РЕЛИГИОВЕДЕНИЕ

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Blasphemy and Violence during the Russian Revolution and the Early Years of the Soviet Union

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This article analyzes incidents of blasphemy that occurred both during and in the period immediately following the Russian Revolution. The debate on blasphemy in revolutionary Russia was initially tied to the political system and ecclesiastical structure of the Romanov Empire. One possible explanation for this anomaly is the political discourse of a "victorious revolution", according to which revolutionary turmoil had birthed a modern, progressive and secular society. A reconstruction of debates on blasphemy, and of sacrilege too, do not fit this narrative. The Soviet state used a rhetoric that would historically have been seen as blasphemous as well as actions that would have been dubbed sacrilegious to push its agenda for modernization, for the redistribution of material resources, the de-legitimization of imperial institutions and the neutralization of political opponents. Violence was a steady companion here. It could take the form of repression by removing relics and liturgical vessels that were venerated by individual believers. It could be cleansing whereby the relic of a saint would be destroyed. Violence also emerged in the physical exchanges between State officials and believers resisting the unsealing of relics and usage of liturgical vessels outside of worship or mass as well as countering the expulsion of church valuables. Finally, a form of symbolic violence could be found in the way in which the faithful were forced to attend the display of relics in public exhibition hall or in the photographic coverage of sacrilegious acts. This was a deliberate move to confront and hurt the feelings of individual believers. This was a deliberate move to confront and hurt the feelings of individual believers.

Keywords: blasphemy, violence, history of Russian Orthodox Church, Russian Revolution, confiscation of church valuables, cult of dead bodies, relics examination, ecclesiastical folklore.

This article analyses incidents of blasphemy that occurred both during and in the period immediately following the Russian Revolution. The politicised interpretation of blasphemy in Russia today makes such an examination especially important. Although the hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution was accompanied by the publication of numerous studies on religious communities during the early 1920s, not a single work has examined the phenomenon of blasphemy during this particular historical time. One possible explanation for this anomaly is the political discourse of a "victorious revolution", according to which revolutionary turmoil had birthed a modern secular society. A reconstruction of debates on blasphemy, and of sacrilege too, do not fit this narrative. At the same time, whereas several research projects have over the past decades examined the connection between folk culture and institutional religion, individual religiosity and its transformation in a context of enforced secularization remains a largely unexplored topic [1; 2]. How did ordinary people, who mostly lived in rural areas, perceive the messages that the new government addressed at them — a government that heralded secularism? To answer this question, the following pages examine materials pertaining to oral history that were gathered by ethnographic researchers and include folkloristic practices. They show that blasphemy retained its key characteristics from the early 1920s to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Orthodoxy and Blasphemy in the Russian Empire

According to the laws of the Russian Empire, Orthodoxy was the main religion of the country and the tsar was its main protector. The Orthodox Church itself was incorporated into the imperial bureaucracy through the Department of the Orthodox Faith and, other than organising the faith, held policing and ideological functions. It also played an active part in the persecution of the so-called Old Believers, i.e. those who had wanted to remain loyal to traditions dating from before the seventeenth century [3–6]. The Orthodox Church furthermore sought the violent 'reunion' of Greek Catholics (Uniates) in the western provinces of the empire, battled against sectarians and oversaw the functioning of monastery prisons. All of these elements shaped popular perceptions of the Orthodox Church as not just an integral pillar of the imperial system, but an enemy of liberty and opponent to reform.

As anthropologist Alexander Panchenko observes, the condemnation and persecution of dissenting religious voices were a returning phenomenon not just during in the eighteenth century but during in the early years of the Soviet Union too, when the State showed a heightened interest in mass religious culture [7, p. 441].

Around the same time that the Russian state started its crackdown on folk belief, i.e. in the seventeenth century, it also imposed its monopoly on the definition of blasphemy, claiming the right to punish those charged with it. The 1649 Law on Blasphemers and Church Troublemakers declared as blasphemers all those who offended "the Lord God and our Saviour Jesus Christ… our Mother of God the Chaste Maiden Mary… the Holy Cross… His Holy Saints", disrupted the liturgy and insulted the higher clergy [8, p. 70–71]. Trespasses were prosecuted and often led to a death sentence or severe corporeal punishment [9, p. 328; 10, p. 464]. The Law on Criminal Punishment of 1845 provided a more elaborate definition of blasphemy [11]. Another article addressed "apostasy from the faith and ordinances of the Orthodox church". Charges under these articles were usually

pressed against Old Believers and sectarians, who were sharply and violently persecuted. Altogether, then, imperial authorities progressively waded into the religious realm, thereby cementing the ties between blasphemy (an offence against religion) and protest against the State. In short, both blasphemous behaviour and State interference in religious affairs had tradition in Russia before the Bolsheviks seized power.

The Revolutionary Process Reconsidered

The foundations of the Russian Empire were shaken by the mass protests that broke out in 1905 after state troops had fired at a peaceful workers' demonstration in Saint Petersburg. Whilst workers engaged in street fights with the police, peasants burned down the houses of the nobility. It was in these early days of the First Russian Revolution that Tsar Nicholas II published, on 17 April 1905, the Manifesto on Religious Tolerance. It abolished the criminal persecution that automatically followed on the renunciation of Orthodoxy and granted both Old Believers and sectarians the right to resume public services and open their churches [12; 13]. These legal changes preceded changes in popular religiosity. At the time of the First World War, blasphemy became a regular feature within army ranks. These dissonant ideas on religion were violently imposed on conquered populations, contributing both to the secularization of the peasantry and to forced conversions. (For example, the so-called 'Uniates' living in the annexed territories were forced to join the Orthodox Church). The anticlerical violence that was unleashed by the war thus made its way into the inner provinces of the empire, with the soldiers becoming its main carriers [14, p. 637].

Radical parish clergy were among those who welcomed the February Revolution, seizing it as an opportunity for "liberation from [a] centuries' old yoke" [15, p. 269]. In various dioceses, assemblies were set up consisting of clergy and laity that overwhelmingly approved the overthrow of the empire and expressed support of the Provisional Government. Indeed, the ecclesiastical community was largely unified in its support of revolutionary reforms, although there were also different voices — stretching from far-right monarchists and the ultra-nationalist black-hundredists to radical Anarchists and Bolsheviks. To respond to political developments, the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church opened in August 1917 where was restored the patriarchy. It also condemned the Bolsheviks.

In October 1917, the Russian Bolshevik Party staged a coup that caught the participants of the democratically-organised Local Council by surprise. Since the Orthodox Church saw itself as the representative of the vast majority of Russians, it expected an official role in the new Soviet state yet a serious conflict soon erupted that turned on the freedom of conscience; after having seized control of the government, the Bolsheviks had officially declared that every citizen had the right to adhere to his or her personal convictions [16]. On 2 February 1918, the Bolsheviks issued the Decree on the Separation of Church and State (officially: Decree on the Freedom of Conscience and on Clerical and Religious Societies) [17].

From the very beginning, there existed a fundamental difference between the Marxist doctrine of religious freedom and the Bolshevik political reality that condoned, even encouraged, violent actions towards religious institutions — actions that both the clergy and the Bolsheviks' political opponents dubbed blasphemous. What followed was a sepa-

ration of discourses. Soviet propaganda spoke of the creation of a new, progressive and science-based society in which the Church would be protected by the freedom of conscience and religion [18]. Yet the way, in which the erosion of religious life and Russia's secular rebirth were celebrated, suggest that it was a clearly demarcated liberty. For this reason, scholars have recently shifted perspective from studying patterns of secularization to focusing on 'forced secularization' [19–21]. According to Peter Holquist, scholars of the Russian Revolution explain the widespread violence in this period by pointing either to circumstances or ideology [14, p. 628]. This opposition between context and intent has parallels in debates on the Terror in France, an event that has functioned as a prism to look at the October Revolution, both by the participants in the revolutionary process and by historians [22].

Revolution and Violence

Russia had witnessed widespread violence before the October Revolution. Stephen Wheatcroft sees the years of the First Russian Revolution (1905–1907) as the first of four waves of violence during the first half of the twentieth century [23, p. 43–44, 53–54]. Although the First World War formed a trigger for trouble in other parts of the world, the fact that violence only became a regular and constitutive feature of political life from 1917 onwards suggests that revolution was more important. The revolution provided a matrix for violent practices that had originated in a context of war and had originally been devised for use against external foes, now deploying them to establish a new political system [14, p. 643]. The civil war was accompanied by hunger, ruin, deprivation and hardship that affected citizens in a way entirely unlike the First World War had done. This experience imposed itself upon Russian society and coloured the government that emerged as victor from the civil war [14, p. 652]. What made Bolshevik violence unique was that it was not conceived for usage during the period of civil war only but rather formed an integral part of the attempt to create a new society, which it would accompany for decades to come. The inherently violent nature of the Soviet state was clearly on view in the campaign aimed at the requisition of church valuables.

The Uncovering of Relics and the Requisition of Church Valuables

According to Darren Reid, the Marxist and Leninist view on religion maintained that people had to be emancipated from the yoke of religious belief. Herein it differed from the Bolsheviks' anti-religious campaign that set out to destroy the (religious) autonomy of peasant villages and bring them under State control. During the period 1917–1929, they used two well-known tactics to achieve this goal: the persecution of individual clergy and the appropriation of religious land and property [24]. Here we will however focus on two lesser-known cases, or campaigns, of which the first dealt with the uncovering of relics (simply put, the "relics campaign") and the second addressed the requisition of church valuables (see also: [25]). The two campaigns were closely connected. Relics were preserved in reliquaries made from precious metals and decorated with valuable stones; their "uncovering" was accompanied by the expropriation of monastic property, which included not just the requisition of liturgical vessels but also the expulsion of the monks from their monasteries. Whilst the religious dimension is evident, the Bolsheviks' campaign

also possessed an important political and economic dimension. Reid even suggests that the secular authority of priests was more dangerous to the Bolshevik regime than their religious authority [24, p. 60]. Here the focus is, however, on the link between blasphemy and violence in these campaigns, although we also touch on sacrilege.

Contemporary accounts that characterized the two campaigns as cases of blasphemy and sacrilege can be found in archives across Russia. Church representatives wrote detailed reports on the incidents, which they sent to their superiors. For example, the abbot of the Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration in Staraja Russa (region of Novgorod) reported that on 2 December 1918, a group of soldiers under the command of Military Commissar Davidov conducted a search (*obysk*) of the monastery where they poked and touched the relics of saints, took off the brocade cover of the altar of Saint Vladimir and tried to remove the massive silver [reliquary] from the main altar, although they only succeeded in removing the glass vitrine that covered it (cited in: [26, p. 333]).

In addition to such acts of sacrilege, clerical reports cited examples of blasphemy that recalled episodes from earlier periods in Russian history. Abbot Archimandrite Ilya of the Monastery of Saint Nicholas Cherny Octrov (region of Kaluga) described how in September 1919 "state officials walked through the church wearing hats, smoking tobacco, cursing, blaspheming" (cited in: [27, p. 44]). The behaviour of the chairman of the regional section of All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (or Cheka), received a special mention. Whilst sitting on the altar and smoking, he shot at the Kiev-Pechersk Icon [showing] the Mother of God with Saints Anthony and Theodosius… inquiring: 'what will the saints do or reply to that?' <…> An episode widely covered in the Soviet press involved an incident surrounding the relics of Saint Alexander of Svir. On 22 October 1918, the saint's reliquary was opened and a wax figure found inside, or so the Extraordinary Commission reported [28]. The implied suggestion was, of course, that the Church had created a hoax to the benefit of itself. When local doctors Belyaev and Fedorov examined the reliquary seventy years later, they instead found that it held the "remains of an elderly male" [29, p. 86]. In another case, which took place on 25 April 1920 in Rostov (region of Yaroslavl), clergymen testified to the fact that the mass unsealing of relics had been accompanied by "sacrilege and insults, aimed at the religious feelings of the faithful, the smoking of tobacco on the cathedral's portico [and] the touching of holy relics by the unfaithful"[1]. The list of similar cases is endless.

Such acts of blasphemy and sacrilege provoked the resistance of the faithful, who sometimes responded with violence [30]. They even caused a wave of anti-state uprisings and demonstrations across the country. Among others, violent clashes occurred in March 1919 in the Monastery of Savvino-Storozhevsky near Zvenigorod (region of Moscow). In the town of Sergiev Posad [30], the faithful protested energetically against the transfer of the relics of Saint Sergius of Radonezh. When going through these cases it becomes clear that these acts of blasphemy and sacrilege were designed as a deliberate provocation on the part of the Bolsheviks with the aid of which they tried to trigger a violent response from those defending the relics. This physical resistance could then be used to justify a 'response' in the form of violence and oppression against the faithful. Of interest is that the clergy (especially the Orthodox priesthood) often referred to how "the religious feelings of the faithful" had been insulted. Also Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow used this concept,

[1] State Archives of the Yaroslavl Region, Fund 130, Inventory 12, File 183, Sheet 1.

especially in his letter warning against the aforementioned unsealing of the relics of Saint Sergius. In the eyes of the Orthodox Church, the faithful were the victims of violence; in the eyes of the Bolshevik State, they were the perpetrators.

Blasphemy as a Modernising Project

Bolshevik discourses framed the acts of blasphemy and sacrilege of the revolutionary era, which included the violation and confiscation of relics, in new ways [31]. The editors of *The Revolution and the Church* (*Revoliutsiya i tserkov'*) played a pioneering role here. This journal was published by the 8th Department of the People's Commissariat of Justice, also known as the Liquidation Department for its role in implementing the separation of Church and State. During the years 1919–1920, the journal contained a separate section on the relics campaign, which contained reports on the unsealing of relics and relevant court cases. One example reads as follows:

> Great periods of social change were always accompanied by the re-evaluation of values, the fall of centuries' old idols, the debunking of centuries' old lies and deceit, which shaped the foundations of the old regime. <…> Life itself, represented by the workers' masses, is now coming to the gilded reliquaries: they lifted up the tombstones, threw down the secret covers from the decomposed human bones. <…> It is [now] clear to everyone that the tombs of all these martyrs and revered [people] were necessary to the monks, merely as a means to hold the uneducated masses in obedience and to exploit popular ignorance [32, p. 10].

The article combines the Marxist/Leninist rejection of religion as an instrument to control the masses with the Bolshevik penchant for destroying religious culture and was part of the series of articles published in the same outlet that discussed the "relics campaign". Most of these texts were written by one author, Mikhail Gorev, who tried to systematise and interpret these events and whose texts reveal a number of characteristics.

First, the author embraced the rhetoric of Enlightenment, arguing that religious mysteries had no place in the modern world and that it should be forbidden to exploit popular ignorance. He quoted commentaries by medics on the state of the relics and advocated their placement in museums, where they could be observed by the public and where lectures on hygiene and education would be given on a regular basis. The publications were moreover characterized by a combination of anticlerical pathos and references to Early Christian values as outlined in the Gospel. A third defining trait was the desire to expose the superstition imbued in folk religiosity as well as the errors contained in the beliefs upheld by ordinary people. This last point is of particular interest, since educated religious circles in Russia had juxtaposed folk religiosity to the official faith for centuries. One possible explanation for this is that the main ideologue behind the battle against the veneration of relics and the principal crusader against church valuables was the former priest Mikhail Galkin (1885–1943), who had published extensively on the relics campaign [33]. He actively collaborated with the new Bolshevik power. Thus, a priest laid the basis for a campaign that stood out for its blasphemous and sacrilegious character.

Different from more traditional religious offences such as spitting on a saint's skull and dressing up in liturgical vestments, the relics campaign aimed at spreading ideas of Enlightenment and concepts of hygiene as well as countering the exploitation of the uneducated rural masses. It was supported by the Soviet leadership and the Decree on the

Liquidation of Relics was passed by the Council of the People's Commissars on 29 July (10 August) 1920 (published on 25 August 1920; for the decree's history see: [34]). The decree, which had been prepared by the People's Commissariat of Justice, aimed to "completely annihilate the barbaric anachronism of the past: the cult of dead bodies".

Following the issue of this decree, the relics question became a business for government officials. In time, they opened an estimated 63 tombs. In each case they reported on the physical decomposition or even absence of the supposedly incorrupt relics of saints. This exposure was supposed to serve as a proof of the lies and fraud that the adherents of Orthodoxy had spread across imperial Russia. To maximise its effect, the unsealing of relics was given extensive public coverage. Representatives from different social circles were invited to attend the events, protocols were drawn up and video footage was shot — a rarity for the time; the footage of the unsealing of the relics of Saint Sergius of Radonezh is especially well-known.

With the help of a scientific method and modern communication opportunities, the publicly-staged unsealing of relics was turned into an educational project that had to debunk the mystery of religion. The Soviet government sought to portray the campaign as a fight against the exploitation of the faithful. It also tried to expose priests as liars, conmen and charlatans. In order to achieve this goal, events specifically targeted large masses. They included activities dedicated to the "debunking of Orthodox miracles", where chemical experiments were used to show how icons were made "new" again without the obvious help of restorers, how why saints could "cry" and why a saint's remains could remain physically intact. Yet, whilst authorities officially operated in a framework of rationality and science, they also had to consider popular piety. After all, folk religiosity could only be defeated through a reappraisal of its meaning, an integral part of which was formed by the veneration of incorrupt relics.

Relics taken from Orthodox monasteries were often moved to history museums in a bid to destroy the institutions that had legitimized, even sanctified the old imperial system [35; 36]. That the same social classes, which had previously been in awe of them now turned to blasphemies and sacrileges, was seen as a sign of their liberation and as the symbolic overthrow of the Russian Empire. This process of desacration returned in metaphoric references to decomposition, as in the case of rotting relics. In lieu of decay and obscurity the new Bolshevik government emphasized hygiene and Enlightenment. Katherine Verdery has stated with regard to socialist regimes that they "sought assiduously to sacralize themselves as guardians of secular values, especially the scientific laws of historical progress" [37, p. 10]. The interpretation of acts of blasphemy was a part of a complex evolution of soviet human studies too, which in turn influenced the shaping of the Russian "laboratory of modernity" [38, p. 205–209].

The Confiscation of Church Valuables

The unsealing of relics went hand in hand with the confiscation of church property and church valuables. All of these campaigns were conducted by armed detachments. On 16 (23) February 1922, the Central Executive Committee issued a Decree on the Confiscation of Church Valuables for the Realization of Aid to Victims of Famine. It ordered local councils "to mobilize all of the country's resources, which can serve to aid the famine-stricken population of the Volga region" [39]. The decree contained articles that formally

defended believers' rights. For instance, it stated explicitly that only those items were to be confiscated "that will not critically harm the interests of the cult itself". Representatives of the different faith communities were also required to be present during these operations. All of this was done to emphasize the humanitarian aspect of the campaign, which was designed to help a starving population.

The texts, especially those found in the Politburo archives and authored by either Vladimir Lenin or Leon Trotsky, showed that in reality the campaign had little to do with famine relief. It was, in fact, a "secret campaign aimed at the registration, collection and sale to foreign countries of national treasures" [40, p. 390]. Aid to famine victims merely formed a cover for the party leadership's attempt to clampdown on Church property. This is confirmed by the fact that the Soviet government emphasized the higher clergy's reluctance to part with its riches, citing the condemnation issued by the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church [41]. What makes this campaign so interesting is that the faithful interpreted the confiscation of valuables by State officials as an act of blasphemy, even more so when physical violence was involved. From the first confiscation onwards, they called for a holy war to defend the objects [42]. This not only animated the conflict between the Patriarch and the government, but also fostered a conflict, even schism within the Church itself: the so-called "renewed" branch of Russian Orthodoxy (*Obnovlency*) called for the persecution of their adversaries in the Patriarchal Church.

The scale of the physical violence used in the church valuables campaign remains a subject of discussion. Contemporary ecclesiastical sources emphasize the ferocity of the conflict and how the population tirelessly resisted the confiscations. In the provinces of Kaluga and Tambov, peasants chased away the commissioners after which the government dispatched squads to the insurgent villages. Kaluga itself witnessed a three-day strike by workers outraged by the looting. A spontaneous uprising of parishioners stopped the confiscation of valuables from the cathedral of Staraya Russa. In Petrograd, members of the requisition committee were unable to enter the Kazan and Trinity Cathedrals, after which those trying to protect the Savior's Church on Sennaya Square were dispersed by a cavalry detachment. The best-known event took place in the town of Shuya in the province of Ivanovo-Voznesensk. After the bell of the Resurrection Church rang on 15 March 1922, several thousand faithful ran to the church in an attempt to stop the requisition. They managed to disarm several soldiers before the military opened fire, killing four and injuring dozens [43].

Even if these examples underscore the ecclesiastical view of infinite aggression, we have to remember that the campaign's form and impact were politicized from the beginning. Thus the Politburo deliberately provoked resistance with an eye on framing the defence of church valuables as a violent attack on the government, an anti-state protest that could be used as a pretence to persecute the clergy and destroy the Church's administrative structure. Hence it does not surprise that this period saw a series of show trials of clergymen [44, p. 95]. Regional studies show, however, a more complex picture in which both clergy and faithful showed a far greater level of compassion towards the starving than the Soviet government suggested and were often willing to part with precious materials to help the famine-stricken (apparently unaware of the government's secret agenda). Such cooperation between clergy and state authorities raises the question whether all ecclesiastical leadership saw the seizure of church valuables as an act of blasphemy, as Patriarch Tikhon did. A collection of documents describing the requisition of church valuables in

the province of Don is of special interest since it shows the plurality of actors and discourses on a micro-level.

On the one hand we find the Metropolitan of the Novocherkassk and the Don Region Mitrofanij stating in March 1922 that "it would be blasphemy if a priest or a layman submits a holy object that is then turned into an ingot. But if he himself turns a holy object into an ingot, if he breaks down a chalice into raw material, and forfeits that to you, there is no blasphemy in that" [45, p. 13]. This was a clear attempt to marry respect for religious tradition and adherence to the faith with the confiscation ordered by the Soviet state. On the other hand we see cases in which the requisition of church valuables led to conflict and violence, such as happened on 11 March 1922 in the Nativity of Our Lady Cathedral in the large city of Rostov-on-Don. When officials read out the instructions preceding the seizure, "groups of wailing people erupted from the market" [45, p. 121]. When they then tried to exit the church, they were suddenly surrounded by a violent crowd that had come to stop the authorities from "robbing the church". The official report of the event offers a welcome insight in how state representatives tried to legitimate their actions. It stated how they had "show[n] compassion towards the religious feelings of the faithful" and had refused bringing "armed security", something that "malevolent actors" had interpreted as the go-ahead to "counter the work of the commission". The report also confirmed that the commission members were all "true-born Russians" (rumours of them being Jews had quickly spread through the city) and that the proto-deacon as well as rector of the cathedral had intervened on the officials' behalf, "prevent[ing] the[ir] violent lynching". After a delay of some days to cool down local agitation, the commission resumed its work since "famine does not wait".

This report, which was published in local Bolshevik newspaper *Rabochii Don* (The Labour Don), hinted at how the parish clergy were in fact prepared to cooperate with state authorities whilst some dark force was trying to sow discord. In this way, the Executive Committee could present the population as supportive of the requisitions whilst blaming oppositional forces for orchestrating insubordination. This protest had to be tracked down and persecuted for "organizing a counter-revolutionary rebellion and wilful resistance to the decree of the Central Committee". At the same time, the local militia was instructed to provide aid to the commission "and not hesitate to use military force" if needed [45, p. 122]. According to this view, the government had called in the troops not to cause escalation but to successfully complete the humanitarian mission of collecting church valuable to save starving Russians. Even so, many parishioners saw the requisition of ecclesiastic property as robbery and blasphemy. To them, the decoration of church buildings and donations given to it were an important aspect of traditional Russian piety. Any attempt to stop it happening was seen not as violence but as justice.

The conflict between state officials and local crowds acquired an added layer because of the decree of 20 January 1918, which had nationalized all church property. As a result, the faithful could no longer claim any right to the valuables and were considered "renters" instead; with ownership of ecclesiastical property already transferred to the State, there could be no talk of confiscation[2]. One consequence of this peculiar legal situation was that by designating the actions of those executing the requisitions as blasphemy, critics suddenly became adversaries of the Bolshevik government, effectively declaring themselves

[2] Shershneva-Zitulskaja, I. A. (2005), Legal status of Russian Orthodox Church in Soviet state (1917–1943), PhD diss., Moscow, p. 99–100. (In Russian)

to be counterrevolutionaries. This analogy between blasphemy and the revolutionary project, including its violence, was especially widespread in émigré literature, as illustrated by Alexander Valentinov's *The Black Book or the Storm of the Heavens* (1924 in English, 1925 in German). It contained a compilation of documents that characterized Soviet policy as a fight against all things religious.

Folklore Interpretations of Blasphemous and Sacrilegious Acts

Alexander Panchenko has claimed that the uncovering of relics did not have much effect on popular religious culture [7, p. 451]. For although in some places rumours would circulate of Bolsheviks "replac[ing] relics" or of relics decomposing after being touched by blasphemers, the inelegant dealings with holy tissues and bones appears to have troubled the faithful far less than one would think. By contrast, the confiscation of church property and narratives of sacrilege as well as divine retribution occupied a prominent place in (post-)Soviet folklore. As early as 1923, an ethnographer from Kostroma published the legend of "The Devil Baby" as part of a collection of local stories [46]. Vasily Smirnov noted that the legend of the birth of a "devil baby" into a communist family was also known in the Yaroslavl, Tver and Vologda provinces as well as in Moscow. In the original version, the communists' burning of religious icons caused the birth of a demon. Blasphemy and sacrilege had invoked God's wrath and led to retribution. An integral part of the cult of the "devil baby" was its display — i.e. the display of a deformed baby — in cultural institutions across the Soviet Union. Indeed, rather than mass religiosity, the peasant veneration of icons, the rejection of the Bolshevik State or apocalyptic sentiments, it was the new trend for exhibitions in urban centres that is perhaps the most astounding development of this period. The public display of monstrosities and abnormalities such as the "devil baby" formed a curious response, even an inversion, to the presentation of relics in museums.

In fact, similar legends outlived the Soviet period [47–49]. Most revolved around a similar set-up in which the first part of the story tells of a person's attempt to defile a relic (mostly an icon) or destroy a church, which is then followed in the second part by divine punishment [50–52]. Folklore recycled the idea of an act and its respective retribution along the lines of 'he chopped an icon apart and got chopped himself apart by a train that very evening'. There were many different examples of an act of blasphemy or sacrilege supposedly causing some form of divine retribution [53]. Well-known were also stories of retributions linked to the violation of icons — throwing it away, using it on the floor et cetera — which led to all sorts of personal calamities including the loss of loved ones. Researchers Ljubov Yurchuk and Ilya Kazakov argue that legends from Pskov region about divine retribution tend to list the names of those involved [54]. What is interesting here is that despite the fact that the destruction of sacred images was very much a phenomenon of the early-Soviet years, these legends mostly put the blame not on the chaotic and challenging historical context but on individual agency. By reliving the retribution that befell those who had committed acts seen as blasphemous and sacrilegious, folklore helped perpetuate experiences from the years immediately following the Russian Revolution to the point that they outlived the Soviet period.

Conclusions

The debate on blasphemy in revolutionary Russia was initially tied to the political system and ecclesiastical structure of the Romanov Empire. Since the Orthodox Church had for centuries been a loyal ally of the imperial administration, it now faced charges of having used icons, relics and other objects of veneration to deceive the uneducated masses. This narrative was developed with the help of clergymen, who were raised with the idea of having to cleanse folk religiosity from allegedly superstitious elements. The campaigns to uncovering relics and confiscated church valuables fits this narrative, as it turned on the idea of bringing Enlightenment and forging a rational as well as scientific world. Other clergymen and believers instead saw in the aforementioned attempts to eradicate aspects of ecclesiastical culture and folk religiosity a direct insult to religious feelings. To counter such claims, and with a monopoly on media coverage, the Bolsheviks declared all ecclesiastic properties national treasures and portrayed their requisition as a humanitarian project aimed at helping famine-stricken Russians. Accusations of blasphemy and sacrilege, or more general of looting, thus lost their legal basis. They also placed accusers semantically in the camp of those opposing the revolution.

The Soviet state used a rhetoric that would historically have been seen as blasphemous as well as actions that would have been dubbed sacrilegious to push its agenda for modernization, for the redistribution of material resources, the de-legitimization of imperial institutions and the neutralization of political opponents. Violence was a steady companion here. It could take the form of repression by removing relics and liturgical vessels that were venerated by individual believers. It could be cleansing whereby the relic of a saint would be destroyed (and the saint 'murdered' — a kind of personification that explains why the fate of relics were occasionally discussed in court cases). Violence also emerged in the physical exchanges between State officials and believers resisting the unsealing of relics and usage of liturgical vessels outside of worship or mass as well as countering the expulsion of church valuables. Finally, a form of symbolic violence could be found in the way in which the faithful were forced to attend the display of relics in public exhibition hall or in the photographic coverage of sacrilegious acts. This was a deliberate move to confront and hurt the feelings of individual believers. Although the examples discussed in this article, especially those involving physical violence, were in majority contained to the immediate post-revolutionary period, the construction of legends and their integration in Russian folklore ensured that the connection between blasphemy, sacrilege and divine retribution survived the Soviet Union itself.

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Богохульство и насилие во время Русской революции и первые годы Советского Союза

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В статье анализируются случаи богохульства, имевшие место как во время Русской революции, так и в более поздний период. Дебаты о богохульстве в революционной России изначально были связаны с политической системой и церковной структурой империи Романовых. Одним из возможных объяснений этой связки является политический дискурс «победившей революции», согласно которому революционные потрясения привели к формированию современного, прогрессивного и секулярного общества. Реконструкция дебатов о богохульстве, да и о святотатстве, не вписывается в это повествование. Советское государство использовало риторику, которая воспринималась населением в качестве кощунственной, и проводило мероприятия, воспринимаемые как богохульные, для продвижения своей программы модернизации, перераспределения материальных ресурсов, делегитимизации имперских институтов и нейтрализации политических оппонентов. Насилие было здесь постоянным спутником. Оно принимало форму репрессий при изъятии церковных ценностей и литургических сосудов, которые почитались верующими, и специальных акций по «вскрытию мощей», при которых почитаемые святыни изымались или уничтожались. Насилие также проявилось в физических столкновениях между представителями советской власти и верующими, сопротивлявшимися вскрытию мощей и использованию литургических сосудов вне богослужения, а также противодействовавших изъятию церковных ценностей. Наконец, форма символического насилия была обнаружена в том, как верующих заставляли присутствовать на демонстрации мощей/святынь в общественном выставочном зале или при фотографии «разоблачений многовекового обмана». В исследовании особое внимание уделяется фольклору об изъятии церковного имущества, разрушении церквей, вскрытии мощей, сохранившему народную интерпретацию мероприятий властей.

Ключевые слова: богохульство, насилие, история РПЦ, российская революция, конфискация церковного имущества, почитание реликвий, вскрытие мощей, церковный фольклор.

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