"Divide and Rule": Religious Policies of the Soviet Government and Evangelical Churches in the 1920s

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The religious policies of the Soviet Government of the USSR in the 1920s can be characterized as a domineering line directed toward the internal disintegration of the confessions, and by provoking conflicts among their various religious currents. Such conflicts achieved the division of believers into several opposing camps. The most important tools for carrying out the policy were selective administrative and judicial repressions, the issuing of detailed regulations and the constant surveillance of congregations by the security organs (Cheka, GPU, OGPU).

How this policy of splintering was viewed by the Bolshevik leadership, as applied universally to the majority of confessions, can be seen from the minutes of the Commission to Establish the Separation of Churches from the State, which was under the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, a commission better known as the Antireligious Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. From 1922-1929, this secret commission under the chairmanship of the “chief godless” (Bezbozhnik) of the USSR, E. M. Iaroslavsky, under his personal responsibility to party leaders, developed and executed church policies in the USSR, aimed toward an effective struggle against religious organizations and their “harmful” ideology, and toward coordinated actions in this sphere among various party and soviet organs.1 As a result of this work, actively supported above all by the political police, the fate of the Russian Orthodox churches, divided into “Renovationists” and “Tikhonovtsy”, was repeated also among Lutherans and Buddhists.2 Attempts at a split within Islam were undertaken.3

1 Minutes of the Commission were published in German: Partei und Kirchen im frühen Sowjetstaat: Die Protokolle der Antireligiösen Kommission beim Zentralkomitee der Russischen Kommunistischen Partei (Bol’seviki). In Übersetzung hrg. Von Ludwig Steindorff, in Verbindung mit Günther Schulz, unter Mitarbeit von Matthias Kecke, Julia Röttjer und Andrei Savin. Reihe: Geschichte: Forschung und Wissenschaft, Berlin, 2007, Bd. 11. The publication makes it possible for historians interested in the problems of the relationship between the Soviet state and the churches, to seriously broaden the factual basis for their research, and to study the mechanism for decision making in the sphere of church policy at the very top of the ‘pyramid’. The introduction of such a scientific turn around, such document access permits a corrective to the viewpoints on the policy of the Bolshevik’s relationship to the churches in the 1920s, as also the so-called “religious NEP”. See the review of M. V. Schkarovsky on the publication of the Commission minutes, in the historical journal Klio (Sankt Peterburg), 2007, No. 3 (38), 133-136.

2 The history of the “Free Living Church” (Free-Ev. Lutheran and Reformed Church of Congregationalist order) on Lutheranism see O. A. Litsenberger, Evangelichesko-liuteranskaia tserkov’ I sovetskoe gosudarstvo (1917-1938), Moscow, 1999.

3 On April 3, 1923, the Commission of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (RCP) for carrying out the decree on the separation of the churches from the state issued an order to the head of the eastern department of the GPU, Is. X. Peters to break up the Muslim church [sic], which had formed a group of renovationists. For that purpose they utilized a congress of the Muslim clergy, which was organized under the supervision of the OGPU and held in Ufa June 10-17, 1923. The delegates were forbidden even to consider a popular project to unite all Muslims in Russia under the power of one Mufti - as the Central Spiritual Administration for all Muslims in Russia. Recorded in the resolutions of the
The problem of the disintegration within the Evangelical churches\(^4\) (Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Seventh Day Adventists, Mennonites and Molokans) into a series of opposing tendencies and groups was one of the central tasks of the Antireligious Commission of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party in all aspects of its work, superseded in the intensity of its work only by the problems of the struggle against the Orthodox church. In this paper we attempt to present the main divisive clash in the actions of the Soviet state with the Evangelical churches during the 1920s.

One of the key reasons for the heightened attention to the evangelical churches by the Party and Soviet leadership was their dynamic growth during the 1920s. In the absence of reliable statistics, and the statements of a series of influential party activists, there arose in the 1920s a myth about the enormous number of “sectarians”. Step by step the myth developed into greater numbers in the mouths of leading persons from various confessions. Thus, in 1922 the leader of the Evangelical Christians, I. S. Prokhanov, declared that the All-Russian Union of Evangelical Christians consisted of 2 million members and followers. In September 1924 at the second All-Russian Congress of Spiritual Christians-Molokan, the number of members in that confession were also estimated to be about 2 million people. An active representative of the idea for the cooperation of “sectarians” with the Bolsheviks in the task of building communism, was the Tolstoyan I. M. Tregubov, who once mentioned the numbers 25-30 million people. The well known expert on sectarianism, V. D. Bonch-Bruevich estimated the number of believers to be 35 million (10 million Protestants, 25 million Old Believers). When formulating a policy on relations to the sectarians, G. E. Zinoviev, at the 13\(^{th}\) Congress of the Russian Communist Party, also operated with the statistic of tens of millions of “communist-sectarians”.

The leading officials of the secret police, on the basis of their actions in the struggle against religious organizations, estimated the number of “sectarians” more realistically. In 1924, the chief of the secret department of the OGPU, T. D. Deribas named as objects of the department’s “work” the “numerous sectarian communities consisting of millions” and “antimilitarists of war time”. In total, according to Deribas, more than two million opponents of the regime must be held under constant surveillance.\(^5\) In a speech to the secret department of the OGPU on May 27, 1924, “Baptists and Evangelists” were named as the biggest sectarian groups in the USSR numbering 2.5-3 million persons.\(^6\) Two and a half years later, when informing the Orgbureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party about the activities of the “sectarians”, the head of the 6\(^{th}\) department of OGPU’s secret department, E. A Tuchkov,\(^7\) estimated the dynamic growth of the evangelical believers from 300,000 in 1917 to 3 million in the mid twenties, pointing to the undoubted danger for Soviet authorities of the “mystical sects” (Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Adventists, Molokan and Dukhobors) when compared to the Old Believers.\(^8\) E. M. Iaroslavskii, chair of the Antireligious Commission of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (RCP), utilized analogous numbers for the growth of the Baptists and fellow confessions - from half a million to 2.5 million

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\(^4\) In Soviet terminology the label evangelical (Neoprotestant) churches traditionally was rendered ‘sect’ [sektantstvo] and members of such churches ‘sectarians’ [sektanty].


\(^6\) Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii, (hereafter RGASPI), Fond 17, opis 87, delo 176, listy 184-187.

\(^7\) See appendix below.

\(^8\) RGASPI, F 89, Op 4, D 119, 19.
persons - when speaking at the meeting of the Orgbureau of the RCP on December 10, 1928. In 1929 at the second congress of the League of Militant Godless of the USSR, another well known antireligious activist F. M. Putintsev estimated the general number of sectarian “Protestants” at 1 million, and stressed a sharp criticism of V. D. Bonch-Bruevich for giving unreliable statistics with reference to evangelical churches. The claim of 35 million “sectarians” Putintsev correctly labeled pure invention, and stated that such statistics led to panic among Party and Soviet staff. “Baptists, evangelist, adventists - those are the militant sects dangerous to us, who have a tendency to grow; new methods of working with their youth need to be taken. That is, we must talk about them, but not to raise a panic,” Putintsev appealed.10

In reality, all the members of NeoProtestant confessions during the 1920s totaled more than 2 million,11 and this included not only actual but also potential members of congregations, namely those preparing to be baptized. The total number of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, as estimated by the leaders of their unions at the end of the 1920s were a bit over one million.

The leadership of the country at the beginning of the 1920s, followed two approaches toward the “sects”. Several of the important figures in party and government,12 especially V. D. Bonch-Bruevich, supported by V. I. Lenin,13 from the theoretical orientation of their pre-revolutionary views, were inclined to see the non-Orthodox Christians as a form of social dissatisfaction, an expanding protest of peasants against tsarism. Persecution by the Orthodox Church also forced “sectarians” to unite against them. So the regime was interested in using the economic potential of the evangelical churches, and their widespread ties abroad. Soviet leaders were also attracted to the “social-communist” side of the sectarians’ teachings, above all in their ideas of social and economic equality. So the “sectarian-communists” represented a multi-million “people within the people”, which should serve for Bolsheviks to show, that the well known popular dream about the communist character of the Russian peasantry, had a real foundation. In this way the myth of the “sectarian-communist” as true supporters of Soviet power arose, which at the beginning of the 1920s had gained broad popularity14. One of the major results of this myth was the decree of 9 April, 1919, signed by V. I. Lenin, which granted “sectarians” freedom from military service.

But a loyal relationship to the evangelical churches never was the sole, dominant line of Bolshevik politics. The political police organs, a priori, took an uncompromising stance against the “sects”. Founded on February 24, 1919 as the secret department of the Cheka, the basic tasks of the Cheka colleagues was directed toward the struggle with “the antisoviet activities of bourgeois and lower middle class parties and groups.” This assignment of the secret department was successfully

9 Ibid. D 26, 14.
10 Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter GARF), F 5407, Op 1, D 35, L 45.
11 The total number of Evangelical Christians and Baptists in the USSR represented about 1 million, about 100,000 Mennonites, about 20,000 Adventists. Unknown were the number of Molokan, the leaders of the confession till the end of the 1920s estimated them to total 1 million.
12 At the 13th congress of the RCP (b), at which, according to A. M. Etkind, the “sectarian utopia” held “official status”, speaking in support of that were G. E. Zinoviev, M. I. Kalinin, A. I. Rykov, V. D. Bonch-Bruevich, and A. V. Lunacharskii. Cf. Trinadtsatyi s'ezd RKP (b), May 1924, Stenograficheskii otchet. Moscow, 1963.
realized later by the staff of the 6th division of the secret-operative forces, who immediately took on the “religiozniki”.  

Order No. 150 of December 1, 1920, “On the strengthening of the struggle with the counter-revolutionary underground”, clearly shows that toward the end of 1920, the evangelical churches were already considered by the Cheka as the most dangerous groups for Soviet authorities. Shifting the attention of the Chekisty on the chief counter-revolutionary forces, from the monarchists and Kadet (party) to the SRs (Social Revolutionary) and “other parties in agreement with them”, the writers of the document stressed that, in order to carry out their antisoviet actions, the SRs were making contact underground with the “legalized congregations of evangelicals and Tolstoyans, and under that banner the counter-revolutionaries could come together to act unnoticed (ispodvol) and dangerously.” In order to succeed against such counter-revolutionary plans, the Chekisty proposed to maintain an up-to-date list of all socialist party members, anarchists, and also “all current and former members of Evangelical Christian and Tolstoyan societies (congregations)”, carrying out on that list of contingents, “unwavering observation for tracking their links, relationships, etc.” and also to “place in the named parties and organizations a sufficient number of experienced, able and fully competent persons in their spheres, who would undertake to fully take part in their lives.”

A significant part of the party organization also began to speak out against the “utopianism of Bonch-Bruevich”. So on August 19, 1921, the matter of the Baptists came up for consideration before the Sub-Bureau of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party. Secretary of the Sub-Bureau, V. N. Iakovleva, gave a speech on relations with the religious sectarians. The occasion for the speech was a circular from the Party Central Committee, demanding of local party organizations goodwill relations to a series of sects, who presented themselves as having “peasant communist education.” Saying that the Party was shifting from “a system of direct elementary agitation, focused on emotions (with powerful attacks), to a system of a more basic and deep struggle with religious beliefs,” Iakovleva then declared that the higher party leadership in Siberia nevertheless proposed to maintain proven methods of struggle with “sectarians”. Expressing the solidarity of views of the Sub-Bureau of the Russian Communist Party Central Committee, its secretary stated: “The Sub-Bureau recognized the purposelessness of changing the forbidding tactics in the relations to the Baptists”, having taken into account that “this sect showed its classic

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16 Lubianka..., pp. 373-374. The order was signed by deputy chair of the VchK I. K. Ksenofontov and the director of affairs of VchK G. G. Yagoda.

17 On September 8, 1921 in Izvestiakh VtsIK, No. 199, a circular was published by NKlu, NKVD, HKZ and RKI RSFSR of August 15, 1921 “On the question of release from military obligations for reasons of religious convictions, on the working obligations of ‘servants of cult’, religious groups, congresses etc.” In part, it stated: “Peasant communist education, which was formed and suffered under tsarism in order to destroy in its economic life separatist individualism, took on social work and was spread among Dukhobor, Molokan, New Israel, and others. In completely healthy ways it followed general Soviet civil laws and regulations. The task of Soviet organizations consists in that, to assist these organizations to develop and strengthen themselves in practical skills and the ways of communist organization of labor, and, moving on to a higher form, that they would serve as practical example for realizing a multi-sided communism for workers.” Obviously this circular drew on the foundational statute of the circular from the Central Committee of the RCP(b) mentioned above.
Kulak essence, and presents itself in active counter revolutionary statements.”

Sharply negative in relationship to the evangelical confessions were the attitudes of the majority of the members of the antireligious commission, above all E. M. Iaroslavskii, P. A. Krasikov, and E. A. Tuchkov. These regarded the activities of “sectarianism” as an attempt to raise religion to a new level, as an orderly form of an antisoivet movement of Kulak elements in the villages. The most creative “sectarian utopianism” had quickly come to the conviction, that “progressive groups of sectarian-communists”, as representatives of the old Russian sects, constitute the passive minority when compared to the “petty-bourgeois” Protestant congregations. So, at the just completed All-Russian Congress of Sectarian Agriculturalists and Producer Union, the majority of the delegates were Baptists who put forward “petty bourgeois demands”. One of the documents from the congress declared that “prisons, concentration camps and other places of confinement begin to be filled anew with martyrs for the faith, who are unwilling, for reasons of religious conviction or because of violating their conscience, to continue to participate in warfare.”, and that “sometimes such people are even shot.” The direction taken by the congress produced deep displeasure in B. I. Lenin and V. D. Bonch-Bruevich.

The seriousness of the “sectarian” danger grew for the majority of the leadership after the campaign to seize church valuables had educated them toward gaining a significant number of supporters, including believers coming from Orthodoxy. The massive move to the Baptist churches, the political organs were convinced, was because of freeing “sectarians” from military service for reasons of religious conviction.

Toward the end of 1922 and beginning of 1923, the GPU of the USSR carried out massive repressive actions in a series of gubernia of the country, directed toward the liquidation of the evangelical churches. In Siberia, as a result of these actions, the de facto legal operations of all evangelical confessions were stopped. The counter action of the majority of the “sectarians” to these repressive measures, was to continue in an illegal status, and the resultant growth in popularity of the sectarians among the rural population, admiring then as persecuted and hunted martyrs, caused the authorities to turn from massive repressions, to once again register congregations and permit “sectarians” to conduct their activities legally.

Having turned away from liquidating congregations of Evangelical churches by administrative means, authorities turned to the policy of destroying the confessions from within, provoking conflicts among various religious currents. If in the case of Orthodox churches, Buddhists or Lutherans, where internal reform proposals served as reason for division, for evangelical churches the “apple of temptation” that served instead was the state’s demand that they “freely” recognize their duty to military service with weapon in hand. Fomenting a split

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18 Tsentr Khreneniia i izucheniiia dokumentov noveishei istorii Krasnoiarskogo Kraia (hereafter TsKhID-NIKK) F 1, Op 1, D 169, L 2-3. For two weeks beforehand, August 5, 1921 the sub-bureau of the Central Committee of RCP refused the appeal of the Siberian Department of the All-Russian Union of Baptists, to be allowed to print its official organ, proposing to the Siberian state publishing house to base the rejection on “insufficient paper”. Cf. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Novosibirskoi oblasti (hereafter GANO). F,pm1, Op 3, D. 21, L 38.


20 T. A. Pavlova, “Istoricische sud’by rossiiskogo patisifizma”, Voprosy Istorii, 1999, No. 8, p.34.


among “sectarians” was not the sole purpose of the complicated game, which the authorities began in 1923. “Free” rejection by believers of their pacifist credo was to be a completely independent task, toward which the organs of the political police devoted much attention. Figuratively speaking, in this situation the authorities were seeking to kill two birds with one stone: split up the evangelical churches by using the “military service question”, and to settle the problem of religious pacifism as manifested by Protestants.

The use of the “problems Decree of 9 April 1919” for putting pressure on the evangelical confessions was obviously not an innovation of the Antireligious Commission of the Central Committee. Earlier already the rich potential for possible activities in that direction were seen by the GPU and the Fifth (Liquidation) Department of the Justice Kommissariat, now key persons of the Commission saw the Chekisty as collaborators and proponents of that policy. Already the first decision of the commission on the “military” question demonstrated that they planned to act decisively in future for further service of that circle of person who had legal right to claim exemption from military service by reason of conscience. On November 28, 1922, the commission decided that “the privilege of freedom from military obligations could henceforth be claimed only by those sects, which had exercised that claim before the revolution,” and charged the NKIu RSFSR to draft regulations forbidding religious propaganda in the Red Army. At this session the commission also took the decision “using the restrictive powers of the Red Army and its enforcement personnel to dismiss sectarians from the army who refused to swear the oath to defend the republic with weapon in hand.”

The issue of military service of “sectarians” emerged again in the minutes of the commission’s meeting in June 1923, that is, at the moment when the “antisectarian” operation of the GPU was being carried out, which clearly and unambiguously demonstrated to confessional leaders, to what measures the organs of power would go, if believers would not change their position about refusing to do military service with weapon in hand. That left the commission with the right to utilize the operation to break the entire pacifist position of the evangelical churches. From the point of view of the authorities, it was also very important that no planning in the near future for a union of two sister streams of evangelical Protestants be allowed, namely the Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Thus they also provoked violence and hostility locally, both between congregations of various confessions, and also within one. So in this connection, to stake all on the “voluntary” acceptance of military service showed the greatest fruit.

The first action was to break the resistance of the Evangelical Christians. It was the pressure put on its leader I. S. Prokhanov by the Cheka, that played an important role in securing the official rejection of pacifism by the leadership of the Evangelical Christians. At its meeting on June 12, 1923 the Antireligious Commission approved the recommendation of the GPU on “utilizing Prokhanov for changing the views of the sectarians toward the Red Army.” According to the plan of the official of the 6th department of the SO OGPU, E. A. Tuchkov, it would be necessary to apply

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23 Regulations for the release from military service for religious convictions were established by decree of the SNK RSFSR “On the freeing from military obligations for religious convictions” of January 4, 1919 which declared as freed from military service those people, who considered it impossible to bear arms for religious-ethical motives. Till the end of 1922 this was regulated by a circular from the NKIu RSFSR of 5 June 1919, “On changes to the decree of freeing from military service for religious convictions” and “on dodging military obligations for so-called ‘religious convictions’” of August 4, 1920; and also the decree of the CNK RSFSR of December 14, 1920, which in fact restricted the sphere of applicability of the decree of January 4, 1919.

24 RGASPI F 17, Op 112, D 443a, L 17.

25 Ibid. D 565a, L 10. In the initial edition of the formulation there were several strange and more adequate deflection measures of the Chekists: “Proposals to the GPU on using Prokhanov for dividing sectarians”. This decision was changed in decree of the Commission on March 20, 1923 on exiling I. S. Prokhanov abroad for anti-soviet agitation.
serious pressure on I. S. Prokhanov, in order to force him to make a declaration about Evangelical Christians rejecting their pacifist convictions. Since Prokhanov tended to be an authoritarian type of leader, and led the union with a firm hand, there was no doubt that the supreme council of the All-Union Evangelical Christians would support him.

To prepare charges for Prokhanov’s arrest, they used a number of his public pronouncements that were characterized by antimilitarism. In September 1922 he had written an appeal under the title “Voice from the East”, addressed to all Christians in the world, in which he had preached pacifist views. In March 1923 I. S. Prokhanov gave a speech at the First All-Russian Congress of “Renovationists” of the Old Apostolic Churches (Drevne-Apostol’skoi tserkvi), where again he publicly stated the pacifist credo of the Evangelical Christians: “The free people of the evangelical churches in Russia did not participate in the bloody struggles of recent times. Its members selflessly stated their desire not to take part in acts of war.”26 Several days after this speech Prokhanov was arrested. The following four months of imprisonment were used for giving him an intensive treatment (obrabotki).

The matter of “Abuse by Sectarians of the Decree on Freedom from Military Service” pre-occupied the Antireligious Commission at its meeting on June 26, 1923, with the resultant decision to take a series of measures along three courses of action: agitating propaganda, juridical actions, and operational ones. N. N. Popov was entrusted with using in print “all materials, that compromised the sectarian views on militarism.” Another prominent member of the commission, P. G. Smidovich, was to present at the coming session of the Party Central Committee a proposal to revise the decree on freedom from military service “along the lines, that sectarians would not be permitted to abuse this decree, as it has been done till now.” The GPU was authorized to increase its activities “to demoralize sectarianism”.27

In July 1923 the plan of the GPU against Prokhanv bore fruit. The cost of his release from prison was a message written by him to the supreme council of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians addressed to “all congregations and all individual brothers of the Evangelical Christians, living in the USSR” in which the followers of evangelical teaching were called upon “to work truly and without any reservation (besprekoslovno) in all Soviet military and civil organizations, also to serve in the Red Army, and not to refuse on general principle.”28

Rejecting the constitution, that at that time served as credo of Evangelical Christian faith, I. S. Prokhanov expressed the desire to eliminate the “misunderstanding” between confessions and the Soviet government, which “alone in this world actually struggles on behalf of the working masses.” As a result, the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Christians stated, that the former pacifist appeals of Prokhanov related exclusively to believers in foreign countries, which “in their ignorance... till now still defend capitalist interests.” It informed all members of the union, that Evangelical Christians, refusing military service or refusing to pay taxes, will be excommunicated from the congregation.29 Desiring to facilitate the freeing of Prokhanov, who had become ill in prison, the Message to the churches was signed by the prominent figures of the AUExh V. T. Pelevin, A. L. Andreev, and F. S. Savel’ev.30 The Antireligious Commission approved the text signed by the leaders of the Evangelicals on June 17, 1923, and decided to publish it following the return of the Russian Evangelical Christian delegation to the 3rd Baptist World Congress in

28 GARF, F 353, Op 7, D 13, L 204.
29 Ibid.
Stockholm. On August 12, 1923 the Message was published in Izvestia and reached a wide public.

The next task of the Chekists was to force the 9th Congress of Evangelical Christians, meeting in Petrograd in September 1923, also to affirm military service. Preparing the congress and working over (obrabotki) of delegates was led by E. A. Tuchkov. During the meeting of the Plenum of the Union, immediately ahead of the Congress, he rejected unpleasant resolutions by the authorities, and the delegates were pressured by him to support Prokhanov’s message.

The 9th Congress of the Evangelical Christians took place in Petrograd from September 1-10, 1923 in the German Reformed church building. Participating in the work of the congress were 303 delegates with voting rights. On the first day of the Congress I. S. Prokhanov and a series of delegates were demonstrably called before E. A. Tuchkov. Debate on the question of the relationship to Soviet power and to military service on September 4 and 5, with 46 delegates speaking. On the vote to support the Message, 205 delegates voted in favor, 20 against, and 33 abstained. E. A. Tuchkov appeared personally at the session that day and applied pressure on the delegates. In this manner, the congress positively approved military service, with only one commentary: the concrete decision about doing military service in each individual case was left to the believer, “according to his conscience, in agreement with existing laws of the Soviet Republics.” The acceptance by the Congress of “recognizing military service as duty”, that is, to fulfill their duties, was an attempt by the leadership of the confession to demonstrate their loyalty. The Leadership of the Evangelical Christians also approved a decision not to agitate against military service and the payment of taxes, pronouncing judgment against “all capitalist forces hostile to Soviet power.”

E. A. Tuchkov concluded with satisfaction, that the Congress proceeded “with complete success, the work done on this sect produced satisfactory results.” Leaders of the Antireligious Commission were also satisfied, N. N. Popov was entrusted on Sept. 18, 1923 with the task of publishing several articles, laying out the results of the Congress and its main resolution. As encouragement to Evangelical Christians, at that same meeting the Commission granted them permission to receive religious literature from abroad.

The decision by the congress, on accepting military service, called forth sharp criticism and protest by a significant number of Evangelical Christian, as well as Baptist congregations. E. A. Tuchkov wrote on September 18, 1923, “such a resolution strongly agitated the Baptists, which they [the Evangelical Christians] got themselves caught in ... the Baptists have fallen into a hopeless situation and now seek a way out.” The formula about leaving the matter of military obligations up to each believer to decide in accord with his religious convictions, could not satisfy the pacifist leanings of believers, above all the Baptists. A mechanism for fomenting a split in evangelical churches was set. The decision of the 9th congress of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians was published in Izvestia and reached a wide public. The next task of the Chekists was to force the 9th Congress of Evangelical Christians, meeting in Petrograd in September 1923, also to affirm military service. Preparing the congress and working over (obrabotki) of delegates was led by E. A. Tuchkov. During the meeting of the Plenum of the Union, immediately ahead of the Congress, he rejected unpleasant resolutions by the authorities, and the delegates were pressured by him to support Prokhanov’s message.

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The decision by the congress, on accepting military service, called forth sharp criticism and protest by a significant number of Evangelical Christian, as well as Baptist congregations. E. A. Tuchkov wrote on September 18, 1923, “such a resolution strongly agitated the Baptists, which they [the Evangelical Christians] got themselves caught in ... the Baptists have fallen into a hopeless situation and now seek a way out.” The formula about leaving the matter of military obligations up to each believer to decide in accord with his religious convictions, could not satisfy the pacifist leanings of believers, above all the Baptists. A mechanism for fomenting a split in evangelical churches was set. The decision of the 9th congress of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians was published in Izvestia and reached a wide public. The next task of the Chekists was to force the 9th Congress of Evangelical Christians, meeting in Petrograd in September 1923, also to affirm military service. Preparing the congress and working over (obrabotki) of delegates was led by E. A. Tuchkov. During the meeting of the Plenum of the Union, immediately ahead of the Congress, he rejected unpleasant resolutions by the authorities, and the delegates were pressured by him to support Prokhanov’s message.
Christians to continue efforts toward union with the Baptists “in complete fusion”, and about forming a general council remained on paper only. Obviously, precisely this variant of the developing situation was what the GPU leaders had intended. Evidence of this can be seen in the memoirs in the sources on the directive of the Secret Operative Administration of the GPU on July 4, 1923, in file number 50870 “On the Split between Evangelicals and Baptists.”

The authorities did not plan to leave things this way. Next in line was the next regular 25th Congress of the Baptists, announced for December 1923. Preceding the Congress, on November 5, 1923 the justice ministry (NKiu) published Circular No. 237 “On Regulations on the Matter of Freedom from Military Service by Reason of Religious Convictions”, signed by justice minister D. I. Kursky and the Chair of the Supreme Court of the RSFSR, P. I. Stuchki, which restricted the sphere in which the decree of January 4, 1919 applied. According to the circular, the right to freedom from military service was to be held only by those confessions, in which the confession of faith clause on refusing military service had been officially recognized as obligatory dogma already during the time of tsarism. The circular named the Dukhobors, Mennonites, Molokans and the so-called “Netovtsy”. Members of other evangelical churches could only be freed from service “in the unusual case that the individual [pacifist] claimant and his family suffered under tsarism because of refusing military service.” In this way, young believing pacifists, who under tsarism had not yet reached draft age, could not realistically expect a positive decision from the court. The situation was aggravated in those cases, where parents did not share the draftee’s religious convictions. Tolstoyan leader V. G. Chertkov characterized the circular in its essential substance as introducing a new “dynastic order” through the formulation of “a series of complicated bureaucratic formalities.” Obviously, such a castration of legislation would “ease” the acceptance by Baptists at their congress of the required decision, since utilization of the right of refusal of military service had become very problematic.

The Resolution of the 9th All-union Council of Evangelical Christians unambiguously demonstrated to their All-Russian Baptist colleagues, what awaited them from the authorities. Not wishing to reject their pacifist credo, the leadership of the Baptists nevertheless hurried to declare their loyalty and to mark its boundaries. In preparation for the 25th All-Russian Congress of Baptists various materials were sent to the congregations. The most important message sent was where the leadership of the confession distanced itself from those of its followers, who were carrying on anti-soviet activities, stating, that “Baptists fulfill all obligations to the state, military obligations are fulfilled by serving bearing weapons in societal work, some parts of the Baptist community accept the possibility of auxiliary service [medical corps].” Besides that Baptists promised “during the period of strengthening Soviet Republics,” not to bring into Russia “special antimilitarist propaganda.”

But to the authorities, such small steps were too little. The position of the Baptist leadership, not wishing to make a compromise on the key question, elicited a hard reaction from

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38 Information on this directive is contained in the circular to the OGPU leadership No. 51342 of December 20, 1923. For an analysis of this document, see below.
39 GARF F 353, Op 8, D 8, L 70.
40 A Russian mystical sect that had only runners [begunov] and strangers [strannikov]. These names obviously stem from the fact that its members were always naysayers, that is, did not present themselves for military service.
41 With reference to the Tolstoyans the authors of the circular came to the conclusion that a “Tolstoyan view of life” was not a religious teaching, that automatically excluded Tolstoyans from the applicable sphere of the decree of January 4, 1919.
42 GARF F 353, Op 8, D 8, L 52.
43 GARF F 353, Op 8, D 8, L 70.
the Antireligious Commission. On November 13, 1932 it intrusted the GPU to resume its campaign in Baptist congregations against the All-Russian group of leaders, “accusing the latter of anti-Soviet and antimilitarist agenda and unwillingness to call an All-Russian congress.”

The 25th All-Russian congress of Baptists took place in Moscow November 30-December 8, 1923. In difficult circumstances, the Chekists actively attempted to secure, without debate, a resolution in favor of accepting military service with weapon in hand, which would fully align with the resolution of the 9th congress of the Evangelical Christians. Over the course of the congress a number of delegates were called in to E. A Tuchkov of the OGPU, and other OGPU officials attended the congress itself. Only the resolute position of a significant part of the delegates prevented the Chekists from attaining their goal. The congress resolution on the issue of military service obligation, said in part: “The congress affirmed, that according to the unanimous opinion of Baptists, they recognize the obligation for themselves, to obey government obligations, they considered it wrong to shed human blood. What concerns the relationship to military service, and the instruments for fulfilling such obligations, among Baptists no sufficiently common view had been reached. Recognizing war as a great evil ... the determination of one’s response to the means for fulfilling one’s military duties belonged to the conscience of each Baptist individually...”

Such a decision of the congress revealed, according to the opinion of the SO OGPU, that the composition of the congress in its overwhelming majority, and its presidium “from the very first day were determined to maintain their antimilitarist views and only toward the end of the congress did a few of the participants with great difficulty introduce a resolution with the hope, that it would be accepted.” In his report of February 27, 1924 on the work of the 6th department of the SO OGPU during 1923, E. A. Tuchkov gave a more defined character to the conformist part of the delegates as “our informers”. Directly after the end of the congress Chekists were able to achieve that 13 delegates - German Baptists and a number of delegates from the Caucasus-declared their disagreement with the decision on military service and their readiness to organize autocephalous structures on the platform of not recognizing the decisions of the congress and its elected Collegium. This decision of the German Baptists was published by the authorities on December 16, 1923, in Izvestiia newspaper.

This fiasco did not cool the resolve of the authorities to force the Baptist to “voluntarily” accept military service. On December 5, 1923, already during the congress, the Antireligious Commission, having heard a speech from Tuchkov, asked the OGPU “in case the congress resolution on the military question goes in a negative direction... to break up the congress into two groups and try to fuse the split off militarists with the Evangelicals.” At the same session of the

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44 RGASPI F 17, Op 112, D 565a, L 39.
45 193 delegates took part in the work of the congress, representing all Baptists congregations in the country, with the exception of the Far East. As the OGPU leadership asserted, in assessing the results of the congress, “the All-Russian Baptist Congress ... showed itself sufficiently clearly that the overwhelming majority of Baptists were not on the side of Soviet power, their speeches, prayers and poetry, and even the table talk was nourished by a thoroughly anti-Soviet spirit.” cf. Istoriiia Khristian-Baptistov v SSSR, Moscow 1989, p. 197; TzKhIDNIKK, F 1, Op 1, D 748, L 19-19verso.
47 TzKhIDNIKK, F 1, Op 1, D 748, L 20-20verso.
48 Ibid. L 19-19verso.
50 Elected to the Kollegium of the congress were P. V. Pavlov (chair), M. D. Timoshenko and P.V. Ivanov-Klyshnikov (members).
Commission, they sanctioned the arrest of a series of delegates, who had pursued a particularly nonconformist position. In carrying out that decision, both during the congress and afterward eleven especially uncooperative congress deputies were arrested. Six of them, namely M. D. Timoshenko, N. A. Levindanto, I. N. Shilov, R. D. Khomiak, Glagolev and Printsev, were later sent to Narym and Solovki prison camps. On December 14, 1923, the chief presbyter (pastor) of the Moscow Evangelical Christian congregation, F. S. Savel’ev was arrested and after 4 months in prison, was sent to Solovki island. Savel’ev was one of the signatories of the AUCEC Message, who then publicly acknowledged his signature as a mistake, and the recognition of military service as a departure from evangelical truth. On December 12, 1923 the Antireligious Commission, having heard a lecture on the Baptist congress entrusted the OGPU with the mission of fostering a split among Baptists, utilizing the military question. A key role in achieving this end, according to Commission views, was the pending congress of Baptists congregations of the Caucasus. At this congress, as a result of the efforts of the OGPU they planned to form an organizing commission, to work toward preparing a new All-Russian Congress of Baptists in Moscow. In its turn, this congress under the control of the Chekists, would “nullify the recent decisions, and together with other resolutions, bring in a resolution to accept military obligations in the spirit of the Evangelical Christians, and to form in Moscow a parallel Collegium of Baptists.

The very high interest in a proper interpretation of the events described above and understanding the role played by the secret police organs, is evident in the directive from the leadership of the OGPU of the USSR No. 51342, sent to all heads of government departments on December 20, 1923. The directive assessed the results of the actions on the OGPU organs locally in their operations of “serving” the Baptists in connection with the 25th All-Russian Congress, and gave instructions on carrying forward the effort to inspire a split. Obviously, that document, signed by the deputy chair of the OGPU, V. P. Menzhinskii, by head of the SO (Secret Department) of the OGPU T. D. Deribas, and the head of the 6th department of the SO, E. A. Tuchkov, was prepared by the latter’s office, and most likely Tuchkov was the author of the directive.

In assessing the achievement of the Baptist congress, the OGPU leadership concluded, that “in general and in its purposes it did not turn out acceptably for us. Above all it failed to achieve

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51 RGASPI F 17, Op 112, D 565a, L 39, 46.
52 A. Nezhnii gives the following statement by E. M. Iaroslavskii: “Divide and rule - that ancient principle of politics became our guiding principle in church matters ... Baptists quarreled among themselves, collided over the military question, then with the help of agents pressed the influence of the Baptist-militarists with those evangelicals who had already succumbed to our tune and were ready to take to hand weapons for the defence of workers-peasant power ... and if necessary let Tuchkov arrest Timoshenko and Shilov for making anti-soviet statements at the congress... Religion in Soviet Russia will soon no longer remain in general; but if so it will last for only a short period of history in an exclusively Soviet way.” Nezhnii, p. 43. The excerpt is formulated by Nezhnii not quite accurately, but judging from the context the quote was taken from a letter of Iaroslavskii’s wife. The authenticity of the text convinces because of the mistake in spelling of the surname of one of the Baptists - Tikhonchenko. The reference should be to M. D. Timoshenko.
53 GARF F 353, Op 8, D 8, L 21. In total up to the beginning of 1924 40 members of various sects were exiled to Narym. What is obvious, is that the reason for such a high number of exiled sectarians in the 1920s was they were believers refusing military service. In the following years, as the “military question” steadily lost its force, the number of exiled sectarians, when compared to other repressed groups, significantly declined. In February 1927 in Narymskoi Krai there were no more than 6 exiled sectarians. Cf. Marginali v sotsiume. Marginali kak sotsium. Sibir’ (1920-1930gody). S. A. Krasil’nikov, red. Novosibirsk, 2004, p. 247-248.
54 RGASPI F 17, Op 112, D 565a, L 48.
55 TsKHIDNIKK, F 1, Op 1, D 748, L 19-19verso.
56 Ibid. The document was published, see A. I. Savin, “This work...produces the appropriate impression in Europe,’ From the Documents of the OGPU Leadership of the USSR on Methods for the Struggle with Religious Organizations in the first Half of the 1920s’, Gumanitarnye nauki v Sibiri, 2005, No. 2, pp. 74-78.
the desired resolution on the military questions, that is, on the very question that interested us the most.” Responsibility for the failure was placed on those governmental departments and plenipotentiaries of the OGPU, who had failed to grasp the seriousness of the struggle with sectarianism, and had not learned “how great was the danger, which they present with their antimilitaristic propaganda.” Only the Chekists of south-eastern Russia and Caucasus did acceptable preparatory work among local Baptists and insured that they had recruited such persons as congress delegates. The Chekists of Petrograd had made the weakest effort in working over (*otbrabotali*), so that of the 7 congress delegates from the northern capital, 4 were former officers."

But, having recognized its one failure, the Chekists in dialectical fashion also found its positive moment. As was declared in the “Survey of the Political-Economic Condition of the USSR for November-December 1923”, as prepared by the INFO of the OGPU and undersigned by the deputy chair of the OGPU, G. G. Yagoda, by INFO officer V. F. Ashmarinynym, “the approved resolutions deepened the split among evangels, adopting at ... the congress a resolution on military service makes it impossible for them to be united. The Baptists are intensifying their efforts, to break up the evangelical organizations on the issue of military service.”

In light of continuing and deepening the work to inspire a split between Evangelical Christians and Baptists, and also within the confessions, the leadership of the secret police requested local organs to endeavor “on the current local congresses” to support the position of the German Baptists, and to attempt to “separate completely from the center the more densely populated Baptist regions, such as Caucasus, Ukraine, Belarussia.” The position of the Baptist-Raskolniki should be motivated by the claim that “the congress on the question of military service held a vague and wrong point of view...” Pursuing all combinations it should serve in the end, “through the Caucasian leaders” to call for an All-Russian Baptist Congress.

The success of the plan emerged from the number of recruits locally of informers and agents. All government departments of the OGPU and the PP of the OGPU paid serious attention to the preparatory work, “to obtain more solid information” and to keep track of resolutions by local congregations, and the process of selecting delegates for the congress. In conclusion the directives again stressed the importance of forthcoming work, which “will have great significance, not only in the sense of suspending future Baptist growth, but it also will result in an appropriate impression in Europe.” In the course of preparing for the congresses, local organs were obliged to report to the SO of OGPU on the fruit of their efforts.

What high hopes underlay the congress in the Caucasus for the Antireligious Commission and the Chekists, is revealed by the sum of 10,000 chernoventsy, which the OGPU, in accordance with the Commission’s decision on February 13, 1924, should request from the government for preparing for and conducting said congress. On February 26, 1924 the Commission again discussed the question of the Caucasus Baptist congress, deciding to postpone the congress by two months, in order to “finalize the line to pursue with the Baptist Collegium on the issue of service.

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57 Ibid.

58 Data on the discovery among delegates of former tsarist officers, were obviously obtained through information provided by the Antireligious Commission under the Central Committee of the RCP (b), which on December 12, 1923 ordered the OGPU to go through the ranks of the Baptists and arrest all former tsarist officers, that had joined congregations after the revolution. Cf. RGASPI, F 17, Op 112, D 565a, L 48 protokol No. 41a.


60 TsKhIDNIKK, F 1, Op 1, D 748, L 19-19verso.

61 RGASPI, F 17, Op 112, D 565a, L 52-53, protokol No. 44.
in the Red Army and dependent on that, set the direction for the Caucasus congress.” The 5th Caucasian Congress of Baptists took place in Piatigorsk May-June 1924, but in contrast to the initial Chekist expectations, it was given a more modest role: it merely affirmed the text of a message of the Baptist Union to the members of churches of February 1, 1924, in which the union leadership stated further compromises on the question of recognizing the obligation to military service. It was this missive from the All-Russian Baptist Collegium, which E. A. Tuchkov had characterized as “an appeal in the spirit of Prokhanov”, which obviously changed the plans of the authorities on a split of the Baptist union and the formation of a “renovationist” union. “There is no doubt, since all Baptist masses know about the message, that a split will not be inevitable, since both evangelicals and Baptists now await a union of antimilitarist Baptists and antimilitrist evangelicals. So Baptists and evangelicals recognizing the requirement of military service for all their members, they are obliged to avoid an internal split. This manifestation undoubtedly, will serve above all to stop the growth of sectarianism and forces them toward moral disintegration”, Tuchkov concluded with satisfaction on February 27, 1924.

It would be no exaggeration to assert, that the exhaustion at the end of the “raskolnicheskii” [splitting] perspectives of the “military question” led to the fact, that in the course of the military reforms adopted September 1925 in the Law on Compulsory Military Service, the statute on freeing from military obligations by reason of religious convictions was included in the law. In taking this action, the authorities did not risk much, the freeing from military service obligations by court action was quite rare in the first half of the 1920s. B. D. Bonch-Bruevich recognized this in 1924, 657 persons had been freed from military service over the course of 5 years.

At the time of the adoption of the September 18, 1925 law, the obligation to military service had been recognized by the 5th All-Union Conference of Seventh Day Adventists, which met August 16-23, 1924. A similar decision was taken in February 1926 at the 3rd All-Union Congress of Molokans, meeting in Samara.

The final blow for religious pacifists came at the 26th All-Union Congress of Baptists, meeting in Moscow December 14-18, 1926, when it approved without debate a resolution on recognizing military service. The measure had been thoroughly prepared by the OGPU organs, pressure was put on the leadership of the Baptist union, and on the local congregations. In the informational “Survey of the Political Situation in the USSR for December 1925”, the Chekists recorded that “among the leading elite of the Baptists there was a split on the issue of military service.” 10 months later, in the survey of the USSR situation in September 1926, they noted undoubted progress: “in connection with the forthcoming All-union congress the question of service in the Red Army acquired a special witticism. At the final plenum of the council, where the issue was entered into the platform of the congress, there was a change in the chairmanship, that place now occupied by one siding with military service without reservation.”

The comment in the

62 Ibid. L 56, protokol No. 45.
64 Arkhivy Kremliia, Politburo i tserkov

65 See Sobranie zakonov i rasporiazhenii Raboche-krest'ianskogo pravitel'stva SSSR, 1925, No. 62.
66 A. M. Etkind, “Khlyst: Sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia... p. 653. Even if V. D. Bonch-Bruevich deliberately reduced the number of released ‘religiozniki’, the actual number of persons freed from military service by reason of religious convictions was quite significant. According to the statistics of E. A. Tuchkov, in Kiev Gubernii alone in 1922-1923, more than a thousand such declarations were deposed in court. Cf. PGASPI, F 89, Op 4, D 119, L 16.
last quotation, undoubtedly was about N. V. Odintsov. There is no ground for suspecting one of
the most senior activists of the Baptist churches in Russia, that he had been recruited by the OGPU
organs. Against such a proposal stands the witness of his courageous position at the beginning of
the 1930s. Above all, what this shows was the sad necessity of compromise with the authorities.

The conformist position of part of the leadership of the Baptist Union at the congress, in
the thinking of the Chekists must also be maintained by delegates at local congresses. How the
OGPU organs forced the necessary resolutions through is demonstrated in the story of the
preparations for the 26th Congress of the Siberian Baptist Union, that preceded the 26th congress in
Moscow. To put pressure on the leadership of the Siberian Union, the Chekists were successful in
utilizing a conflict throughout the first half of the 1920s in the Omsk Baptist congregations on the
right of control of the church building. As one of the biggest and most beautiful church buildings
in the Urals, alongside the congregation of Baptist-traditionalist, there was the so-called “free”
Baptist group, claiming a renovationist motto. On October 6, 1926, the Omsk Regional
Administrative Department, “having received approval from the OGPU Regional Department”
forced the city council to annul the contract of the Omsk Baptist congregation for use of the
building. As was cynically stated in the report to the authorities in Novosibirsk, that this was done,
“keeping in mind the directives from the center to force from the Baptists when concluding a
contract with them for use of the cult building, that they recognize their obligation to military
service as required of all citizens of the USSR, and also in order to prevent the “free” group from
re-forming itself juridically and requesting a day in the week suitable to them.”

The proposal that was put to a vote was: to turn the building into an apartment complex,
which produced heated objection, or submit to pressure from authorities above and accept their
military service obligations - the congregational leadership chose the second option. In exchange
for that, the Omsk authorities, in accord with the decision of the PP of OGPU for the Siberian
Region, gave the right of use of the building solely to the Baptist congregation. In assessing the
vote, taken by the Baptists, it is necessary to remember, up to that time great pressure had been put
on them about the military service matter for more than three years. In the “Survey of the Political
Situation of the USSR for November 1926”, as prepared by the INFO OGPU of December 24, 1926,
it was asserted “Baptists: The recently concluded congresses of the Siberian and Northern-Caucasus
Oblasts, passed a resolution for unconditional military service.” In the negotiations for building
use, concluded by the congregation on February 15, 1927, the statute was officially recorded: “...we
the undersigned, belonging by confession of faith to the Evangelical Christian Baptists, accept
military service alongside other citizens.” The Chekists could celebrate a victory. “At the present
time we have the recognition of military service by the strongest sectarian groups - the majority of
evangelicals, Baptists and Adventists submitted,” claimed V. F. Demenyshin, head of the special

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68 Nikolai Vasilevich Odintsov (1870-1939), well known activist in the Russian Baptist movement, ordained
presbyter in 1909. In December 1924 he was elected vice-chair of the Baptist Union and also treasurer, since 1925 editor-
publisher of the journal Baptist, since 1926 chair of the Federated Union of Baptists in the USSR. In 1928 he led the
delivery of this Federated Union of Baptists to the 4th Baptist World Alliance congress (Toronto, Canada). Arrested on
the night of 5-6 November 1933, on February 27, 1934 the OSO collegium of the OGPU sentenced him to 3 years and sent
and to the Iaroslav prison. On September 28, 1936 the OSO of the NKVD of the USSR permitted him to live in Eniseike
Krasnoiarskii Krai, in the village of Makovskoe. Arrested October 1, 1937, the military collegium of the Supreme Court of
the USSR sentenced him to be shot. On March 7 1939 in Moscow he was shot.

69 Sovetskoe vlast’ i evangel’skie tserkvi Sibiri v 1920-1941. p. 197.

70 “Soversheno sekretno”, Lubianka - Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922-1934). Moscow 2001, Tom 4, Chast 2,
p 829.

71 GARF, F 5263, Op 1, D 1443, L 40.
department of the Omsk Regional Department of the OGPU, in 1927. After the 26th congress of Baptists, in fact the only confession, where members still requested release from military service, using the support of their leading organs, were the Mennonites. Alongside them, the Tolstoyans also continued to demonstrate strict nonconformism.

Beginning in 1927, the question of religious pacifism had lost its critical edge for the authorities. Nevertheless, in combating dangerous recidivism, the Antireligious Commission thereafter decided to reject registration applications of newly emerging sectarian congregations, if the statute submitted omitted the clause on recognizing all state obligations, in the first place - military service. This statue was included in the text of the of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) “On Sectarianism” of April 7, 1927. Right up to its liquidation in November 1929 the Commission continued to pursue its line of fostering division within the evangelical movement, hindering all efforts at union, even the most ephemeral ones. So on May 5, 1925 the Commission reacted with indignation to the declaration of the plenipotentiary of the sect “Christ’s Witnesses” [svideteli Khrista], V. G. Melis about uniting all sectarianists of all stripes into a single agricultural union and ordered the OGPU “not to permit such a union.” But then again, whenever a split occurred in any of the evangelical confessions they were always ready to encourage the more leftist “dissidents”. For example, on October 1, 1927, having heard about new types of Baptists, about its journal and congress, the Commission decided to recognize two parallel branches of Baptists as expedient, gave positive signals to the idea of publishing a journal, permitted a congress, and requested K. A. Popov to shepherd the project through the secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-union Communist Party. On January 12, 1929 the Commission again returned to the question of two streams of Baptists, which now were designated as “fundamentalists” and “modernists”. The key indicator of the “modernists”, according to the opinion of Party functionaries, was to make use of art, cinema and theater in order to “draw” youth into the sect, and also to make links more closely with “American and English capitalists”. As a result, the Commission undertook a form of corrective of its earlier opinion, and now declared modernism among Baptists as dangerous and harmful, but, as before, still sharply criticized any measure, which would lead to the termination of the split.

The “Military Question” permitted the Chekists to foster a split and a weakening of the evangelical churches in the USSR according to the scheme which had been undertaken with success against the majority of the remaining confessions. The once planned union of the Baptists and Evangelical Christians became impossible. Sharp disagreements and friction among the confessions, as also within Baptists congregations, Evangelical Christians, Seventh Day Adventists and Molokans, challenged the agreed positions of their leadership, and did not help strengthen the congregations.

The peak of the policy of “divide and rule” was reached in the 1920s, but its frequent return

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73 In fairness it should be noted, that never was such unprecedented pressure put on the Mennonites, as on the Evangelical Christians and Baptists. Here what played a role was the circumstance, that the tradition of freedom from military service for the Mennonites had more than a century of history, and also that Mennonites congregations were gaining practically no new members through proselytism.
75 For the text of the resolution see Sovetskiaia vlast’ i evan gel’skie tserkvi Sibiri in 1920-1941, pp 217-219.
76 Hard to say which stream of Baptists this was about, perhaps it was a movement like the so-called free Baptists, which rejected church heirarchy and which opposed all organizational structure.
77 PGASPI, F 17, Op 113, D 353, L 46.
characterized the entire “Soviet period” of Russian history. Already with the first pressures toward universal collectivization, with a mindset that included the total destruction of religion in the USSR, the organs of the OGPU kept reaching for proven methods to achieve that end. In March 1930, the leaders of the OGPU of the USSR sent to its distribution network “Circular Letter # 37 on the condition and future prospects of the church movements, and the next tasks of the OGPU organs.”

Having asserted that the “overwhelming majority of the rural population and even a section of the poor were infected with religious superstition,” the OGPU leadership recognized that “we cannot by means of administrative-operative ways liquidate the churches.” Without negating the need for changes in administrative pressures and repressions, the Liubanka [head office] stuck to its thoroughgoing commitment to these measures, and also on the priority of specific methods tied to the formation and support of conflictual relations within religious organizations. The politics of division never lost its relevance, right up to the beginning of the “Great Terror”.

DOCUMENTARY APPENDIX

Presentation by Ia. S. Agranov of the SPO OGPU on awarding chief officer of the 3rd department of the SPO E. A. Tuchkov the Order of the Red Banner.

Moscow
September 1, 1931.

Evgenii Alexandrovich Tuchkov, from a poor peasant family, member of the Party since 1917. Worked in the organs of the VchK-OGPU since 1918.

Currently working as officer of the 3rd department of the Secret-Political Department (SPO) of the OGPU. He participated in 1919 in the suppression and liquidation of the Menzelinskii uprising in Bashkiria.

Under the leadership of Comrade Tuchkov and his closest partners he carried out obviously this circular appeared already after the publication on March 2, 1930 of the Stalinist “Giddiness from Success” article, only the main line of argument in the circular stayed with the spirit of the Stalinist criticism of administrative measures in the struggle against religions. For providing information on the circular the author thanks Nataliia Ruvleva (Kiev) Kand. Ist. Nauk.

Speaking before young Communists and Komsomol members on March 11, 1937 before mobilizing them for work in the NKVD, Peoples’ Commissar for Internal Affairs N. I. Ezhov declared that one of the first level tasks of the NKVD organs was to recruit “major church agents”, who “would be active in passing on information, but also be active in divisive work, that is, foster the internal disintegration of the movement, to grind it down into little pieces.” Lubianka, p.576-578.

Evgenii Alexandrovich Tuchkov (1892-1957) was in the service of the ChK [Cheka] - GPU-OGPU-NKVD 1918. Since May (other sources say December) 1922 till October 1929 he was the head [nachalnik] of the 6th department of SGPU-OGPU, with specialization concerning the struggle with religious organizations in the USSR. From October 1922 as secretary of the Commission for carrying out the Decree on Separation of the Churches from the State under the Central Committee of RCP (b) - VKP (b). In March 1931 he was appointed assistant to the head of the secret political department (SPO) OGPU, while retaining his post as head of the 3rd department of the SPO, which specialized in agency-operative work “with churches of all confessions and with sects”. In that work in the 1920s he had direct responsibility for creating and executing religious policy. In September 1932 for a brief time was deputy plenipotentiary of the OGPU in the Urals. In the middle of 1930 worked in the apparat of the special plenipotentiary of the NKVD. In 1939 he was discharged from the GUGB NKVD with the rank of major.

In 1993, in her publication O. Vasil’eva “Series of Cardinals in the VchK. Men Set Against the Russian Orthodox Church”, which was published in the journal Novoe Vremia [New Times] (1993, No. 46) in fact drew upon excerpts from the Agranov presentation. For 15 years, beginning with the movement of its publication the figure of Tuchkov was an integral part of the historical research on the church policy of the Soviet government. Given the data published by O. Vasil’eva, the author considered it possible to publish the document in full.
enormous work in the splitting [raskol] of the Orthodox Church (into the Renovationists, Tikhonovtsyi, and several other streams). In that work he achieved brilliant results.

With his personal involvement he carried out the task in 1921 of seizing church valuables for the use of the starving.

From 1923-25 two church councils (Sobory) (All-Union Congresses of Churches) were run by him, in which Patriarch Tikhon was removed, and pushed through a resolution abolishing the monasteries, monks, and also one on the declaration of loyalty of the churches to Soviet power.

Over the course of several years Comrade Tuchkov carried out serious work to achieve a split in the Russian Orthodox Church abroad.

He did brilliant work to disrupt the appeal of the Roman Pope in 1930 for a crusade against the USSR.

Through his direct leadership and participation Comrade Tuchkov carried out serious work for obtaining the recognition by sectarians of service in the Red Army with weapon in hand and to liquidate a series of illegal credit organizations operating under the flag of sectarian organizations.

Thanks to the energetic work of Comrade Tuchkov at the end of 1930-31 the All-Union Monarchist church organization "True Orthodox Church", having done its anti-Soviet activities among the circles of black clergy [monks], was exposed and liquidated. The organization had many branch offices, 300 insurrectionist cells, weapons of fire and cold. Standing at the head of this organization’s church-political center, were the professors Losev, Novoselov, Bishop Iosef and others, who had the task of uniting under the banner of the church all religious forces for overcoming Soviet power and restoring the monarchy.

A series of branch offices, such as the one in the northern Caucasus, in TsChO, Nikolskii Raion, Northern Krai and others ready to mount an organized uprising in 1929-30, organized a series of speeches under the motto: struggle against collectivization, against the liquidation of the Kulaks, and so on.

Liquidating in 1929 in the northern Caucasus an insurrectionist organization, called "Imiaslavtsy" that worked under the leadership of the church-political center "True Orthodox Church".

Under the leadership of Comrade Tuchkov over the past 2-3 years there were liquidated several hundred strong anti-Soviet organizations and groups of religious of an insurrectionist and terrorist character.

In the matter of combating the movement among clergy and monastic circles, which were grouped around the churches, Comrade Tuchkov showed enormous energy, initiative, decisiveness

83 So in the text, the reference should be to 1922.
84 Alexander Fedorovich Losev (1898-1938) well known Russian philosopher and philologist, author of about 400 scientific works. Arrested April 18 1930, on September 20, 1931 on the case of the All-Union Center of “True Orthodoxy” was sentenced to 10 years labor camp. The term was served in the BelBaltLager. Released early by colleagues of the OGPU on October 8, 1932.
85 Mikhail Alexandrovich Novoselov (1872-1938) in 1928-1929 was one of the leaders and chief ideologue of the Iosifliane movement, was secretly ordained by Bishop Iosef. In the case of the All-Union Center “True Orthodoxy” was sentenced to 8 years in the camps.
86 This refers to Metropolitan Iosif (Ivan Semenovich Petrovykh. 1872-1937), formally the head of the movement of opponents within the Russian Orthodox Church to the policy of Metropolitan Sergei (Stragorodskii) and his “Declaration of 1927”. In honor of Metropolitan Iosif the movement came to be called the Iosiflantsy. For details see M. V. Shkarovskii, “Istinno-pravoslavnye v Voronezhskoi eparkhii”. Minuwshie. Istoricheskiii al’manakh. Moscow/SPB, 1996, Tom 19, pp 320-356.
87 Imiaslavtsy (imiabozhniky) - representatives of a religious-philosophical teaching on the existence of the names of God, which was spread in Russian philosophical circles in the 1910s. The teaching had a direct influence on the Iosiflantsy.
and resourcefulness.

I petition awarding to Comrade Evgenii Alexandrovich Tuchkov the Order of the Red Banner.”

Nachalnik SPO OGPU Agranov.

CERTIFICATE [spravka]

Comrade Evgenii Alexandrovich Tuchkov for special success in the work of struggle against counter revolution was awarded by his colleagues of the VchK-OGPU: a revolver, honorary symbol as Chekist, certificate with golden watch and statement of thanks.


GARF - F, 1235, Op 141, D 1206, L 1-1verso.