

Godless Propaganda: The Soviet Union's Anti-Religious Propaganda Posters during the 1920s and 1930s

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Abstract

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union launched an anti-religious campaign to accelerate the death of religion within the communist regime. During that time, propaganda posters were put forth to discredit religions and their followers. This paper deals with the various ways in which these posters go about their attack on religions and the people that worship them, including the overall attack on religion, an attack on Eastern Orthodoxy, an attack on other religions and people, and the role of children.

Vladimir Lenin felt it was necessary to aid in the fall of religion using propaganda (Powell, 1975, p. 3). While there was a government branch dedicated to propaganda, it was largely ineffective in the realm of anti-religious propaganda and efforts often fell to specific journals including *Antireligioznik - Anti-religious*, *Bezbozhnik - Godless*, and *Bezbozhnik u Stanka - Godless and the Machine* or *Godless at the Workbench* (Grossman, 1972, pp. 225-226). These journals were the source of many of the attacks on religion that took the form of general assaults as many of the posters were initially published in these magazines. The propaganda posters employed by the Bolsheviks throughout the 1920s and 30s proved successful in creating a false appearance of an atheistic state (Smolkin 2018, p. 50); however, the effectiveness of the anti-religious campaign

was poor, with one statistic finding that 57% of the population in the Soviet Union still held religious convictions in 1936 (Powell, 1967, p. 367). This poor result is likely attributed to the fact that the propaganda likely only drew an audience of like-minded individuals and failed to reach the religious population.

Attack on Religion

The communist view of religion is demonstrated by the bottom text of one anti-easter poster, originally published in *Godless* magazine in 1932—"Easter- and religion in general- is a constricting snare, cunningly set by the exploiters for the workers" (Brown, 2019, p. 106). It instead chose to lump all religions into a single category with little discrimination between the types beyond the occasional focus on

Abrahamic faiths as a singular unit apart from other faiths; however, even this was broken on occasion with the introduction most often of Buddha. The posters of this era frequently depict God the Father, Jehova, and Allah in a manner that is equal parts foolish and racist, and at times downtrodden as well.

Attack on Eastern Orthodoxy

Generally, when Bolsheviks referred to religion, there was a relative understanding that this was referring to the Russian Orthodox Church, while other faiths were expressly named. This is simply a result of the widespread nature of Eastern Orthodoxy at around 70% of the population at the turn of the century in the Soviet Union and its previous ties to the Tsarist autocracy (Smolkin, 2018, pp. 17-22). Most of the posters addressing the Russian Orthodox Church directly target the clergy, often illustrating them as bugs that need to be exterminated, ravens tormenting collective farms, or a hungry wolf (Brown, 2019, pp. 13, 53, 80). However, the clergy were not the only ones subject to ridicule. In children's readings, religious believers "are depicted as a combination of morons, repulsive-looking alcoholics, syphilitics, plain cheaters and greedy money-grubbing clergy...there remains no sympathy for empathy towards the believer" (Pospelovsky 1988, p. 69).

Attack on Other Religions and People

Other religions and people who followed them were the subject of many propaganda posters as well. One poster, published in *Godless* magazine in 1928, mocks the Islamic call to prayer and includes the text, "Neither God nor tsar nor hero/ We will achieve liberation/ By our own hands," a reference to the Internationale, the Soviet anthem (Brown,

2019, p. 33). There are also instances in which Judaism is ridiculed such as the one poster published in *Godless at the Machine* (also translated *Godless at the Workbench*) in 1924. The illustration depicts Jehovah on a leash held by the "Bourgeois" and aided by a Russian Colonel, with text underneath reading, "Bourgeois: Jehova, you must gather your whole people, find your lost children who are hiding here somewhere. The Colonel will help us" (Pospelovsky, 1988, p. 29).

The most common version of attacks on other religions and the people who follow them deals with the west, notably the United States and European colonizers, and directly targets Catholicism, and to a lesser degree, Protestantism. Going into the 1930s, attacks on German Nazis are also introduced. The posters generally seek to undermine the morality of the Christians and Christian nations. In assaults on the U.S., this took the form of highlighting racism towards people of African descent— or in the condemnation of the electric chair (Brown, 2019, pp. 23, 25).

The Role of Children

The propagandists frequently featured children, education, and inter-generational dissent in their posters. One such example is found in Issue 5 of the 1931 magazine *Godless*; an excited young girl shows a drawing of two priests with "I'm Godless" scrawled on the bottom. Around her neck is a red scarf denoting her as a member of the Young Pioneers, a group for children ages 6-14 years old in which they were instructed to promote communism and anti-religious ideology (d'Herbigny, 1933, pp. 534-535). Targeting children, developing groups to perform indoctrination, and ridiculing older generations was a rather strategic move. Instilling such beliefs in a child is a far

easier task than convincing an adult to change their beliefs.

Conclusion

While the Soviet Union made many efforts to discredit religion and create an

atheistic culture through attacks on religion overall, as well as more specific assaults on Orthodoxy, other religions and people, and children, their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful.

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