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## STRANGE BEDFELLOWS: THE BOLSHEVIK-*MOLOKANYE* RELATIONSHIP

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The ailing Russian autocracy finally succumbed in early 1917 to the problems that had plagued it for decades. A provisional government was formed in the hope of maintaining order in the territory until a constitution was created. The Russian Orthodox Church, which relied so heavily upon the former imperial regime for both financial and administrative backing, reeled from news of the Emperor's abdication but made necessary modifications. The doctrinal reforms were largely futile, however, as Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik Party swept power from the fragile provisional state in October 1917 and quickly began to assail the Church with constrictive legislation and a campaign of demoralization.

Seeking to transform Russia from a faltering, backward empire into an enlightened socialist utopia, Lenin viewed the eradication of spiritual activity as a necessary prerequisite to achieving this ambitious goal. A glaring remnant of the old order and a pervasive influence over the Russian people, the Orthodox Church served to impede the Bolshevik quest to legitimize their new government and expand their socialist movement from the urban areas to the countryside where support for them was weakest. The leadership of the atheistic party did, however, take interest in the communal lifestyles and historic discontent of the *Molokanye* and other Christian minority faith groups. Some Bolsheviks, including Lenin, believed the progressiveness of the "utopian" sectarian movement could act as a cynosure for the peasantry, encouraging them to accept collectivization while creating division between the Orthodox rank-and-file and its ecclesiastical leadership.

The cessation of the monarchy in February 1917 undeniably weakened the Russian Orthodox Church. The prior autocracy's deep involvement in the administrative doings of the Church and the "divine" rhetoric asserted by the emperor during imperial times brought needful concern about the viability of Orthodoxy in a tsar-less Russia. Initially following the February revolution, an alignment with the *de facto* leadership seemed advantageous for the Orthodox Church, as the new government was largely comprised of loyalists to the deposed monarch. On March 6, an announcement was published in the Holy Synod's newsletter, the *Synodical Messenger*, which called for support of the provisional government among Orthodox believers due to its "attempts to subdue the chaos that ravages us."<sup>1</sup> The proclamation

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<sup>1</sup> *Sinodal'noye Poslaniye*, 6 March 1917, 2.

did not indicate a desire by the Church to remain within the state apparatus, although it was clearly hoped by Orthodox leaders that some seeds of favoritism would be sown as a result of this gesture.

An issuance within the same periodical announced the dissolution of the imperial Synod in favor of a more “contemporary” prelateship.<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging limitations on its functionality after centuries of intertwinement with the state, the Russian Orthodox Church quickly distanced itself from the shortcomings of the autocracy through this ecclesiastical reshuffling. Further extensive changes increased the autocephaly of the Church, as in the convening of the *Pomyetni Sobor* (Local Council) on August 15 that reestablished the patriarchate and defined the programme of the Orthodox hierarchy.

The *Sobor* culminated in three resolutions that would be the framework for the post-imperialist Church:

- 1) The Russian Orthodox Church is a supreme entity. The role of legislator, administrator, and inspector of the Church belongs to the *Pomyetni Sobor*, which will recur in definitive time increments. The structure of bishops, clerics, and laymen will remain unchanged.
- 2) The patriarchate will be restored by election along with a managerial support structure for the office.
- 3) The patriarch serves as the first of equals among bishops and it is from them that His Holiness will be chosen.<sup>3</sup>

On October 5, days before the Bolsheviks would seize power, the Moscow metropolitan, Tikhon Belavin, was elected Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church with the hope that despite the collapse of the monarchy, the Church could retain its popular support.

Arto Luukkanen wrote: “On the eve of 1917, the Orthodox Church had become somewhat discredited in the eyes of the populace...sectarians were easily able to attract those peasants who were stirred by religious feelings.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the comparatively large salaries of the clergy coupled with the negative perceptions created by the political involvement of Rasputin and the Church’s sustained support for the unpopular war effort had exasperated many Orthodox laymen in the final years of the monarchy. Numerous members of the laity sought to find a new faith that would incorporate their individual spiritual beliefs into a society that, though religiously based, would lack hierarchal strata. As progeny of the Orthodox Church, the sectarian movement had based their doctrines on established Orthodox practices. Their variation from Church principles not only defined the Christian sects, but also provided them with tools for rallying the laity to their causes.

The *Molokanye* were, undoubtedly, one of the most successful sects in this endeavor. The Russian Christian minority faiths, by virtue of their mere existence, were obvious gainsayers of the Church. The *Molokanye*, however, unlike other faiths, were a pro-active group that included their

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>3</sup> Rossiiski tsentr dlia khraneniia izucheniia dokumentov noveishei istorii, hereafter, RTsKhIDNI, f. 1001, op. 4, d. 503, l. 29-78.

<sup>4</sup> Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: the Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party* (Helsinki: SMS, 1994), 39 .

repugnance of the Orthodox Church in their efforts to spread their faith. The aversion of the group towards hierarchal organisations and the predominant faiths of the time were the strongest selling points for potential proselytes to the *Molokanye* faith. The beliefs and practices of the *Molokanye* lacked the contentious problems that divisions between hierarchy and laity had caused for Russian Orthodoxy and other faiths. The message of the *Molokanye* was free of stodgy pretentiousness and had an appealing, matter-of-fact approach:

The only prelate in our midst is Jesus; all others are brothers. Our only teacher is the Scriptures, and our guide is God. Our elders are smart men, and they can interpret hard passages in the Bible to the rest of us; but we do not look upon them as “ministers of the Gospel,” because we are supposed to read the Bible ourselves. They are advisers in many matters, since they have the wisdom of age, experience, and study of the Bible...Our elders are not paid for their services. Did Jesus charge for his tireless services?...Our elders receive confessions from the members, but these confessions are purely voluntary.<sup>5</sup>

The sect had an anomalous awareness of the happenings in the mostly illiterate and unknowledgable Russian Empire given its virulent dealings with the government and the group’s affinity towards education. In early 1917, news of the tsar’s abdication quickly reached the *Molokanye*. An elder, V. Susoeff wrote; “Thank God! Today we received word that the government is no more. We are now free of secular burden as predicted in the prophecies.”<sup>6</sup>

The overarching concern of the Empire during the initial year of the revolutionary era, of course, was Russia’s disastrous entanglement in World War I. As ardent pacifists, the staggering death toll was especially nauseating for the *Molokanye*--- a group estimated to have lost “thousands of brethren, with many communities now lacking male posterity entirely.”<sup>7</sup> The tsarist autocracy made no concessions to those who were fundamentally opposed to war and, subsequently, sects like the *Molokanye* were increasingly agitated. Amidst the intense political debate that engrossed Russia following the February Revolution, the *Molokanye* and other Christian sects already connected to the Bolsheviks and quickly rallied to them. Lenin not only decried the present war, but also promised the sectarians exemptions from future military conscription. A decree from January 4, 1919 announced, “For persons unable to participate in military service because of their religious convictions, the right to substitute medical service for such service is based on the decision of a people’s court.”<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, all members of the Party did not share the same attitude towards sectarian pacifism that Lenin displayed. In the summer of 1920, the United

<sup>5</sup> Rossiisii gosudarstvenni istoricheskii arkhiv, hereafter, RGIA, f.1490, op. 4, d. 783, l. 29-32.

<sup>6</sup> *Pechatki iz derevnyei* (1917). *Rosisskaya Gosudarstvenaya Biblioteka*.

<sup>7</sup> RGIA, f. 1490, op. 4, d. 800, l. 22-25.

<sup>8</sup> *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporiazhenii raboche – krestinskogo pravitelstva*, 1919 (Petrograd: 1920), 109.

Council of Religious Societies and Groups (OSROG) published a list of 66 sectarians who had been executed for not serving in the Red Army.<sup>9</sup>

The Bolshevik slogan of “Peace, Land, and Bread” resonated with the *Molokanye* as it did with many in impoverished and war-ravaged Russia.<sup>10</sup> An ideological adhesion with this minority faith and other sectarians, however, was not new for Lenin and his political cronies. V.D. Bonch-Bruevich was a close Social Democratic ally of Lenin that wrote voluminously on sectarianism and, subsequently, became pivotal in Bolshevik-sectarian relations during Lenin’s tenure.<sup>11</sup> At the 1903 Social Democratic Congress in London, Bonch-Bruevich lectured on the beneficial role of the sectarians in the socialist movement, believing that they “constituted a potential revolutionary force to which the Party should direct its attention.”<sup>12</sup> The religious and political protests of the sects were akin to the Party’s own grievances with the autocratic theocracy. Lenin suggested the publication of a sectarian newspaper for the dissemination of Social Democratic propaganda among these disenfranchised groups.<sup>13</sup> In 1904, the first issue of a Social-Democrat newsletter, *Rassvet (Dawn)*, was clandestinely distributed.

*Rassvet* proved successful in interlacing socialist dogma with religious undertones and, as a result, Party publications for the sectarian movement proliferated. *Sredi sektantov (Among the Sectarians)* was the nine-issue brainchild of Bonch-Bruevich that would define initial Party attitudes towards the Christian minority faiths. This periodical, unlike *Rassvet*, which was a purely not-for-profit endeavor, solicited donations from the sectarians for the “revolutionary cause.”<sup>14</sup> These contributions were used by the Bolsheviks to financially establish themselves independently of the Mensheviks. The sectarians’ financial support aided the political ambitions of the Bolsheviks and they would not soon forget the “benefits provided by the sectarian movement.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tserkovnyi Istoricheskii Gosudarstvenyi Arkhiv, hereafter, TsIGA, f. 353, op. 3, d. 780, l. 29-44.

<sup>10</sup> Trotsky, Leon, *My Life* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1930), 189.

<sup>11</sup> Bonch-Bruevich interest in dissident sectarian movements led him to live in a Dukhbor colony in Canada. V.D. Bonch-Bruevich, *Izbrannye sochineniia*, 1:8-10. These experiences coupled with correspondence with sectarians culminated in the most extensive compiled history of Russian sectarianism during the later years of the Empire.

<sup>12</sup> V.D. Bonch-Bruevich “Raskol i Sektanstva v Rossii. Doklad V.D. Bonch-Bruevich Vtoromu ocherdnomu cyuzdu rossiskii sotsial-demokraticheskii rabochei partii,”(Moscow: 1923), 4.

<sup>13</sup> V.I. Lenin, *PSS Polnoye sobraniye sochinenii V. I. Lenina*, 1-55.

<sup>14</sup> Klibanov, A.I., *Istoriya religioznovo sektantsva v Rossii* (Moscow: 1965), 174.

<sup>15</sup> Bonch-Bruevich, V.D., “*K Sektantam*” (Moscow: 1919), 189. Arto Luukkanen has written of the financial assistance provided by non-Orthodox believers to the Party and concluded that, “one possible explanation of Lenin’s will to appease sectarians ad the bourgeois class is the simple fact that the Bolsheviks were heavily dependent on the financial support of the industrial magnate, S.T. Morozov, who was an Old Believer.” Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief*, 63.

Although Russia lacked Marx and Engels' "preconditions for socialism," the tumult of 1917 provided a fragile window of opportunity for the Bolshevik faction to sweep into power.<sup>16</sup> Marxist assumption had always been that socialism would take root from the base of advanced capitalism. Revolution was to act in accordance with the growth of productive forces and proletarianism. Ignoring this protocol, party leaders likened their own struggle to the short-lived successes of the 1871 Paris Commune. Leon Trotsky wrote:

It is not excluded that in a backward country with a lesser degree of capitalist development, the proletariat should sooner reach political supremacy than in a highly developed capitalist state... True it is that the reign of the proletariat lasted for two months, it is remarkable, however, that in the far more advanced centers of England and the United States, the proletariat never was in power even for the duration of one day.<sup>17</sup>

It was understood by Lenin that in mostly rural Russia, where the proletarian class was less than 10% of the citizenry prior to the Revolution, a greater emphasis on agricultural initiatives was needed than Marxist theory prescribed. The war brought food shortages and, thus, a constant source of concern for the Bolsheviks. Bread riots were the powder keg in toppling a three-century old dynasty and could just as easily cause the demise of the infant Bolshevik regime. In order to remedy this, Lenin sought to transform small, peasant farming operations into larger co-operative efforts that would be more efficient and provide for the growing number of urbanites. The branch of the *Molokanye* known as the *Obshchee*, or Collectivists, in many senses, conformed to the Bolshevik goals for agrarianism and far eclipsed the limited communal involvement of the traditional peasant *kommun*. The group lived in sizeable hamlets, with individual believers collectivizing all of their resources and abilities into the larger community. *Sobora* were convened daily in which work duties were assigned indiscriminately to men and women. The income obtained from work was referred to as the "common sum," and after overhead expenses were paid, the remainder was apportioned equally amongst members.<sup>18</sup> Other groups of *Molokanye* were not as rigidly communal as the *Obshchee*, however, often employing migrant labor and controlling both the agrarian and industrial processes of production. It was the perception of the Bolsheviks that these *Molokanye* demonstrated the potential of large-scale agricultural initiatives despite their "strongly bourgeois" tendencies.<sup>19</sup> In addition to abolishing all private property, the Decree on Land issued on

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<sup>16</sup> K. Marx and F. Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, (Oxford: Cambridge, 1973), 11-14.

<sup>17</sup> L. Trotsky, *Our Revolution*, (New York: International, 1918), 85.

<sup>18</sup> Klibanov, *Istoriya religioznovo sektantsva v Rossii*, 137-38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

October 25, 1917 prohibited the use of paid workers and removed the capitalist prerogatives of these *Molokanye*.

Most Russian peasant families already lived, to some extent, in communal conditions with five or six families cooperatively working the land. Each household, however, retained a personal plot and understood their goals in individualistic rather than collective senses; the small size of these co-operatives and the archaic farming techniques and technology usually employed caused perpetual hardships on the pre-Soviet Russian countryside. The *Molokanye*, on the other hand, were agricultural specialists that produced a wide array of technical crops that were easily reprocessed by industry in addition to their harvests for personal consumption. The *Molokanye* were successful, in large part, due to their agrarian progressiveness. Unlike the archaic wooden plows and strip-farming practices used by the average Russian peasant, the sect utilized more efficient iron plows and practiced crop rotation.

Although Bolshevik leaders outwardly discouraged forced collectivization, peasant unwillingness eventually necessitated some coercive tactics by provincial party representatives if agricultural quotas were to be met. In a speech delivered at the First Congress of Agricultural Communes and Agricultural Artel in December 1919, Lenin censured party members that had tried to forcibly sway the peasantry towards collectivization:

It has frequently happened that the communes have only succeeded in provoking a negative attitude among the peasantry, and the word “commune” has even at times become a call to fight communism. This has happened when stupid attempts were made to drive the peasants into communes by force.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Lenin’s seeming dissatisfaction with this process, the practice was continued throughout the course of the war. Lenin, nonetheless, saw the examples of sectarian collectivity as pertinent in implementing his agricultural endeavors in rural Russia; an area that, by and large, was initially impermeable to the Bolsheviks because of the interweaving of the Russian Orthodox Church with the rural peasant laymen. Allowing groups like the *Molokanye* to proselytize in the countryside might result in not only in the ruralites renouncing the Church, but also economic individualism.

War communism, as the Bolshevik economic policy during the civil war has become known, called for excessive grain requisitions and proved to be unpopular with the *muzhiki*. The Bolsheviks, as a result, often were entangled in acrimonious conflicts with peasants that refused to submit to the Party’s harsh economic demands. The Volga region, the Caucasus, and the Tambov district were particular hotbeds of rural dissatisfaction; each antagonistic conflict threatened to undermine the abilities of the Bolsheviks. Of the three areas, the Tambov province, undoubtedly, was the most troubling for the Party. The close proximity of Tambov (190 kilometers) from Moscow meant that dissident movements in the provincial region easily could penetrate the lone stronghold of Bolshevik power in 1919: a small strip of

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<sup>20</sup> V.I. Lenin, Doklad o sel’skokhozyayctvennykh kommunikh i sel’skokhozyayctvennykh Artelikh (1919).

territory between the capital city and Petrograd. Primarily led by leftist Social Revolutionary Alexander Anatov, the *Antonovshchina* movement sought not only to cease the draconian food confiscations perpetrated by the Party, but also displace the Leninist government.<sup>21</sup> Numerous ruralites in the Tambov province presented an armed challenge to the Red Army requisitions under the auspices of the *Soyuz Trudovykh Krestyan* (the Union of Toiling Peasants): an organization that “set itself to the task of overthrowing the government of the communist-Bolsheviks which reduced the country to penury, ruin, and shame.”<sup>22</sup> During the two-year discord, the *Molokanye* in Tambov retained their pacifistic sentimentality and directed other peasants to refrain from violence as well. While there is a considerable difference between support for the Bolsheviks and just inert pacifism, the communities of *Molokanye*, nonetheless, were bastions of peace for the Party within violent central Russia.

Both the *Molokanye* and the Bolsheviks were in pursuit of lifestyles, which while superficially remote, actually corresponded to each other in the sense that they both sought attainment of the seeming unattainable. The *Molokanye* were an example of Bryan Wilson’s definition of a “utopian” sect; its members sought to achieve a way of life beyond the confines of human experience or control.<sup>23</sup> Until bread riots ended in anarchic revolt in February 1917 and generated an unprecedented struggle for power, the Bolshevik Party could be perceived in the same fantastical terms. Marx and Engels clearly did not view their theories as “utopian,” however, seeing them instead as a precise science, and Lenin similarly countered those who labeled him a dreamer.

It is essential to understand the gravitation of the Bolshevik Party towards the sectarian movement and *vice versa* in more complex terms than only ideological, economic, or even historical senses. One must also look at the common psychological profile of both groups and how their social similarities could have furthered their mutuality. Scipio Sighele wrote in his work, *Psychologie des Sectes*:

Any faith whether it is Islamism, Buddhism, Christianity, patriotism, socialism, anarchy, cannot but pass through the sectarian phase. It is the first step, the point where the human group, in leaving the twilight zone of the anonymous and mobile crowd, raises itself to a definition and to an integration, which may then lead up to the highest and most perfect human group, the nation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For an in-depth account of the Tambov strife, see Delano Dugarm, “Peasant Wars in Tambov Province,” in *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil War*, ed. Vladimir Brovkin, (New Haven: Yale, 1997), 177-198.

<sup>22</sup> Decree of the Tambov Gubernia committee of the Union of Toiling Peasants. RGIA, f. 235, op. 1, d. 29, ll. 77-78.

<sup>23</sup> B. Wilson, *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study*, (New York, International, 1966), 22.

<sup>24</sup> Scipio Sighele, *Psychologie des Sectes*, (New York: Arno, 1972), 42.



A sect is a progressive form of a crowd and a crowd is a transitory sect that has yet to fully organize itself. Sighele makes no differentiation between a political and religious sect, instead referring to their “criminal collectivity” as only varying with respect to the type of crowd from which they take rise.<sup>25</sup> He labels them as “criminal”, not out of derogatoriness, but because these groups are deviants in society that defy social morals and norms. All forms of sectarianism seek unanimity in their beliefs and practices, are highly ritualized, and hold a distinct kinship with other sectarian groups that are concurrently attempting to consciously elevate their cause. It is thus apt to label the Bolsheviks as a sect and to address their relationship with other groups as a characteristic of sectarian social behavior. Sociologist Pauline Young has noted: “A political society in which but one party is recognized and but one party rules inevitably assumes, in the long run, the form of a theocracy, in which the ruling party is merely the ruling sect.”<sup>26</sup>

The indications of this collective psychological association are provocatively manifold. Given Sighele’s perception that institutions necessitate a primordial sectarian element, both the Christian minority faiths and the Bolshevik Party represented the preliminary inklings of an evolutionary progression that, theoretically, could result in achievement of their own respective utopias. Yet, what facilitates this transcendence from dissident toilers to a viable, self-adjudicating establishment? According to Gustav Le Bon, a sect is a homogenous crowd, which often requires “cooperative assistance” from other minority elements of a society if it wishes to be elevated.<sup>27</sup> This conscious action, in turn, incorporates these isolated factions into the new, tangible institution and further encourages this mutual reciprocity.

So, essentially, a compromise must be achieved among all concerned parties, with some obligated to forego the ideals of their own abstract utopia in favor of beneficial inclusion within a concrete heterogeneous system. In the case of the Bolsheviks and religious sectarian groups, this meant that the Party necessitated support from groups like the sectarians in its efforts to consolidate ruling power and that the minority faith groups had to conform with some Party ideas and doctrines if they wanted to certify a beneficial position under the new regime. The *Molokanye*, unlike other utopian faiths, sought “reliance on human power in the reorganization of society” and were convinced that man could “perfect himself mortally and intellectually and shape his own environment.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>26</sup> Pauline Young, *The Pilgrims of Russian Town* xvii-xviii.

<sup>27</sup> Gustav Le Bon, *The Crowd: Study of the Popular Mind* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896), 240.

<sup>28</sup> Christel Lane, “Socio-political Accommodation and Religious Decline: The Case of the Molokan Sect in Soviet Society,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17:1, 235.

If the Bolsheviks viewed sectarianism as a potential means of swaying the Orthodox laity towards their socialist cause, it is necessary to use Sighele's and Le Bon's conclusions in analyzing the Church's rank-and-file as well. This group, since the very inception of the Russian Orthodox Church, was fraught with disunity in terms of religious beliefs and practices.<sup>29</sup> The most prevailing of these nonconformists had officially broken from the Church, as the Old Believers and Christian sectarians had done in the fifteenth century. Still, a sizeable portion of professed Orthodox believers that remained within the Church infrastructure deviated substantially from approved Orthodox practices and, in essence, represented religious sectarian groups. Their variance from prescribed ideology had already raised these assemblages above Sighele's "anonymous and mobile crowd" and meant that they could be more easily receptive to the Bolshevik desires through prodding by both the Party and organized spiritual sectarian groups.

When the Bolsheviks took over in October 1917, the Russian Orthodox Church quickly dismissed the Party as being rogue kleptocrats and encouraged its laity to resist the socialist movement. Patriarch Tikhon referred to the Bolshevik seizure of the Kremlin as a "blasphemous crime against the Orthodox faith and its people."<sup>30</sup> The Patriarch further condemned the "seducers and leaders who were poisoning the heart of the people by teachings denying faith in God, planting envy, greed and rapaciousness."<sup>31</sup> Prior to the 1917 Revolution, Lenin's opinions of the Church bureaucracy and religion, in general, were largely muted. Edward Rosloff writes: "When one considers the prolific output from Lenin's pen, one is struck by the few references to religious topics in his works."<sup>32</sup> The socialist leader's sentiments, though rarely expressed, were undeniable. Lenin believed secular education and freedom of conscience were inalienable rights of the citizenry, upon which the Church had needlessly infringed. In a 1902 edict for the Russian Social Democratic Party, he advocated the complete separation of church and state and demanded the "dissolution of schools that inculcate our youth."<sup>33</sup> Lenin later wrote:

Religion must be declared a private matter---these words convey the customary attitude of socialists to religion. But the meanings of these words need to be exactly defined, so that they cannot send out misunderstandings. We demand that religion be a personal

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<sup>29</sup> See for example, Brenda Meehan, "Popular Piety, Local Initiative, and the Founding of Women's Religious Communities in Russia, 1764-1907," and Eve Levin, "Dvoeverie and Popular Religion," in *Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia*. Ed. Stephen Batalden (Dekalb, IA: Northern Illinois, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> G. P. Fedotoff, *The Russian Church Since the Revolution* (London: Macmillian, 1928), 15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Rosloff, *Red Priests: Renovatism, Russian Orthodoxy and Revolution, 1905-1946* (Bloomington: Indiana U, 2002), 17.

<sup>33</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 6: 30.

matter in the attitude of the present state, but we cannot feel religion is a personal matter in the attitude of our strict party.<sup>34</sup>

The hierarchy's condemnation of the Bolsheviks only hastened the inevitable Party backlash against the Church. On November 2, 1917, a decree by the Soviet of People's Commissaries was issued entitled, "Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia," which nullified all religious privileges and restrictions formerly in existence in Russia.<sup>35</sup> This proclamation was the beginning of the Bolshevik's extensive excoriation of the Church establishment.

As the only faith that was truly privileged and unrestricted during imperial times, the Russian Orthodox Church had nothing to gain and everything to lose from Bolshevik modifications of state religious policy. The January 23, 1918 decree, "On the separation of church from state and school from church," poured salt in the wounds by depriving the Church of property rights and, equally as important, its legal means by which to proselytize.<sup>36</sup> The 13-article declaration made clear the attitudes of the new regime towards substantial religious organizations:

Article 2) *Within the confines of the Republic it is forbidden to pass any local laws, or issue decrees, which may hinder or limit freedom of conscience.*

Article 3) *Every citizen may confess any religion or may confess no religion; every loss of legal rights connected with the confessing of any faith or confessing of no faith is abolished.*

...

Article 9) *No religious instruction is allowed.*

...

Article 13) *All property of the Church and church societies are now the possessions of the people.*<sup>37</sup>

Historical analyses of this declaration have often noted the ambiguous language of the document, which provided considerable latitude for subsequent Bolshevik legislative attacks on the Church. Yet the implications of the proclamation, as it pertained to other religious groups, have been overlooked.

With no religious schools or formal ties with the state, the party decree affected the sectarians much differently than it did the Orthodox Church. While Article 13 made clear that as *church societies*, faith groups like the *Molokanye* were subject to the same secularization of their lands and possessions as the Church, few sectarian resources were ever seized during the early Bolshevik years. Given that most communities of *Molokanye* were situated on the periphery of the Russian territory and their lands were minuscule in relation to the large holdings of the Church, Bolshevik leaders initially allowed the group to function normally.

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<sup>34</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Soetisilizm i religieia: Ob otnoshenii rabocheaei partii k religii," *Novaya Zhizn* 28 (Dec. 1905): 15.

<sup>35</sup> "Deklaratskiya prav narodov Rossii", *Dekret Sovieta Narodnikh Komissaroff*, 2 November 1917.

<sup>36</sup> "Ob otdelyenii tserkvi ot gosudarstva i shkoly", *Dekret Sovieta Narodnikh Komissaroff*, 23 January 1917.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

The repercussions of the early Bolshevik religious legislation, undoubtedly, had a paradoxical effect. The declaration made clear that the Orthodox Church was at the mercy of the socialist government, but through a revocation of Church privileges, emplaced the institution beneath the sectarians. Now free to proselytize without legal constraints, the Christian minority faiths flourished in the early years of Bolshevik power. In a letter of Watson F. Lewis, YMCA Secretary in Russia (1918-1919), he recounts:

How surprising it was to find Christianity growing in the countryside. I felt certain that the poor religious situation in the urban areas was indicative of spiritual stagnation across the whole of Russia. Mr. Heald accompanied my party on a recent trek to the Tambov province...He remarked at how a Dukhobor village seemed to have grown fivefold since his visit there only three years prior.<sup>38</sup>

There has been a prevailing assumption in the historiography of revolutionary Russia that, as Luukkainen has noted, “During the civil war the party’s relations with religious organizations and the ideological battle against religion were matters of minor importance.”<sup>39</sup> It is absolutely certain that the battles between the Red and White forces were the greatest concern for the Party, because a battleground loss could mean the demise of their newly incepted government. Yet, the Bolsheviks helped to ensure these necessary victories by promoting the rejection of the Orthodox Church, which could potentially impede a Red victory given the institution’s overwhelming support for the Loyalist cause. By 1918, the Bolshevik government had already “closed many churches, seized and inventoried church property and valuables, conducted antireligious campaigns, and executed at least ten church hierarchs as well as many priests and other clergy.”<sup>40</sup>

The Party’s ridicule of Church through anti-Orthodox parades and iconic mockery more often than not perturbed the Russian citizenry and distanced them even further from the socialist movement. On March 1, 1919, the government attempted to expose the relics of St. Sergius of Radonezh as being nothing more than a deception by the Orthodox Church. The event produced heated reactions from the populace and, subsequently, similarly planned demonstrations were shelved until after the conclusion of the civil war.<sup>41</sup> Undermining the Church, which was necessary during the civil war period, required a surreptitious plan of action. In the juxtaposed terms of Fedotoff, this was as a victory within the Party of “opportunists” over their “doctrinaire” counterparts that “recognized the energy alive in religious prejudices,”

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<sup>38</sup> Watson F. Lewis Papers, YMCA Secretary, Russia, (23 Oct. 1919). *Rossiskaya Gosudarstvenaya Biblioteka*

<sup>39</sup> Luukkainen, *Party of Unbelief*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Daly, “Storming the Last Citadel: The Bolshevik Assault on the Church, 1922,” *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars*. Ed. Vladimir Brovkin, 235. Also, for a more in-depth analysis of the early persecution of the Church, see Dimitry Pospelovsky, *Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and Persecutions: Volume 2 of A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice, and the Believer*, 1-18.

<sup>41</sup> Dimitry Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Anti-Religious Policies*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 19.

encouraging change from Orthodox conservative forms of religion to more free or sectarian forms rather than a complete aberration from spirituality.<sup>42</sup>

The Orthodox Church during the Bolshevik revolution, like the Party, was not necessarily uniform in its thinking. Rosloff's provocative analysis of socialist-minded Church clerics in his work, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946*, demonstrates some attempts by Orthodox officials to reconceptualize their faith in Bolshevik terms. As neither the Party nor the Church hierarchy felt a particular affinity towards these "feared clergymen," policies from both organizations generally were without regards to the sentiments of these straddlers, especially during the early years of socialist power.<sup>43</sup> Only when a schism occurred within the Russian Orthodox Church, spurred by "opportunist" support for the "Living Church," did their message of compromise divide the ecclesiastical authority.

By 1921, the Bolsheviks had made headway in ensuring the viability of their regime. Most of the opposition White forces had capitulated to the Red Army and the Party had been largely effective in consolidating power, though the ruling apparatus still remained riddled with inefficiencies. While the first three years of Bolshevik power were inundated with draconian wartime economic and political measures, the New Economic Policy was an era of cultural and economic experimentation that sought to make amends with a starving, volatile populace. A cautiously optimistic first step of socialist reorganization implemented after the failure of war communism, the NEP often was compromised by disagreements over the Party *modus operandi*. No issue found less resolve among Soviet officials than the question of what to do with religion. Concerted Bolshevik attempts to impugn spirituality were often met with general indifference or outright hostility from the citizenry as Party efforts were muddled by bureaucratic red tape and jurisdictional overlap.

### **Faculty comment:**

Tricia Starks of the History Faculty said of Mr. Adkins work:

It is my pleasure to nominate the essay, "The Enigmatic 'Milk Drinkers': A Reconsideration of Christian Religious Policy in Bolshevik Russia," by Jesse Adkins, for inclusion in *Inquiry*. I have known Jesse for several years as a student and advisee and find myself impressed at every turn by his drive and quick intellect. He works at a graduate level and sets challenges for himself that make him stand out as one of the most impressive students I have had in twelve years of teaching.

This essay represents truly innovative and interesting research in one of the hottest areas of Russian and Soviet history -- the revolutionary period. The project considers the ways in which religious sects utilized their

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<sup>42</sup> Fedotoff, *The Russian Church Since the Revolution*, 50. The opportunists "recognized the energy alive in religious prejudices," whereas the doctrinaire sought "no compromise with religion."

<sup>43</sup> Rosloff, *Red Priests*, ix.

unique position in opposition to the Russian Orthodox church to garner the favor and attention of the avowedly atheistic Soviet state. To complete this essay, Jesse researched Russian language documents at institutions in St. Petersburg and Moscow using a Sturgis Travel grant, David W. Edwards Scholarship and funding from the American Council of Teachers of Russian.

Jesse worked in the Russian State Library, Soviet-era archives, and with a Russian academician in pursuit of his topic. In addition to extensive research, Jesse's essay shows broad scholarly contacts. Professor B. Lermontov of the Moscow State University has worked extensively on religious dissidents in Russia; he let Jesse sit in on his classes, introduced him to the Russian graduate student community, and gave him advice on how to negotiate the complicated archival system of Russia. Through him, Jesse has met some of the top scholars, Russian and American, in the field.

It is rare for a graduate student to make such important contacts, and absolutely astonishing to hear of an undergraduate garnering such opportunity. It is also not merely a lucky bit of happenstance. It was Jesse's courageousness and drive that allowed him to make the kinds of contacts that masters and Ph.D. students dream about. Through of these contacts, Jesse was advised to apply for the prestigious *Study Group of the Russian Revolution* at which he recently presented an extended version of the paper he submitted to Inquiry.

Jesse's essay is of graduate, even post-graduate, quality. Indeed, the members of his honor's committee commented that his was one of the best theses they had seen in years. I fully expect not to see a work of comparable quality for years.