

11 Atheism's peaks and valleys in Russia

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The history of atheism and Freethought in Russia can be divided into four periods. The first (as of the second half of the 18th century) is the *aristocratic* period when the Russian nobility was keen on the ideas of the French Enlightenment as well as the mysticism and practice of Freemasonry. The second is the period of the search by the *intelligentsia* for ultimate truth apart from official Orthodox Christianity, which was greatly influenced by classical German philosophy, French utopian socialism and Marxism (the second part of the 19th century). In the third period, after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, *Soviet* atheism transformed the philosophical critique of religion into practical politics aimed at expunging not only religious institutions but also the daily expressions of religious beliefs. “Scientific” atheism as an integral part of the Marx-Leninist worldview did not recognize religion as either a public or a private matter and only agreed to tolerate religion for the period of the construction of Communism.

Finally, in *post-Soviet* Russia, the place of atheism as one of the basic principles of Soviet ideology seems to be occupied by religion as a repository of “genuine” spirituality and morality, while atheism has been pushed aside into the intellectual margins. The attitude towards religion in Russia has changed radically since 1988.¹ The state now officially acknowledges the importance of the cultural-historical and ethical role of religion, particularly Orthodox Christianity and so-called traditional religions, which are mentioned in the preamble to the current Federal Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations”, adopted in 1997, and highly values their contribution to Russian nationhood.

In observing the historical transformation of atheism in Russia, it is important to take into account the following: it is widely recognized that atheism, as the denial of the existence of God, appeared in the European intellectual domain in the 17th and 18th centuries (Febvre 1982). Atheism is therefore inseparably connected to modernity. The starting point of modernity in Russia is associated with Peter the Great, particularly, with the implementation of the Westphalian model of “*cuius regio eius religio*” in 1721. Peter dismissed the institution of the Moscow Patriarchate and gave the right to govern the Orthodox Church to the Holy Synod, which was

actually a government department. Peter consequently did a great deal to secularize the Russian state, subordinating the church to the monarchy. The byproducts of the newborn secular culture were close and manifold contacts with Western Europe, as well as aspiration for scientific knowledge and a rational way of thinking.

Atheism in Europe arose not as an independent intellectual movement, but rather as a result of certain trends within Catholic and Protestant theology and subsequent changes in the prevailing conceptions of theism (Hyman 2010). In Russia, Orthodox theology was built on the legacy of the Byzantine church fathers. Unlike in Europe, theological propositions were not supplemented by philosophical reflection, and the domestic theological tradition remained weak until the second half of the 19th century (Florovsky 1979, 7). In the 18th century, the spread of freethinking and atheism among the Russian educated class was not based on a reflection on Orthodox theology, but rather on exporting and adopting European philosophical ideas. Atheism in the 19th century, in contrast, although still highly influenced by European philosophy, was much more linked to the controversial attitude of the intelligentsia towards official Russian Orthodoxy. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, atheism became a tool for implementing the idea of the gradual liberation of society from religion. Atheism exists at present in at least two main versions: a) as the remains of Soviet materialistic philosophy and b) as a reaction to the religious “revival”.

An adequate interpretation of the place of religion and atheism in Russia at the present day is hardly possible without observing their place and role in the imperial, pre-revolutionary and Soviet periods. It is also important to avoid labeling the particular period as either “revival” or “decay”, and instead to analyze the complex interweaving of religion and atheism in a particular socio-cultural context. The historical shifts of the dominant paradigm will be explored in this chapter in light of the overlapping of various factors – historical, cultural, societal and individual – which, in their turn, shape the particular combinations of religion and atheism in the history of Russia.

The prologue of atheism: the Russian aristocracy’s passion for philosophy and mysticism

As of the mid-18th century, Freethought began to spread among the nobility, especially among those who were educated in Western Europe. During the reign of Catherine the Great, the ideas of the French Enlightenment, inspired by Voltaire and superficially adapted to Russian culture, were a major force among the upper cultural levels of Russia. The “Voltaireans”, whether convicted followers or followers of a fashion craze, did not constitute a particular intellectual movement, but instead reflected a certain social mood, which presupposed the gradual spread of secular rational knowledge, skepticism and consequent liberation from religious superstitions.

Voltaire was the most popular author, although the works of Montesquieu, d'Holbach, Helvétius and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – whether in French or Russian – were available as well (Вороницын 1930; Коган 1962). Denis Diderot, who is considered both the first of the Western atheists in chronological order and its premier advocate (Buckley 1987, 249), was the only French philosopher who visited Russia personally in 1773 and 1774, on the invitation of the empress. His works were of great influence over the advanced educated aristocrats in the 18th and 19th centuries. At the same time, as Victoria Frede notes, “the relative weakness of theological and philosophical training among the nobility helps explain why the many deist and atheist tracts produced in Western Europe during the eighteenth century found little resonance in Russia” (Frede 2011, 10).

Many of the educated nobility, dissatisfied with the rationalism of the French Enlightenment as well as the Orthodox Church theology, were influenced by the spiritual ideas of Freemasonry (de Madariaga 2014). Although not violating outward piety, they accepted the Orthodox ceremony in symbolic terms only, which, for Masons, indicated a step on the way from visible to invisible “inner” religion, from “historical” Christianity to spiritual, or “true”, Christianity. Freemasonry rekindled the ancient dream about an esoteric circle of selected and dedicated people who knew the truth because of their “illumination” (Florovsky 1979, 4). Philosophically speaking, Freemasonry was a restoration of Neoplatonic Gnosticism and an inner reaction against the rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment (Smith 1998). Although Voltaireans and Freemasons represented opposite types of thought, in a broader sense, they both belonged to “philosophy”, i.e., to irreligion.

As Gavin Hyman indicates, atheism emerged and developed in modern thought as an intellectual phenomenon among elites. One may also trace a parallel development of atheism as a possible option for society as a whole or for groups or individuals within societies (Hyman 2010, 1). Russia in the 18th century was characterized by a gap between the educated elite, which used French as an everyday language, and ordinary people – *petite bourgeoisie*, merchants, clergy, peasantry, minor officials, impoverished noblemen (*raznochintsy*, literally, “men of mixed ranks”) – with their traditional religiosity. These two parts of society seemed to live in different historical times: the first in modernity, the second in the Middle Ages. Even among the latter, however, there were some signs of Freethought, primarily in the form of blasphemy and/or critique of traditional religious rituals (СМИЛЯНСКАЯ 2003).

Eighteenth-century freethinking, in both rational and mystical modes, did not reach the level of atheism understood as disbelief in the existence of God; it was merely a prologue for future debates. Nevertheless, the influence of the European Enlightenment as the Age of Reason should not be underestimated. The Russian Enlightenment, initiated by Peter the Great and strengthened by Catherine the Great, opened up a new intellectual perspective, which was aimed at the secular ideal of social activism (Billington

2010). The “irrationality” of the Russian Orthodox faith and the consequent decline of its social and intellectual authority (Raeff 1966, 153) began to become apparent to the educated elite, this being the first step on the way to the critical social thought of the Russian intelligentsia. The interweaving of political radicalism and atheism (Вороницын 1930) became a hallmark of the upcoming 19th century.

“Cursed questions” of the Russian intelligentsia and the choice of atheism

Russia’s intellectual life in the 18th century was inspired by French Enlightenment philosophy. The authority was consequently transferred to German classical philosophy in the first part of the 19th century, which stimulated Russian thought for a long period of time. From the 1820s to the 1880s, the mastermind of the newborn Russian intelligentsia² was Schelling with his philosophy of revelation and then Hegel with the idea of the Absolute Spirit as the driving force of personal transformation and world history. According to Schelling, the natural world and human beings share the same substance; thus, the world is intelligible, and absolute knowledge is now possible for humans, not just for God (Berlin 1994; Chamberlain 2008). In the 1820s, the possibility of access to absolute knowledge inspired the circle of Wisdom Lovers (*lyubomudry* – a group of poets-aristocrats) and led them to believe that they were chosen by God to penetrate the mystery of nature and society and guide humanity towards a better future. The Wisdom Lovers, like most noblemen of their generation, were not irreligious, although they did not know many of the Orthodox Church doctrines but “awaited the inauguration of a new phase in world history, the reconciliation between man, nature, and the Absolute, or God, and they hoped to participate in that process” (Frede 2011, 36).

In the 1840s, Hegel’s philosophy – the next intellectual paradigm for the new generation of intelligentsia – Vissarion Belinsky, Alexander Herzen, Nikolai Ogarev, Mikhail Bakunin and others – was interpreted in a way that individual self-development opened the doors to participating in the Absolute Spirit’s work, aimed at the triumph of rationally organized society. Russia was very far from ideal. After the defeat of the Decembrist Revolt in 1825,³ reactionary ideology and imperial politics were strengthened based on the officially proclaimed principle of “Orthodoxy, monarchism and populism” (*pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost*). In essence, this principle declared that Russia was an exclusively special state and nation, without any resemblance to the nations of Western Europe. From the official point of view, Europe had its own historical distinctions: Catholicism and Protestantism in religion, constitutionalism or republicanism in government, civil freedom and secularity in society. Russian ideology claimed this progress was a delusion that had led Europe toward revolution. Russia, it claimed, had remained free from those harmful influences and had preserved untouched

the traditions accumulated through the centuries. In terms of religious preferences, Russia was in a unique situation. Its Orthodox confession was borrowed from Byzantine sources, and therefore, the most hallowed traditions of the early church were preserved. Russia was considered free of the religious disturbances of Western Christendom.

The awakening of Russian social thought in the intelligentsia was a form of protest against the ideology of Imperial Russia, where political activity was strongly prohibited. Politics was transferred to the area of philosophy and literature, and the primary goal of intellectuals as understood by the intelligentsia was to elaborate a theory that would move reality nearer the ideal. Under the influence of German idealism, the questions of the immortality of the soul and the existence of God were inserted into the very heart of debates, and the philosophy of Schelling and Hegel seemed to be the prototype of "a new religion" (Berlin 1994).⁴ As Victoria Frede argues, "The question of the existence of God, though a problem central to modern Western philosophy, took on a peculiarly intensive, existential quality in Russia. . . . It deepened into a struggle for the salvation of both the individual and the country as a whole" (Frede 2011, 3).⁵

The passion for philosophy had contradictory outcomes at times. For some philosophy was seen as the road toward religious recovery. For others, philosophy permitted unbelief and even direct theomachism. Two conflicting camps in the second half of the 19th century – the Westernizers (Alexander Herzen, Timofei Granovsky, Nikolai Ogaryov, Vasily Botkin et al.) and the Slavophiles (Alexei Khomyakov, Ivan Kireyevsky, Konstantin Aksakov, Yury Samarin et al.) – represented two opposing political and cultural-historical concepts. Westernizers accepted completely the reforms of Peter the Great and saw the future of Russia in progress on the Western path to modernity and secularism (Herzen 1956). Slavophiles believed in a unique Russian culture that arose on the spiritual basis of idealized Orthodoxy faithful to the original patterns of Christianity (Jakim and Bird 1998). In spite of controversies, both camps were based on German philosophy: Westernizers on Hegelian rationalism (viewing history as a result of humankind's intelligent creativity) and Slavophiles on Schellingian Romanticism (interpreting history as something that grows unconsciously through the people on the national soil), thus being an expression of the striving for moving beyond a national ideological agenda towards a universalist type of philosophy. In other words, "Westerners expressed the 'critical' and the Slavophiles the 'organic' moments of cultural-historical self-definition" (Florovsky 1979, 16).

The second half of the 19th century was characterized by a split between the nobility and the *raznochintzy*, who began to play a significant role in social-cultural life from the 1840s. The spiritual atmosphere in the 1860s, the time of Tsar Alexander II, was paradoxical. On the one side, there was the government implementing a number of liberal reforms (above all, the abolition of serfdom) and, on the other side, there was social thought, this

being a time when all previous cultural, moral and religious values were rejected. The epoch of *raznochintzy*'s nihilism had begun. While Westernizers and Slavophiles were immersed in philosophical debates concerning the past and present of Russia,⁶ nihilists denied God, the soul, the spirit, ideas, standards and the highest values (Berdyayev 1969, 45). Nihilists believed that every effort should be made to emancipate human beings from prejudice and superstition, which included the common Orthodox faith (Leatherbarrow and Offord 2010).

In addition, the last decades of the 19th century were characterized by the opposite attitudes of educated classes (both nobility and *raznochintsy*) and ordinary people towards Orthodox Christianity. The politics of the Russian state over church affairs was based on the conservative ideology of the idealization of people's "faith", which needed to be preserved in its historical form and protected from the "demoralizing" influence of Western secular rationalism. Atheism (unbelief) was considered the incarnation of all possible sins. Thus, religious faith was moved into the spheres of instinctive emotions and pious feelings and turned into edifying folklore (Florovsky 1979).

Paradoxically, the "torchbearers" of nihilist social thought were the sons of the clergy. They typically received extensive training in Orthodox theology and then entered secular universities (Manchester 2008). Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Nikolai Dobrolubov (Chernyshevsky 2002; Dobrolyubov 2002), the two most influential thinkers in the 1860s, were both sons of provincial priests. They were also the first ones "to claim in print that God does not exist" (Frede 2011, 120), although allusively for censorial reasons. They were under the great influence of Ludwig Feuerbach's "The Essence of Christianity" (1841), in which he argued that the Christian God was merely a "projection" of human subjectivity. According to Feuerbach, dissatisfied with their inability to gratify their physical and emotional needs, humans projected them onto a higher being. The result was a human self-conception that was negative, worthless and sinful, in contrast to God, who was the opposite of these things and before whom human beings must abase themselves (Hyman 2010, 42). God was an "illusion", and to overcome religion meant to appropriate back the human essence, which had been alienated and hypostatized as "God".

Another source of Chernyshevsky's and Dobrolubov's atheism was the mid-19th-century German materialism of Carl Vogt, Ludwig Büchner and Jacob Moleschott. Making reference to the natural sciences and viewing intellectual activity as a purely biological process, they argued that there was no supernatural being; religion was nothing more than a symptom of physical and mental aberration. The adoption of these philosophical ideas resulted in the call for educated Russians to rid themselves of religious superstitions, to reject faith in a higher being and to take an active role in the transformation of Russia. Thus, atheism became an essential component of the movement towards social change. Chernyshevsky and Dobrolubov insisted that soon the new generation of *raznochintsy* (and the nobility as

well) – the “new people” decisively chosen to finish up with the past – would become the dominant force in Russia. In the 1870s, these “new people” – the populists (*narodniki*) – voluntarily traveled to Russian provinces to raise the “dark masses” to higher levels of consciousness and educate the people in order to give them a tool to overcome religious superstitions.

Nonetheless, nihilism could be recognized as a quasi-religious phenomenon. As Nikolai Berdyaev argued, it grew up on the “spiritual soil of Orthodoxy”. (Berdyaev 1969, 45).⁷ At the foundation of Russian nihilism lay the

Orthodox . . . sense of the truth that ‘the whole world lieth in wickedness,’ the acknowledgment of the sinfulness of all riches and luxury, of all creative profusion in art and in thought. . . . Nihilism considers as a sinful luxury not only art, metaphysics and spiritual values, but religion also.

(Berdyaev 1969, *ibid.*)

Nihilism, as a protest against official Orthodoxy, was an attempt to find a new social truth, which appeared to be based on Christianity but took a form that was far different from Christianity. The populist movement failed because its adherents not only met with persecution from the authorities but also were not even welcomed by the people themselves, who had a different outlook on life and different beliefs. The intelligentsia’s embrace of materialism and rationalism had little effect on people’s faith. The outcome was that the intelligentsia went over to terrorism. The result of the epoch of nihilism and the populism of the intelligentsia was the murder of Tsar Alexander II on 1 March 1881. This was the tragic climax of the one-on-one combat between Russian authority and the Russian intelligentsia.

Over the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Russia was characterized by intense debates on religious matters among writers, artists, church and secular academicians, educated aristocracy, clergy etc. The spectrum of attitudes towards religion varied dramatically: from the severe critique of official Orthodoxy by Leo Tolstoy and the quasi-religious movement of “non-resistance to evil by force” named after him (*tolstovstvo*) to Vladimir Soloviev’s universal Christianity and the philosophy of unitotality (*vseedinstvo*) and from newborn Russian Marxists convinced that atheism was a predicate of revolution to discussions about a renewed Christianity, which took place under the auspice of the “Religious-Philosophical Society” in St. Petersburg in 1907 through 1917 (Kline 1968). The main concerns of the debates were the future of Russia and the role of the intelligentsia in the upcoming transformation of society.

The new wave of atheism was associated with Marxism, which was exported to Russia in the mid-1880s.⁸ Georgi Plekhanov, the founder of Russian Marxism, in his writings on religion and atheism, shared the idea of Marx and Engels that “*Religious* questions of the day have at the present time a social significance. It is no longer a question of *religious* interests as

such” (Marx and Engels 1845). In the 1909 collection of works entitled *On the So-Called Religious Quest in Russia* (*O tak nazyvaemykh religioznykh iskaniyakh v Rossii*), Plekhanov developed a critical concept of religion based on up-to-date research, particularly on the theory of the English anthropologist Edward Tylor.⁹ Plekhanov was the first Russian author who produced a purely atheistic, “functional” definition of religion:

Religion is a more or less orderly system of concepts, sentiments and actions. The concepts form the mythological element of religion, the sentiments belong to the domain of religious feelings, the actions to the sphere of religious worship, or, as it is otherwise called, of cult.

(1909)

Plekhanov was particularly critical about two trends in Russian thought of the time: the “God-builders” (Anatoly Lunacharsky, Vladimir Bazarov, Alexander Bogdanov, Maxim Gorky), and the “God-seekers” (Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, Nikolay Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov). In his 1908 work *Religion and Socialism* (*Religia i sotsializm*), Lunacharsky argued that Marxism was a sort of “new religion”, which elaborated Feuerbach’s idea of loving human beings instead of worshipping God. God-seekers in their numerous publications proclaimed the idea of the reconciliation between religion and reason and the enhancement of life based on renewed Christianity. Plekhanov argued that, on the one hand, it was impossible to combine socialism and religion because socialism was hostile to any kind of religion, and, on the other hand, religion could not be reconciled with reason because there was no religion apart from a belief in a supernatural being (Миндлин 1984)

In their turn, God-seekers criticized the intelligentsia for a lack of seriousness towards religion and atheism. Sergei Bulgakov wrote in *Vekh*:¹⁰

The most striking feature of Russian atheism is its dogmatism, the religious frivolity, one might say, with which it is accepted. Until recently, Russian “educated” society simply ignored the problem of religion and did not understand its vital and exceptional importance. For the most part, it was interested in religion only insofar as the religious problem involved politics or the propagation of atheism. In matters of religion, our intelligentsia is conspicuously ignorant.

(Bulgakov 1994, 31)

Thus, Russia approached the revolution in 1917 with a very controversial attitude towards religion. The pre-revolutionary social thought was characterized by the clash between two positions developed by the intelligentsia through the 19th century. The first was a philosophical interpretation of Christianity as a model for genuine self-fulfillment and transformation of Russia; the second was a total denial of religion in general and official

Orthodox Christianity in particular and the conviction that the eradication of religious faith was the ultimate condition of social and political change in the country.

Combating religion was therefore included in the actual agenda of the revolution. Vladimir Lenin wrote in the article "The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion": "All modern religions and churches, all and of every kind of religious organizations are always considered by Marxism as the organs of bourgeois reaction, used for the protection of the exploitation and the stupefaction of the working class" (1909). Pre-revolutionary atheism was more emotional than rational. It had much more to do with the intelligentsia's discontent with the autocratic Russian state and its self-reflection than with challenging the truth of a theological doctrine. The Bolshevik Revolution gave new answers to the "cursed" questions of the Russian intelligentsia – the fate of Russia, the role of the intelligentsia and the existence of God – through implementing atheism in socio-political practice.

Soviet atheism in practice and theory

Prior to the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolshevik Party regarded religion as a sign of people's "backwardness" (*nerazvitost*). It was consequently assumed that education and enlightenment would prove the illusiveness of religious superstitions. One of the first decrees of Soviet power was the Decree on the Separation of Church and State and School from Church, which came into force in January 1918. According to the Constitution of the Russian Federated Socialist Republic of 1918, "For the purpose of securing to the workers' real freedom of conscience, the church is to be separated from the state and the school from the church, and the right of religious and antireligious propaganda is accorded to every citizen" (Constitution of the Russian Federated Socialist Republic 1918, Article 2, Chapter 5). Thus, Russia was confirmed as a fully secular state. The legislation was initially targeted against the church's involvement in public ceremonies but did not mandate the persecution of believers or prohibit public worship. The policy of the state was aimed at the marginalization of religion rather than imposing atheism by force (Husband 2002).¹¹

In the new Soviet reality, the Western understanding of the dichotomy of the private and public as the distinctive feature of secularization was radically reinterpreted. Religious convictions were not attributed to the private domain, but the battle against religious anachronisms was considered a highly public mission. Even in 1905, Vladimir Lenin wrote:

We demand that religion be held a private affair so far as the state is concerned. But by no means can we consider religion a private affair so far as our Party is concerned. . . . So far as the party of the socialist proletariat is concerned, religion is not a private affair. Our Party is an association of class-conscious, advanced fighters for the emancipation

of the working class. Such an association cannot and must not be indifferent to the lack of class-consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs.

(1905)

According to the Bolshevik Party Program adopted in 1919, the strategy of the Bolsheviks was to liberate “the working masses from religious superstitions and organize broad scientific-enlightening and anti-religious propaganda. There is consequently a need to avoid carefully any kind of assault on believers’ feelings, which could lead toward the strengthening of religious fanaticism” (Ипоррамма 1919).¹² In the first years after the revolution, as William Husband underlines, “the Bolshevik Party directed the main thrust of its coercive and ideological anti-religious assault not against individual believers but against church hierarchs and the institutional and property base of religion in the country” (Husband 1998, 79). It was assumed that religion would gradually collapse by the natural order of things over the course of the successful construction of socialism.

As early as the beginning of the 1920s, however, the persistence of popular beliefs became evident. Atheism was thereby recognized as an important part of the Soviet ideology and political practice. Sonja Luehrmann marks out two coexisting models in the original design of Soviet atheism: “One was an idea of functional replacement, where secular forms superseded their earlier, religious equivalents. The other was that of constructing a qualitatively new society that relied on and celebrated human action” (2011, 8). Both models presupposed the minimizing of the private space on behalf of the public space. The idea of “functional replacement” was implemented in the Soviet practice of replacement of religious ceremonies by secular ones, public use of worship places for various nonreligious purposes, transformation of cemeteries into parks etc. (Жидкова 2012). A new type of human being – the new Soviet man – had to be liberated from everything that tended to prevent the progression towards Communism, including religion, which should be replaced by a secular, materialist worldview.¹³

A visible manifestation of the shift in the official political course over religion was the establishment of the League of the Militant Godless (1925–1947) – a voluntary public organization supported by the state and aimed at combating religion in all its manifestations, as well as strengthening its alternative, the scientific worldview. The main focuses of the league’s activities were propagating atheism; disseminating scientific knowledge; producing antireligious literature, newspapers, and magazines;¹⁴ organizing antireligious museums and exhibitions;¹⁵ training specialists of propaganda elaborating secular rituals instead of religious ones etc. The league was very active, particularly before the Great Patriotic War (1941), although its activities were not always successful everywhere (Peris 1998).

As was mentioned earlier, according to Lenin’s legacy, atheism was not supposed to be a private opinion or a result of existential doubt, but instead

a matter of collective responsibility, in the form of organized and institutionalized unbelief. As Daniel Peris writes, "in Bolshevik political culture, a change in worldview was not left primarily to the believer (or non-believer) but had to be expressed and administered in bureaucratic forms. . . . Unorganized sentiments were not acknowledged to exist" (1998, 8). The chief Soviet God-fighter, Emelian Yaroslavsky, president of the League of the Militant Godless from 1925 to 1943, saw the general task of antireligious struggle as being very practical:

To put a coherent scientific communist system, embracing and explaining questions, the answers to which the peasant working mass still sought in religion, in place of the religious outlook. It is especially important to tie such statements together with the transformation of daily life and technology, economic conditions, electrification, introducing a better system of crop rotation, soil improvement and other activities, which improve the hard work of workers and peasants.

(1924)

Obviously, such radical transformation of the societal fabric, as well as of human nature, could not be a matter of private concern; on the contrary, it assumed a high level of public organization and institutionalization.

To strengthen argumentation in propagating atheism among the citizens of the Soviet Union, the league initiated academic studies of religion. Academic research was developing in two main fields: first, critical studies on the origins, varieties and history of religions and second, tracing the history of atheism in Europe and Russia in order to assert the steady atheist and materialist tradition in Russia and elsewhere. In a 1922–1923 discussion between the journalist Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov and the historian Mikhail Pokrovsky, the former argued that religion originated from the relations of production in primitive society, whereas the latter considered the fear of finitude the main source of religion. The discussion predetermined the consequent domination of the societal approach in Soviet religious studies (i.e., the emphasis on searching for the social preconditions of religion) over the psychological one (Антонов 2013). The psychology of faith, religious feelings, characteristics of religious personality etc. became subjects of special academic interest in the 1950 and 1960s.

As concerns the second field, Soviet historians undertook serious efforts to project the Bolshevik type of atheism backwards into history. They interpreted atheism as a natural product of Western scientific materialism, which was adopted by progressive Russian thinkers, as well as the attendant feature of class struggle between slaveholders and slaves, feudalists and serfs, capitalists and the proletariat. The historian Ivan Voronitzyn, in the preface to his *History of Atheism (Istoriia ateizma)*,¹⁶ described his objectives as the full depiction of the battle against religion in the past, the explanation of this battle over social conditions and the interest of social groups and tracing

the appraisal of Freethought along with the development of materialist philosophy (Вороницын 1930, 4). Alexander Lukachevsky,¹⁷ the deputy to the president of the League of the Militant Godless, stressed the importance of the socio-historical context in studying religion (1929). Following Lenin's advice to use the best writings of the atheists and freethinkers of the past, an impressive number of Russian translations of European thinkers were published in the second part of the 1920s, including the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, Lucretius, Giordano Bruno, Erasmus, Benedict Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes, John Toland, Descartes, Ludwig Feuerbach, Ernst Haeckel etc.,¹⁸ along with Marx, Engels, Lenin and Plekhanov's works on religion. Pre-revolutionary Russian atheism became a subject of academic interest in the 1960s (Коган 1962).

The official ideology proclaimed that, by 1929, the year of the "Great Turn" (*Velikii perelom*) in the building of socialism, the social roots of religion seemed to have exploded and heralded the liberation of the working masses from the influence of religion.¹⁹ Inasmuch as the Cultural Revolution of the 1930s promoted the growth of mass atheism, the need to lift up the level of scientific research of religion and strengthen atheistic argumentation was proclaimed (Шахнович and Чумакова 2016). The Great Patriotic War, when the patriotic potential of religion (Orthodoxy) was required, and the postwar reconstruction period focused attention away from atheism.

The new "scientific" stage in the history of Soviet atheism, which followed the "militant" one, was kick-started in 1954 with the Resolutions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on massive shortcomings of scientific-atheistic propaganda and measures of its improvement (*O krupnykh nedostatkakh v nauchno-atelisticheskoi propagandae i merakh ee uluchsheniia*) and on oversights in carrying out scientific-atheistic propaganda among the population (*Ob oshibkakh v provedenii nauchno-atelisticheskoi propagandy sredi naseleniia*). The resolutions pointed out the importance of searching for new ways to overcome religious superstitions. It became clear that, in spite of practical measures (closing down churches and repressions of clergy and believers) and the atheistic enlightenment, religion was far from disappearing, even under the pressure of scientific progress and socialist modernization.

"Scientific atheism" differed from the "militant" one primarily due to its sophisticated nature. The Department of History and Theory of Atheism and Religion was established in Moscow and Kiev State Universities in 1959 and then in other universities in the USSR. As James Thrower indicates, "'scientific atheism' was proclaimed a formal component of the Marx-Leninist *Weltanschauung* and developed accordingly". This meant a "shift from an ideological to a philosophical presentation of atheism" (1983, 135, 141). Courses in "scientific atheism" became compulsory in the curriculum of higher education all over the country in 1964. The purpose was not only to criticize religion but also to emphasize the positive aspects of atheism as part of a materialist worldview, as well as the source of the elaboration of

everyday values. As Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock notes, in the 1960s, "Soviet atheism . . . reoriented itself from the battle against religion towards the battle for Soviet spiritual life" (2014).²⁰

Scientific atheism was proclaimed "the highest form of atheism" compared that of the French materialists of the 18th century and the Russian intelligentsia of the 19th century. As William van den Bercken concludes, "The categorical character of Soviet ideological atheism is also accentuated by its view of itself as the one true atheism, the true unbelief. For in fact, it dismisses other forms of atheism as inconsistent and unscientific" (1985). It was assumed that a "scientific" understanding of religion was only possible if it was based on Marx-Leninism; for "scientific atheism", religion was nothing but an ideological reflection of physical and sociological life (Thrower 1983, 311). Thus, the "scientificity" of "scientific atheism" was guaranteed by the very fact of, first, belonging to Marx-Leninism and, second, by its rootedness in the Soviet way of life.

The Institute of Scientific Atheism in the structure of the Academy of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was established in 1964. Its main objectives were systematic academic research of religion and atheism, examination and mapping of actual religiosity and people's attitude towards religion, coordination of the local atheistic propagandists and educators, training specialists of professional teachers of atheism, sociological investigations etc. (Smolkin-Rothrock 2009). The Institute of Scientific Atheism published the periodical *Issues of Scientific Atheism* (*Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, 1966–1989), which succeeded *Issues of the History of Religion and Atheism* (*Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma*, 1950–1964), previously published by the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. The latter included articles on the history of religion, atheism and Freethought, especially in pre-revolutionary Russia, and combating religious superstitions in the Soviet Union. The spectrum of the former was incredibly wide: from the history of religion in Russia and the Soviet Republics to methods of atheistic propaganda; from Western theories of secularization to critical analysis of contemporary Christian theology; from sociology of religion to psychology of religion; from the legacy of Marx, Engels and Lenin to new religious movements.

In the last decades of the Soviet Union, an important role in disseminating atheism among the wider population was played by the All-Union Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge, which was founded in 1947 and, in 1963, renamed the All-Union *Znanie* Society (Froggatt 2006). From the 1960s through the 1980s, *Znanie* was assigned to promote the atheistic worldview through providing lectures to all the groups of the population in every corner of the state and to produce a wide spectrum of periodicals and brochures. As Sonja Luehrmann indicates, "the assumption was that religious decline would result from the spread of knowledge about the advances of Soviet science. . . . The Society pitted science against religion in a rhetoric of 'knowledge' versus 'faith'" (2015, 7).

Znanie's journal *Science and Religion* (*Nauka i religiia*, from 1959 through the present) played a unique role in the late Soviet ideological landscape being the:

primary Soviet periodical charged with articulating Marxist-Leninist answers to spiritual questions. . . . It was a space where questions about religion, atheism, and spiritual life could be debated – and not just by the ideological establishment (party bureaucrats, academics, the militant atheists of the previous generation, and the new generation of Soviet social scientists), but also by the ordinary citizens to whom the journal gave voice.

(Smolkin-Rothrock 2014, 173)

Thus, by the 1980s, “scientific atheism” had become a highly elaborated, logically coherent, speculative system that included four main sections: studying religion from Marx-Leninist positions, a history of atheism, a critique of religion based on contemporary science and “dialectical materialism” and issues with overcoming religion and the dissemination of the scientific worldview (Угринович 1985, 6). Dmitrii Ugrinovitch, one of the leading Soviet “scientific atheists”, underlined that its peculiarity consisted of the “organic unity of both critical and positive sides”. Limiting “scientific atheism” to its positive side led to dissolving into other Marx-Leninist philosophical disciplines – dialectical and historical materialism (Угринович 1985, 5). In fact, “scientific atheism” as an official ideology seemed to dissolve after the collapse of the Soviet Union along with other sections of Marx-Leninism, and a great many of its promoters’ writings are now forgotten. Nevertheless, a significant number of works, especially in the field of the history of religion, have outlived Soviet times and remain of interest up until now. The best examples are the works of Nikolai Nikol’sky (Никольский 1931), Abraham Ranovitch (Ранович 1959), Sergei Tokarev (Токарев 1964), Joseph Kryveliev (Крывелев 1975–1976) and others.

In general, “scientific atheism” as part of the Soviet universalist project claimed religion as a tool to substitute genuine human relationships with alienated forms, in which a person loses his or her identity by delegating it to the outside religious authority, thus following the tradition of interpreting religion in the German classical philosophy of the 19th century. The reappropriation of human essence meant the ability of the rationalist perception and the mastering of the world and of rational disciplined activity. The very possibility of rational knowledge was seen as a vivid manifestation of genuine human nature, a passionate conviction in the rationalistic design of the universe and in the human capability of its rational reconstruction. Thus, “scientific atheism” was based first, on the belief in the final victory of science over religion; second, on the deep conviction that human beings are the only constructive agents of the historical process; third, on the priority of the *collectivist* belief in scientific and technological progress over *individual*

religious superstitions that might be temporarily accepted in the phase of Communism construction only as “anachronisms”, doomed to vanish in the near future. It was quite optimistic on the perspectives of liberating Soviet citizens from religion, which chained their creative potential by promoting a belief in supernatural powers. It was assumed that members of the Communist Party and the Young Communist League had to present their atheistic worldview both openly and persuasively.

In reality, the gradual separation of the public domain from the private sphere was an important feature of the post-Stalin development of the Soviet state. In contrast to the Western model, the Soviet public space was not a place to discuss common interests and the values of individuals, but rather a place to conform to the state interests without debate. In its turn, the private space became a way to hide private interests from state ideological control. Reflecting on the differences between European secularity (which never suppressed private forms of religious life) and the Soviet one, Andrei Shishkov points out “hyper-privatization” as an important feature of the latter. In the Soviet case, the main vector of the secularization process was directed towards elimination of religion, not just from the public sphere but from the private lives of citizens. Individual religiosity was therefore officially regarded as an antisocial activity, damaging professional careers and all forms of participation in public life. As a result, religion went even deeper into the secret private life of the person (Шишков 2012, 167–168).

Was the attempt to minimize the role of religion in society and the personal lives of people successful, or was the Soviet reality nothing more than a “nationwide *Potemkin* village of atheism” (Peris 1998, 9)? To answer this question, it is important to distinguish between institutional religion and private beliefs and practices. The Soviet state was much more successful in the extermination of the former than of the latter. Even in Soviet times, atheism never fully dominated mass consciousness as the official ideology would have had us believe. Declared atheism was, in many cases, merely a conformist reflection of the current political-ideological situation. “Scientific atheism” never fully became the “people’s belief”; it was mainly limited to urbanites with a high educational level. Many ordinary Soviets always kept religious beliefs: in the mid-1960s, according to official statistics, from 15% to 20% of the urban population and from 30% to 35% of rural populations were confirmed believers (Smolkin-Rothrock 2009).

Since Khrushchev’s “thaw” in the 1960s, a great number of the Soviet urban intelligentsia experienced a religious “revival” as a form of social and spiritual protest against the Soviet political regime. This “revival” found expression in the practice of religious rituals (usually practiced in secret), in the zeal found in the religious and religious-philosophical literature of Western and Russian origin, in the interest in collecting religious antiquities (icons)²¹ and in the works of renowned authors and film directors.²² The revival pointed to the religious needs of particular strata of society that were underestimated or ignored by Soviet officials. The theory that religion was

a product of people's backwardness to be overcome by scientific-atheistic education consequently failed.

Thus, the Soviet state conceptualized and deployed "religion" and "atheism" in different historical contexts for different political, social, and cultural projects (Smolkin 2018, 10). Generally, the history of Soviet atheism is the process of its transformation from the battle against religion towards the construction of a new spirituality:

Soviet secularity was not just an empty space left behind by the forced marginalization of religion but a complex interaction of competing forces – modernization and scientific-technological revolution, religion and spiritual culture – all taking place in the mercurial political landscape of late socialism.

(Smolkin-Rothrock 2014, 176; see also Smolkin 2018)

It had lost its credit with the transformation of the socio-cultural context in post-Soviet Russia.

The new coming of atheism?

As Alexei Yurchak notes, "Although the [Soviet] system's collapse had been unimaginable before it began, it appeared unsurprising when it happened" (2006, 1). Nevertheless, it would not be an overstatement to say that, in 1988, there was no sign that religion would soon occupy such a salient place in Russia's societal landscape and that the search for the new identity of Russia would include the restoration of religion as a source of "traditional" Russian spirituality. Accordingly, the place of atheism was marginalized, and it was even interpreted as an attempt to create a system of values that lay outside the historical spiritual foundation of Russia. The tremendous shift also took place on the individual level: in 2013, according to a Levada-Center poll, 70% of the population of Russia considered themselves Orthodox, about 10% adherents of other religions and about 17% nonbelievers (Общественное мнение 2013). The 2013 poll of the "Public Opinion" Foundation (*Fond "Obshchestvennoe mnenie"* [FOM]) estimated the number of nonbelievers at 25% (Кожевина 2013). A recent poll from Levada-Center indicates that 22% of people are indifferent towards religion (Церковь и государство 2016).

There is an ongoing debate among Russian scholars of religion concerning the methods and criteria of defining and counting the number of believers and nonbelievers. Some researchers consider the self-identification of respondents as a reliable criterion while others believe that it is critical to participate in religious practices (Филатов and Лункин 2011). The numbers presented by the sociological polls differ dramatically: from more than 70% of self-described believers to 4% to 5% of church membership and attendance. Therefore, the religious situation in Russia could be best described as

“believing without belonging”: “In that respect, at least, the Russian case seems far more analogous to Western Europe than might, at first glance, appear to be the case” (Freeze 2015, 6–7). Nevertheless, as Alexander Agajanian underlines, religion in Russia today “is unquestionably a major factor not only for those who regularly practice and observe religion, but is also important and an esteemed reference point for a massive part of the non-religious population” (2011, 17). People usually express a high level of support for religious organizations and activities and, in general, regard religion as a positive factor in the consolidation of society.

According to the Constitution of 1993, Russia, for the first time in its history, is defined as a “secular state” where “no religion may be established as a state or obligatory one” (Section I, Chapter 1, Article 14). In fact, what is in use today is the Soviet technique of excluding religion from the public space, but with the opposite sign. In Soviet times, the state considered religion in general and Orthodoxy in particular as anachronisms that would disappear, or should be made to disappear, in the wake of the emerging Communist society. It therefore used all the powers in its arsenal to exclude religion from the public space. Atheism had served as a champion of Soviet exclusiveness, and combating religion was seen as essentially a public goal. Now, suddenly, not only had Russian authorities found themselves in unity with the leadership of its former nemesis, but it had actually recognized the Russian Orthodox Church as the embodiment of the Russian national idea, the major exponent of people’s hope for a better future. As John and Carol Garrard (2008, ix) argue, since the collapse of Communism, the ROC has been filling the vacuum once occupied by “scientific atheism”, reconstituting a national belief system in its own image.

Sonja Luehrmann (2005) stresses an interesting phenomenon concerning the methods of filling the vacuum, which she calls “recycling”: namely, reusability of social capital – the energy of former atheists who seek to find their place in new societal reality through a radical shift in the ideological paradigm. She demonstrates this idea with the example of former Soviet promoters of “scientific atheism” – so-called methodicians, people who were in charge of interpreting the official ideology to ordinary people. After the collapse of Communism, the skills of those propagandists – journalists, teachers, managers, artists etc. – were easily adapted to post-Soviet reality, and they became active promoters of various religious ideas (Orthodox primarily). It is not incidental that the most active promoters of the “unique Russian religious spirituality” at present are former “scientific atheists” – deputies of the state *Duma* (Parliament), governmental officials, columnists, schoolteachers, educators, social scientists etc. Luehrmann concludes:

Soviet secularity could never quite exclude religion, and post-Soviet religiosity relies on the secular training and skills of former methodicians. We should thus think of the religious and the secular not so much

as characteristics of long historical eras that succeed each other, but as sites of engagement that alternate and overlap in the lives of both societies and individuals.

(2011, 199)

In the academic domain, discussion of the role, relevance and validity of Soviet “scientific atheism” is far from complete. Discussion about the legacy of Soviet “scientific atheism” and its influence on religious studies in Russia was recently initiated by the authors of a collection of articles under the titles “The Science about Religion”, “Scientific Atheism” and Religious Studies: Problems of Scientific Study of Religion in Russia of the Twentieth–Twenty-First Centuries (“*Nauka o religii*”, *Nauchnuy ateizm*”, “*Religiovedenie*”: *aktual’nye problemy nauchnogo izucheniia religii v Rossii XX – nachala XXI v.*) (Антонов 2014). Their criticism of Soviet atheism is based on a presumption about its purely ideological nature and political bias. In response, Marianna Shakhnovitch points out there were many honest researchers amongst the ranks of Communist Party propagandists of atheism who made a significant contribution to the “science of religion”. “Scientific atheism” was, in fact, a Soviet version of religious studies (Шахнович 2015). The discussion²³ proves the need for an objective analysis of Soviet and post-Soviet religious studies in their particular socio-cultural context.

The position of an atheist in Russia today is not so much a “militant God-fighter” or a promoter of “scientific” rejection of religious superstitions, but rather an atheist for “inward use”, a more personalized atheist or simply “a nonbeliever”, someone who denies belief in God, although confident that religion is useful for the spiritual health of society. At the same time, as Kimmo Kääriäinen, Dmitry Furman, and Viacheslav Karpov state, “there have been believers who have kept their faith at times of very stormy atheist onsets, and there are atheists in the post-Soviet period who have survived after the blow of the religious wave, and have not betrayed their beliefs” (Фурман et al. 2007, 49). They conclude that people who now consider themselves atheists are truer atheists than the conformists of the Soviet period, because they have to identify themselves in opposition to the official trend of recognizing [traditional] religion as one of the major socio-cultural factors.

Alek Epstein reminds us that atheism is usually formatted as the antithesis to the dominant religion and bears the features of a negated entity (Эпштейн 2015). The history of 19th-century Russia demonstrates the truth of the inseparable bond of atheism to Russian Orthodoxy. The paradox of Soviet “scientific atheism” is that it was supposed to be a temporary enterprise aimed at the elimination of its subject. Atheism is only sustainable, however, when the subject of its critique exists. Accordingly, one might assume that the increase in religiosity, as well as the promotion of the idea that religion was the only legitimate depository of moral values, may have caused the revival of atheism in public and private spaces. The recent Pussy Riot case

(Uzlaner 2014), as well as the campaign for the restitution of church properties, is an impressive demonstration of such a revival. There are some signs of the popularity of the so-called new atheism in Russia. Recently, the writings of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris have been translated and published. There is a Russian branch of “the Brights” movement with the website <http://brights-russia.org>, which is aimed at the dissemination of the scientific worldview and the enlightenment of society. In addition, there are an increasing number of social networks (for example, the “Atheist” group in the network “V kontakte” with about 700,000 subscribers: https://vk.com/atheist_blog) and websites (for example, the site of the “*Zdravomyslie*” foundation), which promotes atheism and highlights cases of violation of freedom of conscience.

The post-Soviet religious landscape in Russia at present is highly pluralistic and diverse, and religious faith is one possibility among traditional, non-traditional, nonreligious and atheist alternatives, as in many other places in the world. On the individual level, it is not so much that religion conquers atheism. Both religion and atheism, as stratified value systems, actually retreat in confusion under the pressure of spiritualities of different types, mixed up in eclectic ways. Their main source is not traditional or nontraditional religion, but mass culture. These beliefs form unsystematic, uncoordinated, undetermined and unstable combinations, with constantly changing elements, including ones from various religious traditions, old and new. The opposite point of view could consequently be more accurately defined not as a-theism, but rather as Freethought. Finally, taking into account the swapping places of religion and atheism in the history of 20th-century Russia, it would be premature to predict if any particular religious or secular worldview will be able to predominate the country's public consciousness in the near future.

Notes

- 1 The 1,000th anniversary of the Baptism of Russia was officially celebrated in 1988; it was a sign of the so-called religious revival in contemporary Russia.
- 2 The word *intelligentsia* began to be widely used in the 1860s, but the roots of the concept can be traced back to the end of the 18th century (Raeff 1966). Victoria Frede writes: “Intelligentsia is identified with a set of expectations, articulated in ever more pressing terms during the nineteenth century, that to be an educated person brought with it a certain obligation toward the nation and toward humanity. Being a member of the intelligentsia meant holding oneself and others to this standard: Russia's educated minority believed it was called on – morally obligated – to point Russia and the world at large toward a better future” (Frede 2011, 14). See also Billington (2010).
- 3 The Decembrist Revolt took place on 26 December 1825, when a group of military officers refused to swear allegiance to Tsar Nicholas after the death of his father Alexander I. Five leaders of the revolt were then executed and many were exiled to Siberia. The martyrdom of the leaders of the revolt provided a source of inspiration to succeeding generations of Russian nobility and intelligentsia.

- 4 As Isaiah Berlin writes, in the 19th century, Russian intelligentsia under the influence of German idealism saw its calling as the following: "The duty of man was . . . to understand the texture, the 'go', the principle of life of all there is, to penetrate the soul of the world . . . to grasp the hidden, 'inner' plan of the universe, to understand his own place in it, and to act accordingly. . . . History was an enormous river, the direction of which could, however, be observed only by people with a capacity for a special kind of deep, inner contemplation" (Berlin 1994, 120–121).
- 5 The perfect illustration of the extraordinary significance that was attributed to the problem of the existence of God in 19th century Russia is Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Ivan Karamazov represents atheism and his brother Alyosha belief in God.
- 6 With the exception of Alexander Herzen, who was actively involved in the political struggle.
- 7 Vasilii Zenkovsky refers to Russian nihilism as the "secular equivalent" of the religious worldview. In his view, secularism becomes either theomachism or god-seeking; even if "nihilists" accept atheism, their atheism is impetuous and passionate and tends to shift into fanatical sectarianism (Zenkovsky 2014).
- 8 According to Karl Marx's celebrated definition, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness" (Marx 1843). Thus, the real struggle is not against religion, but with the world that produces religion; the struggle against religion is placed within the wider context of the struggle for the total liberation of mankind (Thrower 1983, 18–19).
- 9 Plekhanov's reference to the Russian edition of Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, which was published in Saint Petersburg in 1897, is an example of the wide spread of European religious studies in Russia at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (Plekhanov 1909; Меньшикова, Яблоков 2010).
- 10 *Vekhi (Landmarks)* – a collection of essays about the Russian intelligentsia published in 1909 (Vekhi 1994).
- 11 In a letter to the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of Communist Party, concerning the expropriation of the Orthodox Church's valuables in aid of the victims of the famine of 1921–1922, Lenin wrote: "We must pursue the removal of church property by any means necessary in order to secure for ourselves a fund of several hundred million gold rubles. . . . We must precisely now smash the Black Hundreds clergy most decisively and ruthlessly and put down all resistance with such brutality that they will not forget it for several decades. . . . The greater the number of representatives of the reactionary clergy . . . that we succeed in shooting on this occasion, the better" (1922). For a thorough analysis of Lenin's views on religion and atheism, see Mikhail Smirnov's *Religia I Biblia v trudakh V. I. Lenina – novyi vzgliad na starui temu* (Смирнов 2011).
- 12 The 1919 Program remained in force until 1961. The call to avoid an assault on religious feelings failed to correspond with the socio-political reality, which was much more hostile, especially towards the Orthodox Church. Dmitrii Pospelovsky in *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (1987) depicts the repressions against clergy and ordinary believers in Soviet times.
- 13 The concept of "house-commune" perfectly illustrates the idea of a new Soviet man. In the house-commune, individual flats did not contain kitchens and bathrooms and eliminated the individual running of the household such as cleaning, washing and cooking. The very idea popular in large Soviet cities in the mid-1920s was based on total socialization and publicness of house-commune inhabitants.

- 14 For instance, the newspaper and journal under the similar name “*Bezbozhnik*”, the journal “*Antireligioznik*” and many others. In the 1920s and 1930s, hundreds of antireligious pamphlets were produced. The most popular was Emelian Yaroslavsky’s book entitled *The Bible for Believers and Unbelievers* (*Bibliia dlia veruiushchikh i neveruiushchikh*), which revealed the mythological origins of biblical stories and mocked church rituals and priests.
- 15 The State Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism (currently the State Museum of the History of Religion) was organized in Saint Petersburg in 1930 (see Шахнович and Чумакова 2014).
- 16 Voronitzyn’s research of the history of atheism remains valid through today.
- 17 Alexander Lukachevsky, along with many other activists of the League of the Militant Godless, was repressed and executed in 1937.
- 18 Apart from philosophical writings, a great number of Western Freethought writers were translated into Russian and published in the 1920s, including Giovanni Boccaccio, Charles De Coster, Heinrich Heine, Victor Hugo, Prosper Mérimée, Anatole France, Ethel Lilian Voynich, Upton Sinclair, Herbert Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Rabindranath Tagore, Lion Feuchtwanger, Jaroslav Hašek and others.
- 19 The Cultural Revolution in 1928 and 1929 also brought about a return to repressions, as churches were closed and clergy subjected to arrest and execution. New legislation further restricted religious freedoms and eroded much of the earlier commitment to freedom of conscience (Husband 2002, 137).
- 20 In parallel with the elaboration of theoretical atheism, the new wave of repressions against all confessions in the USSR took place from the late 1950s through the beginning of the 1960s (Bourdeaux 1981; Nikol’skaya 2009, 2017).
- 21 See Vladimir Soloukhin’s *Black Boards* (*Chernye doski*, 1969).
- 22 For example, Andrei Tarkovsky’s “Andrei Rublev” (1966), and Larisa Shepit’ko’s “Ascension” (“*Voskhozhdenie*,” 1976).
- 23 For more, see Elbakyan (2015).

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