Panel: Church, State, and Sports in the Soviet Union

Kevin Smith

Title: “Church and State Relations in the Soviet Union During the 1920’s”
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Kevin Smith is a third-year student at IPFW majoring in history and philosophy and minoring in economics. His main historical interests are in the history of philosophy, specifically medieval philosophy, but he is also interested in the history of Christianity and how church and state relations have changed over time. He is currently employed by Dr. Bernt Buldt as a research assistant working on editing Rudolf Carnap’s Introduction to Symbolic Logic and its Applications for a second edition. After graduating, he hopes to go on to graduate school in philosophy.

Abstract

Prior to the October Revolution of 1917, the Russian East Orthodox Church had complete authority over the spiritual affairs of Orthodox Russians. Starting with Peter the Great’s Church reform of 1721, the Orthodox clergy slowly developed into a professionalized separate class of people. The reform created the Holy Synod, council of high ranking clerics in charge of the Church, which later acquired a patriarch just prior to the October Revolution. This kind of organized and concentrated power could not be tolerated by the new Soviet government. From its very beginnings, the Soviet Union struggled with how to handle the tension between the Communist Party’s explicit goal of atheism and the state’s official doctrine of freedom of religion.

In the 1920s, the Soviet Union and Communist Party used three main methods to remove the Russian East Orthodox Church, and religion more generally, from Russia society: decrees, force, and propaganda. When the Bolsheviks first came to power they were too weak to remove the Church from society by force, so they had to settle with making bold unenforceable decrees. This was their main strategy from the October Revolution until the famine of 1921-1923. During the famine, the state forcibly started taking Church valuables to sell for famine relief. Some Orthodox believers and clergy resisted the confiscation of sacred objects, but the state swiftly put the protests down. Even though the official reason for taking the sacred objects was famine relief, there is good reason to think this was just an excuse. The Church still had great influence over the people, and the famine gave the state the opportunity to turn public opinion against it. After the official Church had been weakened during the famine, the Soviet state started focusing on getting the people to stop believing in religion. They did this in various ways, but the most dramatic thing they did was create the League of the Militant Godless in 1925. The main activity of the organization was to create and distribute anti-religious propaganda amongst the masses. Despite having the support of the Communist party and 5.5 million members, there is very little evidence to suggest it gained any sincere mass support. Out of the three methods used by the Soviet Union
to remove religion from Russian society the aggressive propaganda methods of the League of the Militant Godless were the least effective.

Bibliographical Note

The article “Church and State Relations in The Soviet Union during the 1920s” uses a variety of primary and secondary sources. Most of the primary sources are from Vladimir Lenin and Yemelyan Yaroslavsky. As both the leader of the Bolshevik Party and head of the Soviet government, Lenin had an unparalleled influence on how the Soviet Union dealt with the Russian East Orthodox Church during the 1920s. Yaroslavsky was the first president of the League of the Militant Godless so what he had to say sheds a lot of light on how members of the League viewed their task of removing religion from Soviet society.

The secondary sources are used to provide information about the Church prior to the revolution and help provide context for the information derived from primary sources. G. L. Freeze’s article “Handmaiden of the State? The Church in Imperial Russia Reconsidered,” Daniel Peris’s Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless, and William Husband’s Godless Communists: Atheism and Society In Soviet Russia, 1917-1932 were some of the most helpful secondary sources.