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**ANTI-RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES OF THE UNION OF GODLESS IN UKRAINE  
(1927 – 1930)**

**Abstract.** *The purpose of the research is to analyze the participation of the Union of Godless in the implementation of the atheist policy of the Bolshevik regime by organizing anti-religious events and involving into them of various categories of the Ukrainian society during 1927 – 1930. The methodology of the research is based on the principles of historicism, scientific character, verification, authorial objectivity, moderate narrative constructivism, as well as the use of general scientific (analysis, synthesis, generalization) and special historical (historical and genetic, historical and typological, historical and systemic) methods. The scientific novelty consists in the attempt to deepen the characteristics of anti-religious activity of the Union of Godless of Ukraine during the first years of its existence. The Conclusions.* *The Union of Godless was created by the Bolsheviks in order to eradicate a religious world outlook in Ukraine's multinational population. Propaganda activities were an important area of its work. However, the anti-religious propaganda of the union was not regular, it lacked regularity. The uncompromising rhetoric of the Union of Godless encountered a misunderstanding of a large part of the population and provoked a backlash that was to uphold*

religious beliefs. Still, it is necessary to recognize that the achievements in the anti-religious work of the non-religious organization were indeed, however, the results foreseen by its encourages were not achieved by this campaign, since the Bolsheviks did not manage to transform the world outlook of the population of Soviet Ukraine into a purely atheistic one, which was the ultimate its goal.

**Key words:** Union of Godless, anti-religious propaganda, fighting against religion, Ukraine.

## АНТИРЕЛІГІЙНА ДІЯЛЬНІСТЬ СПІЛКИ БЕЗВІРНИКІВ В УКРАЇНІ (1927 – 1930 рр.)

**Анотація.** *Мета дослідження* – дослідити участь Спілки безвірників у реалізації атеїстичної політики більшовицького режиму шляхом організації антирелігійних заходів та залучення до участі у них різних категорій українського суспільства протягом 1927 – 1930 рр. **Методологія дослідження** ґрунтується на принципах історизму, системності, науковості, верифікації, авторської об'єктивності, поміркованого наративного конструктивізму, а також на використанні загальнонаукових (аналіз, синтез, узагальнення) та спеціально-історичних (історико-генетичний, історико-типологічний, історико-системний) методів. **Наукова новизна** полягає у спробі поглиблення характеристики антирелігійної діяльності Спілки безвірників України протягом перших років її існування. **Висновки.** Спілка безвірників була створена більшовиками з метою викорінення у багатонаціонального населення України релігійного світогляду. Важливим напрямом її роботи була пропагандистська діяльність. Проте антирелігійна пропаганда спілки не була регулярною, їй бракувало систематичності. Безкомпромісна риторика Спілки безвірників нашоувхувалася на нерозуміння значної частини населення та викликала зворотню реакцію, що полягала у відстоюванні релігійних переконань. Та все ж, необхідно визнати, що здобутки в антирелігійній роботі безвірницької організації дійсно були, проте передбачених її натхненниками результатів ця кампанія не досягла, оскільки трансформувати світогляд населення радянської України на суцільно атеїстичний, а саме такою була кінцева її мета, більшовики так і не спромоглися.

**Ключові слова:** Спілка безвірників, антирелігійна пропаганда, боротьба з релігією, Україна.

**The Problem Statement.** An important task of the Communist Party regime in Ukraine was to provide education for a person of a new type, whose views should be fully consistent with Marxist-Bolshevik ideology. In contrast to the numerous religious communities of numerous confession directions operating in the environment of Ukraine's multinational population, the Bolsheviks resorted to the creation of an alternative non-governmental organization, the Union of Godless, whose members were to be persuaded atheists. The strategic goal of this formation was to eliminate the broad layers of population from participating in the activities of cult communities.

**The Analysis of Recent Researches and Publication.** The first attempts to analyze the history of the Union of Godless in the process of growth of the unbelieving movement were made by anti-religious propagandists K. Holbert (Holbert, 1926), I. Rudenko (Rudenko, 1930). Publication of V. Kelembetova (Kelembetova, 1974) was dedicated to the practice of the activities of the Union of Godless in the sense of formation and propaganda of atheism among the population of Ukraine and the USSR, reflecting the tendencies of the research of organized unbelieving movement, characteristic for the 50's – 80's of the XXth century. Among the most recent domestic researches, works of O. Vitrynska (Vitrynska, 2016) and O. Topchyi (Topchii, 2011) took the prominent place, which we relied on while researching the anti-religious activities of the Union of Godless.

**The purpose of the article** is to analyze the participation of the Union of Godless in the realization of the atheist policy of the Bolshevik regime by organizing anti-religious events and involving in them of various categories of the Ukrainian society during 1927 – 1930.

**The Main Material Statement.** The activities of the Union of Godless were aimed at “exposing the exploitative nature of religion, its harmful role in production, culture, life, as well as exposing the counter-revolutionary nature of priests and various religious organizations” (Chefranov, 1930, p. 27).

Units of Union of Godless massively, especially during religious holidays, organized anti-religious activities. The Union of Godless made extensive use of local press, radio, theater and cinema, museums, libraries, and organized lectures, circles, and seminars. Particular importance was given to the introduction of a new Soviet rite – the organization of the communist ceremony baptizing, red weddings, civil funerals, participation in the organization of revolutionary holidays. The Union of Godless promoted natural science, considered the origin of religion, and established the historical and economic basis for its existence. All anti-religious work of the Union of Godless was connected with the struggle for the construction of socialism (Konovalov, 1967, pp. 72–73).

For the “debunking” of religious tenets and positions of the clergy, the godless turned to logic and knowledge. They tried to convince the falsehoods and wrongs of religious beliefs, the inappropriateness of rites and traditions, to substantiate the greed of the clergy and the truth of communist ideology through the achievements of science and a “common sense” (Vitrynska, 2016, p. 177).

The Union of Godless considered it necessary to fight religion not only with a certain religious outlook, but also with a significant social and socio-political factor. Therefore, shortly after their emergence, the Union of Godless units did not want to limit themselves to remote criticism of religion, and began to organize fight against any manifestations of religiosity among the population systematically.

In particular, in Vinnytsia District, the Union of Godless set out the following tasks: to neutralize the religious influence of the clergy on the public life and socio-economic life of the region; ideologically “disarm” religious organizations, circles, opposing them with the Soviet organizations; to assist in the struggle for the Cultural Revolution by engaging workers in active “faithless” work. In this activity, a special role was given to artistic events, reading of anti-religious literature, concerts, theatrical performances and games. Vinnytsia District Council of Godless planned to hold the following anti-religious activities in the years of 1928 – 1929: a district anti-religious seminar for 30 people, a district teacher seminar for 60 people, two inter-district seminars for 60 people; to organize two circles of “rising type” for 25 people; four working anti-religious circles; five peasants; three Polish.

The main method of anti-religious work of the Soviet authorities was campaigning. The godless organized anti-Christmas, anti-Ester, and other campaigns that featured signs of militant ignorance, lack of culture, class restriction, and, in general, failed to respond to declared, by their leadership, the civilized propaganda of atheistic ideas.

Reporting in 1927 on the conduct of a “cultural march and anti-Easter campaign” in the Zaporizhzhya constituency, the party authorities were forced to admit that the carried out work allowed “not quite tactful statements” against believers, even nonsense.

We have a document stating that on February 20, 1928, the Bolsheviks were alarmed that Vinnytsia district failed to promote the main tasks of the Union of Godless among the believing population properly, resulting in no increase of its units. The organization failed to adjust the internal organizational work of godless and to achieve the expected results in the field of anti-religious agitation in the countryside. The state of anti-religious work of the Union of Godless was considered absolutely unsatisfactory in other districts of Podillya.

In fact, the very establishment of the Union of Godless units was carried out without taking into account the principle of voluntariness, because this society was artificially promoted within the population. In addition, the Bolsheviks tried to create as many Union of Godless units as possible, forgetting their quality (Andrushchak, 2016, p. 44).

Often, the tool to overcome “religious prejudice” was a lecture. For example, a doctor from the Dmytriv Medical Center Mr. Kenig visited the village of Ryabukhi in Konotop district and carried out a survey of pupils and the sanitary condition of the school. After giving a report to the villagers, he answered the following questions: “Can a person live without dying? Why aren’t different bacilli spoiling the relics? Is it possible to get infected in the church by kissing the cross?” The doctor answered comprehensive questions, giving examples from life and science. “Medicine with its advice helps the peasant fight terrible diseases and brings to the village anti-religious propaganda”, – village correspondent F. Kovalenko summarized.

Lectures on natural topics were tried to be held in the days of religious holidays. For example, in the village Brytany in Nizhyn Region people were informed that a lecture “Plants and Animals” would be read at the Christmas holidays, during it their structure in a microscope would be shown. A local village correspondent, nicknamed “Nezamozhnik”, wrote: “Our peasants did not believe when anyone said that plants and animals consist of individual cells. If anyone starts to say that this is proven by science, they would only smile in disbelief”. A full school of peasants gathered and brought a microscope from Mynive Technical College. The peasants viewed through it the structure of the plant leaf, the structure of potatoes, meat, examined the blood. The students of the technical school explained everything. Then the peasants spoke much about the various achievements of science” (Topchii, 2011, pp. 179–180).

The method of mass propaganda of the Union of Godless units among workers was the performance of anti-religious people during lunch breaks. They were usually held in the dining room where all the workers who unwittingly attended anti-religious lectures would gather. This method of propaganda had a significant advantage: a large number of workers were able to listen to the reports. In 1930, a group of godless at Tinyakov Kharkiv factory conducted anti-religious activities in the dining room. Initially, this was due to the absence of a special meeting room, but the propagandists soon realized the benefits of this method of work and even after the emergence of a free room continued to work in the dining room (Vitrynska, 2016, pp. 172–173).

One of the forms of work of the Union of Godless units was to conduct mass excursions to the organization which involved large enterprises and major clubs of the area. The excursions involved workers, especially new staff – people from the village and women. A few weeks before the excursion, the workers were informed of the planned event. The Kyiv District Council of the Union of Godless proposed excursions to museums of religious cults, the History Museum, Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, individual monasteries in and outside the city, St. Sophia Cathedral, the anti-religious office of the House of Communist Education and State Farms. During the trip to the farms guides were recommended to prepare reports on the following topics: “Scientifically placed agriculture is not afraid of any accidental disasters”, “Are priests and prayers needed for success in agriculture”, “Heredity and variability in nature and the application of their laws in agriculture economy”, “The role and importance of state farms in rural construction”. Kyiv Regional Council of the Union of Godless advised the rural centers to conduct an agitation campaign concerning “Agricultural Work and the Union of Godless” to involve the peasantry and intelligentsia. The instructions to the units indicated that the main idea of this topic was that religion impeded the development of agriculture, attracted the peasantry to backward technology, and gave rise to belief in supernatural forces

and prejudices related to farming. The rural godless were advised to participate in agricultural meetings and agricultural groups. The godless were called upon to improve the economy by following the instructions of agronomists and thus to prove to the neighbours the error of their religious beliefs (Holbert, 1926, pp. 56–57).

The godless were tasked with eliminating religious influence on economic and social life. The Union was to combat the religious activity of believers and the clergy, in particular to combat organizing fundraisers to improve material status of poor men created on the basis of religion economic associations (sectarian cooperatives, communes), direct and concealed participation of priests in civil associations and events, organization of public dinners, prayer services within the peasant courts, consecration of cattle, apiaries and other agricultural objects.

For this purpose, local Union of Godless units were required that their members take an active part in all levels of community service and, by their own example, demonstrate to the others the benefits of a new way of life and a socialist way of doing business. The godless were to identify the clergy-backed social groups, as well as to identify ways how priests used to pretend the supporters of Soviet power in order to influence the population.

Because in many cases the temple and the priest's premises were a source of propagation of anti-Soviet sentiment, the Union of Godless units had to establish sources of talk and persuade the public of the need to combat the phenomenon. It was believed that by studying the personal composition of religious activists, its past, and its connection with anti-Soviet elements, the unit would enable to manifest itself more active in the case of the decay of the religious community (Postanovy Pershoho Vseukrainskoho zizdu Spilky bezvirnykiv, 1928, pp. 14–15).

Fighting religion, not just “economic expediency”, resulted in the replacement of weeks with what is known as a “continuous week”. O. Yaroslavskyi considered in the article “Transition to the Offensive” the transition to “continuity” as an important “precondition for the displacement of religious ideology” (Slezin, 2005, p. 133). In 1930, godless organization called for the declaration of Christmas as the days of industrialization (Mardershtein, 1930, p. 24). The people of Ukraine were forced to abandon the celebration of religious holidays completely. Easter, the Trinity, and other religious holidays became normal working days. Thus, the struggle for the traditional leisure activities in the village of Markov of Pershotravensky district of the local godless unit began in 1926, but it encountered stiff resistance from the peasants. The Soviet propaganda claimed that the local population tried to damage agricultural machinery and thus prevent the godless from working on Sunday (Rudenko, 1930, p. 65). Even before the introduction of “continuity” throughout Ukraine on the days of church holidays, voluntary Saturday and Sunday works were held. Thus, the center of godless of Ustimivka village in Poltava region, which numbered 220 people in 1929, organized at Easter with the Komsomol members voluntary Sunday work concerning the village adjustment (Kelembetova, 1974, p. 62).

Bolshevik agitators opposed work in favor of developing a country of leisure during religious holidays. To increase the ideological component of the voluntary Saturday and Sunday works and labour in the days of religious holidays, the Soviet leaders set specific goals which money was gained for. In 1930, Mykolayiv Jewish workers in Yom Kippur held voluntary Saturday work; its incomes were transferred to build a “Birobidzhan” aircraft. On the eve of the same holiday in 1931, agitators called to organize a voluntary Saturday work for raising funds for the submarine “Warrior Godless”. The purpose of anti-holiday work was to divert people from performing religious practices by organizing work these days. In 1930, the newspaper “The Godless on the seeding-machine” in Khorol, Poltava province,

stated: “The slogan of the anti-Easter campaign among the collective farmers should be: No collective farm celebrating Easter. No drunken farm worker. For the mass departure of collective farmers in the fields” (Vitrynska, 2016, p. 182).

The work of the Union of Godless also unfolded in an environment of national minorities where certain results were obtained. During 1928, the organization promoted the publication of a German anti-religious journal and the distribution of brochures of atheist content in the Jewish and Polish languages. By engaging in writers’ anti-religious activities, in the same year, the members of the union launched a campaign to discredit Judaism (Postanovy poshyrenoho plenumu vseukrainskoi rady spilok bezvirnykiv 16–19 travnia 1929 r., 1929, p. 115). The Union of Godless initiated the revision of the NKVD instruction concerning the possibility of admission of school children – Lutherans and Baptists to the Confirmation, with a view to its abolition. The members of the union also demanded that the believers and members of the clergy who were involved in the religious teaching of German children would be brought to administrative and criminal responsibility. The Union of Godless demanded that the Soviet authorities establish stricter control over religious communities and denominations that included the German population, and strengthen the oversight of clergy in German villages (Na borotbu z relihiieiu, 1930, p. 18). However, in the overwhelming majority of cases, anti-religious work among the population of ethnic communities under the auspices of the Union of Godless did not become systematic due to the lack of organization of its local units (Antireligioznaya rabota sredi natsionalnostey, 1933, p. 33). In 1930, a mass anti-religious event was held in Dnipropetrovsk with the participation of 12,000 people, many of whom were national minorities. During the campaign, 100 meetings were held and a series of reports on anti-religious content were read. At the same time, the Jewish workers took part in alternative celebrations during the Jewish holidays. They organized the campaign “days of industrialization”, during them the state collected 8 thousand RUB. Some of the money received was sent to Birobidzhan and the rest was transferred to the tractor column. At the same time, the godless raised the issue of the closure of religious buildings. As a result, three synagogues, a cathedral and a church were obliged to stop their activities in Dnipropetrovsk (Voiovnnychi, 1930, p. 35).

**The Conclusions.** The Union of Godless became an alternative civil structure to religious communities, operating in Ukraine. This organization was created by the Bolsheviks in order to eradicate the religious world outlook of the republic’s multinational population. An important area of its work was propaganda activity. However, the anti-religious propaganda of the union was not regular, it lacked regularity. The uncompromising rhetoric of the Union of Godless encountered a misunderstanding of a large part of the population and provoked a backlash that was to uphold religious beliefs. Still, it must be admitted that the achievements in the anti-religious work of the godless organization were indeed, however, the results foreseen by its encourages were not achieved by this campaign, since the Bolsheviks did not manage to transform the world outlook of the population of Soviet Ukraine into a purely atheistic one, which was the ultimate its goal.

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