

## METAMORPHOSES IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STATE AND CHURCH IN 1920S-1940S: REGIONAL ASPECT

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**Abstract:** The paper on the materials of the Mordovian ASSR analyzes regional aspects of the confessional policy led by the Soviet Union in the 1920s - 1940s, in particular its evolution from mass repressions against the Russian Orthodox Church, Muslim Ummah, Protestant communities to the commonly known ideological "relaxation" during the Great Patriotic War. Based on the analysis of regional materials the conclusion is made that locally the repressions and restrictions of the Soviet power against confessions almost never ceased (only their intensity changed), and "religious liberalization" during the war on the territory of Mordovia occurred to an extremely small extent.

**Keywords:** Mordovia, Soviet confessional policy, Orthodoxy, Islam, anti-religious struggle, Great Patriotic War, partial revival of confessional life.

### 1 Introduction

The first half of the 20th century holds a special place in the country's history: World War I and the empire demise, the revolution and the civil war, the birth of the Soviet state, Stalin's modernization and defarming, victory in World War II and the emergence of a new superpower. It was a time when, in favor of accelerated industrialization and urbanization the centuries-old foundations of the Russian state and society laid primarily by traditional peasant and religious values, had been consistently and sometimes ruthlessly destroyed over two decades. However, in the harsh conditions when the Great Patriotic War begun, the atheistic power was forced to stop the raging war against God and appeal to the deep patriotic feelings of the peoples living in the multinational Soviet state that were greatly fed by their religious faith.

Scrutiny of the regional aspect in the relationship between state and religion within the indicated chronological framework allows to elucidate its peculiarities, the depth and scope of changes, the scale of persecution of pre-war times and the revival of religious life during the war with Hitler's Germany.

The population of counties in the Middle Volga provinces, in 1928 united to form the Mordovian District (from 1930 - Mordovian Autonomous Region; from 1934 - Mordovian ASSR), was engaged mainly in agriculture. Russian and Mordovian (Erzyan and Mokshan) peasants settled in Mordovia mainly practiced Orthodox Christianity, there were some Muslims (represented by local Tatar peasants) and small groups of Protestants. The image of Mordovia as an agrarian territory was upheld with censuses for at least four decades (the rural population made up 95.4% in 1926, 93% in 1939; 81% in 1950; 63.8% in 1970) (Razhivin & Shirokova, 2007, p. 33), which could not but affect the preservation of elements of traditional culture, especially among Mordovians and Tatars.

As is known, in the post-October period, the policy towards confessions (especially towards the Russian Orthodox Church) was based on the Decree of the RSFSR Council of People's Commissars On the Separation of Church and State, and Separation of School and Church, published on January 23 (February 2), 1918. Already in the first years of the Soviet rule, it was implemented against the background of a pronounced divisive policy (support for "renewal"), large-scale anti-religious and anti-church propaganda, mainly directed against traditional Orthodoxy, which was associated with the Patriarch Tikhon. But the persecution of the Church and other confessions became

most outrageous during the first five-year plans - the time of grand economic, social, and cultural changes affecting every aspect of the Soviet society.

### 2 Literature Review

In the USSR, the coverage of state and church relationship was almost infinitely dominated by the atheistic concept, according to which confessions (Orthodoxy, Islam, etc.) were presented as public institutions that contradicted the progressive development of the country following the path of industrialization, collectivization and cultural revolution. In Soviet historiography, a warmer attitude of the authorities towards the Russian Orthodox Church and other confessions during the Great Patriotic War did not receive any assessment.

And it was only in the second half of the 1980s, when the ideological pressure was lifted, that researchers were able to seriously focus on, first of all, the centuries-old history of Orthodoxy and Islam and their role in the formation and development of Russian civilization at various historical stages. Changes in the relationship between state and religion at the national level in the post-October decade, persecutions during the first five-year plans, and the revival of religious life during the Great Patriotic War were examined in detail in the works of M.I. Odintsov (2014) and A.S. Kochetkova (Odintsov & Kochetkova, 2014), D.V. Pospelovsky (1995), M.V. Shkarovsky (2010), and others.

The key features of the above processes on the territory of modern Mordovia are explored in the works of A.I. Belkin (1995, 2001), V.I. Laptun (Belyaeva et al., 2013), N.F. Belyaeva (Belyaeva & Yaushina, 2013; Belyaeva et al., 2013), V.V. Miroshkin et al. (2019), E.N. and N.F. Mokshin, E.N. Mokshina (2005), T. D. Nadkin, A.V. Malankin (2013), and others.

### 3 Materials and Methods

The research purpose is to analyze the regional aspects of the USSR confessional policy in 1920s-1940s (based on materials of Mordovian ASSR). The research objectives are as follows: analyze the mass repressions in a post-war period against the Russian Orthodox Church, Muslim Ummah, Protestant communities and their implications; to reveal the causes and peculiarities of ideological "relaxation" in relation to the religious life of people during the Great Patriotic War.

The methodological basis for the research was a multi-level analysis based on the diverse methodological principles. The abstract level of methodology applied in this research includes the general philosophical foundations of the cognition of being, such as the principle of objectivity and consideration of the multifactor nature of the phenomenon under study (here - the Soviet policy towards confessions in Mordovia); the synergetic approach, which through the term "bifurcation point" actually postulates the variative nature of the historical process (contrary to the popular cliché that "history does not tolerate the subjunctive mood"); a systemic approach based on the idea of a research target (here - relationship between state and confessions) as an integral complex of interrelated elements, i.e. a system; deductive (inference from the general to the specific) and inductive (inference from the specific to the general) methods. Thus, the use of both deductive and inductive methods helped to correlate each specific episode with the general setting in Mordovia, to consider the impact of state "atheistic" policy on socio-cultural transformation of peasantry in the region.

### 4 Results and Discussion

All the twists, turns and metamorphoses in the relationship between state and confessions during 1920s-1940s to a greater or

lesser extent showed in the Middle Volga region, which included multinational and multi-confessional Mordovia.

In the first decade of the Soviet rule, the overwhelming brunt was absorbed by the monasteries being the centers of Orthodox spirituality. In addition, it was planned to decompose the church from within by creating a renovation current. If the first task, i.e. the closure of monasteries (in Mordovia: Chufarovskiy, Kurilovskiy, Svyato-Olginskiy, Sanaksarskiy, Sarovskiy and other monasteries), opening (desecration) of holy relics was successfully handled by the authorities, the situation with "renovation" was not so unambiguous. A split of the Russian Orthodox Church from the inside, planned by the Joint State Political Directorate, actually failed, and the authorities had to abandon the "divide and rule" principle. In connection therewith, the task of undercutting religiosity in the society had to be tackled by different means.

Later, the League of Militant Atheists (LMA), established in 1925 with the Komsomol youth as its core, became "the assault force" in the fight against "religious vestiges". Its signature was demonstrative disrespect for religion and public insults to people who were religious and celebrated church holidays, who refused to participate in cleanup Saturdays and other Soviet events.

Transition to complete collectivization and de-kulakization in the fall and winter of 1929 in a peasant country meant a new page in the fight against religion, which still remained the backbone of peasant ideology.

This policy led to the following results: by 1934 there were 576 Orthodox churches in Mordovia, of which only 233 were functioning (data as of December 1, 1934 - the authors). For the incomplete four and a half months, from December 1, 1934 to April 10, 1935, the number of functioning churches went down to 71, and by the end of 1930s there was not a single really functioning Orthodox church left in the autonomy (Belyaeva et al., 2013, p. 33).

Some church buildings and monastic complexes were in the best case used for cultural and educational purposes, and in the worst case - destroyed, used as maintenance buildings and even as prisons (Chufarovskiy monastery). The bright example is Kovylykyn district in MASSR, where, according to the data for 1938, in the villages of Shadim, Staroye Drakino, Mordovskoye Kolomasovo, Kochelaevo, Voskresenskaya Lashma, Volnaya Lashma, Gumny, Parapino, Vechkino, Samayevka, Pokrovskoye, Vysokoye, Izosimovka, Troitsk the churches were converted into barns; two more churches in Troitsk were used to store building materials, and the fourth church in Troitsk was empty. In Alkin, Tokmov, Chepurinovka, Pokrovsk, Ezhovka clubs and reading rooms were arranged in churches; in Stary Drakin and Perevesie they were rebuilt into schools; in Kashaevo village, the church was a place where the electric power plant was installed; and in Budy village, an orthodox temple was turned into a cattle yard (Belkin, 2001, p. 239).

However, despite this situation, many believers in the pre-war republic secretly prayed and performed Orthodox religious rites. A typical case was described in the village of Muravyovka (Ruzaevskiy district, MASSR) by Anastasia Sarasova, a local from the village where a church was closed. Then "people began to covertly gather and pray at homes. The communists or Komsomol members who married in religious ceremonies or baptized their children were expelled from the party. And still people got married in religious ceremonies, and almost all children were baptized. I secretly brought the priest from the neighboring village, and he conducted a rite. So we never forgot the God. And those Communists, who came to remove bells from churches and to close churches, were not let in the houses to stay for a night, peasants would not give them a piece of bread or a cup of water, such was the hatred of people to the destroyers" (Epishin, 1992, p. 3).

It should be highlighted that in the first years of Soviet rule, the attitude of the newly established state to Islam and the Muslim Ummah was much more tolerant than to Orthodoxy. However,

in the second half of 1920s, the grip of the Soviet state on Muslims tightened. This tendency became fully apparent in Mordovia, where the local authorities, as part of intensified fight against religion, almost completely closed or destroyed all mosques and all madrasas without exception (Martynenko et al., 2016, p. 123).

By the end of 1930s, the same fate as that of many Orthodox and Muslim believers in Mordovia had befallen local Protestants: Baptists and Adventists either died in the repression or were sent to prisons or camps.

The beginning of the Great Patriotic War is associated with a new stage in the relationship between state and confessions, a new impetus for which was given by Stalin's meeting in the Kremlin on the night from 4th to 5th of September, 1943, with Metropolitans Sergius (Stragorodskiy), Alexis (Simanskiy) and Nikolay (Yarushevich) and the subsequent restoration of the Patriarchate (Odintsov & Kochetkova, 2014, p. 181).

It is necessary to recognize that the patriotic position of the ROC, which, with a few exceptions, did not succumb to the temptations of collaborationism, contributed in no small measure to the weakening of the Soviet leadership. Orthodox churches that had been devastated over more than two decades of anti-Christian terror were reopening for worship.

But, on the other hand, the real life practice showed that the new instructions from the top were implemented very inconsistently at the local level, in various regions across the country, and the actual indulgence of local authorities towards the Church and believers was combined with all kinds of restrictive measures.

The revival of the Penza Eparchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, to which the Orthodox parishes of the Mordovian ASSR were referred, began in 1944 with the appointment of Bishop Mikhail (Postnikov), a man of great education and energy.

In the course of the research, it was revealed that by 1943 there was no single functioning church left in MASSR. While most buildings were still intact: out of 422 non-functioning church buildings in 30 districts within the republic, 378 were used for economic and cultural purposes (Yurchenkov, 2005, p. 127.) It was obvious that this gave some hope to the population of the republic's villages, especially since a considerable portion of the population preserved fairly strong religious sentiments and eagerly responded to changes in the policy of the Soviet leaders in the religious sphere.

However, at first some leaders of local Soviets did not realize that the government's policy toward religious organizations had changed. This often led to wrong actions and improper assessment of the situation. Against this background, two divergent trends in the attitude towards petitions from believers were observed: some interpreted these measures as permissive, while others, on the contrary, in every possible way hindered the expression of will of the religious citizens.

As a result, by December 1944 in Mordovia only three out of 72 requests for church opening received from believers were satisfied - from Temnikovskiy, Saranskiy and Shiringushskiy regions (Malankin, 2017, p. 86). Between 1944 and 1945, another 278 requests from believers from different MASSR regions for opening of churches were received, which attested that the villagers and the urban dwellers strongly need spiritual support. However, in 1945 only seven churches operated within the republic, one in Saransk and six in rural areas, and this number was very low (Belkin, 1995, p. 157).

As of June 1, 1945, in Mordovia 7 priests, 2 deacons and 1 psalmist were registered by the authorities and allowed to conduct church services (Yurchenkov, 2005, p. 153). By August 1946, there were already 19 churches and prayer houses in Mordovia, by the end of 1947, there were 27 churches, and 39 priests were registered (Belkin, 1995, p. 149).

Thus, the only way out for believers was to gather at home, where services, according to memoirs of residents from Govorovo and Meltsany villages in Staroshaigovsky district of the Republic of Mordovia, due to the absence of registered priests, were conducted by nuns from the nearby closed monasteries. The nuns baptized the newborns and read burial services over the dead. The local authorities were aware of this, but in the changed circumstances did not interfere (Field materials from N. E. Goryachev. Zernov Anatoly Fedorovich..., 2017; Field materials from N. E. Goryachev. Mishina Vera Nikolaevna..., 2018).

In the first post-war years, the flow of requests from the believers for reopening of churches did not stop: 146 in 1946, 111 in 1947, 106 in 1948 (Belkin, 1995, p. 157). However, most requests were not accommodated, as the authorities tried to keep the religious life of people under strict and highly restrictive control.

The revival of religious consciousness could not but raise concerns of the Soviet leadership, particularly as during religious celebrations in some villages there were cases when work in collective farms was stopped and pilgrimages to holy places revived.

Paradoxically, but Khrushchev's "Thaw", which affected many aspects of life and culture in the Soviet Union, not only did not extend to religious life, but on the contrary, brought a new wave of persecution against the Church and other religious communities in the USSR.

## 5 Conclusion

Thus, the Great Patriotic War became a kind of landmark in the confessional policy of the Soviet state: the repressions of the post-revolutionary decade and the era of collectivization were replaced by partial liberalization of religious life, relaxation and even some manifestations of benevolence towards confessions on the part of authorities.

It is quite clear that J. Stalin and his retinue used the potential of the Church, which, despite persecution, wielded influence over a considerable portion of population in order to unite people in the face of the aggressor and bolster their patriotic sentiments. To a lesser extent this liberalization concerned Muslims and did not affect Protestant communities at all.

At the same time, in the backwoods and hinterland, locally, this change in confessional policy was almost not felt. As an illustrative example, this paper presents materials on the Mordovian ASSR, where during the war and in the first post-war decade, local authorities were extremely reluctant to open new churches, even despite the instructions from the top. As for the Muslims in Mordovia, until the "perestroika" era, the only functioning religious building for them was a mosque in the Altay village, Romodanovsky district. Religious relaxation of this period did not extend to the Protestants in Mordovia as a matter of principle: moreover, for Baptists and Pentecostals the trials in Saransk lied ahead in the early 1960s as part of the new anti-religious campaign initiated by Khrushchev.

However, repressive policies toward confessions (weakened at one time and then recommenced with new vigor) have not achieved the pursued goals: Russian peasants, including those in the region under scrutiny (Mordva, Tatars, Russians) in the vast majority maintained their commitment to religion.

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