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From Repression to Appropriation: Soviet Religious Policy and Reform, 1917-1943

by

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Abstract: This thesis analyses the dynamics of religious reform in the USSR from 1917 to 1943 focusing on the role of world religions (Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity) with the emphasis on the fate of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). It argues that the early Bolshevik policy of secularization and persecution was increasingly substituted by state co-optation. This dynamic was shaped primarily by the late Stalinist concerns with state security and worldwide ideological competition to Marxism-Leninism, above all by the perceived threat of the Vatican's influence within the USSR. The thesis employs a range of primary and secondary sources that study the evolution of Soviet religions policy. It offers a model for combining intellectual history focused on ideas and individuals with social history of religious institutions. The author studies how the ideas about the state and religion were developed by politically influential Marxist ideologists and relates those debates to issues concerning the property of religious organizations, their changing legal status, and the persecution and rehabilitation of the clergy. This thesis will be of interest to the students of the Soviet and post-Soviet world, history of religions, and international politics.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Marxist-Leninist State Building and World Religions
2. The Religions of the Empire on the Eve of the Communist Takeover
3. Religion and Reform in the early USSR, 1917-1939
4. The USSR and the Vatican on the Eve of the German-Soviet War
5. The Second World War and Nazi Religious Policies in the Occupied USSR
and Eastern Europe
6. Wartime Concordat and Religious Reform, 1943
7. Joseph Stalin's Worldview and the Russian Orthodox Church
8. Conclusion: Late Stalinism and World Religions

Bibliography

*The great historical turning points were **accompanied** by changes in religion only insofar as the three still existing world religions are concerned: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.¹*

— Friedrich Engels, “Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy” (1886)

Introduction: Marxist-Leninist State Building and World Religions

When the Bolsheviks won the Russian Civil War in 1921 and established their political dominance over most of the territories of the defunct Russian Empire, they became the creators of a new kind of state without precedent in all of human history. Never before in history had a small group of ideologically dedicated atheist radicals found themselves administering one of the largest countries in the world - moreover, a country that was seemingly out of tune with many of their progressive ideas. The former Russian Empire was largely peasant, politically and socially conservative, officially Christian, but at the same time composed of the representatives of a dazzling variety of ethnic groups that were divided by religion, language, and race, and loosely bound together by the legacy of Russian tsars. The contrast between the ideas of the new rulers and the traditional politics of the state they had conquered could not have been starker.

The Soviet Union of Socialist Republics (the USSR) came into existence on December 30, 1922. From the beginning it was meant to become a new type of state, a

¹ Фридрих Энгельс, *Людвиг Фейербах и Конец Немецкой Классической Философии* (Москва: Издательство Политической Литературы, 1976), 29.

successor to the Russian Empire but also an embodiment of a completely new type of economy, ideology, and body politic. The founding of the USSR was a result of the bitter civil war that lasted for five years (1917-1922); it began with the abdication of the tsar and resulted in the defeat of the conservative, nationalist forces during the years that followed.

The victory of the Bolsheviks represented a rupture with the past, at least in the eyes of the victors. No longer would the empire be founded on the traditionalist principles of tsarist autocracy, Eastern Christianity, and Slavic nationalism. All those ancient principles were to be discarded in favor of an atheist and materialist utopian creed that was based on Marxism-Leninism. According to this worldview, the revolution was not only desirable but inevitable; the Bolshevik conquest of Russia was just the first step in that direction.

The belief in the inevitability of the eventual establishment of the global Communist utopia, and the fear of foreign intervention and subversion, largely defined the mindset of Soviet rulers. It coupled hope with paranoia, the interest in everything modern with the fear of everything foreign. It also largely shaped the policy of the USSR which, despite being an ostensibly Westernizing project, tended to distance itself from the West while declaring itself a defender of modern, progressive ideas. In part, this attitude was the legacy of the civil war years. The experience of that confrontation made the Bolsheviks understand that the society around them harbored enemies who desired their destruction and who were willing to unite with, or to seek assistance from, foreigners in order to fight the new rulers.

This paradoxical nature of the Soviet Communist experience, at once open to reform but opposed to the modernizing projects of capitalism, found its most impressive historical incarnation in the story of the Bolshevik policy of reforming the key institution of the defunct Russian Empire - religion.

The empire of tsars was in many ways more conservative than the rest of Europe. It was ruled by a royal bloodline of emperors (“tsar” is a phonetic derivation of Roman “caesar”), whose throne was considered sacred and whose authority was absolute. He was also a de-facto head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which had become totally subordinated to the state following the reforms of Peter the Great. The empire was understood as a property of the nation and the sovereign; everyone who was not considered “native” (i.e., Russian) enough was referred to as “*inorodets*” (“of a foreign bloodline,” plural “*inorodtsy*”) and had limited citizen rights and duties; the term became legally fixed in 1822 and then gradually extended to most national and religious minorities.²

The Bolsheviks, in contrast, believed in universal citizenship, rejected the royal authority, did not support religion, and did not seek the legitimacy of a traditional state but instead sought a revolutionary break with it. In addition, they believed that ethnic identity is transitory and will vanish in a true Marxist state.³ Those positions quickly brought them into conflict with the defenders of tsarist and, more broadly, conservative European values. The Bolsheviks had to resort to large-scale violence and other forms of social engineering to impose their views on the populace.

² John W. Slocum, “Who, and When, Were the Inorodtsy? The Evolution of the Category of “Aliens” in Imperial Russia.” *Russian Review*, 57(2) (1998): 173–90.

³ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 5-6.

The early Bolshevik rule was marked by the increasing hostility of the revolutionaries to what they considered to be outmoded, archaic, and reactionary aspects of the old society. Religion was foremost among those. The hostility culminated in the purges of the late 1930s when most Soviet religious institutions - together with much else that belonged to the old world - were either eliminated completely or brought to the very edge of survival.

And yet, starting with the events of the Second World War and the years immediately following that conflict, the Soviet state reversed many of its policies concerning traditional religious organizations and actively worked to reinstate, reform, and even expand several of the key denominations. In particular, the year 1943 was a watershed moment. A sort of truce, often referred to as a “concordat” (following the western precedents) between the Soviet state and its main religious bodies (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) was established, which allowed for reopening of temples, training of religious specialists, public performance of rituals, and even limited social activities. The biggest religious organization in the USSR, the Orthodox Church, a traditional religion of Eastern Slavs, underwent a revival, and was even able to elect a new leader, the Patriarch - a privilege denied even by the last generations of tsars.

This strange reversal of policy, which seemingly does not fit with what we know about early Bolshevik ideology and practice, raises many questions, some of which will be addressed extensively in this thesis. The contemporaries of the events of the 1930s and 1940s were often baffled by what they thought was the Bolsheviks’ return to tsarist political and ideological practices. They felt that it could even be called the “betrayal of the revolution,” and the attempt to prop up the regime by using counterrevolutionary

organization. The tsarist autocracy was replaced by Joseph Stalin's dictatorship. The preeminence of Muscovite Russians (or "Great Russians") in the USSR was once again being emphasized, and the traditional bulwark of the Russian Empire, the Orthodox Church, was being revived and given a new role in the society.

The thesis of this project argues, however, that the idea that the Bolsheviks, and their leader Joseph Stalin, gave up on the building of Marxist socialism and reverted to the old, tsarist model to prop up their rule is untenable. There is no historical evidence to prove that during wartime in the 1940s the Bolsheviks lost interest in Marxist ideology, world revolution, and materialist philosophy. On the contrary, the war had only reinforced many convictions that were held dear by the Bolsheviks, among them the reality of the Western threat, the superiority of the Soviet system proven by the victory in the war, and the inevitability of Marxism's spread to other countries.

So how to explain the revival of religious policies then? In order to understand the reversal of Bolshevik policies around 1943 with regard to the massive Orthodox Church and other significant religions like Islam and Buddhism, we need to understand the Soviet mind as it developed during the first two decades of Soviet rule, and particularly the mind of Joseph Stalin, the dictator who made all the key decision and who was widely understood to be an ideological leader and interpreter within the party.

The idea of "appropriation" of religion by the Soviet elites is difficult to understand unless we survey the development of Soviet religious policy over the years, which is one of the goals of this thesis. The main methodological assumption here is the idea that early Soviet leaders were pragmatic individuals with well-defined goals, but who were also fervent believers in their ideology. Although plenty of decisions taken in the

USSR could have been influenced by other factors, the Marxist-Leninist ideology was usually the bedrock against which all political action was to be measured. It was especially true of the leader, Joseph Stalin, a man who took ideology very seriously, and considered himself an expert on Marxism.

It would be correct to assert that the revival of religion in the USSR had to do with geopolitical considerations and questions of state security. As the USSR expanded its influence far to the West following its victory in the Second World War, it became subjected to western influences - including religious influences - that were perceived as both a threat and an opportunity for the Soviet cause. Among the most worrying threats was the potential for the expansion of the Vatican's influence into the USSR. The Soviet elite decided to use homeland-based religion to react to western influences, to expand its power, and to play the puppet-master with the religious organizations both within and outside the USSR. However, this does not mean that the Soviets compromised ideologically with those organizations or that they decided to amalgamate with them in a new blend of conservative religiosity and Marxist economics. On the contrary, Marxism was to be the dominant partner, and the newly "reformed" world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam) would be the subordinate partners.

The thesis aims to counter the assumption that a given political organization, in this case the Bolsheviks, necessarily had to be "pro-religion" or "against religion," ideologically. It was rather the case that Joseph Stalin increasingly began to see religion as an institutional form that could be made to serve specific political goals. Stalin wanted to take advantage of this insight in the context of his struggle for the worldwide

triumph of Communism. Appropriation was increasingly seen as a better option than outright repression.

Chapter 1: The Religions of the Empire on the Eve of the Communist Takeover

The religious diversity of the Russian Empire on the eve of the Communist takeover was staggering. Not only were most of Eurasian religions represented on its soil, but they also coexisted within the boundaries of the same state, which was not the case elsewhere in the world.

The official religion of the Russian Empire was Orthodox Christianity. It was not only the religion of the tsar and his family and of all the “Great” Russians, but also of a number of smaller ethnic groups such as the Ukrainians, the Belarusians, the Georgians, the Moldovans, and others. Many of those non-Russian people had Orthodox Christian traditions that were far older and more well-established than in Russia proper. The Orthodox Church, as it existed then and as it still exists, was a centralized religious institution but, unlike the Catholic Church, without an international center like the Vatican. On the contrary, each sovereign state tended to have its own independent Orthodox Church. The Russian tsar was traditionally conceived of as a Christian “Roman” Emperor, the protector of the faith, and one of its central symbols.

Orthodox Christianity was demographically, politically, and culturally by far the most important religion of the Russian Empire and remained as such during the Soviet period and beyond. It is very important to note here that the pre-Revolutionary Russian intellectuals, the Bolsheviks, as well as many contemporary scholars of Soviet religion tended to think about “religion in Russia” as “Orthodoxy in Russia.” In part, intellectuals and Bolsheviks were influenced by the Western idea that Christianity was a paradigmatic religion. They assumed that other religions of the empire operated in a

similar way and they applied the models developed for managing the ROC to other religions. It was a westernizing trend because Christianity was historically dominant in the West. But they were also influenced by a nativist trend, because most Russians were Orthodox, or at least acquainted with Orthodoxy as a family legacy. Whenever they engaged with “outsider” religious communities, the Bolsheviks, just like the tsarist officials before them, tended to use the Orthodox Church as a paradigm-building case when it came to policies or organizational matters: whatever was true of Orthodoxy was assumed to be true of Islam and Buddhism. In particular, just as the ROC was heavily centralized, Sunni Islam and Buddhism also had to be centralized within the Soviet state. Often when scholars discuss reforms of “religion” or “atheism” in the USSR, they tend to discuss the Orthodox Church with little more than a digression on the fate of other denominations.⁴ To some extent this approach is unavoidable and was also largely adapted in this thesis as well, because whenever the Bolsheviks thought about religion in the USSR, they thought first and foremost about Orthodoxy and then about other religions. Therefore, constant reference to policies towards the Orthodox when speaking of the history of other Soviet religions is helpful as a heuristic device to get inside the minds of Soviet officials, but it has nothing to do with the real or imagined similarities between various religious faiths of Eurasia.

The most significant non-Orthodox religious presence in the empire was along the periphery. In the west, Protestant Finland and Estonia were historically linked with the rest of Protestant Northern Europe, in particular, Sweden. Their form of religion was

⁴ One such scholar is Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), which presents itself as a history of Soviet atheism in its title but focuses more specifically on the Orthodox Church. There are good reasons for adopting such an approach, if only because of the numerical and ideological dominance of the ROC within Russia.

Lutheranism, which had spread to northern Europe from Germany during the Reformation. Protestantism never made any noticeable inroads in tsarist Russia proper, although from the time of the Reformation it had a presence in Eastern and Central Europe. Protestant Christianity became even less of a factor in the USSR after the Bolsheviks failed to take possession of Finland, which ended up positioned outside the Soviet borders.

Further south, the Russian Empire came into contact with Catholicism, which was the non-native religion most familiar to Orthodox Russians and other Eastern Slavs who had, at various points in their history, come under the domination of Catholic rulers. Many were converted by Catholic missionaries or as a result of foreign state patronage, especially in the western border regions of the Empire. At one point, it seemed very likely that Moscow itself would be ruled by a Catholic prince, but the populace was able to mobilize against the outsider religious threat. The kingdom of Poland was the most powerful Catholic power in the region, although it was weakened and absorbed by the Russian Empire and other Great Powers by the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. Its place as a local nexus of Catholicism was briefly taken over by the Austro-Hungarian Empire until it collapsed as a result of the First World War. Historically, Catholicism was the very image of the “Other” for Orthodox Eastern Slavs; at the time of their conversion in 988, Orthodoxy and Catholicism still formed a single church, but it subsequently split into two branches in 1054, shortly after the conversion. Following this division, Catholics were viewed as heretics and outsiders who refused to relent in its pursuit to expand further east and convert (or, in their view, re-convert) the populations there. The Catholic Church continued to exist in imperial Russia, given the large number of westerners

living and working in the empire, but it frequently faced hostility and suspicion of the authorities, who were wary of its proselytizing tendencies and global reach.

Whereas different forms of Christianity co-existed in the Russian west, the south of the empire was positioned along the dividing line between Christendom and the Islamic world. Various Muslim peoples who lived in the mountainous areas of the Caucasus had been subjugated during the long 19th century, a process reflected in many works by classic Russian writers.⁵ After that, the empire expanded into Central Asia where it was able to conquer the ancient kingdom of Bukhara, a historically important theological, artistic, and political center of the Islamic world, as well as the surrounding areas populated by nomadic and semi-nomadic Muslim peoples. Although the tsarist government was reluctant to intrude too radically into the very foreign society of Islamic Central Asia, the latter period of Russian expansion saw many Russian settlers moving into the area to farm and to be employed by the government. During the 19th century and well into the late Soviet era during the Afghanistan war of the 1980s, the rulers in Moscow were arguably concerned more about the geopolitics of Central Asia and political competition with Great Britain (and later the USA) than with deepening the engagement with the local populations.

Further east along the southern border of the Empire, it came into contact with Buddhist communities that had survived the earlier Muslim intrusions into Central Asia. The lands around Lake Baikal - the deepest lake and the largest body of freshwater reserves in the world - were historically populated by Eastern Asian Buryat tribes who were closely linked religiously and linguistically with their kin in Mongolia, and to Tibet

⁵ Shoshanna Keller, *To Moscow not Mecca: Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 5.

and its form of Buddhism. Many of the Buryats were eventually converted by Orthodox missionaries, but most chose to remain Buddhist and were able to get the recognition from tsar for their religion and their established links with Tibet and Mongolia. As was the case in Muslim Central Asia, those communities were viewed as “inorodzy,” and, aside from conflicts with the Slavic settlers, they were largely left to their own as long as they acknowledged the power of the tsar over them. However, the Buryats were not the only traditional Buddhist community in the Russian Empire; the other group large enough to be mentioned here were the Kalmyks, an eastern Asian group who migrated to western Russia and settled not far from the Caucasus along the lower reaches of the river Volga. The Kalmyks, who still reside in that region even after several massive displacements, voluntary and otherwise, professed the Tibetan variety of Buddhism.

In the north and northeast of the Russian Empire where the Eurasian landmass ran into the inhospitable and cold regions of taiga and tundra, there were few human settlements and no land borders with other countries. Nevertheless, Siberia - as the region is referred to nowadays - was perhaps the most religiously diverse area in the empire, marked not only by world religions and traditional creeds introduced from elsewhere but also by many native varieties of Shamanism - a decentralized religion focused on ecstatic practices, vision quests, and spirit animals, and prone to blending to various degrees with other religions.

Most of those “foreign” faiths were found along the southern and eastern borders, the longest in the world, and they became integrated into the Russian state as a result of military conquests late in the empire’s history. That does not mean that foreign religions did not exist in the Russian heartland as well. The ancient lands of Mari El to

this day exist as a federative unit within the Russian Federation, not too far east from Moscow. Some of the Finnic-speaking Mari people are now Orthodox but a significant part of population still practices a version of an extremely ancient polytheistic religion that once spread all over Eurasia and can be defined as “proto-Hindu,” because of its historical links to other distant archaic religions of Eurasia, such as the Pakistani Kalash people or the pre-Christian beliefs of the Balts. In addition, there were small groups of Muslim Tatar people who lived under the tsars for a much longer time than the borderland Muslims and who were, by the time of the Revolution, much more Russified and secularized than their Central Asian or Caucasus-based co-religionists.

One has to also mention religious communities that were somewhat distinct from the other religious groups. The newer Christian groups were found all over the empire as a result of missionary activities or migration from further west. Many of them were German settlers, Lutheran and Mennonite, farming land or living in the big cities, involved in trade and science, and professing loyalty to the state. The Jews were an important major group, mostly concentrated in Ukraine and Belarus along the western border, in the lands once under the jurisdiction of Catholic rulers. This area was known as the so-called “Pale of Settlement,” a legally designated part of the Russian Empire where the Jews were permitted to settle. It was the largest concentration of a Jewish population in the world at the time and included some of the holy places associated with Hasidic spiritual leaders, religious schools, and other similar institutions. The tsars recognized Judaism as a separate religion and nationality and used a variety of restrictions to encourage conversions to Orthodoxy.

After their victory in the Civil War in 1921 and the takeover of the country, the Bolsheviks had to contend with this incredible diversity of religious life across their Eurasian state, while at the same time trying to impose their vision of the new society on the populace. That tension between received religious traditions and the Marxist modernizing effort largely shaped the Soviet religious policy for the entirety of the post-revolutionary period.

The Bolsheviks, secure in their identity as followers of Marxism with their materialist and scientific worldview based on a theory of economics, had no difficulty presenting themselves as a pragmatic and no-nonsense force. Without this kind of pragmatism, the Bolshevik party would not have survived for so long under the tsars, nor would they have been able to seize power and emerge victorious in the Civil War. The Bolsheviks approached the question of religion in the same pragmatic matter in which they treated their military alliances or domestic reforms. The Bolsheviks were not initially interested in all of the diverse religious traditions listed above, but when they did become interested, it was in the service of expanding and maintaining their power. Therefore, the more powerful religious institutions attracted most of their attention. Insofar as the reforms of religion were concerned, from the very beginning the Bolsheviks focused their attention on the ROC - the numerically strongest and the most influential religious institution of the defunct empire. Nevertheless, minority religions also elicited their interest - sometimes as an extension of their interest in national identity politics of a specific region, but more often as material for the application of the methods tried on the ROC.

Chapter 2: Religion and Reform in the early USSR, 1917-1939

Politically, the Bolsheviks were hostile to all forms of traditional religion. In addition, they opposed, on principle, any ideology or body of doctrine that was not materialist and Marxian. This hostility can be explained in both ideological and practical terms. The Russian Social Democratic Party (RSDP) was formed in 1898 in Minsk, at the time a provincial city within the Russian Empire; the Bolsheviks constituted a faction within the party that united various Russian followers of the socialist and materialist philosophy of Karl Marx. Although the RSDP was not the only or even the first party to coalesce around Marxist teaching, it eventually proved to be the strongest, once the Bolshevik faction emerged triumphant and was able to seize power, directly or via proxies, in key countries of the world in the course of the 20th century.

Fundamentally, the Bolsheviks were part of a movement that was deeply influenced by the philosophical ideas popular in the West and originating from Germany. They were united by the idea that history has a meaning and direction and believed that the duty of intellectuals consisted in mobilizing the masses to propel history along its predetermined course. Those were the ideas that originated with German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), a notable thinker of his era. However, Hegel tended to put his ideas in a mystical and idealist framework and was loyal to the conservative German state. Such an interpretation was not acceptable to many left-wing thinkers nor to men of action and prospective revolutionaries; before long, a more palatable alternative emerged initially in the figure of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), a

“young Hegelian,” who advocated atheism, and later in a more systematic way in the writings of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and his follower Friedrich Engels (1820-1895).

Ludwig Feuerbach initially studied theology and Christian doctrine and was influenced by Hegel. But later he turned away from the church. In 1841 he published *The Essence of Christianity*, a book deeply critical of the Christian religion. However, instead of disparaging religious doctrines, Feuerbach re-interpreted them, explaining various elements of faith and theological doctrines in terms of the self-elevation of the human mind. This “anthropological” approach allowed him and his admirers a way to analyze Christian thinking in terms of the realities of the human situation. In his *Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach attempted to demonstrate that whereas men thought that they were worshiping God, they were, in fact, worshiping their own humanity.

This de-sacralization of religion was enthusiastically received by Marx and Engels, who constructed their own system on the foundations laid by Feuerbach. They re-interpreted the Feuerbachian humanity as the “species-being” of man seeking a liberation from the oppressive economic system that stifled human potential and prevented mankind from achieving creative freedom. This foundation seemed so solid that its orthodoxy went unquestioned among the future generations of Communists. In their opinion, Feuerbach had shown that the true God was indeed Man and it was mankind that should be worshiped; Marx merely provided a practical explanation of how to do it. In the famous passage in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), Marx claimed that it was necessary to go beyond Feuerbach and act in the name of social change; Marx’s Bolshevik followers largely accepted this conclusion.⁶

⁶ Фридрих Энгельс, *Людвиг Фейербах и Конец Немецкой Классической Философии* (Москва: Издательство Политической Литературы, 1976), 59.

Friedrich Engels later summarized the importance of Feuerbach for Marxists in his *Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886), one of the most popular books of Marxist theory in Russia.⁷ Engels acknowledged the central importance of Feuerbach in his book but blamed the thinker for his lack of interest in social issues. In Engel's view, it was Marx who completed Feuerbach's system by introducing the social dimension.

The implacable hostility towards old religion exhibited by the Bolsheviks derives from this source. The various churches were condemned as "idealist," i.e., unwilling to relate religious doctrines to specific material conditions of existence. This condemnation was not exclusive to religious organizations but was expanded to include the followers of all "idealist" schools of thought, because any type of idealism was anathema to official Marxism materialism. Religion, however, was thought to be a particularly insidious enemy because of its power, popularity, resilience, and, most importantly, its deep ties to the traditional capitalist and feudal states that the Communists wanted to abolish. Therefore, it is not surprising that once the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd they started to pay very close attention to matters relating to religion.

German philosophical thought, exemplified by the figures of Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels did not reach the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire unmediated. Having been in close contact with the West for centuries, the Russians had a home-grown radical socialist tradition that had also influenced the Bolsheviks. Unlike in the case of Germany, it tended to express itself more in journalistic and literary than

⁷ Erik van Ree claims that the book was "more than Marx's writings ... the standard of Orthodox Marxism among Russia's Social Democrats" and that Stalin was fond of quoting from it as early as 1906. Eric van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (New York, Routledge, 2002), 259.

in philosophical forms. Among the most notable thinkers were Georgiy Plekhanov (1856-1918), Nicolai Chernyshevski (1828-1889), and Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876). Bakunin, who became an opponent of Marxism from a leftist materialist and anarchist standpoint, is still mostly known today for his book *God and the State* (1882) in which he criticized religion as an instrument of oppression and envisioned a utopia. Those thinkers preceded the Bolsheviks, historically, as they were part of an older generation of political radicals, but they influenced the movement significantly, even when they diverged from it ideologically.

Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), the leader of the Bolsheviks, was particularly intolerant of religion. He did not appear to care about the differences between the western varieties of Christianity that Hegel and Feuerbach were grappling with and the very different religious landscape of the defunct Russian Empire where western religions were not widely practiced. In his essay “Religion and Socialism” (1905), Lenin argued for the necessity of separating the religious organizations from the functions of the state.⁸ For Vladimir Lenin, following Feuerbach and Marx, religion was the “opium of the masses,” a mental construct, a dream that prevented the oppressed masses from reaching their collective historical goal - the establishment of a materialist utopia in this world. Lenin did not seem to preoccupy himself with the theoretical aspects of religion or its relationship with socialism. He does seem to have been aware of experimental programs of the Social Democratic churches in England where clergy prayed for God to save them from capitalism, but he was apparently unimpressed with such spectacles.⁹

⁸ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty*, 27.

⁹ Harvey Fireside, *Icon and Swastika. The Russian Orthodox Church under Nazi and Soviet Control* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 17.

In general, Lenin's attitude towards religion was little more than that of a secularizer. He wanted to purge the state apparatus from clerical influences and he did not assign much importance to anything beyond that goal. Although he presumably was aware of other religions in the empire, Lenin was only concerned with the Orthodox Church, which was by far the most influential organization among the religious groups of old Russia. That is not to say that Lenin did not understand how religion was related to broader culture in general and to utopian experiments in particular. During the early Soviet period he took active interest in the economic life of the sectarian land communes and even acted as their protector without ever accepting any of their ideological commitments.¹⁰

The views of Vladimir Lenin swiftly became policy when the Bolsheviks published three decrees in 1917-1918 aimed at separating church and state: "The Decree on Land;" "On Civil Marriages, Children, and on the Registration of Acts of Civil Status;" and "On the Separation of Church from State and School from Church."¹¹ Although the statutes guaranteed the constitutional freedom of personal religious belief, they also allowed for a government takeover of the important functions that religious organizations heretofore performed, such as the education of children, and the registration of births, deaths, and marriages. In addition, confiscation of the land impoverished the religious organizations across the empire, especially the Orthodox Church with its vast holdings.

Anatoly Lunacharsky turned out to be the ultimate beneficiary of the ejection of religious organizations from classrooms statewide. In 1918 he was appointed the head

¹⁰ Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917-1929* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1994), 49.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 69.

of the newly created Soviet Department of Education. Ten years earlier, in 1908, he had published a book titled *Religion and Socialism*. In that book Lunacharsky adopted a softer tone about historical religions and offered a humanistic Feurbachian analysis, arguing that Marxism should take over the “positive” aspects of traditional creeds in order to give meaning to human life.

Not all religions elicited the same amount of attention from the politicians in the Kremlin. Although there were attempts to curtail organized religion everywhere, for the time being the Bolsheviks refrained from attacking the religions on the periphery that were linked to national minorities.¹² From the viewpoint of both the Communist ideology and for practical consideration of political power, the ROC was the main enemy of the regime. It gave political legitimation to the hereditary office of tsar who was considered to be a God-anointed monarch, and a successor to the Christian emperors of ancient Rome and Byzantium. The church was also a major landowner in the tsarist empire, which controlled a significant amount of real estate, including churches and monasteries, a fact that automatically made the organization a supporter of the “exploiting classes.” At the beginning of the 20th century, there were 37,000 Orthodox parish churches, 720 cathedrals, and around 700 monasteries.¹³ There were about 100 million believers, 100,000 parish clergy, and 130 bishops in 67 dioceses.¹⁴ During the Civil War, the church was understandably more sympathetic to the Whites and openly hostile to the Reds’ atheism and materialism.

¹² Keller, *To Moscow not Mecca*, 32.

¹³ Steven Merrit Miner, *Stalin’s Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941-45* (Chapel Hill: The University of New Carolina Press, 2003), 235.

¹⁴ Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1998), 1.

Even more disturbing, perhaps, for the new rulers of the Russian Empire was that the ROC acted on its own and attempted to get more autonomy from the state by electing its own head, a patriarch. The position of patriarch had been abolished by Peter the Great in 1700 in order to make the organization more subservient to the rising power of the Europeanized Russian monarchy. After a two-hundred-year hiatus, the new patriarch Tikhon was elected in 1917 at the Great All-Russian Ecclesiastical Council.

Although all religious organizations that were tied in some way to the ruling elites of the pre-revolutionary order were automatically blacklisted by the Bolsheviks as “class enemies,” the ROC was the single most important enemy because of its size and its ties to the Romanovs. The campaign against it was thus implemented soon after the Bolshevik seizure of power. This campaign ran parallel to the more important campaign to reduce the influence of traditional Great Russian nationalism, of which religion was an important component.¹⁵

In February 1922, the government issued a decree ordering the churches to surrender all the jewels and precious metals that they had in their possession.¹⁶ Ostensibly, the move was to alleviate the suffering caused by food shortages but, in reality, it was intended to weaken the church and make it look bad should they refuse to surrender their valuables in the midst of a national famine. The jewels and precious metals had been mainly used for the decoration of church interior and to adorn the icons. After the church authorities protested the measure, the Soviets moved against them - 84 bishops and over a thousand priests were forced out of office.¹⁷

¹⁵ Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 32.

¹⁶ Fireside, *Icon and Swastika*, 30.

¹⁷ Ibid

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), the intellectual mastermind of the Bolsheviks and Lenin's right-hand man, was put in charge of developing a plan that would lead to the liquidation of religion in the empire. The Bolsheviks adopted the tested "divide and conquer" formula: in March 1922 Trotsky unveiled his plan for the liquidation of the institution. The first step was to arrest the patriarch. But the key role in the destruction of the church was reserved for the newly-created group called "renovationists" who did not differ much from the old church in terms of ritual and theology, but presented themselves as more loyal to the new economic order. They were formally established as a group on May 15, 1922.¹⁸ For Trotsky, however, who was certainly not a believer in "renovationist" Christianity, the plan was a way to undermine the unity of the church by creating a schism while at the same time compromising the international connections of that institution. The "Renovationist" church was fully under control of the Soviet authorities and would later be duly resolved in response to Stalin's reform of 1943.

Patriarch Tikhon, the head of the Orthodox Church, was put under house arrest, isolated, and died - seemingly of natural causes - on April 7, 1925. Following his death, the authorities did not permit the election of the new patriarch although the church as a body still continued to exist. In this way, ironically, the new authorities repeated the political move made by Peter the Great centuries earlier.

Another significant move made by the new government was the establishment of the so-called "League of the Militant Godless" in 1925, a theoretically independent body aimed at conveying Communist views on religion to the masses. During the height of its activities, the League published enormous amounts of anti-religious propaganda,

¹⁸ Daniela Kalkandzhieva, *The Russian Orthodox Church, 1917-1948: From Decline to Resurrection* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 18.

including its periodical “Bezbozhnik” (“the Godless”). The institution would, conveniently, cease its activities after Stalin’s decision to “revive” religion in 1943. It also created “atheism museums,” and organized public events, etc. The interesting feature of this ideological organization was that it defined itself exclusively in negative terms and therefore had difficulty formulating an agenda of its own. “The Godless” were criticizing religion but dedicated very little effort to describing the features of post-religious Soviet society. Obviously, its main purpose was to counteract the propaganda activities of religious organizations. But it also evidenced a belief that religious faith was a kind of “primitive proto-science” and hence could be countered by the wide dissemination of scientific information concerning various natural phenomena, which would be familiar to the average Soviet citizen. The prolific Bolshevik publicist and organizer Yemelyan Yaroslavsky (1878-1943) was appointed as its head; he took active part in intra-party debates on religion and organized anti-religious campaigns.

Such drastic measures as Lenin’s secularization decrees, the formation of the “progressive” Renovationist church, confiscations of valuables, and the creation of the atheist propaganda league, curtailed the power of Orthodoxy but did not amount to a full-blown attack on the church. From the first years of the Soviet era to the late 1920s, the Orthodox Church remained one of the most powerful institutions in society. Throughout the 1920s there was a tendency for older, more intransigent believers and clerics to stick to the old ways and hence come into conflict with the Bolsheviks, while the younger and more ideologically flexible groups attempted to reconcile traditional religion with Marxism.

Renovationism was not limited to Orthodoxy but emerged in relation to the other world religions of the Empire. The Jadid reforming movement in Islamic Central Asia, already active before the rise of Bolshevism, was on the rise, and the more intellectual and socially conscious Buddhists had become prominent in Buryatia. To a large extent, this situation was precipitated by the Bolsheviks themselves who, in some cases, were either genuinely interested in this modernizing process or simply viewed it as a tool to further weaken or divide traditional power groups and their clerical allies.

In the eyes of many loyal communists, organized religion in the USSR was not only a “fifth column” that was unsatisfied with the change of rulers but, also, a pernicious ideological institution competing with official materialist ideology. Although the onset of the “New Economic Policy” (NEP) of the 1920s stabilized the country and allowed the Orthodoxy to reestablish its contacts with the invigorated countryside, the efforts of the new government weakened its power and prepared the group for the more violent repression of the following years. By the late 1920s, the political situation in the USSR changed drastically. The NEP, which allowed capitalist elements in the economy and tolerated aspects of the past, brought new prosperity but also new fears that the Marxist system was being undermined from below with the support of foreign capitalist governments.

Vladimir Lenin - a great unifying figure and unquestionable leader - died in January 1924. A power struggle ensued, until the centrist political group led by Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) eliminated right wing and left wing opposition, drove many old Bolsheviks in exile (including Leon Trotsky), or confined them to concentration camps in Russia’s vast interior, or executed them after a series of staged trials.

Joseph Stalin, the dictatorial ruler of the USSR from around 1928 until his death in 1953, dominated the Eurasian political scene to a degree unequaled by any other politician of the 20th century. In the eyes of many observers, the Soviet regime of that era became known as “Stalinism” - a dictatorial system built around the opinions of one man and the cult of his personality. From the late 1920s onward, Stalin had the last word from industrialization of the nation and agricultural reforms to issues related to the film industry, literary life, and, of course, religion.

Joseph Stalin, a non-Russian by blood (“inorodets” in the old imperial system), was born on the outskirts of the empire in Gori, Georgia in 1878. He could have been of partly Ossetian, but was mainly of Georgian ancestry. He was born in an impoverished milieu, baptized in the Orthodox Church, and later enrolled as a student in a theological seminary in Tiflis, the ancient capital of Georgia. After a few years there, he dropped out and pursued a career as a Marxist revolutionary and publicist.

Despite having passed through a few years of seminary, Stalin was not an active participant in discussions of religion during the 1920s. He was better known as an expert on the nationalities question. Having grown up in the borderlands of the empire among tremendous religious and ethnic diversity, Stalin surely understood religion as well as nationalism. He had a chance to interact in Tbilisi and Baku with a variety of ethnic/religious combinations, including Azeri Shia Muslims, Armenian Monophysites, Russian and Georgian Orthodox, Sunni Chechens and Dagestanis, and surely other more exotic groups as well.

Stalin let other Bolsheviks debate the question of religion and during his early years, roughly from 1928 to 1942, he mainly followed Lenin’s old policies on religion. He

was careful to stress his credentials as a faithful Leninist and was committed to the deceased leader's program of further reforming the economy along socialist lines, resisting capitalist influence from the West, and purging culture and society of counterrevolutionary ideas.

However, while adhering to the early Soviet line on religion, Joseph Stalin quietly worked to undermine his political rivals, Trotsky first and foremost. Contrary to the wishes of Lenin, who had wanted Trotsky to control the religious affairs, Stalin organized a parallel organization that excluded Trotsky. The new organization was called the "Commission for Antireligious Propaganda" (CAP) and it was formally established on 19 October 1922, during the session of the Politburo. The Commission was to establish links with various Soviet security services and report directly to the Politburo. In creating this parallel structure and excluding Trotsky, Stalin and his allies had a greater plan to seize power in the USSR.¹⁹

The marked differences between Leninist and Stalinist methods of rule became prominent when Stalin decided to largely eliminate the old generation of Bolsheviks who surrounded Lenin. After they perished or were otherwise removed from the political scene, Stalin decided to implement more radical reforms that pushed the Leninist program to new extremes. The decree of April 8, 1929 barred the religious organizations from constructing new buildings, or from holding any social activities apart from liturgical services.²⁰ That calculated move prevented religion from spreading in the newly urbanized centers that were developed by Stalin during his industrialization push. More menacingly, by concentrating the Orthodox church in the rural areas, it was made

¹⁹ Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief*, 126.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 225.

vulnerable to Stalin's increased hostility against the peasantry. The decision to issue the degree was made on the eve of the greatest famine in the USSR; untold lives of clergymen and their supporters were lost in that calamity and their churches were destroyed or converted for other uses.

In order to understand the religious reforms in the USSR during the 1930s, one has to view them in relation to two key Stalinist programs that were implemented beginning in 1929 and lasting through the late 1930s: the collectivization drive (1929-33) that radically transformed the countryside, and the Great Purges (1936-37) that physically liquidated most of both the old elites who still lingered on from imperial Russia, as well as the new Communist elites who had been established under Lenin. Abandonment of the quasi-liberal NEP economic policy and the collateral Collectivization drive that reached its apogee with the Great Famine of 1932-33 were impossible without breaking down large organizations embedded within society. The old peasant world, for centuries the main powerbase of the Orthodox Church and other traditional religions, was undergoing unprecedented transformation. During the collectivization drive, many wealthy and well-off farmers were categorized as "kulaks" (literally "fists," implying "dangerous enemies") and either killed outright or dispossessed and/or deported to the interior. They were often the pillars of Orthodoxy's strength in the country; their removal and replacement with government-assigned heads of newly created large collective farms hurt the church badly. The closing of active churches continued and was made easier by the chaos of collectivization.

The Great Purges of 1937-39 had radically transformed Soviet society by exterminating millions of people, many of them members of old and new elites. It was

one of the most violent episodes in modern history to occur during a time of peace. In many ways it completed the revolutionary process begun by Vladimir Lenin. Whereas Lenin had ordered the execution of the tsar and his family and ousted the Russian ruling aristocracy, Stalin went beyond that and destroyed first the old agricultural society of the empire and then what remained of its upper and middle classes, including his old revolutionary comrades.

The Orthodox Church and other religions of the USSR were hit particularly hard. Clergy, monks, religious intellectuals, and prominent laity members were arrested indiscriminately and in large numbers. According to the Soviet internal statistics that were later revealed to the wartime allies, by the time of the Second World War the Soviet Union had 4,225 Orthodox Churches still functioning.²¹ Compared to the late tsarist period (37,000 churches active on the eve of the revolution) those were indeed the pitiful remains.

At the same time, the Soviet government continued to support the organizations that were created to combat Orthodoxy and other forms of religious beliefs. The Renovationist Church continued its shadowy existence as the organization that was deemed more loyal to the authorities. At the same time, The League of the Militant Godless were active as ever and in 1933 launched a campaign against the members of the Communist party who had not broken their ties to the Orthodox church. The purges supervised by the League added to the carnage of those years.

In fact, the League expanded its membership numbers during that period. In 1932, it counted 5.5 million members, which was 2 million more than the Soviet

²¹Miner, *Stalin's Holy War*, 235.

Communist Party.²² However, as the historian Daniel Peris claims in his *Storming the Heavens: History of the League of the Militant Godless*, the organization entered a period of crisis in the 1930s because it could not properly articulate its message. The problem with the League as an ideological alternative to old religious organizations was its inability to articulate its ideological mission; in other words, the League's purpose was negative - to combat religious belief - and it was lacking in any sort of positive ideological message. The League was not an organization tasked with the promotion of Bolshevik ideology or, at the very least, it continuously failed in its task, concentrating instead on combating the most visible symbols of religiosity. This was partly because of the lack of educated cadres, a problem that plagued most institutions of the Stalinist era that had been exacerbated by the purges, and made more visible by the ideologically complicated mission entrusted to the League.

The Renovationist Church continued to exist until 1946 as a substitute for the canonical Orthodoxy. However, the reasons for its continued existence were unclear. The leaders of the canonical church made a pledge of allegiance to the new regime quite early on, so the Renovationists could not justify their existence on the basis of loyalty alone. In addition, as the older generation of priests perished during the bloodbath of the 1930s, the shadows of tsarist legacy seemed to quickly recede into the past. The canonical Russian Orthodox Church started to appear virtually indistinguishable from the younger Renovationist organization.

However brutal the legacy of the 1930s, the ROC survived the decade of upheaval. Many clergymen had been purged as counterrevolutionaries and ideological enemies, most churches had been closed or converted to other use, and the peasants

²² Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 2.

that supported the institution had been swept away as “kulaks,” or herded into the collective farms and stripped of property and influence. Yet the Church did seem to hold tenaciously to its very existence. Not all the churchmen were liquidated, nor were all the churches closed and prevented from holding services. The ROC continued to exist as an organization with statutes and leadership, formally in communion with the other Orthodox churches worldwide, although in reality it was stripped of any independence in domestic or international affairs.

The Church was severely truncated but survived as an organization. However, what remained were merely vestiges of the once powerful tradition. The view among the ruling Communist elite, in line with the Marxist worldview, was that the traditional religions were not viable in the post-revolutionary world and would wither away as older generations die off. But perhaps even before the invasion Stalin and his associates had a sense of a possible future usefulness of an institution that was defanged by purges and completely compliant. In addition, the lack of powerful Orthodox powers in the vicinity of the USSR, or possibly anywhere in the world with the exception of politically-insignificant Romania, served to alleviate the ever-present fear of foreign influence.

The campaign against Islam had been put on hold during the earlier years because of the poor Bolshevik control of Islamic regions, particularly in the borderlands. It was now in full swing. The campaign of “unveiling” (*hujum*) of women was a pretext that was soon followed by the abolition of Sharia courts, destruction of cultic sites, persecution of clergy and the Jadids (religious reformers), as well as the old and new

elites more generally.²³ More than 14,000 Muslim clergy were repressed during the purges of the 1930s.²⁴

Buddhism fared even worse than Orthodoxy and Islam, the other two Soviet world religions. Its institutional liquidation was nearly complete. In the Siberian region of Buryatia all of the 47 functioning temples were closed in the late 1930s. By November 1938, all of the region's 1,864 lamas (Buddhist priests) were arrested and most of them were executed. More than one hundred Buddhist temples that existed in the western region of Kalmykia before the Revolution were closed by 1940.²⁵

In addition, Buddhist-majority Mongolia, a Soviet satellite, was taken over by the local Communists and became a puppet state controlled by the USSR. Stalin pressed for the elimination of the Mongolian Buddhist clergy, despite the initial reluctance of the Mongolian Communists.²⁶ By the time the Great Purges of 1936-1937 were over, it seemed as if the world religions in the USSR had failed to find a *modus vivendi vis-a-vis* Stalinist Marxism and would disappear completely and forever.

²³ Keller, *To Moscow not Mecca*, 115-18.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 241.

²⁵ Очирова Н.Г. (ред.), *История буддизма в СССР и Российской Федерации в 1985 — 1999 гг* (Москва: Фонд Современной Истории, 2010), 54-55.

²⁶ Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 278, 462.

Chapter 3: The USSR and the Vatican on the Eve of the German-Soviet War

In 1939, the USSR and Nazi Germany concluded the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. This event resonated in political circles across the world and was a surprise for many because Communism and Nazism had been ideological enemies from the start and had made no secret of it. The Pact also created a disbalance of power in Europe. Many independent states that had arisen in Eastern Europe in the period between the two World Wars were now at the mercy of their powerful totalitarian neighbors. Poland, which included many historically German and Ukrainian lands, was conquered and divided between the USSR and the Nazi Reich in September 1939, setting off World War Two, and bringing new religious communities within the USSR.

As the Soviet borders expanded westwards for the first time since the end of the tsarist era, Moscow was able to directly control large territorial units with predominantly Catholic populations. The empire of tsars had previously had its share of Catholics, mostly in the western reaches of the country in what was historically Poland. However, after the Revolution and the loss at the battle for Warsaw in 1920, the Bolsheviks lost the formerly tsarist-controlled western lands with its majority Polish and Catholic population. As a result, the Catholic Church, perhaps the largest centralized religious organization in the world, was largely spared the excesses of the purges. That made it even more of a problem for the Bolsheviks because it put the Catholics in a privileged position vis a vis the Soviet religious organizations that had suffered heavily from the purges.

Political Catholicism rapidly became a major concern for the Bolsheviks, who during the 1920s and 1930s were already in simmering conflict with the Vatican over the faith of the Soviet Catholics. However, during the period between the foundation of the USSR and the conclusion of World War Two, the Catholics constituted a small minority of the Soviet population, and their political influence was easy to ignore. With the annexation of new territories and populations from Poland and Hungary in 1939 (and later re-annexation of them at the end of World War Two) the Soviets had to reckon with a significant Catholic presence within the territory of the USSR. That encounter would largely shape the course of the Soviet religions policy for the next decade and beyond.

An important characteristic of Bolshevik ideology was its uncompromising character. Everyone either owed their allegiance to the enemy - the propertied classes of capitalism, or to their allies - the working proletariat masses. The alliance of the USSR with the Anglo-Americans did not allay Soviet suspicions of them. According to this worldview, the capitalist countries worked together, seeking to encircle and destroy the young Marxist state. Stalin only added fuel to his fire by proclaiming that as the new Marxist-Leninist society developed, the conspiracy against it would “intensify,” and the struggle with capitalism would become more vicious and implacable.²⁷

If we fully understand the uncompromising worldview of the Bolsheviks who believed that the entire world was united to fight them, we will be able to appreciate the extent to which they tended to see ideologically unrelated phenomena as being essentially unified. According to the Soviets, Hitler was but a product of capitalism and served its ends like a puppet; Great Britain was not a real ally but the most dangerous of all enemies, a dominant world capitalist power; and local Eastern European

²⁷ van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin*, 114-25.

nationalists were not fighters for self-determination but the lackeys of capitalist ideology and “bourgeois” nationalists. Religious organizations based in foreign countries were a particularly malevolent force and there is no reason to think that the Bolsheviks wanted to deal with them any differently than how they dealt with their domestic religious organizations.

Among the foreign religious organizations, the Vatican remained the most powerful and prominent one, the most centralized (an independent state), and the one that was historically most active in Eastern Europe. It was thus natural for the Soviets, in their ideological paranoia, to think that the Vatican would be able to take advantage of the Nazi ideological efforts and the vacuum of power that was created in Europe by the defeat of Nazis, which the Soviets strived to fill. It would also be natural for them to assume that other “capitalist” democracies would be the Vatican’s natural allies in the drive to weaken the world's only true socialist state.

The Soviet’s ideological paranoia made them uneasy vis-a-vis their wartime allies, the USA, and the UK. According to that viewpoint, the victory in the Second World War would not usher in the era of world peace and prosperity, as long as the global forces of capitalism were not completely vanquished. As the Red Army soldiers advanced further West, the Soviet world was to come into close contact with capitalist forces that no longer existed in the USSR and that could be harmful for the young communist society. As the soldiers walked across Europe, they were exposed to much higher standards of living in western countries, and were impressed and not infrequently enriched by it. That parade of Marxian “commodity fetishism” was a reason enough to fear for their ideological integrity.

The unpopularity of Nazism after its complete defeat in Europe neutralized, to a significant extent, Nazi ideological efforts in eastern Europe. Priests and functionaries who allied themselves with the Germans had to bear the stain of collaboration. Those remaining within the USSR had to endure Soviet reprisal. Those abroad had to adapt themselves to the post-war realities. The Vatican, however, stood poised to benefit from the ideological vacuum created by the eclipse of Nazism, especially if the atheistic Soviets were prevented from conquering Europe.

The Roman Catholic Church claimed the adherents of millions of believers across Europe. Its positions were the strongest in Poland, but it had many well-organized communities elsewhere, including in the Baltics and Ukraine. Although the Vatican had tried to avoid conflict with Nazi Germany by concluding the so-called Reichskonkordat with Berlin in 1933, just a few years later it was ready to dissociate itself from the Nazis and publicly attack their ideology. On March 14, 1937 Pope Pius XI published an encyclical “Mit Brennender Sorge,” titled in German and dedicated in equal parts to the denunciations of the Nazi violations of the 1933 treaty and to the ideological excesses of National Socialism. In that document Pope Pius XI emphasized the incompatibilities between the Nazi ideology and Christianity, denouncing the myth of the blood and what it saw as Nazi “paganism.” He also contrasted the Christian God with “pre-Christian Germanic” destiny that had been propagated by Nazi rulers.²⁸ He stressed at many points in the encyclical that race or nation (or state) cannot be exalted beyond the moral laws of Christianity and he emphasized the Judaic background of the Christian religion and the Catholic church. Such a document amounted to a sustained

²⁸ Pope Pius XI, “Mit Brennender Sorge.” Papal Encyclicals Online. Accessed November 1, 2021. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius11/p11brenn.htm>

attack on the foundations of Nazi doctrine and its imperial racial project that, at least to some extent, nullified the stain of the 1933 Reichskonkordat and made it more difficult for the enemies of the Vatican to tie the Church to Hitler.

At the same time the Roman Catholic Church remained at odds with the Soviets. The Vatican was as quick to condemn Communism as it was Nazism; just five days after the release of the encyclical “Mit Brennender Sorge,” the Papal See issued an encyclical condemning “atheistic Communism” entitled “Divini Redemptoris” (1937).²⁹ In that document Pius XI attacked Communism as disruptive of natural order and a “false messianism.” “Divini Redemptoris” summarized a half-dozen earlier encyclicals dating from the latter decades of the XIX century written by Pius IX and Leo XIII explicitly against the teachings of Communism. According to “Divini Redemptoris,” the essential characteristic of Communist ideology is the belief in “the blind forces... of matter (that) moves towards the final synthesis of the classless society.”³⁰ In contrast to the “disproven” Communist doctrine, Pius XI emphasized the role of “moral responsibility” and “belief in God” as a way to build a better society founded on the Catholic idea of “social justice.” The document is a theological critique of the Marxist materialist foundations of Soviet political ideology from the philosophical standpoint of Christian idealism.

In the course of a single week in 1937 then, the Vatican publicized a systematic ideological vision that not only stressed the Church’s points of conflict with both Nazi and Soviet ideological projects, but also admonished the faithful to oppose both “pagan” Nazism and “atheistic” Communism. This move did not make life less complicated for

²⁹ Pope Pius XI, “Divini Redemptoris: On Atheistic Communism.” Papal Encyclicals Online. Accessed November 1, 2021. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius11/p11divin.htm>

³⁰ Ibid

Catholics in the German Reich and the USSR, but it strategically positioned the Vatican to take advantage of any military or ideological losses suffered by the rulers of Germany and the USSR in the upcoming war.

Chapter 4: The Second World War and Nazi religious policies in the occupied USSR and Eastern Europe

On 22nd of June 1941, German armies crossed the German-Soviet border and initiated war with the USSR. This event shocked Moscow's ruling elite. Only a couple of years earlier in 1939, the USSR and Nazi Germany had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which allowed them to participate in the partition of Poland and some other Eastern European lands. The treaty made it possible for the USSR to expand westward, annexing areas in Eastern Europe that had millions of Catholic and Orthodox believers and that included areas with large Jewish populations. The onset of the Soviet-German war in 1941, however, largely nullified those gains. The Red Army suffered defeats in the initial stages of the war, and it was pushed far to the east.

Soviet policies in the newly occupied lands did not gain them popularity there. On the contrary, the Soviet-style Bolshevik reforms and accompanying violence that were implemented between 1939 and 1941 made large swathes of the local populace, including the local elites, fearful and mistrustful of Moscow.³¹

Although the German occupation in the years that followed was in some ways even more brutal than the preceding Soviet period, the opportunity was created for the Nazis to test their propaganda and social engineering methods in the territory they had conquered. Besides the lands that were acquired by the USSR in 1939 (and therefore were not subject to the reforms described in the preceding chapters), the Germans were able to quickly occupy a far larger area of the western USSR, including the entirety of

³¹ Jan T Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 35-45.

Belarus, Ukraine, as well as parts of southern and western Russia proper. The Germans advanced so far east that they were able to make meaningful contact with Buddhist Kalmyks near Volga, as well as various Muslim and Orthodox nations of the Caucasus, who also became the objects of Nazi propaganda and, in many cases, military auxiliaries.³²

The Second World War and the German occupation of the western USSR constituted the immediate context for the change in the Soviet religious policy. The long chain of progressively more violent political experiments in social engineering, international isolation, Marxist experiments, forced secularization, and the pursuit of political utopia quickly came to end when the armies of Nazi Germany crossed the border and put most of the western USSR under their control. A completely different new ideological and political order was imposed on the newly acquired lands. This situation necessitated an appropriate response from Moscow. In the initial stages of the war, it was not entirely clear if the Germans would be able to take Moscow and conquer the USSR all the way to the Ural Mountains. However, once the tide shifted with the German defeat at Stalingrad and later at Kursk, the immediate task of the Bolsheviks changed from surviving the war to reconquering and reintegrating the “lost” western lands.

German occupation of western Soviet land lasted only a few years. Nevertheless, it changed the societies in Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltics in drastic ways, both by means of radical violence and genocide, but also by cultural influences from abroad, however distorted those were by Nazism. The societies were affected by exposure to

³² A very thorough investigation of the subject is Joachim Hoffman, *Deutsche und Kalmyken: 1942 bis 1945* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1986).

the western way of doing things after a long period of Soviet isolationism. As a result of the war, the Holocaust, and the forced resettlements (as well as earlier Soviet purges), the population of those regions became homogenized and overwhelmingly Orthodox, with pockets of Catholics and surviving Jews. In addition, some of those regions were never a part of the pre-Soviet Russian Empire and never a part of the Soviet Union. They had not been occupied by the USSR in 1939 during the interlude between the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the onset of German hostilities in 1942. That amplified the effect of Nazi occupation as the Soviet ideological hold on the lands was not sufficiently solidified to resist the changes brought about by the occupation.

According to historian Stephen Miner, even after the tide of war turned against Germany, the Soviet leadership looked at the inevitable re-incorporation of those territories with a great deal of anxiety. Not only was anti-Russian and anti-Communist animosity a factor, but the vestiges of Western influence were lingering, and even spreading. This was a problem both from the ideological point of view and from the point of view of changing geopolitics, especially in the light of the uneasy relationship between the USSR and the Allies. Politically active Christians, both in the UK and the USA, who were concerned about global Christianity, balked at the atheistic nature of the Soviet regime and the violent persecution of the Russian clergy. Various expat Russian Orthodox groups in the western lands beyond the reach of the USSR were radically anti-Soviet, some having gone so far as to side with the Nazis before and during the war.

To take advantage of the Soviet anti-religion policies, Nazi Germany had declared an international “Crusade” against the Soviet Union, even naming their main

military operation in the East in honor of the German Crusader king “Barba Rossa,” who had drowned in Anatolia during the crusade. Hitler and his followers were principled enemies of the atheistic Soviet state and developed an ideology that had very few points in common with Soviet Marxist-Leninist doctrine. In order to buttress the support for their anti-Soviet ideological and military effort, the Nazis permitted the re-opening of the Orthodox churches and allowed them to conduct services. They also created a variety of organizations to control popular religious sentiment.

Ideologically, the revival of religious life after the arrival of the Germans put the Soviets in a difficult spot. The continued Soviet practice of restraint on church activities compared unfavorably with the active religious life in the German-occupied lands. The Germans and their allies undermined many years of Soviet anti-religious campaigns by lessening the restrictions on religious activities and encouraging the formation of new religious groups. Those relaxations were enthusiastically received by the local populations. In fact, one can speak of a true “revival” of church life in the territories controlled by the Axis powers.

Romania entered the war on Hitler’s side. It occupied the southwestern part of the USSR that included Moldova, southeastern Ukraine, and the port city of Odessa. A non-Slavic Orthodox nation that was hostile to the USSR, Romania immediately took advantage of the situation on the ground and subordinated newly legalized Orthodox communities to the ecclesiastical authorities in Bucharest.³³

³³ Сеницын Ф.Л. “Национальная и религиозная политика румынских оккупантов на территории Транснистрии (1941-1944).” *Вестник МГОУ. Серия: История и политические науки* 5 (2016): 63–70. doi:10.18384/2310-676X-2016-5-63-70

In addition, the predominantly Orthodox lands of Volhynia in western Ukraine had come under the rule of Poland after the end of the Polish-Soviet war in 1921. As a result, the holdings of the Russian Orthodox Church and its clergy in Poland had not been affected by the famine of 1933 and the Great Purges of the late 1930s. At the beginning of World War Two, the large number of Russian Orthodox Churches still active were located in the west, under Polish control, far away from the ethnic Russian Orthodox lands.

In some way the victorious USSR found itself transported into its own past. The aspects of the past that were eradicated in the USSR in the 1930s persisted in its borderlands. Those “capitalist” traditions constituted a threat to the Soviet way of life, and it was not clear how they could be censored or prevented from being used as an ideological weapon. The period of the German Nazi occupation was not remembered fondly by most of the population, but their legacy was retained in many different ways, providing the basis for anti-Soviet sentiments.

One of the ways to deal with the (re)incorporation of the western borderlands was to repeat the formula of the 1930s, i.e., to plan and conduct massive waves of arrests, deportations, and executions of social elites starting with the ruling strata of the local Communist parties. There is some evidence that such a measure was seriously considered at the highest level, long after Germany itself was defeated and occupied. Some members of the Soviet leading circles advocated for a comprehensive purge in the territories that had been subjected to Nazi rule during the war. As late as May 1947, long after the German defeat, Kaganovich pushed for a comprehensive purge of Ukrainian political and cultural elites, which were comparable to the campaigns of the

1930s. They would start in the same way, with the public trials of top Communist functionaries in the republic.³⁴ Nevertheless, the plans were shelved. Stalin was allegedly opposed to being personally involved “in a quarrel with the Ukrainians.”³⁵ Perhaps he thought that the victory in the war and the violent reforms of the western territories already undertaken by the Soviets from 1939 through 1945 had had their effect.³⁶

But what was the extent of the “religious revival” under German rule and can one even speak about the “revival” in the ghastly colonial regime that the Nazis instituted in the East? Historians and eyewitnesses alike often observed that the German occupation of the Soviet lands was welcomed by many of the locals, some of whom still remembered the Germans during the First World War or even of the generation before that; however, the subsequent events and the systemic racism inflicted on the local non-Germanic racial groups, especially the Jews and the Slavs, very soon made them realize that in many ways the Nazi system was even more deadly than the realities of the Soviet rule.

The biggest problem for the Nazis and their collaborators in the East with the restoration of Christian organizations was due to the fundamentally anti-Christian foundations of Nazi ideology. Hitler was not a Christian in a conventional sense of this word. Like many of the members of his party, he was influenced by tribal paganism, by the religions of ancient Greece and Rome, and by the mythology of the Germanic

³⁴ Serhiy Yekelchuk, *Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relationship in the Soviet Historical Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 76.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Gross, *Revolution from Abroad*, 71-125.

sagas, as nostalgically portrayed in the operas of his favorite composer, Ludwig Wagner.

Many German Christians tried to survive as best as they could. They adapted themselves, to various extents, to the new government and its racial doctrines. Many resisted. Some were in conflict with the authorities. In any case, there was no wide-scale purge in Germany itself, but many of the faithful had some worries about the future of their faith in the new Reich, particularly in the light of Christianity's Judaic roots.

Aside from Hitler, there were other members of the ruling clique who were religiously and mystically inclined, not towards Christianity but rather towards different varieties of folkish, blood-and-soil based doctrines that constituted a loosely (in)coherent non-codified system. Himmler carried a copy of the Hindu sacred text "Bhagavad Gita" (The Song of the Lord) with him at all times and imagined himself an incarnation of an ancient German king. On July 1, 1935, Himmler met with his SS associates in Berlin to found the "Society for the Study of the History of Primeval Ideas." Later it was renamed the "Ahnenerbe" and became a quasi-historical party think-tank that collected information on the ancient beliefs of the "Aryans" in order to implement a new religious system in the Reich, or at least attempt to do so if Himmler's influence were to persist and spread.³⁷ However, Himmler's efforts in that direction were often met with derision from other Nazis who were atheistic and suspicious of obscure mystical doctrines, or simply uninterested in Ariosophy.

From the very beginning of the war, the German policy on religion was carried out differently in Germany and in the East. The East in the Nazi imaginary was a land of

³⁷ A good study of the subject is Heather Pringle, *The Master Plan: Himmler's Scholars and the Holocaust* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2006).

brutish, sub-human beasts, who had to be managed for the greater good of the future Germany.³⁸ To that end, several competing political bodies were founded in the occupied lands in order to re-engineer Eastern Europe all the way to the Ural Mountains, the future eastern border of the Reich. The enterprise was in no way subject to the laws that prevailed in Germany; complete freedom was given to the Nazi rulers in order to reshape local societies.

Regardless of the lawlessness that was thus created by placing the East under control of several competing administrative bodies, the Germans were successful in transplanting their own brand of dictatorial tyranny. The principle of “working towards the Führer” was often the only guide to the local Nazi agents, who frequently quarreled with one another, ignored each other commands, and treated the locals as dispensable elements in those power struggles.

An old Nazi party member and longtime Hitler associate, Alfred Rosenberg, became a nominal head of the German occupation government in the East. Among the Nazis, he was considered to be an expert in eastern affairs due to his background as a Baltic German and his familiarity with all things “Russian.” Unlike other Nazis, Rosenberg understood that the populations of the European part of the USSR were divided into many ethnic groups, including many who were resentful towards Russian imperialism and ethnic chauvinism. Rosenberg had his own vision of the fundamental “Eastern land” policy that consisted in consolidating Soviet ethnic minorities against the “Great Russian” dominant group. His vision of the East was that of a colonized land, dismembered along ethnic lines and easy to govern.³⁹

³⁸ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 161-63.

³⁹ Wolodymyr Kosyk, ed., *The Third Reich and the Ukrainian Question: Documents 1934-1944* (London: Ukrainian Central Information Service, 1991), Document 13, 39.

The Edict of Toleration, the key legislative initiative on religion, was promulgated by Rosenberg's "Ostraum" government on June 19, 1942.⁴⁰ It went through several drafts before publication and was reviewed by such influential German administrators in the area as Koch and Lohse. The initial draft of the Edict simply stated that everyone in the occupied East had freedom of religious belief and freedom to form religious associations with like-minded worshippers. Later, various provisions were added after hardliners demanded that the language of the Edict be toned down, and that each local religious organization submit to a local investigation in order to verify its political reliability.

Rosenberg mainly supported the division of the Protestant and Orthodox Churches along ethnic lines. In the case of Orthodox Christianity, he promoted Ukrainian and Byelorussian groups hostile to the "Great" Russians - a policy well in line with his idea of the ethnic breakdown and colonization of the USSR. Rosenberg was hostile to both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican, and he aimed to use local religious groups to weaken the population's ties to both of those religious structures.

Despite the lofty language of the Edict, it was often ignored by the local German administrators (such as the officials of Koch's Reichskommissariat administration) and SS functionaries who acted as they saw fit and who did not have to report directly to Rosenberg because of the decentralized system of Nazi rule. Despite the fact that the Edict offered these Churches the right to organize, the actual policy adopted by the SS and local administrations sought to paralyze any larger religious structures and reduce contacts between religious communities as much as possible. Larger church structures,

⁴⁰ Fireside, *Icon and Swastika*, 87.

such as the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, were partly suppressed as they grew bigger and more influential.⁴¹

Nevertheless, the Edict was a powerful catalyst that sparked a wide-spread religious revival. More and more churches were reopened. The horrors and uncertainties of the war seemed only to fuel the fervor of believers. Orthodox Christianity was no longer de facto banned, and in some areas that were never ravaged by the reforms and violence of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Volhynia, it was both vigorous and widespread. In addition, the German army (*Wehrmacht*) had its own way of managing the lands “liberated” from the Communists. As they entered one conquered town after the other, the German soldiers often reopened churches, cleaned and reconstructed them, and even used them for their own religious purposes. Such policy was frowned upon by Hitler and the more ideological Nazis, but the tension and competition between the army and the colonial administration in the East, together with the importance of the *Wehrmacht* in an on-going war, allowed the generals to do what they wanted within their sphere of territorial command.

After the Germans were defeated by the Red Army and driven from the territories of the USSR, they left behind not only widespread destruction and hatred, but also an ideological legacy. Segments of the population who had collaborated with the Nazis had been influenced by their ideas. Those who had been exposed to the realities of the colonial Nazi government and who had, for years, resisted their rule were now left with the chaotic freedom of statelessness and anarchy, a reality for many locales after the war. This situation was deeply problematic for Stalin and his followers, who

⁴¹ Ibid, 95.

contemplated the best way to re-organize life and re-incorporate the recaptured territories into the USSR.

In the area of religious life, Stalin had to contend with the multitude of still functioning churches of various denominations in all of the reconquered regions. He also had to deal with a variety of religious groups that were either created under Nazi auspices or that had ancient roots of their own, which were greatly affected by war but retained much of their vigor. The enemies of the USSR, both real and imaginary, were in a position to benefit from the abortive religious reforms that the Reich had instituted in the West. No one was in a better position to benefit than the Vatican. Italy had been liberated by the Western Allies and the Pope was clearly outside the Soviet sphere of influence while millions of his subjects in Eastern and Central Europe came under the direct control of the Soviet military and later civil authorities.

Chapter 5: Wartime Concordat and Religious Reform, 1943

After the purges and anti-religious campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, it was perhaps surprising to many that Joseph Stalin would reverse his course and help all three world religions to re-establish themselves in the USSR. In 1943, however, in the midst of the Second World War, this is exactly what had taken place. To further his plans in that direction, Stalin took a decisive first step by deciding to personally meet with the ROC's leaders in his office.

The key meeting took place on September 4, 1943 in the Kremlin.⁴² The day before, the three key representatives of the ROC, Sergei Stagorodskiy, Alexiy Simansky, and Nicolai Yarushevich, were notified that they were about to meet with the authorities in Moscow. Stalin underwent a final briefing before the high-profile meeting. Accompanying him was his right-hand man Vyacheslav Molotov as well as Georgiy Karpov (1898-1967), whom Stalin had appointed the same month as the head of the newly created Soviet for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church. Karpov was to remain the head of that council until 1960, long after Stalin was dead. In 1944, a parallel structure called the Soviet for the Affairs of Religious Cults was created; it was oriented towards the minority religions of the USSR.⁴³

Karpov proved a diligent chronicler, duly recording the meeting between Stalin and the hierarchs in his office.⁴⁴ Before the meeting Stalin quizzed Karpov on the international influence of the Orthodoxy and its historical ties to various international

⁴² Miner, *Stalin's Holy War*, 124-27.

⁴³ Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 78.

⁴⁴ Felix Corley, ed., *Religion in the Soviet Union: An Archival Reader* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1996), Document 89, 139.

structures. The hierarchs were invited in and Stalin talked to them about various matters including his seminary past. The ensuing remarks about “our seminarian turning into the Soviet generalissimo” elicited smiles from the dictator. The Church was promised expanded rights and material support from the state.

The Soviet for the Affairs of Religious Cults that Karpov was to lead was clearly reminiscent of the Synod council established by Peter the Great in 1721 for the same purpose - to control the church. Unlike Peter the Great’s reform that ultimately abolished the position of the Patriarch, this time, on September 12, 1943, the Soviets enthroned the Patriarch as the formal leader of the church, shortly after a separate meeting of the hierarchs on September 8, 1943.⁴⁵

The Orthodox Church was resurrected from the ashes. It was able to enthrone a new patriarch and move into the building of the former German embassy. Its longtime adversaries, the League of Militant Godless and the Renovationist Church, were no longer a threat. However, as the appointment of Karpov and the creation of the Soviet on the Affairs of the Church demonstrated, Stalin had no reason to give the newly reinvigorated Church any real autonomy. It was to remain but an extension and an instrument of the Soviet state in an upcoming battle with the Vatican.

With the approach of the Second World War and the resulting decisive victories of the Soviets and their Western Allies, the Vatican found itself in an advantageous situation. Although many traditional Catholic societies, most notably Poland, were bled dry by both the Soviets and the Nazis, the main traditional adversary of Rome in the East, the Russian Orthodox Church, was critically weakened. At the same time, most centers of Catholic power remained beyond the reach of the Red Army in western and

⁴⁵ Ibid, 146.

southern Europe. In this way, a religious vacuum of power was created that the Vatican was potentially able to exploit.

On the other hand, the crisis of fascism and Nazism in Europe had created another vacuum of power further West. Roman Catholicism, as a traditional European creed, could appeal to those who were disillusioned by radical right-wing ideologies but still bitterly opposed to Communism. Some Catholics were active in the resistance both inside and outside Germany and could now claim the victory as their own. Most importantly, they had subordinate structures within the Soviet zone, some of them hundreds of years old.

The Uniate Church in Ukraine, also known as the Ukrainian Catholic Church or the Greek Catholic Church of Ukraine, was by far the largest Catholic structure within the predominantly Orthodox parts of Eastern Europe. It was principally in the areas of western Ukraine that were only recently joined to the USSR, and it had never been a part of the Russian Empire. Other areas such as Galicia and Transcarpathia, and parts of Transylvania, were originally converted from Orthodoxy to Catholicism hundreds of years earlier yet retained the eastern rituals and, to some extent, the mystical theology of the Orthodox Church. Over the years, the Greek Catholic Church had become a symbol of national identity in the areas ruled by foreigners. During the war, it became known for opposing both German and Soviet brutalities.

The vacuum of religious power in the USSR was by no means an abstract thing. The number of churches and monasteries both of Orthodox and Catholic persuasion was much higher in the western parts of the USSR, which included the "Great Russian" ethnic homeland, than in the eastern parts. In addition, the percentage of Catholics in

the west was much higher, and they were more closely linked to local conspiratorial organizations. Of the biggest concern to the Soviets was the Greek Catholic Church that was mostly active in the western parts of Ukraine that had been joined to the USSR in 1942 and again in 1945. That religious organization had become a symbol of Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Soviet resistance before and during the war. It was a political power to be reckoned with.

There were, of course, also Roman Catholic communities in the western lands conquered by the advancing Red Army, most prominently the Catholics of Lithuania. However, they were not numerous and were traditionally considered “inorodtsy (i.e., ethnic aliens) by the Russians. The Ukrainian Catholic Church, in contrast, was from its inception created as a Catholic structure aimed at conversion of the Orthodox Eastern Slavs.

In order to absorb such a large community of Catholics, Joseph Stalin decided in 1943 to revive the Russian Orthodox Church, which had been reduced to a bare existence, and to extend its presence to the westernmost regions of the USSR. Stalin was well-prepared for such an offensive. His earlier experience as a party specialist in national and minority issues, as well as his past in the multicultural Caucasus, made him understand the extent and threat of Ukrainian nationalism in the newly joined western provinces. To a large extent, western Ukrainian national identity was centered on the Ukrainian Catholic Church - an allegiance that only grew stronger during the period of national subjection to Polish and Austrian rule. The Catholic clergy also formed the political and cultural elite of the region as many Ukrainian aristocrats had been Polonized and Germanized over the centuries. Subduing this elite by

subordinating it to a Russian church loyal to Moscow and repressing the dissenters would be a big blow against Ukrainian nationalism.

However, the other factor that loomed large in the minds of the Soviet elite was the international role that the Ukrainian church played as a subordinate structure of the Vatican. Created in the early modern period, the Uniate church was initially spread over much larger Eastern Slavic territories. In his seminary days Stalin had taken classes on the “spiritual and knightly orders,” on “the decline of the Papacy,” and others, which allowed him to understand the history of the global competition between the two churches quite well.⁴⁶ Now, he wanted to get rid of the Ukrainian national and religious problems in one stroke, i.e., to destroy the support for Ukrainian nationalism and, perhaps more important politically, to put a limit to the ambitions of the Vatican in the “Great Russian” heartland of the USSR.

In 1929, the Pontifical Russian College of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus (*Pontificium Collegium Russicum Sanctae Theresiae A Iesu Infante*) was founded in Rome. Its official reason for existence was to cater to the refugees from the Soviet atheist state, but the real goal was the strengthening of the Catholic presence in the USSR at the time when its traditional religious competitors were severely weakened. In practice, however, it ended up including mostly Ukrainians and Belarusians who had worked in the eastern Catholic regions during the war, and very few “Great” Russians, whose homeland was further east and who constituted the ethnic core of the ROC. However, it remained clear that the final goal of the College was not to contain the Catholic power on the eastern reaches of Poland but to expand deeper into historical

⁴⁶ See note 58.

Russia.⁴⁷ For the Bolsheviks and Joseph Stalin, who were always concerned about the threat of ideological penetration, the College's plan was a clear challenge.

The head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church before and during the war was Andriy Sheptytsky, a Pole by birth but a Ukrainian churchman by choice. In popular memory he is often perceived as a Ukrainian nationalist, but his ambitions stretched much further. True to the historic mission of the Uniate church, Sheptytsky wanted it to expand further into eastern lands, including into the "Great" Russian heartland, and he made trips to Moscow to that end before the war.⁴⁸

Conveniently for the Soviets, Sheptytsky died before the decision to absorb the Ukrainian Catholic Church was made. But the legacy of his missionary efforts, his support for Ukrainian nationalism, and his problematic relationship with the occupying Nazis were there to stay. Barring a massive postwar purge, the only way to deal with his legacy for the Soviets was to use the clergy and the properties of the Ukrainian Catholic Church to grow the Russian Orthodox Church, which by the end of the Second World War had been much weakened by the decades of state persecution and which had few churches of its own. It was an act of institutional cannibalism. Together with the Orthodox properties in Volhynia and in Bukovina, the real estate of Ukrainian Catholics played a key role in the institutional resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church.

In 1949, ten years after the first attempts of Sovietization of the western provinces and after several years of the Nazi wartime occupation, the Ukrainian Catholic Church was completely merged with the Russian Orthodox Church. According

⁴⁷ P. Krasnov, "Secret Activity of Graduates of the Pope Russian College (Pontificum Collegium Russicum) in the USSR." *World Applied Sciences Journal* (30) 9 (2014): 1170-72.

⁴⁸ Paul Robert Magosci, *Morality and Reality: Life and Times of Andrei Sheptyts'kyi* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1989), 313-29.

to official Soviet reports, 3,001 Uniate churches, 1,242 priests and 463 deacons and 1,018 minor deacons “rejoined” the Orthodox church.⁴⁹ Only twelve Catholic monasteries with 306 monks and nuns remained as the centers of pro-Vatican sentiment, but they were closed by the authorities later during that same year. Catholicism in the western USSR disappeared for decades, seemingly forever, while the ROC obtained a massive presence in the lands it had largely been absent from for centuries.

⁴⁹ Боцюрків Б., Українська Греко-Католицька Церква і Радянська держава, 1939-1950 (Львів: Українсько-Католицький Університет, 2005), 201.

Chapter 6: Joseph Stalin's Worldview and the Russian Orthodox Church

Joseph Stalin's life and death was much discussed by his enemies and admirers both inside and outside the realm that he controlled. There are now a number of biographies of Stalin, with a new one coming off the press every few years or so. And yet, with all this wealth of information, many aspects of Stalin's worldview are not yet fully explored.

From a viewpoint of ecclesiastical history, Joseph Stalin was clearly a major figure and a reformer. He destroyed and then revived major world religions that had existed in the state of institutional continuity across Eurasia for centuries, or for a millennium or more. And he did it all within a few decades of coming to power. Yet the least explored area of his biography pertains to his years as a seminarian, right before his "conversion" to Marxism.

As was mentioned earlier, Joseph Stalin did not take a central part in the party debates and policy-making on the subject of religion during the 1920s. In the 1930s, however, as he assumed absolute power and liquidated any kind of opposition to his rule, Stalin also became the final authority on the question of organized religion in the USSR. He decimated the Russian Orthodox Church, imprisoned its clerics, liquidated centuries-long Catholic institutional presence among the Eastern Slavs, forced the closure of every Buddhist temple in the larger part of Central Asia, and de-veiled Muslim women and disempowered Sharia courts and other aspects of Islam everywhere in the Soviet empire.

Later, in 1943, pressured by exhaustion from fighting the war in the West, Stalin relented and instituted a series of reforms. These reforms not only gave the Orthodox Church powers it had not possessed during the tsarist era, such as the election of the national church leader, the Patriarch - a position abolished by Peter the Great, but it also expanded the Church to regions that the tsars had long desired to make Orthodox.⁵⁰ In the same year, he also instituted parallel reforms related to other religions. These reforms lead to the opening of the first post-1930s Buddhist temple in the USSR in Buryatia on December 11, 1945, which is still functioning, and the formation of a central authority (muftiate) for the Soviet Muslims in Tashkent.⁵¹ The reform of the Orthodox Church in 1943 is now referred to by historians in the post-Stalinist era as Stalin's "concordat" with Orthodoxy, in an attempt to create a parallel with the infamous Hitler's "concordat" (i.e., the deal with the Vatican), signed ten years earlier in 1933.⁵² Yet the comparison is misleading because the term "concordat" is a Roman Catholic term and does not have the same meaning in the Orthodox East as it does in the Latin West. More importantly, it is impossible to talk about the reforms of 1943 as a single "concordat." Rather it was a number of "concordats," conceived along the same lines and concluded with all the world religions of the empire. Nevertheless, the "concordat" with the Orthodox church was the most significant of them, owing to the Orthodoxy's disproportional numerical strength compared to other Soviet religions.

Such a drastic turn from violence and destruction to resurrection and state promotion, from suppression to appropriation, is bound to raise some questions, for example, "Why did Stalin change his mind?" or "Why did he do it in 1943?" The answer

⁵⁰ Miner, *Stalin's Holy War*, 163-205.

⁵¹ Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*, 111.

⁵² Miner, *Stalin's Holy War*, 126.

to the second question is more situational and was addressed by Miner and others in their publications, and agreed to in this thesis. According to Miner, et al., in 1943 Joseph Stalin realized that he would win the war, but he also became acutely aware of the global political challenges that such victory would bring, above all the increased contact of the Soviet populations with the anti-Soviet elements from the West, such as the Vatican.

Joseph Stalin did not publish important works on religion. This does not mean that he did not have a well-formed opinion of religion as a political reality. The most interesting documents that shed light on the development of his ideas on religion and political power are the ones that relate to his student years from 1894-99 when he studied at the Tiflis Seminary in the capital of his native country of Georgia. Those five years were important for the young Stalin. He arrived in the capital as a young devout man from the provincial city of Gori, who hardly spoke any Russian. But he was already a very studious individual, and he remained an avid reader and learner during his later life as well. And yet despite the importance of those years, there is very little attention paid by the biographers to Stalin's studies at the seminary. For example, Hiroaki Kuromiya in his biography of Stalin dismisses the entire matter with one sentence, "It is often said that Soso's Marxist learning was shallow, or at least was deeply affected by the simplistic catechism of his ecclesiastical education."⁵³ The implication is that Stalin's [Soso's] education was "simplistic," and he was little more than a "catechumen" during his seminary years. And yet Kuromiya states that Stalin did seriously consider becoming a professor at one point in his life. Stalin's years of seminary constituted the sum total of

⁵³ Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 7.

his exposure to academia and was anything but simplistic, but it did affect his understanding of Marxism and related disciplines.

Stephen Kotkin, in his multi-volume biography of Stalin strikes a more conciliatory note towards the Tiflis Seminary and declares that “the Orthodox churchmen gave the entire Russian empire most of its intelligentsia through both their offspring and their teaching.”⁵⁴ Yet he stops short of explaining what this phrase actually means. Kotkin does mention that the Tiflis Seminary and the Rabbinical School in Wilno were two ecclesiastic schools that produced a number of important Russian revolutionaries. But Kotkin attributes it more to the discipline and organizational skill that such places imparted and not to the strength of the curriculum.⁵⁵ It is true that Stalin’s ecclesiastical past was not a secret. It was known to his party colleagues and was never seriously held against him. Others, such as the infamous Sergei Nechaev, who was the leader of the radical revolutionary organization “People’s Revenge,” and the founder of modern left-wing terrorism, as well as the personal hero of Vladimir Lenin, was also a simple man from the provinces who was educated at the Russian seminary in the city of Smolensk.

Much of current scholarship de-emphasizes the seminary curriculum and the literature that shaped Stalin’s thinking about religion and politics while he was a student at the Seminary. There are strong reasons to think that it was during that time that the intellectual foundations were laid for his legislative initiative in 1943. We are lucky to have fairly detailed seminary records with the description of the courses that Stalin took,

⁵⁴ Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler*, 63.

⁵⁵ Ibid

his grades, the grades of his fellow students, topics that were discussed in class, and even library records that document what Stalin read in his free time.

Leon Trotsky was responsible for introducing the idea of Stalin as a “gray blur” in the party, a bureaucrat who was not notable for any intellectual contributions but was simply an efficient manipulator who worked his way to the top by means of bureaucratic machinations, and carefully removing his opponents one by one. In his influential biography of Stalin, Trotsky spends a significant amount of time discussing his seminary years; but he falls short of real inquiry and mostly limits himself to anecdotal accounts of Stalin as recorded by his various Georgian associates of the period.⁵⁶ In general, Trotsky emphasized Stalin’s role as a soulless bureaucrat and not as an intellectual, and his coverage of the seminary years followed that line of thinking.

The view that Stalin was not an intellectual was shared by many contemporaries. Perhaps it is true that Stalin’s intellectual inclinations were less noticeable than that of Bukharin and Trotsky, who were the intellectual darlings of the party. Stalin did not have a reputation as an effective public speaker. He rose through the ranks thanks to the help of Lenin, who liked Stalin’s organizational ability. Stalin himself aspired to the status of a great military commander, but he undoubtedly considered himself an ideologist as well. His early writings concern the national question, and he was somewhat of an authority in the party on this topic.

The Caucasus region of imperial Russia where Stalin had grown up was especially well-suited to absorb information about the way religion and culture intersected. It was notable for its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Stalin himself

⁵⁶ Л. Д. Троцкий. Сталин. Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed November 12, 2021. https://www.marxists.org/russkij/trotsky/1940/stalin_v1/index.htm

was born an Orthodox Christian. He was a Georgian, from a historically Orthodox nation that had converted to Orthodoxy much earlier than Russia itself. Besides Georgians, the Caucasus was home to Armenians (a separate Christian denomination), Shia Muslim Azeris, and various Sunni nations such as the Chechens. In the north Caucasus lived the descendants of the Russian Cossacks who were Orthodox Christians, as well as the Buddhist Kalmucks. Unlike the more religiously homogeneous areas of the Christian West, the Caucasus was an excellent place to reflect on the meaning of religious diversity, and especially on the interrelation between religion and ethnicity. Religion in that region was more often than not a tribal marker - something that distinguished “us” and “them”; the religious fault-lines often coincided with ethnic and linguistic ones. Growing up in that milieu it would be possible to become convinced that religion is a cultural aspect of ethnic and national identity and should be dealt with as such.

Stalin’s writings are curiously devoid of specifically religious discussion. Although he wrote about ethnicity and nationality, religion as a category of its own never became a subject of a major published work.⁵⁷ However, it would be wrong to assume that he was totally ignorant of the subject matter. On the contrary, by the time Stalin had begun writing on Marxism and related subjects, he was already somewhat of an expert on religion, having completed several years at the Tiflis Seminary.

In considering Stalin’s time at the seminary in relation to his later career, and in light of Stalin’s “reconciliation” with Orthodoxy in 1943, we are forced to reevaluate Trotsky’s description of him as a “gray blur”. Was the concordat a kind of “return” to his

⁵⁷ Erik van Ree, “Stalinist Ritual and Belief System: Reflections on ‘Political Religion.’” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 17: 2-3 (2016): 143-61.

earlier beliefs? Did the Supreme Leader want to re-introduce an updated version of Russian imperial theocracy that the Bolsheviks had supplanted?

We need to pay closer attention to the two questions that interest us the most here: was Stalin as ideologically unprepared as Trotsky believed him to be, and had he, in light of this unpreparedness, simply decided to backtrack to the ideological foundations of old Russia, reviving the imperial church and re-inventing himself as a new kind of tsar? Moshe Lewin takes the “backtrack” position. He has claimed that late Stalinism dispensed with the trappings of Marxism-Leninism altogether and returned to the basic political ideas of the late tsarism.⁵⁸ I acknowledge that this view is supported by at least some circumstantial evidence, in particular Stalin’s general support for Russian language, culture, and nationalism. It might seem like the secularism associated with revolutionary Marxism was being stripped away and something reactionary being put in its place. I argue, however, that this line of interpretation is ultimately unconvincing. There is no evidence that Stalin ever abandoned Marxism because of his newly discovered interest in traditional Russian religion and culture. On the contrary, his political views developed towards Marxism under the influence of studies in Orthodox Christianity and Russian history while he was still a very young man.

What was Stalin’s education at the seminary like? What might he have learned there, not just about religion but about ideology more generally? It is interesting to note that Trotsky, who looked down on Stalin as an ideologue, studied mathematics (like Stalin, he did not graduate). As a result, we might assume that he received little to no classroom exposure to the study of ideology more commonly taught in the social

⁵⁸ Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 146.

sciences and humanities. Stalin's later pretensions were based entirely on self-study and his later contact with European revolutionaries.

Stalin's biographers largely ignore his years at the seminary. They are helped by Stalin's own relative silence on the topic. It seems that the general assumption is that Stalin's pious mother more or less forced him to study to become a priest and that he did not learn much there. Some sources insist that Stalin quit because he could not pay the fees. The dictator himself later claimed that he left to study Marxism. The kind of formative education Stalin received at the seminary is often brushed aside by his biographers who are eager to discuss only his Marxist period, which commenced around the time he decided to leave the seminary. However, the Tiflis Seminary was a remarkable institution. It was the main seat of ecclesiastical learning in Georgia, one of the most ancient Christian states. By the time Stalin enrolled there, it was more or less completely Russified. The only subjects relating to Georgia were the language classes and ancient Georgian church singing.

By looking at the seminary records of the future dictator, it is possible to get a great deal of insight into his early intellectual development.⁵⁹ The records are very copious, including not only transcripts, but also grades for individual assignments, troublemaking and mischief reports, and lists of borrowed library books, etc. It is, of course, far from straightforward to interpret those records. There could have been issues of absenteeism, patronage, grade inflation, severity of individual instructors, and others, which are somewhat intangible. Nevertheless, those documents can help us to gain insight into the formative years in Stalin's life.

⁵⁹ Stalin Personal Fund Archive #558, РГАСПИ. Ф. 558. Оп. 4: Biographical Documents. <http://sovdoc.rusarchives.ru/sections/personality//cards/4455>

The vanished alien world of the old clerical Russian seminary run by celibate ascetics may seem strange and alien to some observers. However, the Tiflis Seminary did not train “catechumens,” i.e., the recent converts to the faith and children. It was an academic institution dedicated to the training of future leaders of the church. The degree that Stalin was studying for is probably most similar to the MDiv (Master of Divinity) degree in the USA today, except that it was a Bachelor’s degree. Like the MDiv, it consisted of liturgical training and also included a broad range of secular humanistic subjects.

The Tiflis Seminary offered coursework in Biblical Studies (the Old and the New Testament); in the Greek, Russian, and Georgian languages; in liturgical singing in the Byzantine tradition, including Greek and Old Church Slavonic, as well as Georgian national styles; in history, mainly European, with a heavy focus on the history of the Russian state; in mathematics and logic; and in a surprisingly broad selection of “liberal studies,” ranging from the philosophy of Kant to a seminar on “the best seasons of the human life.” Young Stalin’s records show a predilection for some of those topics and a distaste for others, and his grades fluctuate depending on the given assignment. Extra-curricular interests also seemed to affect Stalin’s academic performance, his grades fluctuating towards the end of his period at the seminary.⁶⁰ At some point he might have ranked as high as fifth in the class of twenty-nine, but in his last year he was twentieth out of twenty-three.

It is a well-known fact that Stalin had a beautiful voice. He learned professional singing at the seminary and sang willingly, even as he got older, often together with his

⁶⁰ Roland Boer, *Stalin: From Theology to Philosophy of Socialism in Power* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2017), xii.

political associates. He had the best grades in Russian and Georgian liturgical singing (an area with a lot of credit hours and specializations), and he sang church music in his spare time. That was clearly an area in which young Stalin performed very well. Perhaps, given a different set of circumstances, he could have ended up with a career as a church singer (“pevchii”), or a conductor of the Byzantine-style church choir (“regent”).

Another area in which the future dictator performed well was literature, particularly secular literature that was taught sparingly at the seminary. It is clear that Stalin loved 19th century classics such as the poems of Pushkin and the fables of Krylov. He was much less interested in Biblical literatures and his grades on various Biblical topics were poor. Such literary interests also make sense in the light of what we know about the older Stalin. In his memoir *Conversations with Stalin*, the Yugoslav ambassador Djilas mentions that the Russian dictator was interested in classic Russian literature and eager to talk about Dostoevsky, Pushkin, or Gorky.⁶¹

Djilas also mentioned that Stalin had a special interest in history, particularly military history, perhaps unsurprising for a dedicated Marxist. The history curriculum at the Tiflis Seminary consisted mostly of courses on Russian history. Stalin was clearly interested in later stages of Russian history; his grades on topics relating to the ancient princes of Kievan Rus and the pre-imperial Muscovy were not great, but we can see a spark of interest when Stalin gets a better grade for the study of the “foreign policy of Ivan IV,” later one of the dictator’s favorite tsars. Overall, the general impression given by Stalin’s academic records is that he was well prepared for a career in public life or politics even though he did not graduate. He likely became more confident speaking

⁶¹ Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co, 1990), 61.

and writing Russian during the years at seminary, and he became acquainted with a variety of academic subjects. As the preceding analysis has demonstrated, Stalin was more able than is commonly assumed to deal with the issues of the religious reforms in the USSR of the 1940s. He did not have to catch up with the subject matter because he already knew it better than many of his subordinates.

Joseph Stalin saw himself as being engaged in the global revolutionary project that was shaping the society of the future, industrializing the planet, and anticipating the arrival of the communist utopia. But he himself was shaped by the world of the seminary, which taught him several lessons that affected his worldview for the rest of his life. He was fond of reminiscing about it in private, although he never emphasized it in public. The Tiflis seminary was characterized by a semi-colonial way of life that was imposed on Georgia by Moscow. Russian was the only language used for record keeping in the seminary and it was also the language of instruction. Georgian was only studied for historical and liturgical reasons. This semi-colonial ideology was readily absorbed by Stalin, who saw Russia as a more European and modern society that had a right to impose its language and culture on its colonies. There is no reason to think that Stalin was ever a Georgian nationalist. Russian colonial cosmopolitanism was an ideology he probably absorbed at the seminary and he remained loyal to it for the rest of his life. He also understood at an early age how cosmopolitanism interacted with local identities in the sphere of religion: although religion was always a part of national identity, it did not limit itself to the sphere of the local but aspired to the global mission.

For Stalin, and other seminarian revolutionaries mentioned by Kotkin, the most important lesson learned at the Tiflis Seminary was that everything in the world is based

on ideology and the true ideology is systematic and has absolute authority. Stalin also learned not only Christian theology and liturgy, but the philosophy of German idealism and the dialogues of Plato (in original Greek, it seems). His education at the Seminary likely offered a preparation for his later readings of Marxist works, and his embrace of dialectical materialism.

Stalin's love of great Russian autocrats and absolutist rulers of the past was also something he might have picked up at the Seminary, or later given his lifelong passion for continuous learning. The Seminary introduced him to Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible. His library record shows that he borrowed books on ancient Roman emperors.⁶² Although Stalin never attempted to found a dynasty, he did develop an affection for one-person strongman rule. It is also not incidental that Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible were the most important reformers of religion in Russian history: the former had restricted it to increase his monarchical power and modernize the country, and the latter had used it to expand his state by expanding his empire and introducing the Orthodox Church in non-Christian areas.

Marxism, as we saw earlier, developed in opposition to idealist thought systems in general and to Christianity in particular. The influence of Marxism was decisive, of course, and probably contributed to Stalin's withdrawal from the Seminary. The historic record on why he had to leave before graduating is inconclusive, however. We do not know why he left and what was the decisive factor: his health, parental pressure, change of interests, money concerns, etc. All of those were mentioned in one context or the other. The decisive influence of Marxism on young Stalin and Stalin's terror against the clergy during the 1930s make it very unlikely that the dictator was interested in his

⁶² See note 59.

religious reforms just for the sake of the well-being of the ROC. On the contrary, he pursued an agenda of his own. The destruction of the Catholics in Ukraine could have been just the first episode in the global ideological battle for which he was willing to enlist the help of religious organizations that were now totally under his control.

Conclusion: Late Stalinism and World Religions

Joseph Stalin's religious reform of 1943 can give the deceiving appearance of an "archaizing" revolution, i.e., the return to the pre-revolutionary status quo. Such a theory of revolution implies that Stalin, an aging, ex-seminarian Soviet dictator, was tired of Marxism and the Bolshevik experimentation, and attempted to resurrect the old tsarist order, reinstate the old state religion, reimpose Russian nationalism, reintroduce old cultural and social mores, and maybe even create a new ruling class out of the Soviet Communist party.⁶³ Under this theory, the USSR was to remain Marxist-Leninist in name only, but in content was to revert to the old tsarist Russian political system.

Yet there are no grounds for this interpretation. Stalin did not alter the official state ideology in any drastic way. Regardless of its new role in the USSR, the church still had to exist in a society where the official ideology was Marxism-Leninism. Various restrictions on church activities remained in force. Although the activities of the League of the Militant Godless were curtailed, Marxist propaganda persisted in other forms. Stalin did not convert to Russian Orthodox Christianity in his old age, just as he did not become a Muslim or a Buddhist. He used the same institutional and ideological framework in his reform of all three world religions.

The late Stalinist USSR was not an "archaizing" state that reverted to the old ideological and political ideas under the guise of Marxism-Leninism. On the contrary, it was an active Bolshevik revolutionary state that presented its own administrative structures in the guise of religious organizations. In that sense, the Soviet understanding of religion was not so different from the Soviet understanding of

⁶³ Lewin, *The Soviet Century*, 146.

nationality. Both were rooted in classical Marxism - what truly mattered to the leaders were property relations within the state and its economic structure. Culture, ethnicity, and religion were remnants of the old society and were bound to disappear entirely as the cosmopolitan Communist utopia drew closer.

In 1950 Stalin published one of his most important books, *Marxism and Linguistics*. In that book, he argued that language was not part of the Marxist “superstructure” but was a part of the material “base.” What he meant was that there was no such thing as “class language.” The boundaries of language transcended class, and language itself was in some sense a material phenomenon. Why was he preoccupied with philosophy of language in his old age? While the discussion is undoubtedly very abstract, it can be read as Stalin’s apologia for playing with such ostensibly “reactionary” things like religion or nationalism. The USSR was meant to be a new kind of state where the old capitalist property relationships were replaced by new socialist property relationships. Insofar as the older patterns of property ownership were destroyed, the organizations that were based on the older patterns simply disappeared without a trace. Whatever remained - rituals, languages, old books of theology, etc. - were now simply a relic of a fundamentally “classless” language in a socialist society, not unlike the ancient objects in museums that had long lost their original functions. The old enemy had disappeared forever, unless it was to be re-imported again from the capitalist world, should Stalin’s ongoing project of world revolution be threatened by a foreign capitalist conspiracy.

The way the reform of 1943 was implemented, and particularly its focus on the destruction of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the western provinces, point to the

geopolitical role of Stalin's approach to world religions. "We need something like a new Vatican," Stalin confessed to Karpov.⁶⁴ Like a master chess player, Stalin looked over the entirety of Eurasia, carefully placing his pieces in all the strategic positions. In the West, the Catholics were pushed back and lost their property and influence to Stalin's Orthodoxy. The Japanese invasion had not taken place but, in 1943, the first Buddhist temple, the Ivolga Datsan, was founded in Buryatia, in Eastern Asia, where only a few decades earlier multiple temples had dotted the landscape. Did it have a planned role in the event of a new war and chaos in Asia? The geographical location points to Mongolia, China, and Japan in the east, and Tibet and India in the south. The same year, in 1943, the Central Asian Muftiate was created, centered in Tashkent.⁶⁵ It unified the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan under one administrative umbrella. Was it meant to be a political weapon for the expansion further south?

We might never know what Stalin really thought on the subject of this religious reform and its connection to international politics. It is not even clear that the reform of Soviet world religions was completed as intended. However, Stalin was preoccupied with the question of territorial and ideological security during his entire political career. Ideological security does have a territorial aspect when it boils down to local identities. Seen in this way, Stalin's religious reform can be interpreted as a bulwark against foreign influence, a platform for revolutionary expansion, and, fundamentally, as a state security measure.

⁶⁴ Miner, *Stalin's Holy War*, 126.

⁶⁵ Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*, 2.

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