

The Campaign That Never Was

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A resolution entitled "On strengthening the atheist education of the population" was issued by the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party in July 1971. For some reason this document, rarely quoted by Soviet writers and apparently missed by Western specialists, was not published at the time.¹ In exploring the context in which this resolution was produced, we shall be concerned with two questions: why was it issued at this time, and was it meant to herald a new campaign against religion?

For five years after Krushchev's fall in October 1964, his successor Brezhnev struggled for pre-eminence within the leadership. During this period very little attention appears to have been devoted to ideological matters, and even *Nauka i religiya* (Science and Religion) could be found stressing that the key to overcoming religious prejudices was economic development.² Nevertheless, no-one questioned the basic premise of official ideology, that the education of the new man "presupposed his liberation from religious prejudices and other survivals of the past".³

From about 1968, this situation changed. Reacting to events in Czechoslovakia and the start of foreign broadcasting of *samizdat* materials into the USSR, official pronouncements began to take on a more explicitly ideological flavour. In April 1968 a Central Committee plenum called for an "uncompromising struggle with alien ideology",⁴ whilst two months later candidate Politburo member P. N. Demichev attacked imperialist propagandists who sought to undermine Soviet society by spreading values contrary to those of socialism.⁵

¹The resolution does not appear to have been noticed by any Western observers, and the first reference to it which I discovered was in an editorial on atheist education appearing in *Sovetskaya Kirgizia*, 1 September 1973.

²*Nauka i religiya*, 1966 No. 11, pp. 2-3.

³*Ibid.*, 1967 No. 11, pp. 2-3.

⁴*Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika*, 1969 (Moscow, 1970), p. 10.

⁵*Kommunist*, 1968 No. 10, pp. 14-35.

By late 1970, Brezhnev had considerably strengthened his personal position within the political leadership. This, coupled with the relatively healthy performance of the economy, enabled the General Secretary to give a remarkably self-confident address to the 24th Party Congress which met in the spring of 1971. Here Brezhnev devoted far more attention than previously to ideological matters, stressing in particular the importance of creating a new Soviet man:

A great project — the building of communism — cannot be advanced without the enormous development of man himself. Communism is inconceivable without a higher level of culture, education, sense of civic duty and inner maturity of its people . . .

Comrades, the make-up of the new man, his communist morality and outlook, are consolidated in constant and uncompromising struggle with survivals of the past . . .

The Central Committee feels it necessary to strengthen our entire ideological work, above all to make more active and purposeful the propagation of communist ideals.⁶

A subsequent editorial in *Nauka i religiya* explored the meaning of this speech for atheist work, noting that:

. . . the feeling of active participation in the happy future cannot but create a special spiritual atmosphere, one in which there exist all the preconditions for the fundamental restructuring of the inner world of each person, including the believer.

Nevertheless, as long as religion remained influential amongst a sizeable part of the population, the party would have to carry out atheist educational work actively.⁷

Four months after the party Congress, the Central Committee issued the resolution "On the atheist education of the population" (16 July 1971), which was followed in August by a *Pravda* editorial on similar lines.⁸ The resolution noted that in many parts of the country:

. . . party organisations and ideological institutions have decreased the degree of attention paid to the atheist education of the population and have frequently permitted a conciliatory attitude to the spread of religious views.

Indeed, communist and Komsomol members were often to be found participating in religious rites. Weaknesses were also evident in educational institutes and in certain literary-artistic works which

⁶ *The 24th Congress of the CPSU — Documents* (Moscow, 1971), pp. 100-101.

⁷ *Nauka i religiya*, 1971 No. 4, pp. 2-3.

⁸ *Pravda*, 18 August 1971.

idealised customs and practices associated with religion. Clerics and sectarian preachers were quick to take advantage of such shortcomings, and if matters were to be rectified, all party and social organisations must improve and intensify their atheist work. At the same time, local *soviets* and administrative organs should ensure “the strictest control” over the observation of the legislation on cults, and take “the necessary measures” to bring to an end the activities of those believers who opposed Soviet laws.⁹

In October 1971 *Nauka i religiya* took up the challenge, attacking the *Znaniye* Society for the decreasing number of atheist lectures given under its auspices during the late 1960s, and pointing to a reduction in the output of atheist literature. It also noted that propagandists tended to rely on outdated and simplistic critiques of religion.¹⁰

This campaign, if such it was, extended into the republics. A Central Committee resolution on political work in the Lvov region noted that religious influence remained “significant”, though many party organisations failed to take the problem seriously.¹¹ In Azerbaidzhan, First Secretary Aliev, addressing a republican Central Committee plenum, told of communists who took part in religious rites and named an academician and a composer who had donated money to mosques.¹²

Continued official concern was demonstrated at a major conference held in March. Opening the proceedings, M. T. Iovchuk, rector of the party’s Academy of Social Sciences, noted that, at a time when religious organisations were becoming more active, many people, including young people and intellectuals, were “indifferent” to matters of religion and atheism. It appeared to have been forgotten, he warned, that religion was “totally alien” to a Marxist-Leninist world-view and that its effect on socialist society could only be negative.¹³

A further prong in the attack during the early 1970s was an emphasis on the need to combat “bourgeois falsification” of Soviet religious policy. Addressing the 24th Congress, Brezhnev had warned:

We live under the conditions imposed by the relentless ideological war which imperialist propaganda is waging against the world of socialism, using the most subtle methods and most powerful technical means . . . The air is besmirched with all sorts of

⁹See appendix for full text and source.

¹⁰*Nauka i religiya*, 1971 No. 10, pp. 2-6.

¹¹*Ob ideologicheskoi rabote KPSS — sbornik dokumentov* (2nd edition; Moscow, 1983), p. 208.

¹²*Balinsky rabochi*, 2 November 1971.

¹³Papers by Iovchuk and other contributors were published in *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, *Vyp. 13*, (Moscow, 1972), pp. 5-62.

fabrications about life in our country . . .¹⁴

Over the next decade the theme of ideological struggle was to be a constant refrain in writings on religion and atheism. Of course, Western studies of Soviet religious policy had always been subject to criticism, but rarely had either the virulence or quantity of such material been matched.¹⁵

Towards an Explanation

Any explanation of the renewed emphasis on atheist work in the early 1970s must point to general political developments. Firstly, if by 1971 Brezhnev was indeed fully in charge, his "comprehensive programme" had of necessity to include some form of statement on ideology. Further, *détente* was by now in its embryonic stage and some form of ideological tightening was essential to prevent the "contamination" which more open East-West relations were likely to entail. A number of questions, however, remain unanswered.

Why was the subject of religion and atheism chosen for a specific Central Committee resolution?

One tentative answer may be deduced from events and trends of the period. Was it purely coincidental that a month before the resolution was issued a Russian Orthodox Church Council (*Sobor*) had elected a new Patriarch — Pimen? A number of atheist articles and books had pointed to "modernist tendencies" within the churches, claiming that these helped to preserve the church's influence on society. Was the regime reminding Pimen that the official commitment to atheism was still in force?¹⁶

On more solid ground, the resolution's comments on the

¹⁴ *The 24th Congress of the CPSU — Documents* (Moscow, 1971), p. 109.

¹⁵ An early example of the cruder variety appearing in the early 1970s was A. V. Belov and A. D. Shilkin, *Ideologicheskiye diversii imperializma i religiya* (Moscow, 1970); see also Central Committee Instructor E. I. Lisavtsev writing in *Agitator*, 1971 No. 18, pp. 33-35, and his later *Religiya v bor'be idei* (Moscow, 1975); perhaps the most notorious of these works was Belov and Shilkin's *Diversiya bez dinamita* (Moscow, 1972, and 2nd edition in 1976). These works should not in any sense be seen as marginal or extraordinary, for in 1977 Brezhnev was to attack dissidents as people "who advance against the socialist system, embark upon the path of anti-Soviet activities, violate laws and, lacking internal support, turn abroad to imperialist subversive centres" (*Leninskoy kursom, Tom 6* (Moscow, 1978), p. 377).

¹⁶ This would, of course, depend on the assumption that the church actually had access to the resolution.

importance of the strict application of the laws can be seen as a response to a considerable increase in religious dissent during the late 1960s. By the early 1970s, members of virtually all Christian denominations were active in protest movements. Some sought an extension of religious rights, others joined up with human rights activists in defence of civil liberties, and for the Lithuanian Catholics religious dissent was closely linked with the developing campaign for national rights.

However, the most fertile territory in the search for an answer to our question remains the 24th Congress's call for a strengthening of ideological work. Between July and December 1971 the Central Committee issued at least five resolutions dealing with ideology and political education. All emphasised that the concentration on economic tasks during the late 1960s had deflected attention from ideological questions.¹⁷

Whilst the initial impulse came from the central leadership, the actual working out of the resolution was presumably left to the Propaganda Department. Here we may hazard a tentative analysis, based on our limited knowledge of the inner workings of the political system, of the manner in which this resolution emerged.

Working within the guidelines set out in Brezhnev's speech, the Propaganda Department was left to devise resolutions giving precise form to the document's more general ideological prescriptions. Whether the Politburo actually specified certain topics — for example, atheism — or whether this was decided at Secretariat or Central Committee departmental level we do not know. Once the choice was made, however, the drafting of the resolution was probably taken over by either a specific sector within the Propaganda Department — possibly that for Mass Agitation — or assigned to a sub-committee dealing with religious affairs. Given his apparently central role in religious policy, Central Committee Instructor E. I. Lisavtsev would almost certainly have been involved, alongside specialists from the party's Institute of Scientific Atheism. Once drafted, the resolution would have been passed to a senior Secretary, the most likely candidate being Mikhail Suslov, and then sent up to the Politburo for formal approval. From there it would have been sent down through the Central Committee apparatus to the whole hierarchy of party organisations. These in turn would have adopted similar resolutions, to which would have been attached a specific list of tasks or objectives to be achieved. Meanwhile, the Propaganda Department would have ensured that the quantity of published material increased considerably.

¹⁷Texts in *Ob ideologicheskoi rabote KPSS — sbornik dokumentov* (2nd edition; Moscow, 1983), pp. 199-215.

To what extent was the campaign successful?

It had a marked effect on publishing. The number of major press articles on religion and atheism rose from 39 in 1971 to 100 in 1972, whilst the number of books also rose in the years 1972-74¹⁸ — the slight delay merely indicating the time required for preparation.

Believers experienced more tangible effects. Presumably in response to the resolution's call for tougher enforcement of the law, the annual number of religious arrests rose by more than fifty in 1971-73. This in turn can be related to more general developments in dissent policy, in particular the harsher approach adopted by the regime in 1970-73.¹⁹

Yet despite these quantitative indicators, a *Pravda* editorial in September 1972 warned that: ". . . the chief thing in atheist education is not the quantity of measures taken, but their quality." Indeed, this editorial was much more critical of failings in atheist work than the one which had followed the issuing of the resolution, for it noted that even a Central Committee resolution had not been enough to push some party committees into galvanising their anti-religious work — in Uzbekistan the number of atheist lectures given had in fact declined, and where lectures were given, no-one cared about whether or not they were relevant to the needs of the listener. Worse still, party members continued to participate in religious rites.²⁰

Conclusions

We should be wary of treating the developments outlined in this article as indicating that in 1971 a new campaign was launched against religion. Rather, religion was affected by wider political developments, of which three were particularly significant: the renewed stress on ideology which accompanied Brezhnev's increasingly firm hold on political power; the general attack on dissent which was launched in 1971-73; the context of *détente* for, as *Nauka i religiya* was later to put it, whilst the changed climate of international relations would enable more foreigners to become acquainted with the realities of Soviet society, there would also be more opportunities for "diversions" based on religion.²¹ In other words, the 1971 resolution should be seen less as indicating a new campaign — despite the propaganda and

¹⁸Figures based on *Letopis' gazetnykh statei* and *Yezhegodnik Knigi SSSR*.

¹⁹On this, see P. Reddaway, "Policy towards dissent since Khrushchev", in T. Rigby, A. Brown and P. Reddaway, eds: *Authority, Power and Policy in the USSR* (London, 1980), pp. 173-74.

²⁰*Pravda*, 15 September 72.

²¹*Nauka i religiya*, 1974 No. 2.

repressive changes coinciding with its appearance — than as an official reminder that anti-religious activity was still a vital part of Soviet ideological work.

APPENDIX

On Strengthening the Atheist Education of the Population (A resolution of the CPSU Central Committee, 16 July 1971)

1. The Central Committee of the CPSU notes that in a number of republics, *krais* and *oblasts* [provinces and regions — *Ed.*] ideological institutions have decreased the degree of attention paid to the atheist education of the population, not infrequently permitting a conciliatory attitude to the spread of religious views.

There has been a weakening of atheist education in schools, secondary and higher educational establishments. In several publications, films, and television broadcasts, there has been unjustifiable depiction of religious ritual and church life. There are also occasions when individual communists and Komsomol members stand aside from the struggle with religious prejudices, and sometimes even take part in the performance of religious rites.

All these [phenomena] are utilised by churchmen and sectarians in their attempts to preserve and extend their influence over several sections of the population.

2. The Central Committees of Union republics, *krai* and *oblast* committees are required to work out and implement concrete measures to strengthen the atheist education of the population. They must revive the atheist activities of social organisations, cultural-enlightenment institutions, the *Znaniye* Society, as well as those of the press, television and radio. They are to pay special attention to

the preparation and retraining of atheist propagandists, and to this end make more extensive use of universities of Marxism-Leninism, and schools for propagandists. More attention must be directed towards the creation of new socialist traditions and customs.

3. The USSR Ministry of Higher and Secondary Education, the USSR Ministry of Education, the USSR State Committee for Professional-Technical Education . . . are to improve the atheist education of students, utilising for this purpose all forms of class and extra-curricular work. The role of teachers, pedagogical staff, parental committees and student councils in this matter must be examined.

The USSR Union of Writers, the USSR Union of Artists, the USSR Union of Architects, the USSR Union of Cinematographers, the USSR Union of Composers and the USSR Union of Journalists are recommended to discuss the question of activating the participation of creative workers in the atheist education of the population.

4. Local *soviet* and administrative organs are to turn their attention to the need for exercising stricter control over the observance of the legislation on religious cults. They are to take the necessary measures to bring to an end the activities of religious fanatics, churchmen and

sectarians who contravene Soviet laws on this question. *KPSS — sbornik dokumentov* (2nd ed; Moscow, 1983), p. 200.

Source: *Ob ideologicheskoi rabote*

FOR YOUR DIARY

Residential Conference

A two-day residential conference has been arranged by our West Midlands and Burntwood Support Groups. It is to be held at Birmingham University on 19-20 September 1987. The topic for the conference is The Present Position of Soviet Believers and it will be led by our Information Director, Alyona Kojevnikov and our Research Director, Philip Walters, assisted by other members of the College staff.

The cost, including all meals from Saturday lunch to Sunday tea and overnight accommodation, is £35. Booking forms are available from

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