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RELIGION AND ATHEISM IN EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE UKRAINIAN EDUCATORS IN THE 1920s-1930s

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Abstract

The article illustrates the process of formation of the atheist worldview of Soviet citizens under the pressure of Bolshevik propaganda in the context of student-teaching communities of higher educational institutions of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. The study shows two poles of the life of teachers: the limit of involvement in the work in the societies of militant God-fighters and the marginal position of the believers with all the resulting negative consequences for the personality, which the atheistic totalitarian state tried to create for a person. Along with highlighting the state-wide patterns of the anti-religious struggle in the Ukrainian socialist society of the 1920s-1930s in general and in the environment of the higher school in particular, the focus of the study is on identifying regional peculiarities in the life of students and teachers of Poltava.

Keywords: atheism, Christianity, everyday life, higher education, Ukrainian SSR, USSR.

Introduction

In the labyrinths of “true” Soviet democracy, many democratic freedoms were declared to be respected, and freedom of religion was theoretically such a freedom. However, faith and education hardly coexisted in Soviet society. Believing in the environment of the Soviet educator must be considered as a phenomenon of rebellion or even social deviation. The country, which officially announced its disbelief in God, could not tolerate freedom of religion from its ideological pawns, which were the teachers. However, as Poltava citizens of 1960s noted, in the Soviet Ukraine, “the freedom of conscience was primarily the freedom of anti-religious propaganda.”¹ That idea, in fact, was used by the authorities and party bodies, functionally controlling people’s personal lives. In the period of 1920-1930, the Soviet authorities were the most aggressive in the choice of the methods and techniques of fighting with religion using administrative, propaganda. and operational forces. The country’s teachers, who were educated by the Ukrainian SSR pedagogical universities on atheistic principles, were an outpost in the struggle for the purity of the Soviet consciousness from “religious remnants.”² The ideological basis of the transformations in the spiritual sphere lies in the evolution of the views of the leaders of Bolshevism on the issue of the attitude of the proletariat to religion.³ Their core struggle was based on the Marxian doctrine of military atheism with an assessment of the religion as the “opium of the people.” If in February 1919, Vladimir Lenin assumed that the policy of separating the Church from the state should be based on the broadest scientific and educational and anti-religious

¹ Г. Бардик. Програма КППС і атеїстичне виховання трудящих. *Зоря Полтавицини* [Bardyk H. Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Atheistic Education of Workers. The Star of Poltava region], 1962, no.4, p.1.

² О. В. Лук’яненко *«Найближчі друзі партії»: колективи педагогічних вишів України в образах щодення 1920-х – першої половини 1960-х років: монографія.* [Lukyanenko O. V. “The closest friends of the Party”: collectives of pedagogical universities of Ukraine in everyday images of the 1920s – the first half of the 1960s: a monograph] (Poltava: Simon Publishing House, 2019), p. 362.

³ Людмила Бабенко. Як українців робили атеїстами: державна політика проти релігії у перші десятиліття радянської влади. *Україна модерна: міжнародний інтелектуальний часопис.* 7.11.2017. [Lyudmyla Babenko. How Ukrainians were made atheists: state policy against religion in the first decades of Soviet power. *Modern Ukraine: an international intellectual journal.* 7.11.2017.]: <http://uamoderna.com/md/babenko-atheism>

propaganda when the process of establishing a materialistic worldview had to avoid harming feelings of believers. However, the Soviets were aware that violence against the Church and the clergy could not be the only means of combating the religious beliefs of the broad masses. Therefore, they emphasized the need for large-scale, anti-religious propaganda through dissemination of scientific knowledge, criticism of religion through special lectures, or debunking of religious miracles and relics. Party leaders strongly advised to concentrate anti-religious propaganda within the walls of schools and universities.⁴

The Start of the Atheistic Campaign in the Educational Institutions

In 1925, the Kharkiv Institute of Public Education, according to the resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) Ukraine (hereafter CP(b)U), became the vanguard of the atheistic struggle. Then an anti-religious department was created at the Faculty of Political Education.⁵ In Poltava, the educators also tried to keep up with national measures. In February 1924, the first group of atheists was organized at the local institute of public education under the leadership of teacher Kosobutskyi.⁶ A year later, it had already become a noticeable ideological structure of the city. Ten months later, in December 1924, educator Dementienko was an active lecturer at an atheist seminar at the Education Committee of the Poltava Governorate. The members of the group started an active anti-Christ campaign, which culminated in an atheistic, anti-Christmas relaxation evening for the workers of the region with an atheistic lecture. The number of the newly formed God-fighting body grew rapidly in the first years of its existence. By the summer of 1925, from 32 people

⁴ О. В. Лук'яненко Віра і безбожництво у середовищі освітян України першої половини ХХ століття: полтавський акцент. *Держава і Церква в новітній історії України : збірник наукових статей за матеріалами VI Всеукр. наук. конференції* [Lukyanenko O. V. Faith and atheism among Ukrainian educators in the first half of the 20th century: Poltava accent. *The State and the Church in the modern history of Ukraine: a collection of scientific articles based on the materials of the VI All-Ukrainian Congress*]. (Poltava: Astraya, 2017), p. 225.

⁵ Бабенко, *op. cit.*

⁶ Держархів Полтавської області [State Archive of Poltava Region]. Ф.П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4736. Арк.4.

in its ranks, it tripled to 102 members. However, the work methods were monotonous and sluggish—mostly, lectures, and reports for the like-minded people. In 1925, the atheistic team of Poltava Institute of Social Education held seven such meetings. Students and teachers did not have a clear work plan. And even the existing measures were often not brought to completion. For example, the planned for December 1924 Christmas show-trial for the religious Poltavites was never implemented, as well as the “trial on Shrovetide” in 1925.⁷

The universities in the Soviet Ukraine had been already working in the sphere of atheistic education way before the establishing of the state-supported non-believers’ organizations. It is known that in November 1922, the communists of the Poltava teachers’ institute divided the anti-religious work of the establishment into seven lectures. The teachers explained to the listeners the theories of the origin of religion, emphasizing the presence of common elements in all religions. Their colleagues, students and teachers of the research department of the Kamianets-Podilskyi Institute during the research expeditions to study the ancient monuments of the Kamianets District in the early 1920s, were also obliged to give a series of lectures on atheistic topics to the local population.⁸

In order to rationalize the process of “cleansing from faith,” in December 1922, the lecturers of the institute even appealed to the Poltava City Executive Committee asking for a subscription to the magazine “Science and Religion.”⁹

If one looks at the situation with religious publications through the eyes of a God-fighter, then in the first half of the 1920s it was really not in favor of atheists. A large number of religious publications forced the infidel authorities to impose restrictions. It is known that in 1925-1927 the Poltava District Inspectorate of Public Education banned the printing of all German missionary

⁷ Ibid., Спр.4737. Арк.1зв, 3, 17.

⁸ О. Б. Комарніцький *Студентство педагогічних навчальних закладів радянської України в умовах формування тоталітарної системи (20-30-ті рр. XX ст.)* [О. В. Komarnytskyi Studentship of pedagogical educational institutions of Soviet Ukraine in the conditions of the formation of the totalitarian system (20-30s of the XX century)]. (Dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Historical Sciences, specialty 07.00.01 – history of Ukraine. Kamianets-Podilskyi National University named after Ivan Ohienko, Kamianets-Podilskyi, 2017), p.161.

⁹ Ibid., Спр.4755. Арк.2, 5.

publications and even German popular magazines in the city clarifying them as mass religious literature. In 1929, for anti-religious reasons, it was even forbidden to print labels for wine called “Church.”¹⁰ However, apart from atheistic, the government pursued purely pragmatic goals. Thus, during the explanation of the decision to ban the publication of the Timesheet Calendar (“Tabel Kalendar”) by the Union of Evangelicals, we read that it was made, among other things... to save paper stocks in the state.¹¹

The anti-religious activities mentioned in the life of the Poltava Institute are also observed in other universities across the Soviet Ukraine of the early 1920s. Thus, the Nizhyn Institute of Public Education held its anti-religious seminar for 63 people.¹² In the Velyki Sorochyntsi Pedagogical College (Poltava Governorate) this work was also set at a particularly high level. This can be seen in the “thaw-day” memories of Mykola Chumak, who studied there for a teacher in 1920s. Among other clubs, he mentions the activity of the section “Godless” (*Bezbozhnyk*) that was set at a particularly high level. He noted:

Nowadays [*in 1950s–O. L.*], this name [*“Godless”– O. L.*] sounds rude and the anti-religious work itself is conducted in a different way. But then, in 1921-1925, the work was so important and effective that it cannot be overestimated ... Fighting fervor is still in us now, thirty years later, because we conduct strong anti-religious propaganda even thirty years later.¹³

Over time, the activity of the anti-religious association at Poltava institute began to decline. Thus, in the II and III trimesters of the 1924-1925 academic year, the atheistic group published four issues of the newspaper “Godless” (*Bezbozhnyk*). As we see, it was a very popular name borrowed from the newspaper “*Bezbozhnyk*” published since 1922 as a main Bolshevik atheistic periodical. However, institutional paper was not so durable as the state one. After

¹⁰ Ibid., Ф.Р-369. Оп.2. Спр.12. Арк.755.

¹¹ Ibid., Спр.2. Арк.37.

¹² Центральний державний архів вищих органів влади та управління України (ЦДАВО України) [The Central State Archive of Higher Authorities and Administration of Ukraine]. Ф.166. Оп.7. Спр.9. Арк.15.

¹³ Держархів Полтавської області [State Archive of Poltava Region]. Ф.Р-4010. Оп.1. Спр.73. Арк.36-37.

the fourth issue the atheist's newspaper of Poltava educators merged with the general student sheet turning into its appendix. The number of "god-fighters" fell 2.5 times in six months as well: from 102 members of the atheist group to 40 students who actually continued to participate in the anti-religious campaigns of the educators in the region.¹⁴ As Oleksandr Komarnitskyi states, the numbers of active faith-fighters was small: 3.6% of students were atheists in Kharkiv institute of public education in 1923 and 1.6% in 1924-1925; in Kyiv institute of public education in 1923-1924 there were 1.4% of them. As a rule, at their meetings, students just listened to reports, presented abstracts, and held discussions on religious topics.¹⁵

It seems that the majority of the proletarianized educational intelligentsia enrolled in the ranks of "god-fighters" not because of their beliefs, but because of the popularity of the infidel worldview. Measuring the sizes of the atheistic clubs, we should not also forget about the phenomenon of Soviet "paper organizations," which, according to Lyudmyla Babenko, existed only virtually in the Communist party reports while the real anti-religious activity was replaced by paperwork which discredited the anti-faith movement itself.¹⁶ In our case, we find not only the statistics of the downfall of the membership in "Godless club." The minutes of the pedagogical institute include the criticism of the decrease in the number of carriers of God-defying ideas voiced by the teachers themselves, and not by controlling bodies from above. They were able to assess not only the quantitative, but also the qualitative side of the atheistic work. As witnesses, they stated with great confidence a real physical decrease in the members of the infidel circle in the Poltava institute of Public Education. This goes along with the state trend when in the end of the 1920s intelligentsia of Ukraine itself contributed to the strengthening of religious attitudes, and the student youth made up the largest

¹⁴ Ibid., Ф. П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4737. Арк. 42.

¹⁵ Комарніцький, р.220.

¹⁶ Бабенко, op. cit.

group of believers through participation in religious sisterhoods and Mutual Aid groups. However, the state was sure that the end of the 1920s demonstrated the steady destruction of religious ideology, probably, trying to shape public opinion with a typical false statistic on the Bolshevik's anti-religious campaigners.¹⁷

The Educators During the “Godless Five-Year Plan”

A new stage of Church-fighting lasted from the end of the 1920s to the end of the 1930s. The all-union meeting of the Central Committee of the CPSU(b) on June 8, 1929, include anti-religious propaganda in the list of permanent campaigning and propaganda activities of all structural divisions of party bodies. The further changes to the Constitution of the USSR expanded the interpretation of the concept of “anti-state activity” in relation to the clergy and believers and limited the activities of religious communities. It was forbidden not only to hold religious services and religious activities outside the prayer houses, but also to provide religious knowledge privately.

The proclamation of this “godless five-year plan” in 1929 somewhat revived the process of atheism of the collectives of pedagogic institutes.¹⁸ It is difficult to talk about atheism of the inner world of the lecturers and students. However, extracurricular activities acquired such atheistic coloring. Since 1927, young people during the winter break received the obligation to carry out religious propaganda at their places of residence.¹⁹ According to Viktor Prylutskyi, youth (especially members of the All-Union Leninist Communist Youth Union (Komsomol) were at the forefront of anti-religious propaganda in the period 1920-1939.²⁰ Thus, in April 1929, students of the Poltava State Pedagogical Institute received a plan for holding anti-religious seminars in the regional

¹⁷ Центральний державний архів громадських об'єднань України (ЦДАГО України) [Central State Archive of Public Associations of Ukraine]. Ф.1. Оп.24. Спр.2684. Арк.9-12.

¹⁸ Ibid., Спр.2917. Арк.76.

¹⁹ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4739. Арк.50зв.

²⁰ Прилуцький В. І. (2001). *Молодь України в умовах формування тоталітарного ладу (1920–1939 рр.)*. Київ. Інститут історії України НАН України [Victor Prylutskyi. The youth of Ukraine in the conditions of the formation of the totalitarian system (1920–1939). Kyiv. Institute of History of Ukraine, NAS of Ukraine]. p.34.

villages. The days of the May holidays (which coincided with religious holidays that year) were especially full of lectures. In the spring, 10 members of the propaganda brigade, with the help of the Komsomol, staged atheist performances for the peasants. However, they did it for money.²¹ Due to the lack of reporting, it is not clear whether such paid anti-religious measures had been effective. Probably not very much, because the peasants went to the church more willingly rather than to the performances of the future teachers, even when they proposed free events with the cultural activities as an alternative to the religious ceremonies. For example, students and teachers of the Poltava institute of public education organized the club for the elimination of illiteracy at the Semenivka village council (modern-day Poltava region) in 1925. But they were unable to start work because the local residents decided to celebrate Holy Week and Easter and not to increase their level of literacy refusing to study during the religious holidays.²²

However, this criticism of students and teachers is not fully fair. The youth could hardly do anything against the power of folk religiosity, which even the Communist authorities and party bodies could not cope with. The department of education of Poltava governorate, which managed atheist campaigns in the region, also noted with disappointment the strengthening of religious sentiments in the countryside. In 1925, faith in holy springs and miraculous icons strengthened again despite the presence of atheistic brigades of the educators in the rural areas of the governorate. This even provoked the authorities to call for a meeting of anti-religionists at the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine and the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks).²³

²¹ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф. П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4743. Арк.15зв.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., Ф.Р-495. Оп.1. Спр.8. Арк.221.

In addition to the surrounding villages, educators also worked in the city with school children and teachers of the primary schools. The teachers' training institute of Poltava organized one six-hour seminar at so-called "junior consenters" (1-3 grades) and two at "senior consenters" (grades 4-7). In April 1929, the university organized a demonstrative corner of the infidel for children. The future teachers were given the obligation to use the possibilities of chemical science to expose the origin of religious miracles.²⁴

But there were examples when educators fought the church under the social and economic dissatisfaction, the Bolsheviks used the factor of unsatisfactory financial support for young people in their anti-religious propaganda. So, at the Kamianets-Podilsk Institute of Public Education, students and workers, who were promised 81 kg of wheat, removed a cross from one of the city's churches and installed a red flag instead. The same fate befell the church of the institute.²⁵

However, there were cases when institute teachers opposed to anti-religious work doing it in the ideologically correct way. When, in 1931, the city authorities demanded from the Poltava Institute of Social Education to introduce an anti-religious component into the course of geology and natural science, the educators refused, saying that the need to talk about religion with students during the natural sciences course humiliated even the discipline itself.²⁶

In Ukraine, in May 1928, the First Congress of Infidels ("Bezvirnyk") took place. It was attended by 23 educators who represented, including 16 branches of that atheistic society in universities of the Ukrainian SSR.²⁷ The Poltava regional branch of the "Bezvirnyk" society grew at an incredible pace. By May 1931, the number of movement participants was about 20,800 people in 158 centers. Communist Party bodies proudly noted the decrease in the number of religious rites performed by the population, the decrease in the number of believers and the

²⁴ Ibid., Ф.П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4743. Арк.1зв, 7зв.

²⁵ Комарніцький, р.220.

²⁶ Ibid., Ф.П-12. Оп.1. Спр.23. Арк.254.

²⁷ ЦДАГО України. Ф.1. Оп.24. Спр.2684. Арк.32.

frequency of their visits to prayer houses. The state began an active struggle with all its might. As of 1931, in the Poltava district alone, eight churches and four synagogues were closed and turned into Soviet cultural institutions, and a petition was sent to the All-Ukrainian Central Executive Committee asking to close four more churches and one synagogue.²⁸ In June 1930, the Poltava District Inspectorate of Education obliged all regional executive committees to contribute to the transformation of churches located in the villages into village houses of culture, theaters, and libraries. They ordered to organize circles of non-believers and writers in the building of the religious institutions, asking to purchase literature, cinema and radio equipment for them. Enterprises and universities were supposed to help in anti-religious work of subordinate villages.²⁹

But there was an opposition as well. Thus, some students supported their teachers with religious beliefs, in particular, teachers of the Dnipropetrovsk Russian Pedagogical College Dobrovolskyi, Levitovs and Chernyavskyi, who refused to sign a petition to close the local Bryansk church and choral synagogue. Their example was followed by ten third year-students.³⁰ The “godless five-year plan” encouraged aggressive actions. Educationists were stimulated by the idea that the implementation of the five-year plan in four years and the successes of socialist construction “narrowed the social base of religion and led to its death among the working masses.”³¹ The Poltava District Inspectorate of Education did not spare money for the quick repairs of churches immediately after their closure, in order to start using them “for a new direct purpose.” Thus, they closed ancient Poltava Exaltation of the Cross Monastery leaving it “exclusively for cultural and social needs.”³² The educators of Poltava pedagogical institute once helped to turn its premises into the railway men’s club and the archives of the Poltava

²⁸ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.П-12. Оп.1. Спр.23. Арк.225.

²⁹ Ibid., Ф.Р-369. Оп.2. Спр.14. Арк.20.

³⁰ Комарніцький, р.222.

³¹ ЦДАГО України. Ф.1. Оп.24. Спр.5309. Арк.3, 8.

³² Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.П-12. Оп.1. Спр.26. Арк.142.

provinces archival management. Then, in 1933, the children's labor colony of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the USSR (NKVD) was housed in the monastery buildings. And at the end of the 1930s, the buildings of Poltava Monastery were transferred to the Poltava State Pedagogical Institute for dormitories and a dining hall, as well as teachers' apartments.

The Communist authorities of Poltava did something even more radical than transforming the religious building into civil ones. For example, they issued an order to dismantle the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saints Peter and Paul, which stood almost next to the Poltava Pedagogical Institute in the center of the city in no more than two decades, starting on May 17, 1934.³³ The church was stone-built, rectangular in plan, one-nave with an octagonal apse. A beautiful, slender Gothic bell tower rose above the entrance. A bell weighing about 560 kg was installed on the belfry. The entrance was decorated with a round "rose" window with a decorative ornamental frame. The service was performed to the accompaniment of organ brought from Germany. It was the only organ hall in the city of Poltava. When in 1933 it was blown up ahead of the schedule, students of Poltava pedagogical institute worked extremely hard to fulfill that Party's command of the complete destruction of the sacred building. They razed to the ground the remains of what was until recently a church and helped to plant a small "Student Park" on the site of the former churchyard.

Calendar and Other Problems of Fighting Religiosity

To deepen the gap with faith, the Communist party mobilized the residents of Poltava to switch to a continuous working day on all religious holidays and Sundays.³⁴ Such a game with everyday consciousness at the level of the symbolism of the days was a continuation of the campaign started several years

³³ Ibid., Спр.50. Арк.3.

³⁴ Ibid., Спр.23. Арк.225.

before because the country that was battling the faith actually lived under the religious calendar since 1917.

As Article 10 of the Decree of the Council of People's Commissars on an eight-hour working day (1917) stated, the schedule of holidays on which one was not supposed to work included all Sundays and the following holidays: January 1, January 6, February 27, March 25, May 1, August 15, September 14, December 25 and 26, Friday and Saturday of Holy Week, Monday and Tuesday of Easter Week, the day of the Ascension of the Lord and the second day of the Feast of the Descent of the Holy Spirit. For non-Christians, it was allowed to include other holidays in the schedule, instead of Sundays, in accordance with the custom of their faith. At the request of the majority of workers of an enterprise or farm or any of its departments, the holidays of January 1 and 6, August 15, September 14, December 26, Saturday of Holy Week and Monday of Easter Week could be replaced by other free days³⁵.

So, in 1928, the authorities forbade printing in red all days off except Sunday in the calendar. Before that, for example, in 1927 Timesheet Calendar with seven-day weeks, there were three categories of 65 "red dates". They included 52 ordinary Sundays, 6 holidays (New Year (January 1); Lenin's Memory Day and Memory of 9 January, 1905³⁶ (January 22); The Overthrow of the Autocracy³⁷ (March 12); The Paris Commune Day (March 18)³⁸; International Day³⁹ (May 1

³⁵ Декрет Совета Народных Комиссаров о восьмичасовом рабочем дне. *Собрание узаконений РСФСР* [Decree of the Council of People's Commissars on an eight-hour working day. Collection of laws of the RSFSR], 1917, №1, ст. 10. https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Декрет_о_восьмичасовом_рабочем_дне

³⁶ The holiday combining the memory of Vladimir Lenin (In January 1924, Lenin's health suddenly deteriorated sharply; he died on January 21, 1924) and commemorating of the events of January 9 (22 in Gregorian calendar), 1905 in St. Petersburg, also known as "Bloody Resurrection" or "Red Resurrection" - the dispersal of a procession of St. Petersburg workers to the Winter Palace, which aimed to present a collective petition about workers' needs to Emperor Nicholas II.

³⁷ The holiday to mark the date when on February 27 (March 12), 1917, the general political strike in Petrograd turned into an armed uprising. A significant part of the army (about 67 thousand people) went over to the side of the revolution.

³⁸ The holiday to commemorate the March 18, 1871 revolutionary uprising and the government in Paris that existed from March 18 to May 28, 1871.

³⁹ In 1888, the American Federation of Labor convention in St. Louis declared May 1 as a National Day of Struggle for workers' rights. A year later, in 1889, the Second Congress of the International decided to make this date a day of solidarity among workers around the world.

(Sunday in 1927); Proletarian Revolution Day⁴⁰ (November 7) and ten “resting days” (actually, religious holidays: Annunciation (March 25), Holy Saturday (April 23), Easter (April 24-25 in 1927), Ascension (June 2 in 1927), Holy Spirit Day (Trinity) (June 13 in 1927), Transfiguration (August 6), Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 15), Christmas (December 25-26.)⁴¹ But in the Communist party order from 1928 it was forbidden to place the names on sacred dates in the calendar sheets if red Sundays coincided with religious holidays. The use of such names as Christmas, Easter and Green holidays in the calendar required a separate cancellation.⁴²

In the early 1930s, Sunday lost its sacredness on the official level. Infidel educators were supposed to contribute to new socialist rites taking root in the environment of a new person.⁴³ It was connected with the attempt to implement in the USSR the Soviet revolutionary calendar starting from October 1, 1929. Each month consisted of 30 days, the remaining 5 or 6 days were declared so-called “month less holidays” (Russian ‘*bezmesiachnye kanikuly*’), and they were not part of any month or week but had their own names: Lenin’s Day after January 30, Labor Days two days after April 30, Industrial days two days after November 7, in leap years an additional leap day had to be inserted after February 30. The de-sacralization of Sunday was seen in the reforms of the days of the week in the USSR. In 1929-30 it consisted of 5 days, while all workers were divided into five groups named by colors (yellow, pink, red, purple, green), and each group had its

⁴⁰ The commemorating of The October Revolution (or October Revolution, in the official historiography of the USSR “The Great October Socialist Revolution”) a mutiny in the Russian Republic, which took place on October 25 (November 7), 1917, during which the Provisional Government, which was in the capital of the state, Petrograd, was arrested, and the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets and a group of Bolsheviks led by Lenin took over the central power, proclaiming a socialist revolution, the liquidation of capitalism, and the transition to the construction of socialism.

⁴¹ Владислав Бурда. Чому православні українці святкували Різдво 7 січня, а греки, румуни та болгари — 25 грудня. Історія про календарні суперечки та вірність давнім традиціям [Vladyslav Burda. Why Orthodox Ukrainians celebrated Christmas on January 7, and Greeks, Romanians and Bulgarians - on December 25. A story about calendar disputes and loyalty to ancient traditions.]. *Chas.News*. 24.05.2023: <https://chas.news/past/chomu-pravoslavni-ukraintsi-svyatkuyut-rizdvo-7-sichnya-a-greki-rumuni-ta-bolgari-25-grudnya>

⁴² Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.Р-369. Оп.2. Спр.11. Арк.35.

⁴³ ЦДАГО України. Ф.1. Оп.24. Спр.5309. Арк.3.

own day off per week (the so-called '*nepřeryvka*' (continuity)).⁴⁴ On December 1, 1931, the 5-day week was replaced by a 6-day week with a fixed day of rest on the 6th, 12th, 18th, 24th, and 30th of each month (March 1 was used instead of February 30, each 31st day was considered an additional working day). The normal 7-day week was returned on June 26, 1940. Initially (in the 1940s), the week in the USSR began on Sunday, later on it started on Monday.

Later on, except the calendar reforms, there seemed to be only three problems of the atheist movement in the educators' collectives. The first was that women prevailed in religious communities, and it appeared that the lecturers did not pay due attention to them while delivering anti-religious lectures in the cities and villages. The second problem was weak anti-religious work among national minorities, as well as among working and student youth. And, finally, the third was the weak involvement of wider circles of scientific and pedagogical workers in active anti-religious work. For example, despite activities at the state level, since the end of the 1920s, for almost a decade, there was no evidence of the work of anti-religious organizations in the Poltava Pedagogical Institute.

As a response to the criticism, in the late 1930s, students and teachers of the Poltava Pedagogical Institute were no longer limited to a simple systematic reading of two or three anti-religious reports per semester only within the walls of the university.⁴⁵ Educators received special orders for the anti-religious campaigns among the townspeople. Thus, in January 1938, the propaganda and agitation department of Poltava city Communist party committee obliged teachers to give lectures on the class origin and content of religion.⁴⁶ Later, the institute was constantly receiving a list of the "anti-religious menu" from the authorities. In January 1939, it included conversations with the community on the topics

⁴⁴ *Постановление СНК СССР от 24.09.1929 (ред. от 08.07.1977) "О рабочем времени и времени отдыха в предприятиях и учреждениях, переходящих на непрерывную производственную неделю"* [Decree of the Council of People's Commissioners of the USSR dated 09/24/1929 (edited on 07/08/1977) "On working time and rest time in enterprises and institutions switching to a continuous production week"]. <https://www.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc&base=ESU&n=2853#pIFW7sT9V0vtRXiD>

⁴⁵ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4784. Арк.21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Спр.4785. Арк.34.

“How did faith in God arise?”, “Class essence of Christmas” or “Political significance of the All-Union census and “Bloody Sunday”⁴⁷.

In the late 1930s, the educational institution of Poltava became a viable enclave of atheist struggle. It received the administrative territory in a real ideological subordination. The Poltava city party committee officially assigned the nearby Kobyshchany village with its district to the pedagogical institute for conducting anti-religious propaganda. The party saw the students as a “highly qualified cultural force” to oppose the church.⁴⁸ And although the youth read books on anti-religious topics with the local residents, the religious leaders continued, as defined by the party’s regional committee, “their dark work.” Therefore, in addition to the youth, the Communist party asked to allocate teachers as extra lectures on the topic “Elections to local councils of workers’ deputies and the tasks of anti-religious propaganda,” with the utmost necessity “taking into account the conditions of Kobyshshany residents” (extreme religiosity and some delinquent behavior at the same time).⁴⁹

A campaign to artificially expand the ranks of the godless citizens began. The reason was the activation of the organization “Bezbozhnyk” at the national level. In 1937, they published the provisions on local centers of the union of militant atheists. From now on, they were defined as a mass voluntary organizations for active followers of the struggle against religion as a means of influencing exploiters, a remnant of the past in the mind and everyday life. The regulation established the mandatory presence of association branches with at least three members in universities.⁵⁰ In March 1938, the *Bezvirnyk* (Non-believer) society at Poltava Pedagogical Institute counted 505 people.⁵¹ Within a year, in 1939, the organization was re-named into the “Union of Militant

⁴⁷ Ibid., Спр.4794. Арк.119

⁴⁸ Ibid., Арк.31.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ЦДАГО України. Ф.1. Оп.24. Спр.7105. Арк.23.

⁵¹ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4785. Арк.8зв.

Atheists” and included 542 educators. However, being so numerous on paper, it was criticized by institute management for a complete inaction.⁵²

Manifestations of Educators’ Religiosity in the First Decades of Soviet Power

At the Kamianets-Podilskyi Institute of Public Education, anti-religious campaigns intensified with the approach of the Easter holidays. In April 1922, students were allowed to leave for the Easter vacation. Already next year, they were forbidden to celebrate Easter. Young people were not allowed to visit churches, chapels, and synagogues. At the same time, Easter Sunday was declared a working day, and the day off was moved to Monday. A significant part of the students, even under the threat of expulsion from the institute, did not renounce their religious views. On May 8, 1923, at a meeting of the office of the Kamianets-Podilskyi Institute, it was discussed that some students and teachers participated in church services. In February 1924, political commissar of the Kamianets-Podilskyi Agricultural Institute, Kindrat, spoke at a meeting of the institute’s bureau about the frequent visits of students of the Institute of Public Education to church.⁵³

In 1924, among the employees and professors of Poltava Pedagogical Institute, there were persons who showed sympathy for religious beliefs. Some students complained that they had to take exams with such a professor “whose room was a real iconostasis.” The head of the department of education of Poltava governance, and later the rector of the pedagogical institute Matviy Farber, occasionally emphasized that one of the purposes of the Institute of Public Education of Poltava was the training of an active anti-religionists, which was impossible with such religious personnel⁵⁴.

⁵² Ibid., Спр.4796. Арк.7.

⁵³ Комарніцький, р.220-221.

⁵⁴ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.Р-495. Оп.1. Спр.8. Арк.5.

Despite efforts to replace Christian rituals with new Soviet ones, educators still held on to the usual forms of faith manifestation. Thus, on November 26, 1927, the Communist party committee of the Poltava Institute of Public Education noted with indignation the presence of religiosity among the staff. Their participation in the process of carrying the coffin with the dead lecturer's body to the church, walking as part of the funeral procession through the city with crosses and flags, and in the allocation of the appropriate amount of money to sponsor that religious farewell was recognized as an unacceptable political act for 16 students and lecturers.

The party members tried to explain the ideological blunder by saying that among the II- and III-year-students present at the ceremony there was an element of non-proletarian origin, and the teachers belonged to the cohort of so-called "old teachers." The majority of self-governing higher education organizations demonstratively took the position of non-participation in the funeral of a colleague. It is noteworthy that the administration of the institution accepted this activity of the team members as deviant behavior that should be condemned, corrected, and even ridiculed. This is evident from the proposed measures. Among the list we find the reading of anti-religious lectures "Religion and Science" and "New Life" to students. Lecturers were contacted through the regional trade union committee and departments of education. The high point in the process of the public court was the publication of a critical article and feuilleton in the press.⁵⁵

We know about even more drastic measures. Thus, the second-year student H. Herasymenko, who was recognized as an instigator of youth to participate in the funeral, turned out to be a candidate for Communist party membership. When it was his turn to pass the recommendation commission in June 1928, the boy was

⁵⁵ Ibid., Ф. П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4741. Арк. 13зв.

deprived of the title of candidate for party membership⁵⁶. A similar fate befell his colleague Saprykin.⁵⁷

Until the end of the 20s, the Bolsheviks did not succeed in eradicating religious beliefs from the student environment. In particular, the Zinovievsk⁵⁸ Pedagogical College reported on the events held in 1928-1929 survey of students, 3.2% of whom admitted that they believe in God (in fact, this figure was actually higher). Some of the youth continued to celebrate religious holidays, for example, at the Kharkiv Institute of Public Education.⁵⁹

However, one should not perceive teachers' religiosity as something unique. Even the top party figures of the region came under a barrage of criticism for their religious past. Thus, in 1934, the second secretary of the city party committee, Illevsky, was called an idiot and a politically illiterate person, because it became known to the community that, having been the secretary of the party committee in the city of Chutovo (Poltava region), he was baptized and married in a religious ceremony in 1924.⁶⁰

The state itself called for the search for believers through the activation of religious organizations in the republic. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine recommended particularly careful monitoring of "outbreaks of religiosity" after the activation of churchmen with the adoption of the "most democratic" Constitution of 1936. They, apparently, too loosely interpreted Article 124 of the Basic Law, which spoke about the freedom of religious cults and the freedom of anti-religious propaganda recognized for all citizens.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Ibid., Арк.48.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Спр.4743. Арк.66зв.

⁵⁸ modern Кропивницький, Kirovohrad region

⁵⁹ Комарницький, р.222.

⁶⁰ Ibid., Ф.П-12. Оп.1. Спр.53. Арк.25.

⁶¹ *Конституция (Основной закон) Союза Советских Социалистических Республик. Утверждена Чрезвычайным VIII съездом Советов Союза ССР 5 декабря 1936 года (с последующими изменениями и дополнениями)* [Constitution (Basic Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Approved by the Extraordinary VIII Congress of Soviets of the USSR on December 5, 1936 (with subsequent amendments and additions)]:URL: <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/cnst1936.htm>

Religious figures worked especially actively to convert residents of Kharkiv and Poltava to faith.⁶²

For almost a decade, the internal documentation of the Poltava Institute of Public Education was silent about manifestations of religiosity among participants in the educational process. Already in March 1937, the attack on believers began with the case of dean Leonid Tkachenko. The public process began with a simple discussion based on an anonymous message. In particular, the teacher was accused of the fact that his wife was at the funeral of the local bishop. Later it turned out that it was slander because the woman was sick during the ceremony. There were colleagues who came to Tkachenko's defense. So, E. Dubova stated that she didn't believe (!) that her colleague was a religious person. Let's pay attention to the wording itself: not the rational "convinced" or "knew," but the irrational "did not believe" in the fact. The educator also noted that even if the priests did come to his house, the institute should better oppose this, and not condemn the colleague. The cohort of the belligerent went much further. Thus, the educator Yudin emphasized that although he had known Tkachenko for a long time as an intelligent person, he considered him "not our person" because he was observed to be religious. These included at first glance completely mundane things that caught the eye of fighters against religion. For example, atheists were outraged by the fact that the cleaner came to L. Tkachenko's house every Saturday to tidy up before Sunday, the holy day. The fact of decorating the Christmas tree also irritated the critics. If for the communists at the beginning of January, Yudin noted, it was already cleaning up, then for Tkachenko it was only adjusting to the Orthodox Christmas. A first-year student A. Herasin spoke on behalf of the youth, emphasizing that the students believed that the university should not have religious people in leadership positions. The then director Ivan

⁶² ЦДАГО України. Ф.1. Оп.24. Спр.7105. Арк.5.

Onisin, who seemed to know about manifestations of religiosity in the institution and did not react to it, also did not react specifically to these alleged facts.

The practice of denunciation for faith has become a popular phenomenon. In May 1937, the Communist party organization listened to an appeal about the inadmissibility of following religious cults by lecturers' families. These "shameful phenomena" became accepted by the general public when educators demonstratively condemned them at the 6th Poltava city Communist party conference.⁶³ To the already criticized biologist L. Tkachenko, stories from the personal life of the teacher of the Department of General Literature Mykhaylo Sudeykin were added⁶⁴.

A month prior the party organization of the institute received another anonymous information about the performance of religious rites by the lecturer Pyankov.⁶⁵ And at the end of June 1937, party members turned their attention on students as well. Together with the teachers, at the party meetings, the worldview of the third-year student Kalashnyk was criticized. The girl remarked that she believed in the fact that the consecrated water did not spoil for 15 years. During the discussion, it turned out that many students from the 3rd year went to fortune tellers to find out their future. Against this background, the higher education staff was concerned with the activation of Christian organizations who were trying to fight those superstitions with their own methods.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The list of measures for the atheization of society, the degree of involvement of educators in the process of fighting religion, the strengthening of the anti-church policy of the state, and the manifestation of their own religious beliefs by

⁶³ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4782. Арк.7зв, 10, 15, 53.

⁶⁴ Держархів Полтавської області, ф. П-251, оп.1, спр.4782, 15

⁶⁵ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4783. Арк.46.

⁶⁶ Держархів Полтавської області. Ф.П-251. Оп.1. Спр.4782. Арк.24.

students and teachers themselves made it possible to distinguish the following periods in the study of the problem.

1) The period of conditional freedom of conscience (1920-1922) (in the conditions of freedom of religion, proclaimed by the Decree of the Council of People's Commissars on the separation of church from state and school from church, religious tradition was preserved in the environment of the "old lectureship"; in pedagogical institutes, it was not forbidden to celebrate major religious holidays, in particular, Easter, adjusting the vacation time to the needs of religious educators).

2) The period of aggravation of contradictions (1923-1927) (with the beginning of the state's attack on religion, the first anti-religious departments (Kharkiv Institute of Public Education) and atheist circles were formed in universities; anti-religious evenings, theatrical trials over church holidays, and propaganda seminars among educators were started for the population of the regions; students were obliged to carry out anti-religious propaganda at their place of residence during the holidays; administrations issued prohibitions to participate in religious ceremonies of weddings, baptisms, and funerals; the Easter holidays were canceled; the Society of Friends of the newspaper "Bezbozhnyk" (The Godless) started to function (later reformed into the Union of the godless).

3) The period of centralization of the anti-religious struggle (1928-1936) (educators took part in the First Congress of Unbelievers in 1928; collectives of pedagogical institutes participated in the implementation of the plans of the "atheist five-year plan"; in some universities, they formed branches of the Union of Militant Atheists; educational institutions equipped corners of non-believers; chemistry and biology teachers joined in debunking miracles through demonstrative experiments and lectures; teams of pedagogical institutes took an active part in the destruction and reorganization of religious buildings; villages and separate districts were secured behind educational institutions for conducting

anti-religious work; they stated social purges of persons related by family relations with priests and employees of religious organizations).

4) The period of legitimized offensive (1937-1941) (the regulation on the branches of the Union of Militant Atheists initiated the formation of branches in each higher educational institution of the Ukrainian SSR numbering at least three people as voluntary organizations for active followers of the struggle against religion; “explosive (often fictitious) growth” began the number of anti-religious educators; at first, the centers presented extensive work only in reports, in practice demonstrating apathy to the cause; intensification of anti-church work took place with the adoption of the Constitution of the USSR in 1936 (1937); repressions against students and teachers-believers began in universities within the framework of the all-Union Stalin’s “great purge,” the degree of aggression towards believing colleagues decreased by the end of 1940, but did not disappear).

As we can see, the first two decades of Soviet rule in Ukraine affected not only the social and economic, but also the spiritual dimension of people’s lives. In the circle of educators, explorations of the use of force model of state-church relations began. According to the Soviet authorities, the collectives of pedagogical institutes and colleges had to help in the rapid construction of a non-religious state. Later they should have become educators of a new generation of the atheist society. The theory and practice of communist construction in the Ukrainian SSR showed that among the teachers and students of the higher pedagogical school, the right to freedom of conscience and religious worldview should not be preserved. Manifestations of such phenomena were interpreted by the party organizations of institutes as an alternative system of values to the Soviet one; sometimes it was even understood as hostile to the new communist view of the Soviet teacher. Not surprisingly this led to the ruining of the lives of some educators. To survive, they demonstratively renounced their faith or were deprived of the right to hold positions in higher schools or had problems with

admission to other institutions of higher education after expulsion or suffered bullying if they continued their studies.

However, in practice we see that the authorities ignored the high level of religiosity of the Ukrainian population. This can be seen at least from the unsuccessful anti-religious campaigns led by teachers and students in communities, primarily among the Ukrainian peasantry. In the late 1920s, the Bolsheviks saw the collapse of their plans to build a religionless society by methods of terror. Authorities resorted to flexible methods of anti-religious policy, widely executed by the educators. One of the proposed actions was the massive anti-religious propaganda, which students and teachers of pedagogical institutes began to carry out with variable success, partly against their will, under the pressure. It is not surprising that such excessively frequent activities of educators in villages and cities had adventurous features, and the lectures themselves offered a primitive content. Often, during such visits to believers, the low level of training of educators and propagandists was revealed. According to archival documents and scientific research, only the intervention of the special services apparatus in the fight against the “religious front” was able to make educational raids against faith more effective.