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# МИРОВАЯ И НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ КУЛЬТУРА

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## WORLD AND NATIONAL CULTURE

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### БОРЬБА С РЕЛИГИЕЙ И ЦЕРКОВЬЮ В БЕЛАРУСИ В УСЛОВИЯХ ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ КОМАНДНО-АДМИНИСТРАТИВНОЙ СИСТЕМЫ (КОНЕЦ 1920-х гг. – 1941 г.)

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Проанализировано содержание информационно-пропагандистской работы партийных и комсомольских структур в Советской Беларуси по распространению атеизма. Установлено, что в рассматриваемый период единой точки зрения по вопросу оценки эффективности атеистического воспитания населения не существовало. Определено, что административные меры в виде закрытия храмов и арестов священнослужителей являлись основным инструментом борьбы с религиозностью населения.

**Ключевые слова:** православная церковь; антирелигиозная пропаганда; коммунистическая партия.

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## STRUGGLE AGAINST RELIGION AND THE CHURCH IN BELARUS UNDER THE CONDITIONS OF THE COMMAND AND ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM FORMATION (THE LATE 1920s – 1941)

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The article analyses the content of the information and propaganda work of party and Komsomol structures in Soviet Belarus on the spread of atheism. It is established that during the period under review there was no single point of view on the issue of evaluating the effectiveness of atheistic education of the population. It was determined that administrative measures in the form of closing churches and arrests of priests were the main tool for combating the religiosity of the population.

**Keywords:** Orthodox Church; anti-religious propaganda; Communist Party.

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### Introduction

By the end of the 1920s in the USSR there were tendencies of significant transformations in socio-political life. One of the most controversial was the church issue. The foundation of a new state system capable of ensuring development in conditions of political and economic isolation was being laid. The purpose of this work is to study the main directions of anti-religious agitation and propaganda activities of party and state structures as a significant component of all ideological work, which began at the turn of 1928–1929. The process of concentrating efforts to solve the most important national economic tasks also had an impact on the policy towards religion and the church. There

was no unambiguous position on church policy. The political conjuncture was decisive in the position of the party heavyweights. Directly determining the nature and content of anti-religious work, responsible workers could not develop a unified position on this issue<sup>1</sup>. The 15<sup>th</sup> All-Union conference of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) in 1926 did not develop effective measures to combat the religiosity of the population. Measures to compromise the clergy, ridicule religion had no effect on 80 % of the population<sup>2</sup>. That is how many percent of citizens, according to the Joint State Political Directorate (JSPD), continued to remain believers by 1928.

### Results and discussion

Since 1927, there has been an increase in the number of religious organisations [1, p. 197]. Harsh anti-religious campaigns and aggressive church policy irritated citizens. The population did not see the presence of church organisations and clergy as a threat to the ongoing socio-economic transformations. At the same time, a person could associate a number of reasons for failures with the presence of godless power. Sometimes such thoughts were expressed publicly. As on the eve of the re-election of 1929, when the virtually uncontested election of a representative of the government as a deputy was commented as follows: «Trouble. The Antichrist was chosen again»<sup>3</sup>.

The opinion on the ways of further development of the only socialist state in the world by the end of the 1920s resulted in a plan of large-scale social transformations. Building a new, more prosperous and just society required

fundamental transformations in the humanitarian sphere as well. It was ideology that could unite people in the struggle for their fatherland. The ways and means of achieving the goal set by the party could be very diverse, and obstacles, including in the form of the alleged opposition of religious organisations, should be eliminated. In September 1927, J. V. Stalin indicated in an interview with the first American working delegation that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) should lead the fight against religion and the church: «The party cannot be neutral in relation to religion, and it conducts anti-religious propaganda against all and every religious prejudice, because it stands for science, and religious prejudice goes against science, because every religion is something opposite to science... The party cannot be neutral with regard to religious prejudices, and it will conduct propaganda against these prejudices, because this is one

<sup>1</sup>Rus. State Arch. of Socio-Polit. history (RSASPH). Fund 17. Invent. 60. File 791. Sh. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. Fund 89. Invent. 4. File 125. Sh. 2.

<sup>3</sup>State Arch. of the Rus. Federation (SARF). Fund 5407. Invent. 2. File 132. Sh. 30.

of the surest means to undermine the influence of the reactionary clergy who support the exploiting classes and preach obedience to these classes»<sup>4</sup> [2, p. 132]. Of course, even if we assume that the leader, familiar with religious terminology, understood as religious prejudices precisely prejudices, and not beliefs, then all the same the direct executors had to accept this in the bolshevik interpretation. All ideological attitudes unequivocally pointed to the clergy as an obstacle in the construction of socialism. The CPSU and the security agencies have become the direct executors of the fight against real and potential enemies both inside the state and abroad. The internal party opposition was actually stopped. The General Secretary already had the opportunity to control the main party forces. However, the approach to religious organisations, as it turned out in the 1930s, required a special approach, including the availability of effective information and explanatory work. Forceful methods of work prevailed on the ground, which caused mass discontent of the population. In particular, the JSPD ambiguously assessed the use of virtually exclusively administrative measures<sup>5</sup>. In the BSSR, the situation with the organisation of effective anti-religious work was very difficult. In the spring of 1928, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (bolsheviks) of Belarus (CC CP(b)B). V. Knorin stated: «Now we are attacking religion, and the priest and the priest are attacking us. We are hardly holding the positions that we had a few years ago, moreover, we are obviously retreating from these positions. The success of the religious movement is an indicator that we have not coped with the colossal task that we face – the spread of anti-religious influence over the working class»<sup>6</sup>. A year later, in the resolution of the Bureau of the CC CP(b)B «On measures to strengthen anti-religious work» stated: «The Bureau of the Central Committee notes that despite the existence of a number of directives from the Central Committee on strengthening anti-religious work, this work remains still not deployed, carried out from campaign to campaign and generally unsatisfactory, in no case able to resist the revival of religious organisations and especially all kinds of sects, Catholic clergy and Jewish clericalism, which occurs against the background of the aggravation of the class struggle»<sup>7</sup>. On 10 December 1928, Chairman of the Central Council of the League of Militant Atheists Ye. M. Yaroslavsky, when discussing measures to strengthen anti-religious work in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU), demands a sharp activation from all party and state structures: «Comrades, the resolution proposed here and the factual material distributed to you paint a rather unsightly picture of

the situation of anti-religious propaganda and religious organisations. We consider the formulation of this question in the Central Committee as the formulation of one of the sides of our offensive against the capitalist elements in pursuance of the decisions of the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress. I must say that the party pays too little attention to the fact that, in the person of religious organisations, capitalist elements have a complex and strong apparatus of agitation and propaganda, which has a century-old experience of influence and relies on the incredible technical and cultural backwardness of agriculture, on the still strong influence of the kulaks»<sup>8</sup>. The task was specified in the circular letter of the CC CPSU dated on 24 January 1929 «On measures to strengthen anti-religious work»: «The Central Committee of the party draws attention to the fact that party, Komsomol and other public organisations provide too little support to the “Union of the Godless” and the cause of anti-religious propaganda (out of 128 party committees in January–June 1928, 64 did not discuss issues of anti-religious propaganda at all, and the party committees where this issue was discussed in most cases limited themselves to adopting general resolutions, without providing actual opportunities for their implementation). The Komsomol pays almost no attention to systematic anti-religious propaganda... The Central Committee draws attention to the fact that the success of anti-religious propaganda is hindered by the fact that in the ranks of party members, Komsomol members, members of trade unions and other Soviet organisations, there is an underestimation of such phenomena as the strengthening of the reactionary influence of religious organisations not only on the broad masses of workers and peasants, but also in some places, especially in the Muslim East, in Belarus, and on the grassroots apparatus of the Soviet government»<sup>9</sup>. It turned out that those who were supposed to be at the forefront of the fight against the influence of religious organisations actually sabotaged it. J. V. Stalin’s group needed to find a way out of the situation. His supporters, only by rallying around the party and the Komsomol, could resist a huge number of alleged opponents, more convinced, prepared in organisational and propaganda. The new bourgeois NEPman stratum, the kulaks did not arouse much sympathy among the population, however, in the matter of preserving the liturgical premises, paying taxes and payments, it was impossible to do without them. It was very problematic to weave a fist, a NEPman and a priest into a single triad. By this time, the Russian Orthodox Church had learned to survive in extremely unfavorable conditions. Illegal church structures operated. Further support of non-Orthodox groups and

<sup>4</sup>Hereinafter translation by us. – *I. Ya.*

<sup>5</sup>SARF. Fund 5407. Invent. 2. File 132. Sh. 133.

<sup>6</sup>Nation. Arch. of the Repub. of Belarus (NARB). Fund 4n. Invent. 1. File 4294. Sh. 26–27.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. File 3508. Sh. 1.

<sup>8</sup>RSASPH. Fund 89. Invent. 4. File 26. Sh. 7.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. File 125. Sh. 2.

confessions was even more dangerous, due to their close contacts with co-religionists from abroad.

The system of checks and balances established by the middle 1920s in state-church relations could not be considered sufficient at the end of the decade. Haphazard plans, reports, and references did not undermine the root causes of the population's religiosity. The personnel and propaganda potential of religious organisations, the material and technical base were still significantly ahead of the ideological vertical [3, p. 95]. At a meeting of the Organisational Bureau of the CC CPSU on 10 December 1928, Ye. M. Yaroslavsky gives the following figures and arguments: «The asset of religious organisations is about 500 thsd members of the spiritual councils of 2 different religious organisations. These members of the spiritual councils are almost exclusively, or at least half – disenfranchised, former landowners, merchants, kulaks... They have, in addition, 350 thsd agitators and propagandists-ministers of worship, then about 100 thsd monastics. Thus, if we take only this asset, we will get about 1 mln assets, sometimes very strong politically, really enjoying a certain influence and having a certain material base, which we atheists usually do not have... They still use our schools comparatively, at least they use schoolchildren. In Moscow, 35–40 % of schoolchildren, one way or another, are served by churchmen, sometimes schoolchildren of Komsomol age attend church... The clergy are moving to relatively more cultured “updated” methods of their work. They organise all kinds of choral circles, needlework circles, workshops, even try to organise all kinds of children's circles, preach the organisation of nurseries with religious influence on mothers, etc»<sup>10</sup>. All this potential with a certain degree of probability could be turned against the Soviet government. In the 1980s, the believer was not considered trustworthy, especially since it concerned the 1930s. It became obvious that despite the significant growth of the ranks of the League of Militant Atheists in 1929–1931, it was «an ear on clay feet». The figures of the growth of the ranks of the atheists were not supported by concrete actions, and if it was possible to create the illusion of violent activity in the press or at meetings, then there was practically no work in the field. Only persons who were completely dependent on the state and (or) convinced atheists could take decisive steps to promote materialism. J. V. Stalin appointed Komsomol members as the locomotive of godlessness, as in 1923. Which, by the way, were distinguished by a weak formulation of anti-religious work. The Central Committee of the Komsomol on 25 March 1930 on the work of the Western Regional Committee and the Central Committee of the Komsomol of Belarus stated the following: «The Central Committee notes: anti-religious work is not included in

all economic, political and propaganda work carried out by the Union of the Godless. Everyday systematic work is replaced by campaigning, and therefore anti-religious work turns into self-sufficient work, divorced from the immediate tasks of the Union of the Godless. The mass godless movement of working youth is extremely poorly organisationally fixed»<sup>11</sup>. The Komsomol members were characterised by active actions of a hooligan nature. At the same time, they significantly revived anti-religious work, which began to be reduced almost exclusively to recruiting new members of the League of Militant Atheists without proper propaganda processing. In turn, the League of Militant Atheists was a structure that had to coordinate activities and methodological support. There were narrow departmental interests, where anti-religious work usually came last, and its implementation was considered the task of an exclusively specialised structure. Even the overestimation of the number of League of Militant Atheists members in 1931–1932 was obvious. Less than 2 % of the citizens of the USSR [4, p. 87]. They were unable to become organisers of systematic atheistic work. Meanwhile, anti-religious work is unambiguously interpreted as a front with all the consequences that follow from this: the struggle against religion and religious organisations is one of the urgent party tasks, one of the most serious tasks of the class struggle against capitalist elements<sup>12</sup>. The League of Militant Atheists was tasked to convey the class essence of anti-religious activity more clearly and convincingly to the population: «Direct political campaigns, take for example the re-election of Soviets, and campaigns directly related to socialist construction, and also having political significance, take, for example, the distribution of loans, do not receive the desired scope in some places due to the opposition of churchmen and sectarians. The counter-revolutionary political struggle is being waged under evangelical slogans» [4, p. 5]. These words of the deputy Chairman of the Central Committee of the League of Militant Atheists of the USSR required the development of a system of protective measures primarily for the clergy and active parishioners. At the same time, the fact that already in the second half of the 1920s there was an autonomous system of communications and administration in the Russian Orthodox Church was not actually taken into account. Other cults were even more conspiratorial<sup>13</sup>.

The policy implemented through the JSPD in relation to religious organisations could become effective only if the hierarchs, clergy and parish councils turn out to be part or an appendage of the state apparatus. This Trotskyist attitude did not take into account the main thing – the possibility of cults to organise the functioning of their structures outside the official legal field. In the 1920s, this was clearly demonstrated by the secret ballot

<sup>10</sup>RSASPH. Fund 89. Invent. 4. File 26. Sh. 2–3.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. Fund 1m. Invent. 4. File 443. Sh. 70.

<sup>12</sup>Антирелигиозник. 1929. № 7.

<sup>13</sup>NARB. Fund 4п. Invent. 1. File 3513. Sh. 20–21.

for the election of the patriarch [1, p. 165]. At the legislative level, a number of restrictions are being adopted for persons deprived of voting rights. In 1931–1932, there were seemingly parallel processes. After the maximum administrative increase in membership in the League of Militant Atheists, the competent authorities recorded a significant increase in interest in worship services and participation in religious holidays<sup>14</sup>. At the same time, with these unfavorable facts for antireligious people, the process of closing the liturgical premises went on with short tactical interruptions, and by 1932 about half of them were no longer functioning<sup>15</sup>.

At that time, especially in 1936, a completely new question concerning the organisation of anti-religious work arose. On the one hand, almost all the liturgical buildings were closed, priests were withdrawn or were unable to perform their functions. On the other hand, forms of religiosity transformed so much that all previous methods of struggle had to be radically changed and brought into line with new realia. Because of the most powerful organisational and ideological capacities when compared with all existing opposition forces, religious figures pushed underground and changed hieratic practice actually became the most dangerous enemy of the Soviet propaganda. J. V. Stalin, in contrast to the overwhelming majority of people responsible for providing national security, understood groundlessness of assessment of population religiosity on such formal features as the number of existing houses of worship and performances of the sacraments and rites recorded. It was these indicators that in tsarist Russia had been wrongly regarded as a pledge of theopathy and allegiance to the authorities for 200 years. In the context of the need for crushing anti-government forces, J. V. Stalin, making in November 1936 an «On the draft Constitution of the USSR» report at the 8<sup>th</sup> Special All-Union congress of the USSR while discussing new constitution amended in terms of enfranchisement to the clergy, marked the following [5, p. 14]. At the same congress, J. V. Stalin rejected a proposal to ban any religious activity totally: «Then there is the amendment to art. 124 of the Constitution draft, requiring changes, which will provide banning of any religious rites. I believe this amendment should be rejected because it is not within the spirit of our Constitution»<sup>16</sup>. It is not clear what the developers of the Constitution and J. V. Stalin meant by the concept of «religious rites» but their exception from the category of formally prohibited acts indemnifies a significant number of citizens against criminal responsibility. For example, secret baptism of children was a mass phenomenon. Ad hoc bodies recorded them, and citizens performing secret baptism were seized. Believers were not subjected to the formal

administrative or criminal prosecution for performing religious rites. It was the presence of cases of performing religious rites that determined the level of propaganda activities efficiency when a bureaucratic system of performance records had already been established. To push any believers' religious activities underground intimidating them with criminal prosecution was much more acceptable for local authorities than to organise an effective system of public awareness campaign aimed at atheistic reeducation.

A census in 1937 was a milestone event in the organisation of the struggle against religion. The question of the relation of the settlement towards religion was raised by J. V. Stalin personally. The answer shocked both him and those who got access to the results. About 57 % (about 90 mln people) had enrolled that they had been believers in spite of the threat of various sanctions [6, p. 51–57]. If to take into account the secularisation of pre-revolutionary society, the liquidation of religious organisations, the objective impossibility of community-minded population categories to give an honest answer then the success in atheism propaganda (67 mln people) were not seemed to be as impressive as it was presented and expected by executive officials. Religious dope had amazed almost all the strata (classes) of socialist society. Religious commitment was high. An affirmative answer had been in general expected and justified from 94.5 % of those who were illiterate and aged 70 and older, while from 32.5 % of competent young people from 16 to 19 years it meant practically an all-around failure of the activity of the party and government institutions at the antireligious front. Although the census returns had immediately been classified, they represented the power balance at the local level. For example, in Drybin region while collecting signatures for the opening of the church from 303 from 1068 people were under 30 years old<sup>17</sup>. After a mass forced churches closure, clergy withdrawal, mockery of religious practices participants and treating believers with tolerance for their acts of hostility to the Soviet power, the situation for the reports outwardly seemed to be rather good and at a sufficient for self-complacency level. In fact, the situation has been detrimental both for agitation-and-propaganda work and for spiritual and moral condition of a society. It has already been repeatedly pointed out by the Commission on Cults under the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union: «Population's religiosity was driven underground by administration. It results in secret forms, it seeks escape and finds it first in some changes of religious practices and their current situation adaptation, and later it results in the forms of organised illegal groups, which are widely used by counter-revolutionary groups to create counter-revolutionary groups of fascist and terroristic

<sup>14</sup>State Arch. of Publ. Assoc. of Gomel Reg. (SAPAGR). Fund 261. Invent. 2a. File 131. Sh. 1.

<sup>15</sup>NARB. Fund 261. Invent. 1. File 13. Sh. 4.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. Sh. 33.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid. Fund 4π. Invent. 1. File 12099. Sh. 370.

order»<sup>18</sup>. The style of the text corresponds to the spirit of that time. Moreover, 1936–1937 forced aids to consider all around them as fascists and terrorists, when in fact the absolute number of them, even if set for anti-bolshevik, simply wanted to practice a particular religion. Deprived of the opportunity to participate in the activity of officially registered and thus responsible for their cult practice and the attitude to the authorities organisations, believers have been subjected to serious ideological disorientation. For traditional denominations the emerging forms of religious life were often very far from canonical. We can find the following characteristics of these forms in the information of the Commission on Cults under the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union: «The stray priests have appeared. Various impostors, sorcerers, soothsayers, saints and many others have appeared and it is easy to be scammed»<sup>19</sup>. People's tendency to the occult and mystical actions substituted a traditional religion, thereby preparing «the ground for all sorts of anti-Soviet propaganda, rumors, gossip (about the Antichrist)» and «increasing the interest in religious beliefs in the community part»<sup>20</sup>. Party leaders and the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs realised that the pursued line for the destruction of organisational foundations of religious organisations was in fact erroneous and futile. It was impossible to withdraw a huge number of people and not profitable in view of the demographic situation and the lack of labour force. Even 20 years' period was not enough to reeducate those who absolutely didn't accept materialism but the question needed to be solved in the near future.

In order to localise the radical believers' influence, People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the BSSR offered the plan on pacification of the unassured: «Using the absence of functioning churches K/r church element conducts an intensified anti-Soviet agitation among the grass-roots layers of the population, interpreting the policy of the party and the Soviet government concerning free practice of worshiping in an anti-Soviet way, and makes believers go underground. Thereby and in order to strike the anti-Soviet religious core group more rapidly, and for anti-religious corruption of grass-root religious groups we consider it necessary to allow the renewal of divine service in a range of those churches (10–12), which do not function and the question of their closure has not been raised»<sup>21</sup>. The People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the BSSR Major of State Security A. A. Nasedkin in his report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus (CC CPB) in addition to his suggestion pointed at the necessity of anti-religious work intensification in the whole agitation-and-

propaganda system. The commissar knew the situation in the republic and realised, that the government actions on the closure of churches formed unfavourable conditions for the current anti-religious propaganda. By 1936, 10.9 % of the pre-revolutionary churches functioned in Belarus, though there were 28.8 % throughout the country, 35.6 % functioned in Russia and only in Ukraine the number was smaller than in Belarus – 9 %<sup>22</sup>. Besides, most complaints submitted by the Permanent Commission for Religion of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR concerned the illegal closure of churches. In 1935 as many as 152 delegates were from the BSSR. According to estimates of the above-mentioned commission, 32.4 % of churches were closed illegally<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, 22 % of the legally closed churches did not function. In this case «legally» means that a certain procedure was conducted, and the absolute majority of the decisions taken by popular demand did not take believers' opinion into account. It is hard to believe, that villagers of Borodetskoye, Berezinsky region, agreed on the closure of their temple, while the nearest functional one was 70 km from their village. As for Vitebsk, after the last of the ten churches liquidation the nearest church was located 50 km away. When it was impossible to stop the service legally, local authorities resorted to different subterfuges. Particularly, during the harvest period, the issue of grain storage was the first on the agenda. Believers agreed on the temporary nonspecialised use of the church facilities as grain storage. They did not use the building during this period, but the payment for it was enforced anyway. After being used the churches were returned to the «believers in a corrupted form. Usually the property of these churches is broken and plundered»<sup>24</sup>. Often churches were occupied for storing grain while there were other places available for such purposes. In this way, instead of improving the forms and methods of anti-religious work the local authorities used the tactics of the administrative pressure typical for the early 1920s and 1930s.

The top officials of the CPSU knew about the situation with anti-religious work at the local level. To make any fundamental decisions some catalyser was needed. The February-March plenum of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) in 1937 appeared to be the one where J. V. Stalin pointed out the shortsightedness of many officials in the political parties as well as the government leaders. On 3 April 1937, the CC CPB adopted a resolution «About the work of the Union of Godless in the BSSR». In the document the given organisation was blamed for the failure of the whole activity as it had not managed to form an effective system of anti-religious

<sup>18</sup>SARF. Fund 5263. Invent. 1. File 32. Sh. 110.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>NARB. Fund 4п. Invent. 1. File 13219. Sh. 76–77.

<sup>22</sup>SARF. Fund 5263. Invent. 1. File 32. Sh. 81.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. File 46. Sh. 76.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid. File 32. Sh. 97.

education and in fact this organisation was about to disappear. Besides the main reasons there were other ones mentioned such as clogging the organisation with «class-alien» elements and lack of proper control over the atheists' activities from the party, All-Union Leninist Young Communist League and Trade Union. It should be noted that these structures had to be the core of atheists, but should not be limited and had only controlling and directing function. In the resolution it was stated that the leaders of the parties and the community were satisfied with the success of socialism construction and intended to weaken their attention to still existing and the most dangerous and cruel «remnant of capitalism – religious belief». The decision of the Central Committee indicated a personal responsibility of the party leaders, the leaders of Komsomol and the Trade Union ones and «offered to organise anti-religious work in accordance with the requirements of the party under the conditions of Socialism victory and Stalin's Constitution»<sup>25</sup>.

The resolution from 3 April 1937 designed a wide range of mandatory measures. Firstly, there was a task to create an actually new structure of atheists' organisation within two months. The information about the state of the organisation was depressing: «the Central Council of the Union of the Godless of Belarus was elected in 1929 and co-opted in 1930–1931 and at the plenary session it consisted of 37 members. Moreover, 26 people were removed from the list of the plenary session, 16 of them were expelled from the party... Only 2–3 people out of the 11 remained were actively involved. The fee-based administrative office of the Central Council of the Union of the Godless consists of Executive Secretary Comrade Shoshin and an instructor. For 8 years, the Union of the Godless made no reports to the electorate and its work was not controlled by anyone. Throughout Belarus, the Union of the Godless organisation includes 30–35 thsd members, but nobody keeps an accurate count. Organising bureaus were created in 83 districts in 1937 but district councils were elected only in 10 districts at the Union of the Godless regional conferences. There is no massiveness in any kind of work from the Central Council to the Union of the Godless unit»<sup>26</sup>.

The confirmation of the information is obtained from a third-party inspector. On 19 August 1937, the employee of the Central Council of the Union of the Godless A. Berezkin inspected Vitebsk region. In the reporting notice he gave the following characteristics to the situation in Belarus: «In Belarus, where a number of individuals were introduced into the body of the Central Council of the Union of the Godless, who at present are exposed as spies, saboteurs and adventurers, the Union

of the Godless organisation is in the state of complete collapse. The plenary session was composed of public enemies: Shukevich, Shchutsky, Kapaeovich, Uspensky, Levkov, at present also exposed as a public enemy, was the head of the Central Council of the Union of the Godless Presidium in Belarus»<sup>27</sup>.

It was necessary not only to create primary the Union of the Godless units in schools, factories, collective and state farms, but also to form and reshape decision-making structures in the regions, districts and cities of the republic. The party hierarchy had to strengthen them with the help of politically literate employees and make them free of other social burden. In large cities, it was planned to input full-time and paid secretaries of districts and city organisations [7, p. 14–18]. This plan was also addressed to the issue of strengthening the agitation-and-propaganda work getting community organisations, education, publishing companies, radio involved. The party-state structures were given the duty to gain the information about the forms and methods of «clergy and religious sects» activities and then to provide the center with this information. «In the last 14<sup>th</sup> paragraph it was stated»<sup>28</sup>.

On 31 May 1937, All-Belarusian executive meeting of outreach offices was held where the revitalisation of anti-religious work was closely linked with strengthening the anti-Soviet agitation: «Bearing in mind that the churchmen and sectarians conduct their subversive activities in order to fight not so much for the religion, but to combat with the activities of the party and the government, and in particular they set the backgrounds for influencing the most backward masses of workers before the elections to the Supreme Soviet and other organs of the Soviet power, and for this reason the main task of the party organisations in the conducting anti-religious work should be the broadest deployment of the general political organisations on the issues of the international as well as domestic situation of the Soviet Union, the popularisation of the decisions and resolutions of the party and government at each enterprise, farm, state farm and among individual farmers. As for the most fanatically-minded individual groups of workers special attention should be paid to conducting a deep anti-religious propaganda, fully revealing the leaders of church communities and sects»<sup>29</sup>.

The meeting put forward such a complicated task which requires great efforts and recourses simultaneously stating that the majority of the regions hadn't completed the bureau's resolution from 3 April 1937 to a minimum extent and on time.

During the summer period the situation changed insignificantly. In the resolution stating part of the

<sup>25</sup>NARB. Fund 4п. Invent. 1. File 10990. Sh. 93.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. File 11852. Sh. 35–36.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. File 10990. Sh. 6.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid. Sh. 95.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. File 11853. Sh. 76.

CC CP(b)B «About the state of the anti-religious propaganda in Belarus» of 7 October 1937 it was mentioned that the local party structures had not started the process of learning about the «disruptive activity of churchmen and sectarians» and were not capable to detect those who sabotaged anti-religious struggle. The resolution defined a range of events on the given issue. The necessity in reinstatement of the Union of the Godless structure was mentioned again. The Republican Union of the Godless Organising Bureau was created and it was to re-register all the existing Soviet members within 2 months and to launch the work on attraction of new members. To make it possible it was necessary to reestablish local units. It was planned to set up Organising Bureau in all cities and regions and they had to prepare and hold peripheral, regional and municipal conferences of atheists<sup>30</sup>.

It should be mentioned that in comparison with the previous years anti-religious work was activated after the resolutions. In many cities and regions existing shock-workers of atheism were mobilised, new active members were recruited. There were lecture groups and propaganda teams created, conferences held. Anti-religious propaganda issues were discussed at the party's plenary sessions. However, that was not the system work, which the CC CPB insisted on. In the summary of the results for 1937 the following was stated: «Over years there have been no regional communities of atheists. The work of local councils has implied only conducting anti-religious campaigns. If some of them existed before, they all have disappeared since 1937 as no funds were given to support chargeable units in 1937»<sup>31</sup>.

In practice Komsomol organisations and trade unions were not engaged in anti-religious work and the party organisations did not manage to pay enough attention to this issue and were trying to be aside. The Union of the Godless which is directly responsible for this piece of work being supported at its own expense was about to disappear. Apart from organisational efforts, financing was needed to hold certain events and to pay salaries to the staff. Collected contributions could not cover the actual expenses<sup>32</sup>. In the draft resolution of the CC CPB from 27 October 1937 certain sums necessary for the organisation of the Union of the Godless activities were specified. In the resolution itself the question was formulated vaguely: «To propose the government to consider the cost estimate of the Union of the Godless for 1938 taking into consideration increasing the central office personnel, salaried secretaries allowance in all district, city and regional centers, funding publishing activity and running antireligious classes»<sup>33</sup>. Meanwhile

people's commissariat of education did not complete the decision about an appropriate use of the funds devoted to antireligious propaganda.

On 28 October 1938, the Bureau of the CC CPB adopts the resolution «About strengthening antireligious propaganda and agitation in Belarus», where it is pointed out again, that «the state of antireligious propaganda in the BSSR is not satisfactory. Party, Komsomol, trade union and soviet organisations eliminated themselves from the administration of antireligious propaganda and the department of propaganda and agitation of the CC CPB did not supervise this most important sphere of agitation work»<sup>34</sup>. On the whole, the resolution had an exclusively directive tone aimed at finishing the process of effective antireligious work started in April 1937. It should be noticed that the suggested plan on many positions was the same as some other similar documents of ten years' term, but concerning a completely different situation<sup>35</sup>.

The resolution from 28 October 1938 supposed primarily the completion of the Union of the Godless organisational structure formation. The party vertical was in charge of this task. The communists, especially the responsible workers, were already overloaded with various issues, and by giving them another line of work, as we see from the analysis of the implementation of the resolution, the CC CPSU overestimated the capabilities of their regional, district and especially primary organisations. The main objects of antireligious influence by the middle of the 1930s were lower administrative officers and ordinary citizens. Setting up the Union of the Godless units from these people would have maximum effect. The Fee-based Administrative Office of the Central Council of the Union of the Godless stressed it in its instruction from 2 May 1937 about holding electoral meetings: «The meaning of the Union of the Godless conferences is great for our organisation. They should consolidate the success of conducted antireligious work in regions, strengthen the Union of the Godless management, unify the identified atheistic actives, elect efficient and reputable district councils of the Union of the Godless and thereby finish the reconstruction of the organisation. It should be understood that even good in its inner structure national or regional council will not achieve the best results without well-established and hard-working district councils. And only well prepared and held Union of the Godless conferences can elect such councils»<sup>36</sup>. In the places where the work of the Union of the Godless was to be organised, the importance of lower structures was understood well, but «the absence of systematic work with the population» had to be

<sup>30</sup>NARB. Fund 4п. Invent. 1. File 1035. Sh. 101.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid. File 12099. Sh. 387.

<sup>32</sup>Калинина А. С. Трансформация церковно-приходской жизни православного населения БССР в 1929–1939 гг. : автореф. дис. ... канд. ист. наук : 07.00.02. Минск : БГУ, 2019. С. 24.

<sup>33</sup>NARB. Fund 4п. Invent. 1. File 1035. Sh. 153.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid. File 12475. Sh. 21.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. Sh. 24.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid. File 11853. Sh. 73.



identified, as it was in Rechitsa in 1938 at a district party meeting<sup>37</sup>. A comprehensive approach to the preparation of the conferences, indicated in the instructions of the Central Council of the Union of the Godless was likely to be ignored in almost all the regions of the BSSR. In many cases, an ideological event, important for a region or a city, resembled gathering of secret commissioners. For example, the conference held in Polotsk in August 1938 was formal and could bring nothing but harm to the front of atheism. The conference can hardly be called district. There were representatives of only three organisations – the railway, prison and college. The rest ones were appointed as the party organisers exclusively from the municipal organisations. No advocacy and awareness raising work within the enterprises and, furthermore, in the collective farms, was carried out. District Party and Komsomol Committees did not endow the conference with any political importance, which was designated by senior management. Instead of discussing the strategies to combat the «religious spell», with its «popularisers» as «ardent enemies of socialism» the assembled held the elections of the Union of the Godless district council, the members of the audit committee and the delegates to the regional conference. «The elections themselves were held in violation of the most elementary rules – not only the conference delegates were chosen, but also those who are not even the Union of the Godless members; the member of the District Council comrade Voronin (elected at this conference) to the question the delegate of which organisation he was, responded: «I was not a delegate, I am not even an the Union of the Godless member, I was just walking down the street, learnt about the Union of the Godless district conference was being held and decided to come and listen to it. At this time the District Council nomination was held, and my candidacy was put forward – so I was elected»<sup>38</sup>.

Despite the shortcomings party and state structures in 1937–1938 managed to strengthen the work on the researched direction significantly. This concerned primarily the growth in the number of the Union of the Godless units and members. Whereas in 1935–1936, according to a very approximate optimistic data, there were about 30–35 thsd members, for 1 January 1939, there were already 2098 units and 60 206 members. By 1 January 1940, there were 2857 units and 90 913 thsd members<sup>39</sup>. In fact, these figures were underestimated. Some districts did not report their data. Many established and functioning units were not registered. In the first half of 1940, their number continued to rise, most likely due to adding new units without control over the actual existence of the previously calculated

ones. Such accounting led to a certain complacency of the central party structures in the country, although there were three times fewer than in 1932. Weakening influence of ardent anti-religionists in Moscow was not aimed at active actions as well. There was a steady tendency in the termination of anti-religious activity, except for reading certain lectures and such presentations as «Harm of religious ceremonies» and «The origin and counter-revolutionary essence of Easter»<sup>40</sup>.

Grass-roots leaders, operatives did not quite understand the essence of the anti-religious work. For them, the realisation of national economic plans was more important, and an elementary absence of underwear crosses and icons in houses and in flats was the evidence of atheistic re-education. In Kochanovich flax mill in Orsha the member of the factory committee Chistobaeva said, that having a meeting with the working women of Kostroma flax mill she saw even the young wearing crosses, and «We haven't got such facts»<sup>41</sup>. The chairman of the Communist Party Committee of Kirov factory in Vitebsk obviously quite consciously asserted: «We do not have believers. We have gone to all the workers' flats and have not noticed the icons»<sup>42</sup>.

In 1937, a complex of anti-religious activities started realising, originally having an organisational format of the Union of the Godless units revival. Based on creating the structure of atheists, the party organisations had to involve the largest possible number of participants into anti-religious work. The socially active part of the community was to become the main skirmishers in this direction. Teachers, doctors, technical officers, Komsomol and communists could influence the population by their examples of critical attitude to religion and church. The strongholds of antireligious work were concentrated in schools, reading-rooms, clubs. There were special courses for advocacy training, 103 listeners took them only in 1940. In the same year the supernumerary lecturing group consisting of 75 well – trained scientists was set up. At the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of BSSR headed by academician S. Ya. Wolfson a group of atheism was created, which was assigned with the task of improving the scientific and methodological basis of atheistic work. The agitators and propagandists were assumed to deal with the preparation and publication of scientific and popular brochures. Individual atheists' work and lectures with pietistic colleagues and students' parents are becoming the main form of anti-religious work organisation. Presentations are reviewed and edited by leading Belarusian scientists. The Central Council of the Union of the Godless of the BSSR lecturing

<sup>37</sup>SAPAGR. Fund 254. Invent. 1. File 212. Sh. 114.

<sup>38</sup>NARB. Fund 4п. Invent. 1. File 13189. Sh. 80.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid. File 13974. Sh. 50.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid. File 15629. Sh. 22.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid. Sh. 20.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid. Sh. 26.

group read 803 lectures only in 1940, 526 of them in the western regions, to about 72 thsd listeners<sup>45</sup>.

A significant drawback in the organisation of anti-religious work was the unwillingness of such primary organisations as Komsomol and Trade Union to deal with the problem. These organisations virtually ignored this sector of advocacy. Having considerable funds they were eager to make money holding leisure activities rather than ideological advocacy of workers. In June 1941, the Central Committee of Komsomol pointed out that some of their institutions were too enthusiastic about «vulgar» and depraving fee-paying leisure activities, having made it «practically the only form of youth recreation service»<sup>44</sup>. In rural area, where the bulk of religious people were concentrated, the anti-religious work was very poor or even absent. The central national press contribution to the promotion of atheism was also insufficient. During 1940 such newspapers as «Zvezda» and «Sovetskaya Belorussiya» published only 3–4 relevant materials, while some regional newspapers published only 1–2, which in the conditions of anti-religious literature insufficiency made the work of grass-roots organisations much more difficult. By July 1941, mainly due to lack of qualified staff it was impossible to organise the

work of village reading rooms and the party educational offices. Their functioning was only formal. In reality the buildings were poorly equipped, permanently closed and available literature was not read. The reunion with Western regions of Belarus and Ukraine contributed to the movement of qualified propagandists to those parts, which made a negative impact on the work in Eastern regions.

The year of 1940 did not bring the premises for strengthening anti-religious propaganda. The republic enlargement led to the transfer of a large group of party members to the Western regions. On the reunited territories religion and church organisations were an integral part of local population life. They had a «pestilential» effect not only on ordinary citizens of the Eastern regions, but also on responsible party members and their families. The party leader, J. V. Stalin understood the absence of potential for the entire social secularisation. Most of the citizens were both religious and conscious creators of a new Soviet State. The anti-religious activity could not be ceased since sharp attacks on traditional confessions led to the emergence of a considerable number of religious groups and streams, including occult-mystical ones, but the issue was not on the agenda any more.

### Conclusion

Thus, this study shows that by the beginning of the World War II there had been no formal effective model of anti-religious work in the BSSR. The leading and guiding role of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) in the expansion of atheism had not brought the proper result. The party structures were not able to mobilise all their sources to fight against the religiosity of the population. The executive power gave no financial support to the anti-religious party decisions. Public organisations, educational system, carrying out their specific tasks, could not pay a considerable attention to that issue. The party structures showed no unity in the struggle for the public ideology. The Union of the Godless, fully

controlled by the party, could not attract and, therefore, make active propagandists of atheism even a tenth of people with a materialistic view. By 1941, a quite effective agitation-and-propaganda structure could solve rather complicated problems in the sphere of ideological influence but still there was no consistency and effectiveness in terms of anti-religious work. The majority of the Soviet people did not have a materialistic view, and emerging forms of religious practices and communities harmed the spiritual and moral development of the society. The atheistic experiment of bolsheviks cost a lot to the Soviet people. Even today the society and the state feel its consequences.

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<sup>45</sup>NARB. Fund 4п. Invent. 1. File 15512. Sh. 25.

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