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## RUSSIAN PEASANTRY'S RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIONS IN THE 1920S (MATERIALS FROM THE VOLGA REGION)

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### *Abstract*

The article assesses the level of religiousness of peasants in the Volga region, on the example of Penza and Saratov provinces, in the first post-revolutionary decade. The 1920s were marked by an increase in the religious indifference of peasants. One of the trends in the development of anti-clerical sentiments in the Volga region is the transition of public consciousness not to atheism, but to sectarianism. In general, the change in the religiousness of peasants occurred on two levels. On the one hand, religious traditions had a strong influence on the daily behavior of peasants, although not as much as in pre-revolutionary Russia. Believers, the main contingent of whom in the region under consideration were elderly men and women, were less affected by the changes. The main elements of the system of religious beliefs: the temple, icons, the Orthodox cross, ritual practice, clergy service, and the moral image of the clergy were firmly entwined in the general canvas of everyday life of peasants. On the other hand, atheistic propaganda and cultural work in the village changed the outlook of peasants. The young generation was the most active in anti-religious manifestations. For them, their break with religion meant that they could move up the ladder of office, and thus become involved in social benefits. It is this category of villagers that will be the basis of the Soviet power in the future, implementing the ideas of collectivization.

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**Keywords:** Farmers, religiosity, Russian Orthodox Church, religion, atheistic propaganda.



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## **1. Introduction**

Scientific understanding of the peculiarities of the religious life of the Russian people requires an appeal to the spiritual traditions of peasantry, which was one of the main bearers of Orthodox culture, Russian religiousness and morality. The study of this problem makes it possible to consider a person not only as an object of influence, but also in the role of the subject forming the internal content of the historical process, allows us to judge about the peculiarities of the mental structure of society on a certain chronological segment.

It should be noted that it is necessary to study the regional aspect of the problem, which is due to the difference in the potential of the socio-cultural environment of individual administrative formations. Appealing to the regional history will allow to avoid the schematic character and pressure of evaluation judgments already established in the scientific world, creates a reliable and detailed system of argumentation.

The research uses the materials of two Volga provinces (Penza and Saratov), which is caused not only by their geographical proximity, but also by the change of administrative boundaries in the course of the development of the regions, which was an additional factor in the emergence of the community characteristics of farmers' everyday life. On the other hand, the use of materials from the two neighbouring provinces solves the problem of isolation and isolation of a certain region from the life of the country as a whole and removes possible accusations of narrowness of the evidence base.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The study of the content of religious ideas of the Russian peasantry in the conditions of the government policy aimed at the elimination of "religious relics" is complicated by two circumstances. Changes in the worldview (in this case, religious), religiously oriented mental structures of society as a whole can be characterized as a very complex and lengthy moral and psychological process, and, therefore, to expect that the number of secular individuals within one decade will exceed the number of carriers of the patriarchal picture of the world is not possible. In addition, the influence of communist ideology as a form of quasi-religiousism cannot be denied.

## **3. Research Questions**

The extent and nature of changes in the religious life of farmers in the Penza and Saratov provinces under the influence of the state policy aimed at fierce struggle against religion in the first post-revolutionary decade.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

Analysis of the religious worldview and ritual practice of the Russian peasantry in order to identify factors, directions, nature, features and results of evolution in the first third of the twentieth century under the influence of public policy.

## 5. Research Methods

The methodological basis of the work is based on several complementary principles. The main one is the principle of historicism. The given principle has allowed investigating religious life of farmers in development, a parity of its steady forms and innovations at separate stages of evolution.

The method of system-historical analysis allows to consider the phenomenon of religiosity in a complex way and to study it from different sides, taking into account its structural elements. In addition, this method was used to identify the significance of the religious component in the social system.

The method of comparative analysis played an important role in comparing the elements of religious culture of different regions. It is aimed at revealing the essence of the phenomena through the similarity and difference of their inherent properties. This method is also based on the movement from the single to the general (induction), which allows taking into account the peculiarities, revealing common patterns.

When processing the questionnaire data, the method of statistical analysis was used, the purpose of which is to measure the phenomena, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The method of content analysis was also used in the work, when in the collected homogeneous material (reports, letters, etc.) fragments of text (sequences) are distinguished, which are structured by topics and later on the formalized material is subjected to a new analysis from the point of view of repeatability of the same type of information.

## 6. Findings

At the beginning of the 20s of the twentieth century, a large-scale company was established to plant an atheistic worldview. Lectures, conversations, debates on natural science topics greatly contributed to the emergence of doubts among farmers in the question of "God's existence". Local party bodies recorded in their reports the results of the impact of such activities on the farmers' consciousness. In particular, in the report of the county commission on work in the village in Penza sponges of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (b) about the religiousness of the population of Kerenskaya volost it was said: "It is possible to ascertain that religion in the peasantry is not the same as it was before... When I dealt with them the origin of the Earth and man according to the Bible, this conversation caused one laugh in relation to this creation. And one farmer after that stated: "This is how we were fooled, told that if you read, you would go mad. You won't go crazy, but you'll know the truth about what we've been treated to for so many years. The conversation was conducted under Christmas, people gathered 60 people and all the respectable age. In the reports of the county committees of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (b) of Saratov province it was noted: "Natural science lectures and talks have a known effect on religious beliefs, for example, a 55-year-old man from Red Yar sent a letter to the editorial office of the newspaper "Tractor", in which he writes: "I believed in God all the time, but when I was sown last year on the advice of an agronomist, and I had a better harvest than others, I realized that God does not give me a harvest," "There is a great demand for the Bible for believers and non-believers" by E. Yaroslavl. This book is listened to with great interest and in the end it gives brilliant results. For example, a student of the Saratov Rabfak sent a middle-aged peasant (the Lobynets Farm of the Kotov Parish) a "Bible for believers and nonbelievers", who read and came to the meeting, began to agitate that

there is no god, these are attempts to deceive us. Some men came down on him calling him a godless man. He shows them the book, "Behold, read and know that our asses are fooling us. The desire of the peasants to study anti-religious literature, as noted in the reports, was explained, first of all, by the desire to get an answer to the question "Is there a God", because the agitators could not give a natural scientific explanation due to their unpreparedness and ignorance. "As it was noted in the report of the Serdoba district committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (b) of the Saratov province, this craving sometimes has ugly forms, as in the Ivanovo cell of the Chubarovskaya parish, where a circle of godless people was organized to study the Gospel in order to find contradictions and beat the believers in disputes. The eradication of illiteracy also played a role. The reports pointed to the demand among the farmers for anti-religious talks and debates, increased interest in the universe, the origin of life on earth, the emergence of religion, religious holidays. Nevertheless, there are reports that "peasants are not satisfied only with reading anti-religious books aloud ...", "peasants are very critical of every book and every word about religion".

The ambivalence and reversibility of such processes must also be taken into account. The idea of God still held a prominent place in the peasant "picture of the world". In 1928, the Penza Regional Executive Committee received the following letter: "In September 1927, the citizens of the Penza Regional Executive Committee received the following letter Flat Temnikovskaya parish at a general meeting decided to close its church, and the church building was converted into a room of the izba-reading-room ... The advanced village asset is afraid of not making the church reopened as if the GIC, and then have to ask God for clemency for such a serious crime committed by godless people over the temple of God.

The pages of the Penza newspaper "Advanced Village" for 1927 describe the case when an elderly peasant with. In response to a question from the Deputy Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Cabinet of Ministers "why the winter crops are sown late", he replied that "the seeds were not consecrated in the ass, which are consecrated for the second rescue ("Transformation"), and, by the way, in other parishes of Bednodemyanovsky uyezd by 75 per cent. for this reason, the winter crops were sown on September 13–15" (Sadyrova, 2010, p. 26).

Attempts to plant new cult events have only had mixed success. Thus, in his work, Lebedeva (2006) cites the content of the letter about the celebration of the eighth anniversary of October, taken from the farmers' correspondence: The second plan was about the choice that the peasants had to make. The Soviet celebrations coincided with the fair. The peasants, having visited the school cleaned for the holiday, mostly went to church. The documents on the farmer movement in the Saratov Province in 1917–1922 contain information that the peasants of the Sinenka Parish in the Saratov Province decided to celebrate the day of the revolution and honor the memory of the fallen "freedom fighters", having served the funeral service in the local church. Demonstrators sang revolutionary songs and a funeral anthem (Rybkov, 2003).

One of the characteristic features of the preservation of the former system of religious beliefs in the 20s is the existence of superstitions. In particular, the analysis of letters from rural residents to the "Peasant Newspaper", Sukhova (2008), revealed indications of preservation of superstitions in farm life.

The questionnaire survey "On the Influence of the War on the Life of the Population" conducted by the Russian Academy of the History of Material Culture in 1923–1925 in the Penza Province contains ethnographic description of individual villages, which testifies to the preservation of faith in housewives, witches, sorcerers, spirits and the afterlife among the older generation. By analyzing the answers to the question "How do icons and churches look now?", Lebedeva (2006) revealed a sharply negative attitude to the church and icons in 17 % of those who filled out the questionnaires (the reference to young people only), in addition, 37 % (mostly the same age group) recorded an indifferent attitude to religion, 33 % – firmly attached to religious beliefs (elderly and middle-aged people).

The clearly contradictory attitude of peasants towards religion is traced among those who were involved in the new forms of industrial collective economy that emerged during the first years of the revolution, including new forms of social dormitory. Revolutionary changes in the way of life prevented farmers from abandoning their ancestors' spiritual experience with the same ease and speed. For example, in the Malo-Azyanskaya Commune of the Krasnoslobodsk District of Penza Province, "almost all women go to church on holidays, baptize babies, bury the dead according to the church rite, in times of serious illness summon a priest to their homes and receive communion" (Lebedeva, 2006, p. 36).

The response of believers to the closure of churches and the persecution of priests is the withdrawal of national religiosity into the "underground", expressed in the creation of a secret national church. Faithful Russian peasants were forced in some situations to assume the functions of priests to the extent that they could cope with them. This led to the formation of a special group of people in the Russian village, who, depending on the location, may be called "saints", "pilgrims", "nuns", "singers", "readers". In the absence of full-fledged church life in the rural community, such functions are most often assumed by women (Pashina, 2008).

The secular tradition allowed only women who had fulfilled their marital and maternal duties to manifest an overpowering devotion, as they considered the vocation of women in the family and childbearing, rather than in religious affairs (Meehan, 1993).

Usually, widows who lost their children to their mothers, old virgins, and often wives of repressed priests, i.e. women who had made a vow to serve God due to circumstances that were usually tragic, became "saints". In the absence of a priest, they had absolute religious authority among the villagers (Pashina, 2008).

Female farmers were the most conservative force behind the preservation of religious practices in village life. In the mass demonstrations recorded by the OGPU bodies "due to the kinks in the church affairs", rural women played the main role (Denisova, 2007). It was women who were at the forefront of defenders of religion, as it was observed in 1922, during the period of the autopsy campaign (Leontieva, 2001).

It is telling that, in the process of analyzing women's mass unrest in the context of a policy of collectivization, speeches in defense of religion and the church occupy a special place. Viola (2010) calculated that in the first half of 1930, along with 1154 baby riots of anti-collective nature, 778 mass demonstrations took place on religious grounds (ratio of 1.5:1). In the second half of the year, 12% of women's speeches were also based on religion. Viola sees the reasons for this zeal in favour of religion in part in the psychology of the Russian peasant woman, the so-called "petty bourgeois instincts", which

were more pronounced in women than in men. The petty bourgeois instincts were mainly related to farming, providing food for the family. They also included issues related to church and religion (Viola, 2010).

The revolutionary crisis and the Civil War that followed it provoked a crisis of perception and brought about irreversible changes in the "world view" of the entire Russian society and peasantry, among others. As a result, this predetermined the replication of anticlerical sentiments (Sukhova, 2008). It should be noted that the rural clergy in the 1920s lost any material support from the state: the payment of state salaries, pensions, etc. was stopped. According to the adopted charter of 1923, the parish community assumed the obligation to pay for the work of the church parish. Thus, the clergy lost part of their income, which led to the fact that the differences between the masses of farmers and priests in the way of life were practically evened out. However, this "democratization of morals", the reduction of the respectful distance in relations with the priests did not contribute to the piety before them. Criticism of those priests, who did not correspond to the popular ideas about the clergyman, until 1917 was restrained by the pious farmer's fear of falling into the sin of condemnation, especially severe in relation to a person holding the priesthood. As part of the peasantry's internal retreat from faith and the church, such criticism became increasingly unbridled and heated by revolutionary agitators of an atheistic nature, and after 1917. – In the past few years, the Russian government's policy and ideological pressure has resulted in caricature of "popes" on the club stage (Gromyko, 2001).

One of the trends in the development of anti-clerical sentiments in the Russian village is the transition of public consciousness not to atheism, but to sectarianism, i.e. the preservation of religious motivation. For example, the February 1925 report of the Russian State Pedagogical University (OGPU) on the state of sects within the Penza Province reported that "a particularly strong growth of sects was observed in the period of 1919–21...". "The overwhelming majority of ... sects combine mainly the middle class and the poor. The small number of Kulak cult members is explained by the fact that they hold on to their "Orthodox religion" too tightly and do not allow any changes in it. In total, by 1925, there were 15 sects in Penza Province, of which the most numerous were Baptist and Evangelical Christian sects (330 and 340-400 people, respectively). In the memo to the head of the agitation department of the Saratov regional committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (1925) the following data are given: about 80 sectarian congregations (in the province), which include Baptists, Molokans, Mennonites, Adventists, students, runaways, Pomors' consent and Tolstoy. Each community had between 20 and 160 people, mostly peasants (Sadyrova, 2010). Perhaps the sects seemed much preferable to a church in decline, attracting peasants with its rationalistic teachings and clear explanations. It should be noted that in the first post-revolutionary years the attitude of the authorities towards sects was much more positive than that of the Russian Orthodox Church. This was primarily due to the fact that the sects saw the unification of people who were in opposition not only to the official religion of autocratic Russia - Orthodoxy, but also to its statehood, which made it possible to consider the sectarians potential allies in the fight against the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time, it was supposed that under favourable social conditions the sects would disintegrate by themselves. It was only by the mid-20s that the attitude toward the Russian Orthodox Church and the sects became equally negative (Zehanskaya, 2000).

It is not possible to speak of a sharp drop in religiousness among farmers in the 1920s. For the believing and doubtful young people of the countryside, who were open to new ideological influences in the conditions of acute lack of knowledge, the idea of God was a temporary "attitudinal support", the need for which disappeared as the level of education increased. The older generation of the village needed the idea of God as a habitual justification for traditional moral foundations.

Of course, one must admit that the degree of commitment of the farmers to the norms of ecclesiastical life or, on the contrary, the development of anticlerical moods were directly related to the material well-being of the farmers, i.e. had an objective basis. Good harvest – and farmers are diligent in the performance of their religious duties ("donate to the temple", are friendly to the clergy, etc.). It was a bad harvest year – and the peasants "accept unwillingly", because the shepherd who came to their house with a prayer should be gifted with bread and money. The natural pragmatism of the peasantry in the hungry years 1921–1922 could not fail to manifest itself in a certain separation of a part of the peasantry from the church, however, has nothing to do with conscious atheism.

## 7. Conclusion

Farmers' "ritualism", loyalty to the tradition, which is explained by the conditions of economic practice, and above all by its family and labor nature, were the most important reason for the stability of the position of religion in the village. The farmers' religious worldview represented a certain synthesis of faith in the supernatural and communist ideology as a result of the absorption of revolutionary images. Nevertheless, farmers' trust in the promises of the authorities and their habit of passive protest contributed to the success of the anti-church policy. The result of government activity, as a factor influencing the attitude of farmers to the Russian Orthodox Church, was the formalization of the cult practice of the population and the reduction of time spent on religious worship. Among other age groups, the younger generation was the most active in anti-religious manifestations. Formally, state propaganda did not welcome domestic blasphemy as a method of fighting for the spread of anti-clerical sentiment, but in practice the role of the destroyer of religious values was actively played by radical youth. And yet, despite the fall of the church's "authority" in the mass consciousness, the main elements of the system of religious representations: the temple, icons, the Orthodox cross, ritual practice, the service of the clergy, the moral image of the clergy, etc. were so firmly entwined in the general canvas of everyday life of peasants that the process of inertial extinction of religious representations stretched for many decades and has not been completed.

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