

# Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed

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*Under communism, the Russian religious landscape consisted mainly of two competitors—a severely repressed Russian Orthodox Church and a heavily promoted atheist alternative to religion called “scientific atheism.” Under these circumstances, one might expect the rapid spread of religious disbelief, but the intensity of the atheist campaign originated from official mandate and not popular appeal. In turn, scientific atheism never inspired the Russian population and grew increasingly uninspired as Soviet officials created a monopoly “church” of scientific atheism in hopes of replacing persistent religious beliefs and practices. This article is dedicated to explaining why Communists could not successfully convert the masses to atheism. The findings provide evidence that systems of belief require more than simply the power of promotion and coercion to become accepted.*

*A philosophy whose principle is so incommensurate with our most intimate feelings as to deny them all relevancy in universal affairs, as to annihilate their motives at one blow, will be even more unpopular than pessimism—that is why materialism will always fail of universal adoption.*

—William James

Atheists waged a 70-year war on religious belief in the Soviet Union. The Communist Party destroyed churches, mosques, and temples; it executed religious leaders; it flooded the schools and media with anti-religious propaganda; and it introduced a belief system called “scientific atheism,” complete with atheist rituals, proselytizers, and a promise of worldly salvation. But in the end, a majority of older Soviet citizens retained their religious beliefs and a crop of citizens too young to have experienced pre-Soviet times acquired religious beliefs. This article seeks to explain why atheists, with the full support of a totalitarian state, were unsuccessful in secularizing Russian society.

As many observers of the Soviet Union noted, convinced Communists demonstrated a conviction to their doctrine that was remarkably similar to religious faith (see Berdyaev [1931] 1966; Berlin 1996; Kaariainen 1989; McDaniel 1996; Zaehner 1986). Scientific atheism, the official term for the Communist Party’s philosophical worldview, posited the ultimate purpose of human existence, a moral code of conduct, and created a collection of atheistic rituals and ceremonies that mimicked religious ones. In addition to developing this ersatz religion, Soviet officials heavily promoted scientific atheism. The doctrine was taught in schools, advocated in the media, and emphatically propagandized in books, posters, the arts, during holidays, and with celebrations. Convinced atheists could join atheist organizations and meet on a regular basis in lieu of church participation; the primary atheist organization was the League of Militant Atheists, which was active prior to World War II and later replaced by the Knowledge Society. All in all, scientific atheism was omnipresent in the daily lives of Communist citizens. Atheist propaganda and rituals, in combination with the brutal repression of Russian religious groups, produced an atheistic “church” similar to a state-supported religious monopoly. Nonetheless, a belief in God remained a steadfast conviction for the majority of individuals throughout Soviet Russia. And the number of convinced atheists virtually disappeared after the fall of communism. How could a doctrine that had so much going for it fail to gain widespread appeal? In sum, scientific atheism lacked

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plausibility due to the recruitment tactics employed by the Soviet government and inconsistencies in the doctrine itself.

In this article, I examine the ultimate failure of scientific atheism in Soviet Russia. First, I clarify the concept of a monopoly religion. Then I investigate Soviet Russia's religious economy, a landscape dominated by a severely weakened Orthodox Church and a heavily promoted atheist alternative to religion. Under these circumstances, one might expect the rapid spread of religious disbelief, but the intensity of the atheist campaign originated from official mandate and not popular appeal. In turn, the tenets of scientific atheism never inspired the Russian population but instead grew increasingly uninspired as Soviet officials created a monopoly "church" of scientific atheism in hopes of replacing persistent religious beliefs and practices. The majority of the article explains why Communists could not successfully preach atheism to the masses even with the full support of the state.

### INITIAL CONCEPTS

Research shows that levels of religious membership and participation are strongly impacted by state regulation of religion (see Chaves and Cann 1992; Finke and Stark 1992; Gill 1998; Iannaccone 1991; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Stark and McCann 1993). States may regulate the spread of religious doctrines in several ways. First, they can establish tax, property, and civic laws that favor certain religious organizations, enabling them to more easily spread their doctrines. Second, churches may receive direct financial support from states. Finally, states may outwardly ban certain religious groups and imprison and sometimes execute their members. In these instances, regulation becomes outright repression.

State support of a favored religious organization can produce what Iannaccone (1991) calls a "religious monopoly," where one religious group dominates a region to the extent that its population has little or no exposure to alternative religious doctrines. Studies of religious deregulation in Europe (Stark and Iannaccone 1994), Latin America (Gill 1998), and the United States (Iannaccone, Finke, and Stark 1997) show that reductions in state regulatory policies will lead to the introduction of new religious doctrines and the growth of minority religions. Based on these findings, Stark and Finke (2000:284) conclude that "the capacity of a single religious firm to monopolize a religious economy depends upon the degree to which the state uses coercive force to regulate the religious economy."

Without religious regulation or in circumstances of complete religious freedom, a religious market will be highly competitive because it allows for the promotion of multiple religious doctrines. The religious market of the United States provides a case where religious groups succeed and fail based on their own initiative. In this setting of active religious competition, no single religious group has cornered the American religious market and active new religious movements often grow and flourish (see Finke and Stark 1992).

In contrast, religious monopolies rely on state support instead of popular appeal; this provides little incentive for a favored church to actively minister to its population. As Gill (1998:68) explains: "Although monopoly guarantees that religious consumers cannot defect to other faiths, a lack of pastoral attention to its parishioners will weaken the popularity and credibility of the church. Religious apathy and cynicism result." This was certainly the case in Imperial Russia where the Russian Orthodox Church "from 1721 to 1917 had been the handmaid of the tsars" (Ramet 1998:229). This state-supported religious monopoly existed mainly as an arm of the government and had little incentive to generate active church participation. In fact, church attendance was surprisingly low in Russia when compared to religious activity throughout western and eastern Europe at the beginning of the 19th century (Iannaccone 2002).

Under Communist rule, religious regulations shifted dramatically from Tsarist policies, which favored the Russian Orthodox Church, to policies that repressed all religious activity. As a substitute, the Soviet regime established an official atheistic replacement for religion. In this way,

scientific atheism became the new “religious” monopoly of Russia. However, this monopoly would never fully replace the old one.

### SOVIET RUSSIA’S RELIGIOUS ECONOMY

Post-revolutionary Russia appeared the ideal place to spread the doctrine of scientific atheism. Leading up to the Russian Revolution, many Russians were completely disillusioned with their political and cultural traditions and after the Tsarist regime was overthrown, many believed in the promises of a new socialist utopia. In fact, Russian Communists were “able to persuade people far beyond the borders of the Soviet Union that a superior model of modernity had been discovered” (McDaniel 1996:14). In addition, religion in Russia had been dominated by an extremely weak and entirely state-sponsored institution. When Communists took over the state, the Russian Orthodox Church became their unconditional property. Sabrina Ramet (1998:229) elucidates:

The Russian Orthodox Church was subordinate and controlled by the Soviet State. Its chief newspaper was proofed by the KGB before publication. Its clergy were promoted, demoted, and assigned according to the preferences of state authorities. The curriculum and admissions at its seminaries were subject to the veto of authorities . . . . Some clergymen and bishops turned KGB informers. As for the patriarch, he was obliged to make “positive propaganda” for the Soviet Union abroad . . .

Some ambitious Orthodox clergy even became atheist proselytizers for the League of Militant Atheists, essentially abandoning the old state religion for the new one (Ramet 1998:230). In the early years of the Soviet Union, scientific atheism was somewhat successful. The President of the League of Militant Atheists, Emelian Yaroslavsky, explained that past attempts to free humanity of religion failed because they were insufficiently scientific. He promised that the Soviet state could remedy past failures through the promotion of a clearly defined scientific atheism. Yaroslavsky predicted that:

there can be no doubt that the fact that the new state of the USSR led by the Communist Party, with a program permeated by the spirit of militant atheism, gives the reason why this state is successfully surmounting the great difficulties that stand in its way—that neither “heavenly powers” nor the exhortations of all the priests in all the world can prevent its attaining its aims it has set itself. (Yaroslavsky 1934:59)

With the support and funding of the Soviet regime, the League of Militant Atheists launched an atheistic crusade that was intended to totally secularize Soviet society by 1937. According to the League’s own count, this voluntary organization steadily grew since its formation in 1926 (see Table 1).

By 1932, the League boasted over 5.6 million members; this number draws some suspicion when one considers that the Communist Party only had around 1.8 million members at the time. It seems dubious that a radical atheist group would have recruited three times as many members as the Communist Party. Nevertheless, the League proposed an audacious plan to expand its membership even further. Realizing in 1931 that approximately half its members resided in Moscow and Leningrad (Kolarz 1962:11), the League was determined to create atheist “cells” across the entire Soviet Union in order to reach rural citizens who were currently ignorant of the atheistic science.

What parishes are for the Church the cells were to be for the League of Militant Atheists, only cells were to outnumber the parishes at the ratio of sixty to one or so. The Five Year Plan of anti-religious propaganda which was adopted in 1932 and was to run until 1937 provided for the organization of 400,000 cells in town alone; not less than one cell was to be founded in each factory, government office and school. In addition, 600,000 cells were to be founded in the countryside, one cell in every inhabited locality, collective farm and machine tractor station. (Kolarz 1962:11)

**TABLE 1**  
**ACTIVE ATHEISTS AND PARTY MEMBERS**

Year	Official Atheist Organization Members	Communist Party Full Members
<i>League of Godless</i>		
1926	87,000	639,652
1929	500,000	1,090,508
1932	5,670,000	1,769,773
1941	3,500,000	2,490,479
<i>Knowledge Society</i>		
1947	1,414	4,774,886
1950	130,000	5,510,787
1958	800,000	7,296,599
1963	1,200,000	9,581,149
1967	1,800,000	12,135,103
1970	2,500,000	13,395,253

*Sources:* League of Godless (Pospelovsky 1987:60–61); Knowledge Society (Powell 1975:50); Communist Party (Scherer 1984:30–31).

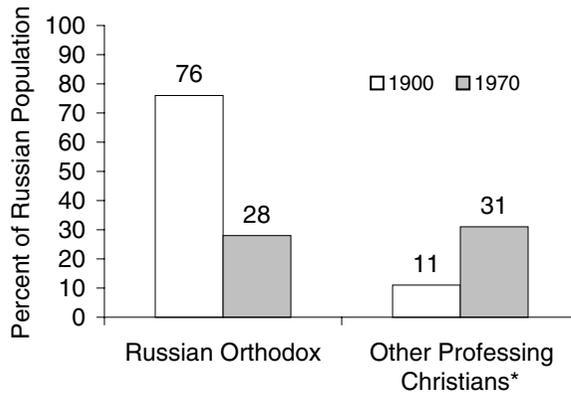
In total, Yaroslavsky hoped to establish one million atheist cells throughout the Soviet Union. The League relied on volunteer members to recruit other members. However, the League simply did not have sufficient membership and organizational efficiency to achieve such an ambitious goal in five years.

Nevertheless, Yaroslavsky set out to demonstrate the League's achievements by including a religious question in the 1937 Soviet census. The results were disastrous to the future of the League of Militant Atheists, which was disbanded in 1941, and religious survey questions never reappeared in subsequent Soviet censuses. Although no detailed results from the 1937 census can be reported because data analysis was quickly aborted, Soviet documents indicate that just over 56 percent of the population admitted to being religious believers (Corley 1996:76; Fletcher 1981:211). Yaroslavsky also ambiguously maintained that most (around two-thirds) of the religious believers resided in rural areas (Pospelovsky 1987:65). These crude results indicate a dramatic drop in religiosity when one considers that in 1900 nearly 100 percent of the people that lived in regions that would eventually constitute the Soviet Union were religious believers (see Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 1980). Regardless, Yaroslavsky and Stalin viewed the number of atheist converts (even with probable inflation) as unsuccessful (Pospelovsky 1987:65).

The findings were disappointing because the "science" of atheism had predicted a different outcome. Communists expected individuals to abandon religion with fervor. As it turns out, Russians did leave the Russian Orthodox Church in droves but did not abandon religion at the same rate.

In 1900, non-Orthodox Christian groups represented around 10 percent of the Russian population (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 2001). These groups included Baptists, Evangelicals, Flagellants, Mennonites, Old Believers, Pentecostals, and Tolstoyans, to name a few that were most visible at the beginning of the 20th century (Corley 1996). By mid century and toward the end of the Soviet era, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and various "charismatic" sects entered the religious landscape. Quite interestingly, data confirm that while membership in the Russian Orthodox Church rapidly declined under communism, Protestants and various Christian sects slowly proselytized new members (see Figure 1). From 1900 to 1970, the percent of non-Orthodox Christians (not including Roman Catholics) went from 11 to 31 percent of the Russian population.

**FIGURE 1**  
**CHANGE IN RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS FROM 1900 TO 1970**



\*Professing Christians is a combination of Protestants, Independents, Great Commission Christians, and Crypto-Christians. It does not include Roman Catholics.

Source: Barrett et al. (2001).

Small proselytizing groups partially thrived under communism because they continued to seek converts while being savvy to the dangers of religious expression. Prior to the revolution, the Tsarist regime effectively banned many of the small religious sects and cults while actively promoting the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church (Corley 1996). Nondominate religious groups throughout Russia were accustomed to religious repression even before the rise of the Communist Party and the ubiquitous promotion of scientific atheism. Active religious sects developed tactics to recruit and retain members under conditions of repression in pre-Soviet times.

Successful groups were inventive in introducing nonmembers to their religious community and in exchanging ideas with other religious groups. For instance, a Mennonite visitor to the Soviet Union in 1970 observed that a traveling evangelical minister:

was forbidden to preach unless registered to do so in that locale. But when such a visitor was invited to give a greeting at the service, he managed to expand the greetings to a greeting from Jesus and the Epistles of Paul! Substitution Sunday schools were achieved by carefully planned birthday parties. The choir practice, with a protracted meditation in the middle, became a de facto youth meeting. A Christian wedding meant that unbelieving friends and relatives would be present and would hear a Gospel invitation, and would see how the celebration was enjoyable without getting drunk. And at funerals, churches still make sure that their best preachers and an adequate choir are on hand—here, too, the focus is often more on the living . . . than the dead. (Sawatsky 1984:2)

Soviets were quite aware of the increase in new religious groups but had their own explanation for this phenomenon. Soviet historian Barmenkov voiced a Marxist interpretation of increased sect activity by reasoning that this was simply confused attempts by uneducated individuals to embrace misguided socialist ideas. Barmenkov (1984:112) explains:

The petty-bourgeois elements in the cities and in the countryside were attracted by the sectarian preaching of mutual assistance and voluntary sharing of property. And while people’s religiosity in general did not increase at that time, the specific social processes in the classes led to the outflow of believers from Orthodox into sects.

For this reason, Soviets were mainly concerned with the Russian Orthodox Church and trusted that “temporary” sectarian growth was, in part, evidence of the success of atheist propaganda. In this, Communists trusted that sectarian groups represented the last gasp of religion as it receded from the society. Therefore, many small religious groups subsisted under the radar of Soviet

anti-religious efforts. Ironically, the Communist Party planted the seeds of religious pluralism by undermining the Russian Orthodox Church. Sectarian religious groups continued to flourish through the Soviet era and after the fall of the Soviet Union. In fact, the end of communism was greeted with religious revivals throughout Russia due to the activities of newly allowed religious movements (Greeley 1994).

### FORCED SECULARIZATION

Soviet society clearly contained numerous incentives to relinquish religious belief and membership. First and foremost, the costs of religious belief and membership were extremely high because, in many instances, religious individuals could be executed or sentenced to decades of hard labor. Religious groups were the victims of extreme violence immediately following the 1917 Russian Revolution. In the Civil War that followed the Revolution, Bolsheviks targeted Orthodox churches, monasteries, and clerics as potential sources of anti-religious activity. Church property was seized and religious leaders, monks, and nuns were often killed in the process. The terror of the Civil War sometimes spun out of control as murderous gangs took advantage of the melee: "in many cases the tortures, murders and vandalism were the autonomous initiative of local anarchistic bands of army and naval deserters calling themselves Bolsheviks" (Pospelovsky 1988:1).

More systematic religious persecution began in the 1930s and reemerged periodically according to the whims of Soviet leadership. Anti-religious propaganda grew in the 1920s but the unfavorable results of the 1937 census marked a turning point in Soviet religious policy. Because religion was thought to be the result of social inequality and an opiate of the oppressed masses, the League of Militant Atheists was in a bind to explain the endurance of religion within a socialist utopia. Therefore, "they made a tactical move of proclaiming religion as a cause and not merely the symptom of social problems . . . religious practices became the scapegoat of the Soviet ideological machine, they became the only readily admissible reason for the failure of the complete re-education of the masses" (Pospelovsky 1987:26). According to this argument, Communist society did not secularize because religious believers prevented communism from attaining perfect social justice, which, in turn, would effortlessly secularize society. To end this cycle of religion, Yaroslavsky declared that "several hundred reactionary zealots of religion" needed to be exterminated (Pospelovsky 1987:65).

In addition to liquidating religious advocates, the Soviets also promoted religious ignorance. A common tactic of attacking religion employed by Communists was the spread of false information concerning religious activities. Of great importance in the Russian Orthodox tradition is the role of icons; many Orthodox believers fill a corner of their home with these religious symbols and pray to them daily. The League of Militant Atheists felt it was important to remove these religious relics from individual homes and composed various lies to justify their destruction. In one especially fierce effort to eradicate religious possessions, the League of Militant Atheists "claimed that an epidemic of syphilis in the countryside was being spread through the practice of kissing icons" (Peris 1998:85).

The Soviets actively sought to prevent religious education and replace it with atheistic propaganda. For homework, school children were sometimes asked to go home and try to convert one member of their family to atheism and the schools daily ran through anti-religious lessons. For instance, one Russian grammar text required the recitation of the following answers to a series of questions concerning Islamic practices.

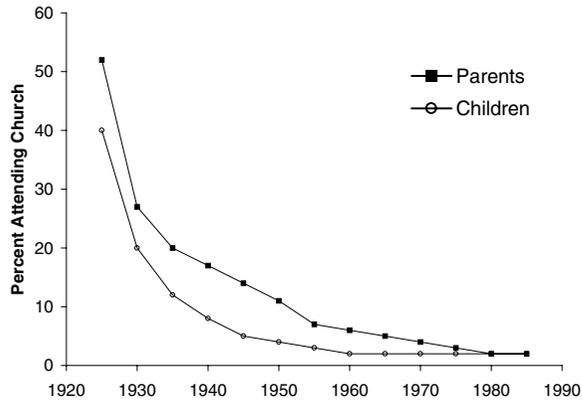
Q: What does the mullah do?

A: Mullah reads the Koran and when someone dies he reads prayers.

Q: What does he read about in the Koran?

A: We do not know.

**FIGURE 2**  
**RETROSPECTIVE CHURCH ATTENDANCE RATES IN RUSSIA**



Source: Iannaccone (2002) compiled from 1990 International Social Survey Program.

Q: Does he himself understand what he reads?

A: No.

Q: Does he read the prayers for nothing?

A: No, he gets money for this. (Bociurkiw and Strong 1975:154)

As this example demonstrates, anti-religious propaganda infiltrated the most basic lessons in unrelated topics. The Soviet educational system held “the bringing up of children in the atheist spirit” as one of its primary missions (Van den Bercken 1989:138).

If religious education occurred in the Soviet Union, it had to occur at home. Private religious instruction is very hard to trace in Communist times. Sadly, the Soviets left us with no data on church attendance to trace the impact church closures had on religious participation, but one can recall certain phenomenon using retrospective data. Iannaccone (2002) demonstrates the validity and reliability of retrospective religious data from the *International Social Survey Program* (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research 1994). Using questions concerning respondents’ memories of childhood church attendance and their recollection of their parents’ church habits, he reconstructs attendance rates from 1925 to 1985. I reproduce Iannaccone’s data depicting church attendance of Russian parents and their children in Figure 2.

One sees that church attendance drops dramatically in the late 1920s and continues to slowly decline until 1985. By 1970, only 4 percent of parents attended church and in only half of those families did their children accompany them. This is a reversal of a trend that holds in all western European countries—children will always attend church more than their parents if not at the same rate (see Iannaccone 2002). This occurs because religious parents want to introduce their children to religious beliefs and practices (and in some cases feel that church attendance is more important for their children than for themselves). In contrast, many religious parents in Russia were not bringing their children with them to church. Most certainly, religious parents hoped to spare their children the potential social and political costs of church attendance.

Communists ensured a drop in church attendance not only through coercive tactics but by also denying religious groups a place to meet. In seizing all private property, the Soviets were able to determine the fate and use of all churches, mosques, and synagogues. They immediately began church closures following the 1917 Revolution and by 1928 around 15,000 Russian Orthodox churches were officially shut down. In 1941, less than 8 percent of the Russian Orthodox churches functioning in 1914 were still in existence. The number of Russian Orthodox churches then grew during World War II and subsequently shrank as post-war anti-religious policies reemerged (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**CHURCH CLOSURES**

Year	Number of Russian Orthodox Churches
1914	54,000
1928	39,000
1941	4,200
1945	16,000
1948	15,000
1958	17,500
1966	7,500

*Source:* Powell (1975:41).

Churches were not only closed but also converted into buildings for Communist offices or activities. Most dramatically, they remade the beautiful Petersburg Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan into the Museum of the History of Religion and of Atheism, which professed to exhibit the folly of religion. Even when a church building was demolished, the Soviets would publicly make use of its materials for the new socialist society. For instance, “the Revolutionary Square metro station in central Moscow was constructed from the stones of the Danilov monastery” (Epstein 1995:181). In the 1930s, all church bells were confiscated and melted down for their precious metal (Luukkanen 1997:181). No longer would Soviet citizens hear the bells chiming a call to worship.

Because Soviets were prevented from worshipping in shared religious services and inundated with anti-religious propaganda, the Soviet population lost their religious knowledge, familiarity with church ritual and doctrine, and interactions with fellow worshippers. Under these circumstances one might expect confidence in religious explanations to fade, but Soviets undermined their own purpose by so brutally persecuting religious leaders and defacing religious symbols, which were revered by a majority of the population. Consequently, it was difficult to generate confidence in a government and doctrine that was so outwardly heartless in its hatred for religion.

Communist elites came to realize that their harsh dealings with religion were not proving an effective means to convert individuals to the truth of atheism. Reports within the Soviet government indicated that purging of religious believers was in fact backfiring; one 1939 report read: “during the previous years a number of priests and religionists were declared counter-revolutionaries and many more churches were closed but it now appears that in many cases this was carried out by the enemies of the people in order to increase hostility to the Soviet government” (Timasheff 1942:97). As this report hints, the blame for religious persistence was attributed to Yaroslavsky’s own organization and during the final months of the Great Terror the “personnel and cadres of the League of Militant Atheists movement were under heavy fire” (Luukkanen 1997:161). Widespread killings of religious believers ended on the eve of World War II, and as Soviets faced death from a foreign invader, religious persecution was put on hold.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately following World War II, religious persecution generally took on a less deadly form through the use of social sanctions and a renewed effort to offer religious believers an atheistic alternative.

### THE CHURCH OF SCIENTIFIC ATHEISM

Soviets found that religious rituals and holidays were the most difficult outward expression of religion to suppress. Religious holidays presented an initial dilemma because most people greatly

enjoyed congregating for seasonal celebrations around religious themes. In response, Soviets decided to create work schedules that always conflicted with religious holidays. They cleverly replaced the seven-day week with a six-day one:

five days of work, the sixth off. The anti-religious propaganda believed this would be a most effective means of preventing believers from attending the Sunday liturgy. In addition, the 25th and 26th of December were proclaimed the Days of Industrialization with obligatory presence at work. Yet, high work absenteeism on religious feast days is reported as late as 1937. (Pospelovsky 1987:56)

Because work absenteeism continued on religious days, the Soviets determined that they needed to provide alternative atheistic holidays to fulfill the need for celebrations (see Peris 1998:87–89). They created six state holidays that overlapped with major religious festivals and a multitude of rites to mark important events like weddings and funerals. Of course, “the regime’s adoption of numerous rituals in the personal and political realm ran counter to the general antiritualistic orientation of most nineteenth-century European intellectual trends, including Marxism” (Peris 1998:93), but as the anti-religious campaigns grew, so did their belief that religion could only be destroyed through a clever replacement.

The overt pageantry and solemnity surrounding Communist rituals illustrate the extent to which Communists embraced the pseudo-religious role of scientific atheism. In fact, atheist rituals and Communist celebrations resembled religious ceremonies quite closely. “Red” weddings mimicked religious weddings with Communist officials donning robes and sanctifying the union between husband and wife in church-like settings complete with candles and alters emblazoned with Soviet symbols. Similarly, atheist funerals and even birth rituals (a response to baptism) aped the sanctity and ceremony of their religious counterparts (Powell 1975:71). May Day celebrations and other national expressions of Soviet power were “infused with ‘positive’ secular symbols” (Bociurkiw and Strong 1975:158) intended to stir the hearts and minds of the citizenry and promote an undying love for Communist leaders.

The godlike worship of Communist elites appears the most ironic twist of Soviet communism. The writings of Lenin were treated as sacred text from a prophet and became the final justification of any act. Lenin’s embalming further played on the Russian Orthodox belief that the bodies of saints decompose at a slower rate. Placing Lenin under glass in a state of suspended animation directly replicated the display of the bodies of saints in monasteries throughout Russia. In turn, Soviet officials violently opposed the display of saints and argued that their bodies were actually frauds made of wax; to prove their point, Soviets exhumed the bodies of saints and performed tests to determine their true consistency (Wynot 2003:19). Meanwhile, the waxy corpse of Lenin served as a “genuine” replacement. When Yugoslavian Vice-President Milovan Djilas visited Lenin’s tomb in the 1940s, he observed the following: “as we descended into the Mausoleum, I saw how simple women in shawls were crossing themselves as though approaching the reliquary of a saint” (Bourdeaux 1965:124).

Stalin also promoted himself as the “Father” of his people, applying the full force of the Soviet media to repeating the message that he alone could protect Soviet citizens from the evils of the world. During his reign, citizens were consistently admonished to “Be Like Stalin!” and for a time after Stalin’s death it was suggested that he be made an “eternal member” of numerous Soviet organizations (Kolarz 1961:24). In this way, Soviets elevated political figures to transcendental status unbecoming the initial rhetoric of historical materialism.

There is some evidence that many Soviets switched from celebrating religious holidays to participating in atheistic rites, although individual reports indicate that many may have done so reluctantly (Powell 1975:80). Data from Estonia vividly depict the growth of an atheist alternative to confirmation. The Knowledge Society introduced a coming-of-age celebration called the “Summer Days of Youth,” which was intended to mimic and replace church confirmations. Between 1957 and 1970, the number of church confirmations dropped dramatically in Estonia

**TABLE 3**  
**SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS RITUALS**  
**IN ESTONIA**

Year	Summer Days	Church
	Youth Celebrants	Confirmations
1957	36	10,000
1958	2,200	8,100
1959	6,300	6,400
1960	6,950	3,950
1961	7,000	2,730
1965	na	550
1968	6,000	na
1970	na	488

*Source:* Powell (1975:82).

while the number of participants in the Summer Days of Youth grew impressively in the first three years of their introduction (see Table 3).

The Knowledge Society was formed to take over the functions of the defunct League of Militant Atheists and offered not only atheist education but also various extracurricular activities, such as the Summer Days of Youth. "Each of the union republics had its own [Knowledge] Society, and there were branches in every region, territory, city and district" (Powell 1975:48). The Knowledge Society grew to a membership of 2.5 million by 1970, a number less than half the size of the League of Militant Atheists in 1932 (see Table 1).

In the late 1960s, the Communists collected data indicating that the message of scientific atheism was actually more successful than the number of Knowledge Society members would suggest. A survey of 60,000 people living in the Voronezh region of the Russian Federative Soviet Republic included a religion question. Soviet researchers divided their sample into the following five groups: (1) convinced religious believers, (2) wavering religious believers, (3) nonreligious, (4) convinced atheists, and (5) active atheists. I group the first two categories as "religious" and the last three categories as "nonreligious." Soviet findings appear to show a low percent (22 percent) of religious believers (see Table 4).<sup>2</sup> This is a considerable drop from 56 percent religious believers reported in the 1937 census, assuming that the Voronezh sample was representative of the Soviet Union.

There are reasons to question the results of the Voronezh sample. First, independently collected data from religious groups around the Soviet Union at this time calculate that religious believers constituted around 52 percent of the Soviet population (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson 1980). Second, the Voronezh study reports that 12 percent of the sample were "active atheists," meaning that these individuals diligently spread the message of scientific atheism to convert others. This would mean that approximately 29 million Soviets were atheistic proselytizers, a number far greater than the 1.8 million members of the Knowledge Society at that time. It seems unlikely that so many Soviets would be actively promoting atheism while not affiliated with the official organization of scientific atheism.

Finally, the fall of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a religious revival (see Froese and Pfaff 2001; Bourdeaux 2000; Ramet 1998; Borowik and Babinski 1997; Anderson 1994; Greeley 1994; Swatos 1994). Kuran (1995) argues that unforeseen jumps in public opinion indicate the existence of preference falsification, which refers to a situation in which publicly stated opinions fail to reflect privately held beliefs. Based on Kuran's idea, one could interpret the religious revivals throughout the former Soviet Union as a reflection of the degree to which Soviet citizens hid their true religious beliefs under communism.

**TABLE 4**  
**1965–1967 VORONEZH REGION SURVEY (N = 60,000)**

	% Religious	% Nonreligious	% Active Atheists (Also Included in Nonreligious Column)
Whole sample	22	78	12
<i>Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson comparison (1970)</i>	48	52	na
<i>Region</i>			
Rural	33	67	na
Urban	15	85	na
<i>Gender</i>			
Women	31	69	9
Men	11	89	15
<i>Education</i>			
Illiterate	69	31	na
Primary	26	74	na
Secondary	1	99	na
Post-secondary	0	100	na
<i>Occupation</i>			
Unskilled farmer	31	69	4
Skilled worker	6	94	9
White-collar worker	3	97	20
Technical specialist	0	100	42

*Sources:* Voronezh region survey 1966–69 (n = 60,000); urban/rural (Marshall 1971:60); men/women (Fletcher 1981:88); education (Fletcher 1981:92); occupation (Fletcher 1981:104).

The fact that any religious belief survived under communism indicates that Communists failed at the goal they had set for themselves. This was a continuing irritation for Communist leaders, who were baffled that many of their citizens were unable to see the obvious fact that God does not exist. The inability of Communists to see that the truth of scientific atheism was not obvious to would-be converts shows why they had so much trouble explaining it and securing confidence in it. These problems become clear by placing the doctrine of scientific atheism and its means of promotion under objective scrutiny.

**THE TENETS OF SCIENTIFIC ATHEISM**

On some level, the failure of the Soviet political and economic system explains why scientific atheism never replaced religion. Because scientific atheism was inextricably tied to Communist ideology, the inability of that ideology to sustain a viable political and economic system also produced its inability to sustain committed believers. But one must not forget that even until the late 1960s, “the success of the Soviet Union, albeit by totalitarian and economically inefficient methods, in making of itself the world’s second industrial and military power is indisputable” (Nove 1969:378; also see Goldman 1968; Munting 1982). Chirot (1999:24) explains a common misperception concerning the viability of the Soviet system.

We were able to make fun of the Soviet model, even in the 1950s and 1960s, because it offered so few luxuries and services. But the Soviets and those who believed in the Stalinist-Leninist model could reply that, yes, they did not cater to spoiled consumers, but the basic sinews of industrial and military power, the giant steel mills and power generating plants, had been built well enough to create an economy almost as powerful as that of the United States.

Up until the 1970s, the Soviet economy was arguably a success, at least in terms of the goals Soviet leaders had set for industrial growth and technological advancements. In the technological races of the 1950s and 1960s, “it became clear to all but the most dogmatic skeptics that the Russians had attained an impressive mastery over science and technology” (Goldman 1968:80).

Scientific atheists believed that their technological and scientific successes would obviously disprove the validity of religion because the two are fundamentally in opposition. Official Soviet ideology stated that “religion exists where knowledge is lacking, religion is opposed to science” (Yaroslavsky 1934:48). One can think of this as a strong albeit naïve version of secularization theory. The naïvete in scientific atheism comes from a completely materialistic or literal understanding of religious concepts. The following examples of failed anti-religious propaganda clearly demonstrate the difficulty of waging “scientific” attacks on religion.

Scientific atheists viewed any technology as evidence of atheism because it demonstrated that humans could work “miracles” that were not preformed by God. At the very first attempts to industrialize the newly created Soviet Union, scientific atheists seized on the introduction of new technologies as a source for their anti-religious propaganda. For example, farming technology became a means to convince rural residences of their outdated reliance on religious concepts.

An anti-religious pamphlet printed in the first Five Year Plan period was entitled “Prayers or Tractor” and a widespread poster crudely elaborated on the alleged contradiction between “cross and tractor.” The alternative, “religion or tractor” with which the communists operated, never existed in the minds of the people for whom this propaganda was intended. The illusions about “atheist tractor” were therefore soon shattered, especially when peasants affixed crosses to them and when priests celebrated thanksgiving services at their arrival in villages. (Kolarz 1961:20)

As this instance demonstrates, scientific atheists simply did not understand the nature of religious belief. The fact that a tractor exists does not translate into a disproof of God and, ironically, Kolarz points out that farmers often interpreted these agricultural advancements as gifts from God.

Similarly, scientific atheists thought that atheism was empirically proven because God remained unseen or because certain religious stories were scientifically inconceivable. Following World War II, Soviet officials started a campaign to produce natural-scientific arguments against belief in God. For instance, Soviet scientists placed holy water under a microscope to prove that it has no special properties and “the corpses of saints were exhumed to demonstrate that they too were subject to corruption” (Van den Bercken 1975:143). The Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism also detailed the scientific impossibility of many biblical stories; one exhibit explained that “the ark that Noah built could not have accommodated all the animals which then populated the earth” (Bourdeaux 1965:107). In one of the most famous examples, cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin proclaimed upon his return from the very first space flight in history that he did not see God in space.

Aeronautical technology was often presented as proof of atheism and Soviet leaders viewed every flight as an “assault on heaven.”

In the Russian language, as in many others, there is only one expression for both “heaven” and “sky” and “assault on heaven” therefore meant both the technical conquest of the air and the conquest of space where God was supposed to live. . . . However, before atheist propaganda was able to exploit the “conquest of the stratosphere” it suffered a tremendous setback when the stratosphere plane “SSSR” crashed after having reached the height of 22 kilometers. As the communists considered these flights a challenge to religion . . . the more simple minded believers considered the accident and death of all three pilots as an act of divine punishment. (Kolarz 1962:20)

Even when the Soviet aeronautical program was successful, the most undiscerning religious believers could easily explain it away, as one little girl aptly responded to Gagarin’s inability to see God: “but only those with faith can see God” (Kolarz 1961:96).

As these examples illustrate, scientific atheists did not recognize the nonempirical character of religious concepts and stories. In most cases, atheist proselytizers had little or no knowledge of actual religious doctrine. In fact, a visitor to the Soviet Union in the 1960s reported that “no atheist ringleader has ever dared to allow those under him to study the Bible, even for the purpose of spying out the enemy’s territory in order to more easily conquer it” (Bourdeaux 1965:125). Under these conditions, atheist recruiters were largely ignorant of the nonempirical tenets of religious belief, which led them to only attack the supernatural using empirical arguments.

Concurrently, professional scientists realized that they had nothing really to say about religion. Although they were making rapid advancements in physics and chemistry, Soviet scientists rarely accepted the enticements of available funding and career promotion to work on the “science” of atheism. By the 1970s:

Very few persons register for graduate work in scientific atheism in the Institutes of the USSR Academy of Sciences or in the faculties of higher educational institutions. In the period of 1957–63, only three doctoral dissertations and some sixty candidate’s theses dealing with scientific atheism were defended. . . . The lack of scholarly research and interest, combined with faculty and student indifference to atheist themes in their regular classwork, suggest that the effectiveness of university based anti-religious programmes is likely to be quite limited. (Bociurkiw and Strong 1975:157)

The lack of any intellectual interest in scientific atheism left the work of anti-religious propaganda to individuals who knew little about religion or science. Atheist preachers who held “intellectual revivals,” fashioned after religious revivals, displayed their ignorance through an inability to properly impart what scientific atheism meant and how it explained the world.

Often the intellectual revival embarrasses the lecturers with difficult questions. They are, for instance, asked, “Why are our youth so rough? Why have we so many neglected children?” These are wounding questions in a Communist society where there should be no laziness or neglect. Sometimes members of the audience point out that recent discoveries in physics are incompatible with the official materialism, or that men are able to perceive only phenomena but not the essence of things. Faced with such questions the propagandists are completely at sea. (Timasheff 1942:103)

Atheists proclaimed that religion was based on ignorance, but they repeatedly demonstrated their own incapacity to address the most basic questions from their would-be converts. Peris (1998:175) notes that “the background, training, and work experiences of the League’s cadres made the successful delivery of the regime’s message of atheism highly problematic.”

Because atheism was supposed to be scientific, atheist promoters were wed to the use of science to prove atheism. This led to difficulties, as actual scientists avoided the topic of religion. In the end, atheistic “science” became an ideology that avoided the scientific method altogether. Although scientific atheists may have initially discussed evidence for atheism, they soon fell into an ideological stance that did not allow for any actual discourse.

Soviet atheism admits no serious differences of opinion, no skepticism vis-à-vis the monocausal explanatory theory of historical materialism. Each and every book repeats the old truths and is a variation on the same theme, a re-establishment of principles. . . . the avoidance of confrontation with those who think differently, the fear of direct challenge, must surely indicate an unvoiced realization that the doctrine is not up to it. (van den Bercken 1989:146)

In attempting to provide an alternative to religion, scientific atheists were unable to construct any clear or resounding message. On the one hand, they hoped to demonstrate that science was opposed to religion. However, their scientific “proofs,” such as showing that God did not live in the sky, misjudged the meaning and intent of religious explanations. On the other hand, they demanded an unquestioning faith in atheism without any real evidence for atheism. By not being able to respond to simple questions or allow for open discussion of concerns, scientific atheists

appeared insecure about their own doctrine. This could not have generated confidence in their would-be converts. The line between faith and science became blurred within the doctrine of scientific atheism, which demanded a holy reverence for nonscientific ideas masquerading as science. Soviet citizens were left disoriented by such an explanatory scheme. In addition, they were repeatedly told that the Soviet doctrine of scientific atheism was the only alternative to religious belief. Under these circumstances, many Soviets held on to their religious faith as the only plausible response to a world in which atheistic concepts were vaguely defined and empirically unproven.

### CONCLUSION

The failure of scientific atheism in Russia is interesting because it had every advantage. First, the Soviet government generously financed atheists while brutally suppressing religious advocates. For this reason, scientific atheism should be considered the equivalent of a religious monopoly. Second, scientific atheism was promoted throughout Soviet Russia in schools, workplaces, and the community. Finally, scientific atheism offered rituals, ceremonies, and the promise of a utopian society as a direct alternative to religious offerings.

The most generous estimates of atheistic belief show that less than one-quarter of Russians were atheists and this number dramatically drops to around 5 percent of the population after the fall of communism. In other words, scientific atheism was surprisingly unsuccessful when one considers all its competitive advantages.

When one looks at how atheism was promoted and the actual tenets of scientific atheism, its unpopularity proves less confusing. First, the doctrine of scientific atheism was itself problematic. It confusingly claimed to be a science while abandoning scientific methods altogether. Actual scientists avoided the topic of religion and produced no work that could verify the science of atheism. Second, scientific atheism replicated religious ceremonies, rituals, and produced a new Communist sense of the sacred as an alternative to religion. This simply confused the population, many of whom mistook scientific atheism for a new religion and not an exit from religious belief altogether so that even those few who wanted to believe in the ideals of atheistic communism simply ended up praying to the gods of Lenin and Stalin. Finally, the messengers of scientific atheism themselves lacked credibility. Atheist proselytizers knew little about religion or science and their ignorance was apparent to their would-be converts.

Many of these problems stem from the fact that scientific atheism was an ideology imposed on a population from official channels. Communists did not attempt to engage the hearts and minds of would-be converts but expected individuals to simply bend to patently superficial beliefs. In fact, Communists forbid any active discussion concerning the weaknesses of scientific atheism even in the attempt to improve them. The ultimate indication that atheism never inspired the Russian people is that it virtually disappeared after the fall of communism. In this, scientific atheism closely resembles the weakness and impotence of monopoly religions that rely on political favoritism for subsistence and become apathetic to the needs of their congregations. In contrast, successful religious movements continually evolve to suit their surroundings and address contemporary issues. Successful branches of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism all offer explanations concerning a myriad of social issues that have been formulated and refined by able theologians throughout centuries of discourse and debate. If compared, one can see that the unrefined and undeveloped ideas of scientific atheism never evolved to inspire or entice the public.

Nearly seven decades of anti-religious propaganda and atheist promotion could not secularize Russian society. Systems of belief, be they religious or atheistic, need to engage individuals in order to gain widespread acceptance. In the end, the attempt to force secularization in Soviet Russia was fundamentally insipid, the result of an atheistic monopoly that never questioned itself or addressed the concerns of its would-be converts.

## NOTES

1. In 1959, Khrushchev implemented a renewed religious campaign, under which “religious groups of all denominations were to suffer their worst persecution since the 1930s” (Corley 1996:184; also see Pospelovsky 1987). Although the intensity of active religious repression fluctuated throughout the Soviet era, consistent social pressure to disavow religious traditions and beliefs never disappeared. In his two-year study of religion in Soviet society during the early 1980s, van den Bercken concluded: “Social control is an important means of promoting atheism in society . . . [Control] is aimed at religious life by means of the many group sessions Soviet citizens must attend in the workplace as part of the educational system. Groups discuss the ‘anti-social’ behavior of religious believers who are subject to ‘comradely verdicts’ . . . it is shameful for citizens to attend a church service or wear crosses; so to do is grounds for public criticism and depending on the gravity of the offence, sanctions involving the career. Controls within the Communist cadre groups also extend to members’ family and friends: a party leader can be expelled because his son-in-law sings in church choir” (Van den Bercken 1989:136).
2. Even though the Voronezh survey found a relatively low number of religious believers, Soviet researchers found it curious that there would be any religion remaining in a modern Socialist society. Survey findings show that it was generally the uneducated, unskilled, rural, and female population that remained religious (see Table 2). One Soviet social scientist explained that “nonparticipation in social production is at the present time a general peculiarity of the life of the believers . . . most believers, for example, have conducted and still do conduct private enterprise, or work at private handicrafts” (Fletcher 1981:102). This explanation is based on a theoretical assumption that religion is a product of capitalism; clearly, this type of explanation raises many questions and Soviet researchers obviously failed to recognize or willfully ignored the fact that there were strong incentives to deny religious belief. Still, advocates of atheism worried about the persistence of religion and the Soviet government renewed anti-religious efforts in the early 1970s and again in the late 1970s (Corley 1996:244).

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