsars and oppressors of Russia’. This was largely a matter of *realpolitik* directed at holding onto power in Muslim areas during the civil war. When Red forces re-took White-held Muslim regions, they reopened mosques and religious schools and upheld Islamic laws. Among those whom Stalin addressed were ‘Chechens and mountaineers of the Caucasus’.²⁹⁰ In February 1944, he would deport hundreds of thousands of these same mountain people on deadly journeys to the Far East, accusing them of having collaborated with Nazi Germany.²⁹¹

[21] Trotsky’s ‘Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema’

Even after he was edged out of official anti-religious work, Trotsky continued to put forth ideas about how to combat religion. In his July 1923 *Pravda* article, ‘Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema’, he argued that the socialist state could use the cinema to lure Russians away from both alcohol and religion.²⁹²

[22] Marx’s Poetry

Stalin had poetry in common with the young Karl Marx. Edmund Wilson describes one of Marx’s spiritual-revolutionary ballads in *To the Finland Station*: ‘A Promethean hero curses a god who has stripped him of his all; but he swears that he will have his revenge, though his strength be but a patchwork of weaknesses: out of his pain and horror, he will fashion a fortress, iron and cold, which will strike the beholder livid and against which the thunderbolts will rebound’.²⁹³

[23] Julian Calendar

The Bolsheviks discarded the Julian calendar in favour of the Gregorian calendar in February 1918, but religious holidays continued to be celebrated according to the Julian calendar. Therefore, Russian Orthodox Christmas takes place on 7 January.²⁹⁴

[24] Lysenko

Stalin’s support for the neo-Lamarckian agronomist Trofim Lysenko’s ideological campaign against Mendelian genetics led to the destruction of genetics in the USSR and the persecution of the most talented geneticists during the Terror of the 1930s.²⁹⁵

[25] ‘Dizzy with Success’

On 2 March, 1930, Stalin declared collectivisation a victory in his *Pravda* article, ‘Dizzy with Success’. But, shaken by the scale of peasant resistance, he cynically blamed local Party officials—those who were ‘dizzy with success’—for such excesses as might have incited the peasants against his rule.²⁹⁶ He even mocked the removal of bells: Just imagine removing the church bells—how r-r-revolutionary!²⁹⁷

[26] Third Rome

In 1511, the Pskov monk Filofei wrote to Tsar Vasily III that, since Rome had fallen to heresy and Constantinople to the Turks, Moscow had a special holy mission: ‘This third, new Rome, the Universal Apostolic Church under thy mighty rule radiates forth the Orthodox Christian faith to the ends of the earth more brightly than the sun ... Hear me, pious Tsar, all Christian kingdoms have converged in thine alone. Two Romes have fallen, a third stands, a fourth there shall not be’.²⁹⁸

[27] The Palace of the Soviets

The site of the cathedral was meant to be used for the monumental Palace of the Soviets, one of the most ambitious architectural projects of the age. Architects envisioned a giant skyscraper, the tallest building of its time, crowned with a sculpture of Lenin. Following the German invasion of 1941, the project collapsed because the site became a target for German bombers and the building materials were needed for the war effort. Under Khrushchev, the site was used for a giant swimming pool, which opened in 1960. The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was rebuilt on the same site between 1995 and 2000.²⁹⁹

[28] Spanish Inquisition

The original Inquisition captured Russian imaginations in 1490 when the archbishop of Novgorod wrote to the metropolitan of Moscow in praise of Ferdinand of Spain: 'Look at the firmness which the Latins display. The ambassador has told me about the way in which the king of Spain cleansed his land.' A church council that year attacked the heretical sect of so-called 'Judaizers' as 'vessels of the devil' and 'forerunners of the Antichrist.'³⁰⁰

[29] *Darkness at Noon*

In his 1940 novel of the Terror, *Darkness at Noon*, the Hungarian ex-communist Arthur Koestler imagined a Stalinist interrogator revealing the quasi-religious logic behind the Terror to an imprisoned Old Bolshevik: "If one told the people in my village," said Gletkin, "that they were still slow and backward in spite of the Revolution and the factories, it would have no effect on them. If one tells them that they are heroes of work, more efficient than the Americans, and that all evil only comes from devils and saboteurs, it has at least some effect. Truth is what is useful to humanity, falsehood what is harmful. In the outline of history published by the Party for the evening classes for adults, it is emphasised that during the first few centuries the Christian religion realised an objective progress for mankind. Whether Jesus spoke the truth or not, when he asserted he was the son of God and of a virgin, is of no interest to any sensible person. It is said to be symbolical, but the peasants take it literally. We have the same right to invent useful symbols which the peasants take literally."³⁰¹

[30] Russian Heroes

Aleksandr Nevsky of Novgorod preserved his city's relative independence from the Mongols, defeated a Swedish army on the Neva River in 1240, and Teutonic Knights on Lake Peipus in 1242. Dmitri Donskoi fought a decisive battle against the Golden Horde in 1380. Kuzma Minin and Dmitri Pozharsky expelled Polish forces from Moscow in 1612.³⁰² General Aleksandr Suvorov fought successful campaigns against the Ottomans for Peter the Great.³⁰³ Mikhail Kutuzov led the defence of Moscow against Napoleon.³⁰⁴

[31] Chkalov

This rhetorical habit appears to have begun with the Soviet pilot Valery Chkalov, who wrote in a 1938 *Godless* article that he had not seen paradise or gods in the sky.³⁰⁵ In Russian, 'sky' and 'heaven' are represented by the same word, *nebo*.

[32] Stalin Buried

It was during the 22nd Party Congress that Stalin's preserved body was removed from its place in Lenin's tomb and buried beneath the Kremlin wall—under truckloads of cement.³⁰⁶

[33] Parasite Laws

In 1961, the Supreme Soviet issued a decree titled, *On Strengthening the Struggle with Persons Avoiding Socially Useful Work and Leading an Anti-Social, Parasitic Way of Life*.³⁰⁷ It allowed local authorities to exile such 'parasites' as black marketeers and dissidents to 'specially designated places' for three to five years.³⁰⁸

[34] Punitive Psychiatry

During the Brezhnev era, psychiatrists loyal to the state sometimes diagnosed political dissidents with 'creeping' or 'sluggish' schizophrenia—a novel designation—and held them in mental institutions, where they forced them to take psychoactive drugs. Human rights activists drew attention to the political misuse of psychiatry, and from 1977, several nations tried to have the Soviet Union expelled from the World Psychiatric Association. When it looked as if they would succeed in 1983, the Soviet members resigned.³⁰⁹

[35] Jewish Emigration

Begun's case was part of a wider standoff over Jewish

emigration. Following Israel's decisive victory in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, in which the Soviet Union had favoured Egypt, large numbers of Soviet Jews sought to emigrate to Israel. Many felt that the government's anti-Zionist rhetoric tapped into pre-existing anti-Semitism, but they faced considerable obstruction when trying to leave.³¹⁰ In response, the US Congress passed the 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which denied most-favoured-nation trade status to countries with 'non-market economies' that also obstructed emigration.³¹¹

[36] *The Place of the Skull*

Aitmatov's novel, which was published in English as *The Place of the Skull*, tells the story of Avdy, son of an Orthodox deacon, who struggles against the two 'invulnerable fortresses' in the realm of belief—conservative Orthodox theology and Soviet scientific atheism. He is ultimately crucified by drug dealers, whose trade represents the Soviet promise of heaven on earth. Aitmatov, a self-described atheist and a Muslim by heritage, told *Literaturnaya Gazeta* that the example of Jesus's martyrdom 'gives me the opportunity to say something personally important to modern man.'³¹²

[37] Mayakovsky

One example, which would be transparent to anyone, comes from his 1917 poem, 'Our March': 'We'll cleanse all the cities of the world with a flood even greater than Noah's'³¹³

[38] Law on Freedom of Conscience

In October 1990 authorities published the new 'Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations of the USSR'. The opening text read, 'This law guarantees the rights of citizens to decide and express their attitude towards religion, to convictions corresponding to this and to the unhindered confession of a religion and the performance of religious rites, and also to equality and protection of the rights of citizens regardless of their attitude towards religion.'³¹⁴

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Roland Elliott Brown

Cover image
FUEL

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Godless at the Machine, Issue 1, 1926

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Drawing by Martin Rowson first published as a cover for *New Humanist* magazine in 2008.

Pages 10-11
The cooperation of classes in nature, or the earthly path to the kingdom of heaven.
Godless at the Machine, Issue 10, 1925

Pages 178-179
RED FLOOD. A VOICE FROM HEAVEN: A flood down below, a flood up above. There is nowhere for a chicken to run.
Godless at the Machine magazine, Issue 5, 1923

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From the Russian Revolution in 1917 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Communist Party propagandists waged war on all the gods. *Godless Utopia* is the first book to tell the extraordinary story of Soviet atheism through decades' worth of vivid and alarming artwork that the state produced to fight what Karl Marx had once called 'the opium of the people'.

