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SOVIET BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS ON THE THEME OF ATHEISM: STATISTICS AND CRUCIAL POINTS*

By Paul Roth

The goal of this examination is to ascertain how many books and pamphlets with atheistic content are offered in the Soviet Union. Moreover this article will attempt to point out tendencies and crucial points of Soviet atheistic propaganda. The type of Soviet statistics available will offer an insight at best, since a complete survey is not possible. Indeed the annual published volume, "Books in Print in the Soviet Union," does contain a subject heading "Atheism and Religion," but this listing does not include all publications in book or pamphlet form which have an atheistic content. In the weekly Russian publication "New Books" which refers to books and pamphlets which will appear from Soviet publishers in the near future, one finds books and pamphlets with atheistic content under many entirely different subject headings.

Books or pamphlets with religious content appear in the Soviet Union in quite small and private editions. Indeed, the Soviet constitution permits public atheistic propaganda but not religious propaganda. A religious book offered to the public would be an offense against the constitution. Thus, it is not surprising the the Soviet authorities consider the so-called "illegal" importation of Bibles into the Soviet Union as an offense against the laws of the state.

From inspection of an internal report, not intended for publication, of V. Furov, the Deputy Chairperson of the Council for Religious Affairs concerning the "Condition of the Russian Orthodox Church," a reader can make a few generalizations about what the Moscow Patriarchate was

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permitted to print in the year 1975 in the way of books and pamphlets for
the more than 30 million Orthodox Christians in the Soviet Union.
Contained in this report were: the pamphlet "Orthodox Church Calendar"
(50,000 copies), the Easter and Christmas message of the Patriarch
(10,000), one or two anthologies entitled "Theological Works" (3,000), a
ritual for divine worship (10,000), and a handbook for the clergy
(20,000). The number of books and pamphlets actually received by
religious people cannot be verified, since printers often printed fewer
copies than were ordered and some of the orders were sent to foreign
countries as propaganda. All of these publications are strictly limited
to material about liturgy and theology. Any kind of stance on current
social or political problems is prohibited, unless the Patriarch wishes
to repeat the peace proposals of the Soviet government.

The Bible seldom is permitted to be printed in the Soviet Union.
The All-Union Council of Evangelical-Baptist Christians in Moscow stated
publically the intention to publish 20,000 New Testaments, 10,000
Biblical concordances, and 10,000 hymnals in 1984. The Evangelical-
Baptists in the Soviet Union celebrated their 100th jubilee in that year.
Whether these editions were printed and how many of them reached their
intended audience, has not been determined by this author.

All books which appear in public are based on "materialist"
assumptions. Classic literature forms an exception in this case. Those
books and pamphlets which belong to the categories "Marxism-Leninism,"
"Social Sciences," and "Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology" are based on
atheism. Those which belong to the category "Atheism and Religion" are
antitheistic, often "militantly" atheistic, with the exception of those
texts which are intended for export to foreign countries.
We will attempt to gather essential points about the year 1981 from official statistics (source: SSSR v 1981 godu, Moscow, 1982). All together 83,007 books and pamphlets in editions expressed in millions totaling 1,898.7 copies appeared in the USSR in 1981. Of that number, 17,764 books (106.9 million copies) were not for sale; they were distributed free of charge. Of the 83,007 books and pamphlets mentioned, 2,022 (44.6 million copies) belong to the category "Marxism-Leninism," "Social Sciences," and "Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology." 227 books and pamphlets are in the category, "Atheism and Religion" (5.5 million copies). The average printing of these books and pamphlets on militant atheism was 24,100 copies, 224 of which appeared in languages of the Soviet Union's people. This statistic does not contain information about the printing of antireligious posters.

The overall picture changes if we go through information from particular publishers. There we come across the publishing house "Knowledge" (Znanie). This publisher is an organ of the society which under the name "Society for Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge" which replaced an atheist group, which had been dissolved at the beginning of the war. This new society was formed in 1947 and took the name "Knowledge" in 1963. This publishing house also puts out the most important atheist magazine in the Soviet Union, Nauka i religiya [Science and Religion.] In 1981 the "Knowledge" publishing house produced 44.4 million copies of books and pamphlets. Thus, here is a supplemental publication on the theme of atheism, which seeks primarily to demonstrate the "unscientific basis" of all religions.

The number and the diversity of books and pamphlets printed under the title "Atheism and Religion" is surprisingly low. The population of
the USSR in 1981 amounted to close to 265 million citizens; the Communist Party had approximately 17 million members. One explanation of low numbers of atheist publications might be that atheism is wide-spread and regularly taught; no religious publication is permitted to oppose it. Another explanation might be the lack of demand for books about atheism. It is an open secret that books with an emphatically atheistic content do not sell well, clutter up the magazine shelves and take away the paper needed to publish other kinds of books. The publishers are thus not exactly interested in publications of this type. Also, at regular intervals the party complains about the low level of these publications. For example, in 1981 in the Soviet Republic of Tadzhikistan, only a single book under the category "Atheism and Religion" was published (5,000 copies) for a population of 3.9 million citizens.

How difficult it is to evaluate the effect of publications of this kind can be illustrated by the following example. In 1968 the Moscow Press for Political Literature published a translation of a Polish book, entitled Biblical Stories in an edition of 200,000 copies (Z. Kosidovskiy, Bibliyskie skanzaniya). The book sold well. Numerous religionists bought it, not to explode the biblical "myths," as the publisher has hoped, but instead to get acquainted with the Old Testament in any form.

We will now attempt to discover crucial points and tendencies of Soviet atheistic propaganda with the aid of the previously mentioned Soviet periodical "New Books." All issues from the year 1983 were evaluated. "New Books" mentions only some of the expected publications; however, the selection is made from publications originating in the Soviet republics. Every title announced is introduced by a short text.
For our purposes all new titles from the issues of "New Books" for 1983 and 1984 which concern religion and atheism were considered.

In the periodical "New Books" 63 books and pamphlets were listed for 1983 and 1984 for readers in the Soviet Union on the theme of atheism and religion (not to be confused with the category "Atheism and Religion") from 19 Soviet publishers (3.7 million copies). From this number the conclusion can be reached that we are dealing only with a selection. Also, there is no information regarding those publications which were announced in earlier years as appearing in 1983 and were then published in that year. For 1983 eight publishers from seven Soviet republics announced 13 titles on this theme with a total number of copies 431,000. That is, there were not even publications listed from 15 Soviet republics. Twelve of the thirteen publications listed were in Russian; a brochure from Kazakhstan in German was also listed. This was a collection of articles against "religious secularism," by two German authors. Thus, this brochure was directed against that very small group of believers to which Soviet-Germans belong. Of the 431,000 copies mentioned above only one book came from the Moscow Political Publishing House (250,000) and one from the Moscow publisher "Young Guard" (10,000). A conclusion is possible that the majority of Soviet publishers -- and there are more than 200 -- are not interested in the publication of atheistic literature.

For 1984 "New Books" announced 50 titles on the theme of atheism and religion from 15 publishers with a total number of copies of 3.3 million. The announcements came from four republics. Moscow Political-Publications alone announced 17 titles with a total of 2.3 million copies. Thus, the listings for 1984 as well as 1983 show that the
numerous Soviet publishers are not particularly interested in books about atheism. With the exception of the Political Publishing House, no publisher in "New Books" offered more than three titles on the theme.

If we combine the announced titles for 1983 and 1984 (collectively 63 listings totaling 3.7 million copies) in order to identify significant themes, we come up with five categories.

Most of the titles, 17, are concerned with the **atheistic education of the population** (total number of copies 761,000). In addition we have not yet mentioned a slide-series from the Moscow publisher "Poster" (30,000 sets). These publications were specifically for teachers, educators, and propagandists. The average number of books in each printing amounted to 44,700 copies.

It is also evident that three publications (with 300,000 copies collectively) are concerned only with the atheistic education of the party. The publications with the largest printing under the rubric "Atheistic Education" cover the topic of the atheistic education of school children (150,000 copies). Other publications are about the atheistic education of young people of the rural population and of the women in Turkmenistan (1000 copies). Some publications deal especially with the question of how a person can accomplish atheistic educational goals in mathematics classes by using films. Also interesting is a publication which gives guidelines for interpreting and explaining Russian paintings, churches, icons, etc., so that religious problems are concealed and non-religious explanations substituted.

According to the number of publications, namely 14 books and pamphlets, the group **Atheism, Science, Religion, and Superstition** is in second place; however, in terms of complete editions (1,595,000 copies)
and in the average number of copies per edition (114,000 copies) this category is certainly in first place. These publications are meant for the "ideological-worker" as well as for a wider range of readers and for the masses. Two are specifically for teenage readers. The Moscow Political Publishing House -- this is the largest printing among all publications on the general theme of atheism and religion -- plans to publish an "Atheistic dictionary" with 300,000 copies and sequels numbered 13 (250,000) and 14 (200,000) to a title known as "Atheistic Readings."

Problems which confront atheists can be deduced from titles of announced publications: Creation, Origin of Humankind, The Meaning of Life, Life After Death, or The Existence of an Immortal Soul. Four publications alone take up the problem of the immortal soul (together they amount to 270,000 copies).

Judging from the number of publications, altogether 13, the category Churches and Religions is the next most significant topic. But counting total number of books (194,500 copies) and figures for an average run (15,000 copies) this topic ranks in last place. Only five publications are dedicated to Islam and of them, three are historical reports. One is clearly polemical. The three publications which are concerned with the Russian-Orthodox Church are polemic. They denounce the reactionary past of this church and the "falsification" of the representation of the "Baptism of Russia" 1000 years ago.

Both of the publications against the Catholic Church are antagonistic; one is an expose of the unpatriotic activity of the Uniate Church; the other is the "conversion report" of a former Catholic who became an atheist. The two publications about Buddhism are historical.
From these observations one can conclude that these publications are intended for a wide readership among the general public.

On the theme *Atheism and Religion in the Conflict of Ideas* only eight publications are announced. They have, however, a quite high total number of copies (723,000) and the second highest average number of copies per book (9,000). Additionally, "New Books" recommends these publications not only to educators and propagandists but also to the general reader. In this category, there is also a publication in the series "Arguments," which was to be published in the Political-Press in 1984. It is notable because of the large number of copies: 200,000. The theme of this publication is the anticommunist activities of religious centers in the capitalistic West. If we count the total number of copies of different publications, which have variations on the theme (namely conversion, awakening of mistrust in the population of socialist states, etc.); then we come up with a total number of 360,000 copies. The principal adversary is clearly the Catholic Church. Overall it is "proven" that a tight bond exists between capitalism and religion. E. Parnov emphasizes in his book *The Throne of Lucifer* (Polit-Press, 150,000 copies) the relationship between middle-class society and its modern tendency toward "mysticism, superstition, etc."

In connection with the previously discussed group, we must also observe the following thematic category which presents *Atheism as a provision for a fulfilling life* to the Soviet citizens. We find only six publications (total number of copies: 221,000). These books and pamphlets are written specifically for a broad range of readers although the average printing (almost 37,000 copies) does not indicate great reader interest. Religion is represented as the reason for spiritual and
intellectual problems. Religion is to be replaced by a life based upon atheistic principles with an atheistic value system and holidays and rituals free of religious content.

Under the heading "Other" five publications are listed (total number of copies: 213,000). In this category, for example, we find the second edition of the recent publication of the Chairperson of the Council for Religious Affairs, V. Kuroyedov, entitled Religion and Church in Soviet Society (Polit-Press, 100,000 copies), which is intended for the "ideological worker." Kuroyedov describes the relationship of state and church in the Soviet Union, "Lenin's principle" of the freedom of conscience; at the same time he opposes "the falsifications of middle-class clergymen" who misrepresent the religious situation in the Soviet Union.

If we attempt to draw a conclusion from the statistics taken from "New Books," which, we reiterate, are obviously incomplete, we can state the following:

1. Clearly, atheistic literature in the Soviet Union belongs to the category of prescribed literature, not popular literature.

2. In the framework of the desperate Soviet efforts to revive Marxism-Leninism, debate against religion is undertaken less by means of reference to the classical authors of Marxism-Leninism (Marx, Engels, Lenin, etc.) than by means of criticism of the alleged lack of scientific dimension in religion.

3. In the framework of refusal to allow information from the western world, religion is depicted as the co-conspirator of capitalism.

4. Atheistic propagandists apparently have the greatest
difficulties with the following problems: creation, origin of life, death, and the soul.

5. The work of atheistic education should be significantly increased.

One set of offerings from "New Books" which deal with religion, has not yet been mentioned. It is the category of books and pamphlets about religion in foreign languages. For 1984 four Soviet publications have been announced, seventeen titles (total number of copies: 206,000). They are divided among nine languages, so it is a question of eight different texts.

Also, these publishers' notices are incomplete. Polemical remarks against religion are only promulgated if religion is presented as assisting capitalism, (for example the United States). That is these publications for foreign countries differ fundamentally from those for the Soviet citizen. Thus, it is argued that true freedom of conscience is realized most fully in the Soviet Union. Here the announcements are directed to Muslims as the main target group. Out of a total printing of 206,000 copies, 153,000 are clearly intended for Muslims.

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