

Soviet state policy towards the "sectarians" in the first post-revolutionary years (1917-1922): theoretical and philosophical foundations and practical implementation (based on foreign studies)

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Abstract. The article deals with the theoretical and philosophical foundations of Bolsheviks' attitude towards religion in general and "sectarianism", in particular, during fledging years after the October Revolution. The relationship between philosophical views and practical policy of the Bolshevik government is analyzed. Unformedness of religious policy of the Soviet state in combination with the pre-revolutionary affection of the top Bolshevik leadership to "sectarians", who, like the Bolsheviks, were persecuted by the tsarist autocracy, as well as the hope for their support of young power, predetermined inconsistent, but the loyal in general attitude of the new state towards "sectarians" during fledging years after the October Revolution. Research attention is focused on the analysis and assessment of the Bolsheviks' religious policy represented in the foreign English-language historiography.

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Introduction

At the present stage of research on the history of the religious policy of the Soviet state, a positive experience of the first years of Soviet power in building relationships with "sectarians", former religious dissidents, attracts the attention of scholars (legislators, historians and theologians) both Russian and foreign [1, 2, 3]. The issue of the philosophical foundations under the religious policy of the Bolsheviks and the practical experience of its implementation in fledging years after the October Revolution was repeatedly appealed by the Western scholars. In Western historiography there is a prevailing view that the Bolsheviks, when came to power, had no clear principles in religious policy. Considering the Civil War (1918-1923) as "the early period of the formation of the anti-religious policy of the Bolsheviks" that established the background for future policy, D. Peris argues that the Bolsheviks, when they came to power, had no plan with respect to the religious question [4, p.24]. Referring to the origins of Bolshevism and Marxism, he noted: "Marxism did not give recipes what to do with the religion after the triumph of the revolution. Revolution triumphed not in the country with secularized working class, as in the west, but in rural agrarian and Holy Russia" [5, p.23-24]. Beeson T., analyzing the attitude of Marx and Marxism to religion, as well as attitude of Lenin and Bolshevism to religion, rightly pointed out that in a "conflict and chaos of a revolutionary situation after 1917, the Bolsheviks often have forgotten Marx's theory and acted in accordance with the specific situation in

order to gain support of their power" [6, p.15-29]. He estimated the religious policy of the government in the Civil war period (1918-1921) as "cautious" policy, associating it primarily with views of V.I. Lenin, who warned against the danger of offending religious feelings of believers. This thesis has been reflected in the Program of the Communist Party, adopted in 1919. In this period, according to T. Beeson "a bet was made on erosion of influence of religion by economic and social actions, rather than direct confrontation with religious institutions and believers" [6, p.35]. On the contrary, [Timasheff N.](#) argued that the communist doctrine, imported to Russia "as part of the great Westernization process", was perceived in terms of orthodox Marxist version, based on materialism as "metaphysical foundation"; this originally predetermined the attitude of the Bolsheviks towards religion and its fate in the Soviet state [7, p. 10].

When studying the subject, as well as the historical and theological perspective in whole, it seems necessary to use a combination of formational analysis methodology of the concrete historical material and civilized approach. This allows one to explore comprehensively the historical facts, phenomena and processes, taking into account both a socio-economic, cultural and civilizational characteristics.

Frameworks of the Bolshevik theory of religion were laid by V.I. Lenin. In December 1905, Lenin published the first article about the religion titled "Socialism and Religion" [8]. Considering religion as "a type of spiritual oppression, lying

everywhere on the mass, stifled by endless work on others", V.I. Lenin treated roots of religious beliefs exclusively based on materialist position: "Impotence of the exploited classes in their struggle against the exploiters also inevitably generates belief in a better afterlife ... ". In this work he gives the following characterization of religion: "Religion is the opium for the people. Religion is a kind of spiritual cheap booze... " [8, P. 142-143]. However, in those times nobody was referring to the struggle against religion. Socialists' position did not go beyond the requirements of church and state separation, as well as the introduction of freedom of conscience: "The state has nothing to do with religion; religious communities should not be associated with powers of the state. Everyone must be absolutely free to profess whatever religion he prefers, or not to accept any religion at all, i.e., to be an atheist ... There should be no payments to the state church, no state payments to church and religious societies, which should become entirely free civil unions of like-minded people, independent of government " [8, p.143-144].

By 1909, V.I. Lenin again expresses his thoughts on religious issues in the articles "On the attitude of labor party to religion" and "Classes and parties in their attitude to religion and the church". These studies were directed against "anarchism" (pay exaggerated attention to religious matters) and opportunism (indifference to religious matters), and argued the middle path. On the one hand, V.I. Lenin urged not to bracket the fight against the oppressors with the struggle against religious prejudices [9], on the other hand, he believed that indifference to religion can be fraught with great danger, as it will encourage religious quest [10, p. 123].

This approach has been considered in detail in the article "On the significance of militant materialism", written in 1922: " ... The mass must be given the most diverse material on atheist propaganda, to acquaint them with the facts of the various areas of life, approach them this way or that in order to intrigue them, to awaken them from their religious sleep, to shake them on every side in widely differing ways, etc. " [11].

The Bolsheviks did not hide anti-Orthodox focus of their first activities in the sphere of religion. Orthodoxy was formally pursued not as a religion but as a fragment of the old regime [5, p. 20-22; 6, p. 19]. Peris D. determines the time from 1918 to 1921 as a period of immediate direct conflict between the Soviet government and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) [4, p.32]. Known Baptist figure and publicist, emigrant N.I. Saloff-Astakhoff, speaking of the first decrees of the Soviet regime in an approving tone, noted, however, that "despite all these decrees, they

gradually began to fight against the whole religion" [12, p. 102-103].

Setting the task of winning and retaining power, the Bolsheviks initially were willing to use confessions supporters of Western origin, indeed because Marxism itself was a product of Western society. According to the Bolsheviks, "Sectarian" movements of protestant type, developed on Russian ground, were a form of social protest of the mass against the despotism of the autocracy. In his early works, V.I. Lenin called "sectarianism" to be "performance of political protest under religious guise", and considered this phenomenon as "peculiar to all nationalities at a certain stage of their development, rather than just to Russia" [13, p. 228]. For V.I. Lenin, religious component in the "sectarians" activities both before and even more after the revolution was perceived no more than a shell, whereas the core, the basis were still political and economic interests of "sectarians".

Friendly attitude towards the "sectarians" in the Soviet government was defended by V.D. Bonch-Bruевич, the first Marxist-sectologist, who studied everyday life of "sectarians", their struggle for rights since the prerevolutionary times. He believed that "sectarians" can be potential allies of the Bolsheviks in building communist relations in society. Obviously, V.D. Bonch-Bruевич sincerely believed that "as soon as socialist propaganda spreads among the "sectarians", this community will move widely and deeply ... and the red banner of socialism will wave over ... newly formed rows of courageous ... fighters for the new world " [14, p. 635]. Kolarz W. noted that V.D. Bonch-Bruевич, first of all "highly valued sectarians due to their economical effectiveness ... " [15, p. 288].

Lenin, Bonch-Bruевич and their supporters have seen in the "sectarians" people, willing communism, though, religious communism, in their own understanding; the "sectarian" communities are an example for the future construction of socialist life. However, according to Western researchers, Bolsheviks, who supported the "sectarians" during the years of tsarist, when came to power, faced a problem: "How now to treat sects that were supported by the Bolshevik party before, now, when they have won the political power, and when "sectarians" do not fit in its ideological canons " [10, p. 159].

For V.D. Bonch-Bruевич "sectarianism" was not uniform; it contrasted the two groups of "sectarians": Whips with all their branches and Protestant denominations. In the list of "sectarian" groups, which according to Bonch-Bruевич were ready to cooperate with the new power, as well as to start construction of the communes and state farms, Baptists and evangelicals were last: "Fighters against

the spirit, Molokans of all persuasions, Beginning of the century, Jehovah's witnesses, the New chosen people of different sects, Stundists, Mennonites, Malevants, Enoch followers, Tolstoyans, Dobroliubovians, free Christians, non-drinkers, podgornovtsy, some of evangelical Christians and Baptists" [14. P. 658]. Distrust of V.D. Bonch-Bruevich to the latter was due to the private property and the petit-bourgeois nature of the Protestant "sectarianism".

The tradition of generally positive attitude to the first actions of the Soviet power in the field of religion, in terms of their impact on development of "sectarianism", and in particular, the Evangelical-Baptist movement in Russia, was set up in the very first Western studies, including those conducted by emigrants, and then continued in the Soviet and the post-Soviet secular and religious historical scholarship. Even those religious emigration people, who had anti-Soviet attitude, approved in principle the first Soviet government's regulations concerning religion, and particularly, the unprecedented rulemaking on the military question [12, p. 102-103]. **Bolshakoff S.** believed that "sectarians" "periodically enjoyed expansive kindness of the Bolshevik government, which relied on their support in the fight against the Russian Orthodox Church". In this regard, he defined "the first years of the Russian Revolution" as "the heyday of Russian Protestantism" [16, p. 119]. One of the first Western scholars of relations history between the Soviet state and religion, Hecker J.F. in 1927 also defined the Russian state policy towards the "sectarians" as "favorable" [17, p.155]. Most subsequent researchers also saw clear "signs of kindness" of the Soviet government towards "sectarians", considering the Decree of 1919, which gave the possibility to release from military service with lethal force because of religious beliefs, to be particularly striking evidence of this fact [18, p.164-172].

Extraordinary loyalty of Bolshevik government in relation to the "sectarians" in this period can be explained, most likely, not due to the thinking inertia of Bolsheviks, who still saw potential allies in earlier persecuted denominations, but due to good political judgment, which consisted in the fact that Bolsheviks intended before the end of the Civil War to use loyal relationship, established earlier towards "sectarianism", and prevent its transition to the enemy camp, using at that its economic opportunities; in addition, the permitted activity of "sectarians" was quite adequate to the Bolsheviks' course towards the destruction of the ROC [19, p. 78].

Changing the course of the Soviet power in relation to religion in general and "sectarianism" in

particular, most researchers refer to the end of 1922 - beginning of 1923. New look in religious policy towards its tightening is associated by many researchers with the period of the disease and then the death of V.I. Lenin, and at the same time - leaving the political scene by V.D. Bonch-Bruevich [4, p. 25-31; 5, p.19; 20, p.186; 21, p. 42-43]. According to T. Beeson, change of course in relation to religion was associated with "a return to the ideas of Marxist theory", deviation from which was practiced in tactical reasons in the first post-revolutionary years due to the attempts of the Bolsheviks to adapt Marxism to the concrete historical conditions [6, p. 20, 29-31]. Not everyone in the party leadership supported the position of V.D. Bonch-Bruevich towards the "sectarians". This was demonstrated, for example, by the debate on the question of bringing "sectarians" to socialist construction that took place at XIII Congress of the Russian Communist Party of Bolsheviks (RCP (b)) in 1924. Young communists, behind which stood Trotsky, and party professionals on militant atheism were against flirting with "sects" [14, p.659-666]. Even during these years, the anti-religious course of Soviet-party policy was defined, and repressions against the "sectarians" took place especially at the local level, which, however, unlike the policy towards the ROC at that time, were not of a concerted and systematic nature.

In general, in the conditions of profound socio-political and military crisis, in which Russia was during the analyzed period, the development of religious policy could not be a priority guideline for the new government. Unformed religious policy of the Soviet state in combination with the pre-revolutionary preferences of the top Bolshevik leadership to "sectarians", who also were persecuted by the autocracy, as well as hope for their support of young power, predetermined inconsistent, though, the loyal in general attitude of the new state in 1917-1922. However, soon the anti-Orthodox campaign expanded its confessional boundaries and turned into an anti-religious crusade, questioning the legitimacy of the existence in the Soviet state of all ideological competitors and all religious movements.

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