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## (Anti)-Religious Aspects of the Cold War: Soviet Religious Policy as Applied in the Estonian SSR

**Abstract:** The author demonstrates that the implementation of state policy on religion was not particularly effective in the Estonian SSR. It was mild compared to several other regions of the Soviet Union, and particular campaigns “on the religious front” frequently depended on the discretion of local officials. Soviet policy on religion directed a great deal of attention toward new secular Soviet ceremonies and managed rather effectively to graft new rites into society.

The Baltic republics were the “Soviet West” for the people of the Soviet Union. At the same time, those republics were presented to the West as a kind of display window where quite a few things could take place that would be unthinkable elsewhere. This also meant a somewhat more lenient attitude concerning religion, which led some to believe that Estonia was a testing ground for a more lenient religious policy.<sup>1</sup> This position seems to be incorrect, but it does indicate that, despite the centralized Soviet system, there was some room for different interpretations of religious policy in the USSR. The prerequisite for this, however, was a complicated system that had developed rather randomly, the fundamental nature of which was the attempt to solve problems using organizational means—“if there is a task, then create an agency to resolve it.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the apparatus for antireligious work was intertwined with different interests and chains of command. It was far from effective and relatively eloquently proved Stalin’s claim that “cadres decide everything.”

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1 Toivo Pilli, “Towards a Revived Identity: Estonian Baptists, 1970–1985; Sheryl Corrado and Toivo Pilli (eds.), *Eastern European Baptist History: New Perspectives* (Prague, 2007), p. 143.

2 Leonid Mletšin, *Brežnev* (Tallinn, 2011), p. 11.

## Historiography

After Estonia regained its independence, the religious history of the Soviet period did not begin attracting more serious interest until around the turn of the millennium. Vello Salo's *State and Churches 1940–1991*,<sup>3</sup> the only general survey of the topic to this day, was soon joined by studies conducted using archival sources. These include Riho Altnurme's *The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Soviet State 1944–1949*,<sup>4</sup> Jaanus Plaat's *Religious Movements, Churches, and Free Congregations in Lääne County and Hiiumaa: Processes of Change in Religious Associations from the Mid-18th Century to the End of the 20th Century* and his *Saaremaa Churches, Religious Movements, and Prophets in the 18th–20th Centuries*,<sup>5</sup> Toivo Pilli's *Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity under Communism* (Milton Keynes, 2008), Andrei Sõtšov's *The Estonian Orthodox Eparchy under the Influence of Soviet Religious Policies in 1954–1964*,<sup>6</sup> Riho Saard's *Spirit of Tallinn*,<sup>7</sup> and Atko Rimmel's *Anti-Religious Struggle in the Estonian SSR 1957–1990: Main Institutions and Their Activities*.<sup>8</sup> The anthology *History of Estonian Ecumenism*<sup>9</sup> provides an overview of the internal life of churches and the relations between them. One of the most recent works on Soviet-era religious life is a collection of articles and memoirs, *Belief in Freedom*,<sup>10</sup> published under the aegis of the Lutheran Church.

Even though they are not expressly dedicated to religious questions, researchers of the resistance movement also shed light upon the collaboration of churches with the authorities and repressions that befell believers, for instance Indrek Jürjo's *The Exile and Soviet Estonia*,<sup>11</sup> Arvo Pesti's *The Dissident Movement in Esto-*

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3 Vello Salo, *Riik ja kirikud 1940–1991* (Tartu, 2000).

4 Riho Altnurme, *Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kirik ja Nõukogude riik 1944–1949* (Tartu, 2001).

5 Jaanus Plaat, *Usuliikumised, kirikud ja vabakogudused Lääne- ja Hiiumaal: usuühenduste muutumisprotsessid 18. sajandi keskpaigast kuni 20. sajandi lõpuni* (Tartu, 2001); idem, *Saaremaa kirikud, usuliikumised ja prohvetid 18.–20. sajandil* (Tartu, 2003).

6 Andrei Sõtšov, *Eesti Õigeusu piiskopkond nõukogude religiooniipoliitika mõjuväljas 1954–1964* (PhD-thesis, Tartu, 2008).

7 Riho Saard, *Tallinna vaim* (Tallinn, 2010).

8 Atko Rimmel, *Religioonivastane võitlus Eesti NSV-s aastail 1957–1990: tähtsamad institutsioonid ja nende tegevus* (Tartu, 2011).

9 Riho Altnurme (ed.), *History of Estonian Ecumenism* (Tallinn–Tartu, 2009).

10 Anne Velliste (ed.), *Usk vabadusse* (Tallinn, 2011).

11 Indrek Jürjo, *Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti: vaateid KGB, EKP ja VEKSA arhiividokumentide põhjal* (Tallinn, 1996).

*nia in 1971–1987: Collection of Documents*,<sup>12</sup> and Viktor Niitsoo's *Resistance, 1955–1985*.<sup>13</sup>

Research literature published during the Soviet period also cannot be entirely set aside. Though heavily slanted ideologically, it can still be useful in drawing attention to otherwise obscure topics and facts. Most notable is Lembit Raid's monograph *From Freethinkers' Circles to Mass Atheism: Marxist Atheism in Estonia in 1900–1965*.<sup>14</sup>

## Historical Overview

Even though a commitment to atheism remained a constant in Soviet religious policy, its implementation depended primarily on the political needs of the day, which differed from one period to another. Stalin's religious policy involved limited cooperation with "official" churches (primarily the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) but also other major confessions). "Sectarians" were regarded more severely, and various repressions befell them (for instance, the deportation of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1951).<sup>15</sup> However, the situation became more acute shortly after Stalin's death, for two reasons. First, when the atmosphere of fear that prevailed during Stalin's lifetime collapsed, a religious renaissance of sorts followed, alarming leading figures in ideological work. Second, Nikita Khrushchev's clique in the Party gave increased attention to ideology and the "scientific-technical revolution." As a result, the decision "On Major Shortcomings in Scientific-theistic Propaganda and Measures to Improve It" was pushed through in July 1954, leading to a boom in atheist propaganda that lasted nearly three months. Excesses that followed throughout the Soviet Union, domestic and foreign policy considerations, and a power struggle within the Party led to the discontinuation of the campaign in November of the same year, marked by the decision "On Errors in

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12 Arvo Pesti, *Dissidentlik liikumine Eestis aastatel 1972–1987: dokumentide kogumik* (Tallinn, 2009).

13 Viktor Niitsoo, *Vastupanu, 1955–1985* (Tartu, 1997).

14 Lembit Raid, *Vabamõtlejate ringidest massilise ateismini: marksistlik ateism Eestis aastail 1900–1965* (Tartu, 1978).

15 Aigi Rahi-Tamm and Andres Kahar, "The Deportation Operation "Priboi" in 1949," Toomas Hiio, Meelis Maripuu and Indrek Paavle (eds.), *Estonia since 1944: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity* (Tallinn, 2009), pp. 382–3.

the Conduct of Scientific- theistic Propaganda among the Population”, adopted by the CPSU Central Committee (CC).<sup>16</sup>

The ongoing power struggle between Khrushchev, Georgii Malenkov, and Viacheslav Molotov delayed the “fi al solution of the religious problem” for a few years. In the meantime there was a substantial increase in religious ceremonies (such as confi mations and christenings), largely to meet the needs of people returning from prison camps and internal exile in Siberia, who had not had such opportunities while they were away. Yet by 1957, when the scales of power tipped in favor of Khrushchev, religious questions once again became the focus of attention. Offi al ideology stressed the utopian plan to create a new “Soviet man” and to achieve communism over the course of the next couple of decades. “Religious vestiges” that still persisted despite the “severing of religion’s social roots” and had even started reviving were seen as the biggest obstacle. Thus, an unprecedented antireligious campaign was started in 1958<sup>17</sup> and lasted (with ups and downs) until 1964. The campaign had three primary thrusts: the atheist propaganda war; the development of new Soviet rituals such as secular equivalents of religious ceremonies; and “administration”, or the suppression of churches by tightening and consistently applying laws governing religion.

After Khrushchev was toppled in October 1964, religious policy was re-evaluated. It was clear that regardless of the colossal blow dealt to religion, an atheist state could not be created all at once by shutting down churches. Several religious associations now operated underground and had become hostile towards the state. For this reason, the state preferred to maintain control over their activities by seemingly moderating its stance while at the same time implementing a long-term policy of choking them off. Thus the principle according to which churches and

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16 Mikhail Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov v XX veke* (Moscow, 2010), p. 350.

17 Many authors (such as Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov*, p. 382; John Anderson, “The Archives of the Council for Religious Aff irs, *Religion, State and Society* 3 [1992], pp. 399f) also place the antireligious campaign in the years 1958–64, yet its fi st signs can be found in Estonian archival materials in 1956–57. Kristina Burinskaitė also makes the same claim for Lithuania in ‘KGB tegevuse eripärast Leedus aastatel 1954–1990’ (Specific Aspects of the Activities of the KGB in Lithuania 1954–1990), *Tuna* 15 (2012), no. 4, p. 82. It is not likely that this activity derived solely from local enthusiasm, especially given such coincidences, yet the actual reason for this activity can only be guessed at (for instance, the wake of the decisions of 1954 or instructions relayed by higher-ranking persons employing “telephone law” [a practice by which persons with political power issued orders over the phone instead of using conventional bureaucratic channels, and such orders had to be obeyed] and other similar factors).

the state operated for practically the entire Brezhnev era was the Taoist aphorism, “if you sit by the river long enough, you will see the body of your enemy fl at by.” The possibilities for churches to stand up to state policy and atheist propaganda in this kind of position warfare were rather limited, and the numbers of congregation members dwindled quite consistently.

Ideological questions came to the fore once again in the late 1970s, and a brief atheist campaign was unleashed in the early 1980s. While the aim of the previous campaign was to bring churches in line and evangelize believers in the atheist spirit, it became clear by the end of the 1960s that people had not turned into militant atheists. Instead, they displayed indifference towards both religion and atheism—since religion had been forced to the margins of society,<sup>18</sup> atheist activism seemed like tilting against windmills. Thus the new campaign had two objectives. On the one hand, it sought to convert an indifferent population to a committed atheist worldview. On the other hand, it sought to bring into line clergymen and believers who had become active at the end of the 1970s, who had made themselves conspicuous, and who had developed closer ties with the dissident movement in various places in the USSR (albeit to no particular extent in Estonia).<sup>19</sup> There was no particular enthusiasm in this campaign—compared to the previous one, it remained weak and faded away by 1984–85.

Fresh breezes started blowing in religious policy in 1987–88. The reason for this was the need to gain widespread support for the new perestroika policy. Yet the 1,000th anniversary of the ROC in 1988 was also of no small importance. The beginning of that year can also be considered pivotal in Estonia in terms of the attitude towards religion.<sup>20</sup> Raion and town authorities gained considerably more freedom in their dealings with churches, and state religious policy coordinated from Moscow became increasingly less relevant.

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18 Riho Altnurme, ‘Eesti Evangeelne Luterlik Kirik Nõukogude Liidus (kuni 1964)’ (The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Soviet Union [until 1964]), Siret Rutiku and Reinhart Staats (eds.), *Estland, Lettland und westliches Christentum* (Kiel, 1998), p. 230.

19 Pesti, *Dissidentlik liikumine Eestis*, pp. 22–4.

20 Prit Rohtmets and Ringo Ringvee, ‘Religious Revival and the Political Activity of Religious Communities in Estonia during the Process of Liberation and the Collapse of the Soviet Union 1985–1991’, *Religion, State and Society* 41 (2013), no. 4, pp. 356 ff.

## Party Decisions concerning Atheism

The initiator of antireligious activities throughout society in both the USSR and Estonia was the Communist Party. Atheism was one of the fundamental principles of its program. In 1953–89, the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party (hereinafter referred to as the ECP CC) touched on questions of atheism and religion in its decisions 24 times. Nearly a third of them copied CPSU CC decisions and were adopted only out of bureaucratic necessity for source documents in reference to which action could be taken. The most important of these documents were the 1959 decision “On the Measures to Improve Antireligious Propaganda” and the 1982 decision “On the Strengthening of Atheist Upbringing in the Republic”, both of which unleashed an antireligious campaign. Another third of the decisions were associated with local activism (for instance, the 1968 decision “On the Methods for Improving Scientific- theist Propaganda in the Republic”, which led to the creation of new units for antireligious work). The remainder, however, were associated with keeping an eye on the first two groups and providing them with guidelines (for instance, “On the Atheist Work of the Narva Municipal Party Committee among the Population,” 1986).<sup>21</sup> In sum, the vast majority of religious policy was dictated in Moscow, but local authorities retained the right to decide on minor details.

At the same time, the ECP CC’s attitude towards atheism and religious questions was relatively passive. This topic was less important than other ideological issues. Most decisions of this type were adopted routinely, and their function was largely to act simply as reminders of the struggle against religion. Communication within the Party on the theme of atheism between Moscow and Tallinn, as well as between Tallinn and local cities and raions, was quite infrequent, and aside from campaign periods, activity on the theme of atheism mostly faded away in “localities” within the first year after the CC decision. This is no surprise, considering the barrage that units working in ideology were subjected to. They were constantly bombarded with new propaganda themes—red-letter days and foreign policy questions, communist upbringing, Soviet patriotism, proletarian internationalism, and so on.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, antireligious activity was merely a tedious obligation for many people to earn brownie points from higher-ranking organs, because churches were so marginal that there was no visible enemy. The fact that

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21 Rimmel, *Religioonivastane võitlus*, pp. 47 ff.

22 Peeter Kaasik, ‘Vabadus on orjus: Proletaarsest internatsionalistist’ (Freedom Is Slavery: About Proletarian Internationalism), *Akadeemia* 25 (2013), no. 7, pp. 1184–225.

to a great extent, all atheist work took place on a “social basis”<sup>23</sup> also played a role in this. Thus, many decisions remained on paper and were not implemented, and all effectiveness ultimately boiled down to the enthusiasm of a few activists (Estonia’s core atheist activists numbered about 20–30 people throughout the entire period covered here). Nevertheless, not everyone associated with the topic of atheism should be considered merely a henchman of the state—there were quite a number of people whose personal agenda coincided with that aspect of state policy.

### The Legal Framework for Discouraging Religion

After Estonia was occupied, the USSR’s laws on religion went into effect. The regulation “On the Separation of Church from State and School,” issued on 23 January 1918, banned the teaching of “religious dogmas” in school, meaning that religion was reduced to the private sphere and that churches lost the right to own property, as well as losing the status of a legal entity. The religious code adopted in 1929 banned private prayer, church work among youth, and religious propaganda but created “freedom to engage in antireligious propaganda.” It also prohibited clergymen from wearing their habiliments in public, or from engaging in activity outside their congregational building. At the same time, the state’s rights to interfere in church life increased: clergymen had to be registered by the state in order to obtain an “operational license,” but the state had veto rights. Clergymen were forbidden to join congregational boards of directors on 16 January 1931, in order to reduce their influence in the congregation.<sup>24</sup>

In Estonia, the “Temporary Guideline” available to the public drawn up in 1945 by the commissioner of religious affairs, Johannes Kivi, regulated the activities of religious associations. It was compiled in accordance with instructions received from Moscow, but its disclosure was in fact a slip-up arising from a miscommunication.<sup>25</sup> With the exception of this guideline, religious legislation manifested almost no local initiative. Existing legislation copied the laws of the USSR or the Russian SFSR.

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23 Work on a “social basis” meant work done through personal initiative (that is, free of charge) for the good of the entire Soviet state. It was often an additional duty that was part of certain salaried jobs that had to be done, if only to avoid trouble.

24 William van den Bercken, *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union* (Berlin-New York, 1988), pp. 93–7.

25 Altnurme, *Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kirik*, pp. 62 f.

In the course of the antireligious campaign at the end of the 1950s, a number of confide tial or semi-confide tial regulations and instructions were added to publicly disclosed legislation to create the framework necessary for discouraging religion. The ee USSR Council of Ministers regulations date from 1958. The fi st of these called for reducing the land belonging to abbeys, banning the payment of wages to church employees, and seeking ways to reduce the number of abbeys. The second regulation increased the income tax levied on monasteries and spiritual centers. The third regulation sought to put an end to pilgrimages.<sup>26</sup> The most important regulation, however, was unquestionably the regulation “On Strengthening Control over Religious Organizations” adopted on 16 March 1961 (the ESSR Council of Ministers equivalent was adopted on 13 April of the same year)<sup>27</sup> and the confide tial instructions for its implementation. The regulation stressed that it was inadvisable to register congregations with “fanatical and anti-state viewpoints”—Jehovah’s Witnesses, Adventists-Reformists, and others—and required a one-time USSR-wide statistical census of congregations to be carried out. The data thus obtained was used in the subsequent campaign to shut down congregations.<sup>28</sup> The instruction, in turn, added restrictions to nearly half of the articles of the 1929 law.<sup>29</sup> Criminal and administrative penalties for violation of the religious code were also made more severe.

The policy of gradually choking off congregations implemented after Khrushchev’s campaign brought what seemed to be concessions. For instance, the requirements for registering congregations were relaxed in 1968 by a decision of the Council for Religious Aff irs (CRA), which also permitted religious associations to own automobiles and real estate.<sup>30</sup> The objective was to regain state control over congregations that had gone underground during the campaign. At the same time, however, several Criminal Code articles concerning religion

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26 John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 34 f.

27 Eesti Riigiarhiiv (Estonian State Archives, ERA) f. R-1961, n. 1, s. 103, l. 7 ff.

28 Sõtšov, *Eesti Õigeusu piiskopkond*, p. 117.

29 Philip Walters, ‘A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy’, Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.), *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 20. The text of the instructions can be found at ERA f. R-1, n. 15, s. 547, l. 9 ff.

30 Walter Sawatsky, ‘Secret Soviet Lawbook on Religion’, *Religion, State and Society* 4 (1976), no. 4, p. 28; Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov*, p. 385.

were once again tightened, as was administrative responsibility for violation of religious legislation.<sup>31</sup>

The new policy required that believers understand the applicable legislation based on more than just hearsay. The intervening confessional regulations were formulated into a public Statute for Religious Associations, which the Russian SFSR Supreme Soviet approved in 1975. The corresponding Estonian equivalent was publicly disclosed through the ESSR Supreme Soviet Presidium decision of 22 April 1977.<sup>32</sup> The adoption of the statute confirmed the status quo and did not actually change anything.

A new religious code was issued in the USSR in 1990 due to additional changes in religious policy in 1987–88, but this no longer affected the situation in Estonia.

## Institutions Associated with Religious Policy

### Diagram 1. Institutional Diagram of the Struggle against Religion

This diagram outlines hierarchical relationships rather than mutual influences between institutions, which were much more complicated. Units that trained propagandists in atheism are not considered in this article and so are also not included in the diagram.

Agencies associated with atheist propaganda

1. ECP Central Committee (initiation and guidance of all activity)
  - 1.1. Propaganda and agitation department
    - 1.1.1. Press, radio, and television sector
    - 1.1.2. Estonian SSR Atheism Commission
    - 1.1.3. ECP Central Committee lecturers' group atheism lecturer
  - 1.2. Municipal and raion Party committees
    - 1.2.1. Propaganda departments
      - 1.2.1.1. Ideology/atheism commissions
      - 1.2.1.2. Groups of lecturers (not on the regular staff)
2. Leadership of the Znanie Society (guidance of practical atheist activity, holding lectures)
  - 2.1.1. Scientific-methodological Council of Atheism
  - 2.1.2. Atheism sections of the Znanie Society's regional organizations
3. Estonian Leninist Communist Youth League (ELCYL) Central Committee (organization and development of youth summer days)
  - 3.1. Secretariat

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31 *ENSV Ülemnõukogu ja Valitsuse Teataja* (ESSR Supreme Soviet and Government Gazette) 31 (1966).

32 *ENSV Ülemnõukogu ja Valitsuse Teataja* 19 (1977).

- 3.2. Regional committees
  - 4. Council of Ministers
    - 4.1. ESSR Ceremonies Commission (central organizational work associated with ceremonies)
      - 4.1.1. Regional executive committees
        - 4.1.1.1. Ceremonies commissions
        - 4.1.1.2. Marital status bureaus, happiness palaces
    - 4.2. Ministry of Culture
      - 4.2.1. Council of Adult Education Courses
      - 4.2.2. Council of Adult Education Courses in Culture and Atheism (atheist propaganda)
        - 4.2.2.1.1. Atheism and culture universities
        - 4.2.2.1.2. Adult education courses associated with ceremonies
      - 4.2.3. ESSR Centre for Folk Creative Work (development of new ceremonies)
        - 4.2.3.1. Estonian SSR Folk Creative Work and Cultural Work Scientific Methodological Center
    - 4.3. ESSR Ministry of Higher and Vocational Secondary Education
      - 4.3.1. Various universities
        - 4.3.1.1. Faculties of “Red subjects” (courses in “scientific theism”)
    - 4.4. ESSR Ministry of Education
      - 4.4.1. General education schools (atheist teaching in school lessons)
    - 4.5. ESSR Council of Ministers Radio and Television Committee
      - 4.5.1. Radio
      - 4.5.2. Television
    - 4.6. ESSR Council of Ministers State Publishing, Press and Book Trade Committee
      - 4.6.1. Publishing of books
      - 4.6.2. Various newspapers
  - 5. ESSR Central Council of Trade Unions
    - 5.1. Cultural centers, libraries, etc. (rooms for atheist work, exhibitions, and other such matters)
    - 5.2. Trade union functionaries in institutions (sending people to study at atheist adult education courses)
- Agencies that dealt with “administration”
- 1. USSR Council of Ministers
    - 1.1. Commissioner(s) of religious affairs (mediation between churches and the state, coordination of administration)
    - 1.2. Control commissions that operated under the executive committees (LCRC) (supervision of religious laws)
  - 2. State Security Committee (KGB)
    - 2.1. Fifth Department (repression of clergy and believers, subjugation of leading clergy)

Institutions and organizations that dealt with questions of religion and atheism could be divided up into the administrative line connected to the government

(Council of Ministers) and the ideological line connected to the Party. Yet since relations of subordination were complicated and all activity was based on Party ideology, this kind of distinction was only conditional in practice. In addition to this, the Party system duplicated executive power to a great extent,<sup>33</sup> as well as the activity of different organizations associated with ideology (such as the Znanie Society).

At the republican level, the ECP CC guided all activity related to ideology; the questions related to atheism were under the jurisdiction of the Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD). The PAD's group of lecturers (whose primary function was to provide consultation to CC members in their area of expertise) also included a lecturer on atheism. The corresponding position was created in 1959 in connection with the atheism campaign<sup>34</sup> and was done away with in 1988. Even though the ideology secretary who headed the CC's PAD officially approved decisions, the lecturer certainly had a significant role in forming attitudes. The lecturer was the link connecting the CC and other units associated with the field of atheism. He dealt with correspondence and resolving questions on religious themes, represented the Party apparatus at supplementary training sessions for employees, participated as a guest at youth summer days, and organized atheism seminars himself. The lecturer could be considered the local coordinator in the field of atheism.

In reality, coordination should instead have been the work of the ESSR Atheism Commission that was created in 1962. The idea for forming the commission came from Jaan Kanter, commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>35</sup> Its aim was to provide people in leading positions, interested persons, or people familiar with the theme of atheism with the opportunity for joint discussion. However, it was also intended to stimulate people in important positions in different agencies to bring up questions of atheism from time to time, because at the lower levels, and at higher levels as well, practically nothing took place in this field without personal initiative. This was a unit that was born half-dead and spent most of its time in suspended animation; it was truly active only during the atheism campaign of the early 1980s. A few documents were indeed published under the name of the commission (for instance, the guidelines for

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33 Olev Liivik and Raili Nugin, *EKP kohalikud organisatsioonid 1940–1991* (ECP Local Organizations 1940–1991) (Tallinn, 2005), p. 213.

34 Eesti Riigiarhiivi Filiaal (Branch of the Estonian State Archives, ERAF) f. 1, n. 6, s. 12518, l. 17.

35 Sõtšov, *Eesti Õigeusu piiskopkond*, p. 146.

the struggle against the celebration of Christmas in 1982),<sup>36</sup> but this was due not to the activity of the commission but that of more active individual members.

Atheism commissions or atheism sections were controlled by ECP municipal and raion committees. They were formed as a result of the 1962 ECP CC Bureau decision “On the Methods for Improving Scientific- theist Propaganda in the Republic.”<sup>37</sup> Their aim was also to bring together activists; to coordinate, stimulate, and control the activity of activists in enterprises, schools, and institutions of higher education; to carry out and inculcate Soviet ceremonies; to analyze the activity of churches; and in the 1960s also to look after the content of the atheism column in local newspapers.<sup>38</sup> However, their activity and reports to higher-ranking organs leave the impression that the commissions were created primarily to demonstrate the diligence of the local ECP committees in regard to atheism. Their actual activity was quite meager.<sup>39</sup>

The last (or fi st) instance in the Party hierarchy was the Party cell organizations created at places of employment. They were responsible for controlling all ideological activity taking place in the corresponding institution. Other organizations that likewise dealt with “communist upbringing” included the Komsomol and trade union organizations, clubs, libraries, Znanie Society lectures, the group of political informers, the collective of agitators, schools from the system for political and economic education, discussion groups, and seminars.<sup>40</sup> The number of different units alone already inspires awe, but this was typical of the Soviet system’s attempts to compensate for quality with quantity. Thus, the ideological work carried out depended greatly on how active the propagandists of a particular institution were, as well as on the mentality of the institution’s leaders. Generally speaking, according to archival material, there was almost no atheism-related activity by propagandists at the level of Party cells.

In connection with work, trade unions cannot be left unmentioned. Their role in the USSR differed somewhat from known practices in democratic societies. Instead of being an organization for representing workers, trade unions operated more as an extension of the Party.<sup>41</sup> Trade unions had wide-ranging authori-

36 ERAF f. 1, n. 32, s. 106, l. 3ff.

37 ERAF f. 1, n. 295, s. 5, l. 6.

38 ERAF f. 148, n. 77, s. 11, l. 52.

39 ERAF f. 1, n. 10, s. 210, l. 1.

40 Ülo Nõmm, *Ideoloogiaküsimused parteitöö praktikas* (Questions of Ideology in Practical Party Work) (Tallinn, 1980), p. 11.

41 See also Donald D. Barry et al. (eds.), *Soviet Law after Stalin: Soviet Institutions and the Administration of Law* (Leiden, 1979), p. 277; Lembit Kiik, *Ametiühingud võõra*

zation in personnel policy, which was why “comrade courts” functioned under their aegis. The aim of such courts was to root out various improprieties such as absenteeism, drunkenness, and immoral behavior, including the personal issues of religious co-workers. The author of this article has a tape recording of an event billed as an “expanded trade union meeting” where the discussion of the behavior of an employee who belonged to the Jehovah’s Witnesses (an officially banned sect) lasted nearly three-and-a-half hours. Since clubs and cultural centers were under the jurisdiction of trade unions, they also dealt with inculcating Soviet traditions and the festive commemoration of various red-letter days within the working collective. They also sent employees to different supplementary training and education programs—some also on the theme of atheism—at adult education courses.

The Znanie<sup>42</sup> (Knowledge) Society, however, played the most important role in atheist propaganda. It took the teachings of the Party to the people under the guise of popular scientific lectures. Since the activity of the society was not particularly popular due to its ideological orientation, institutions and enterprises were obligated to order a certain number of lectures and to guarantee an audience for them. Such lectures were held at places of employment after work or at lunch hour, and attendance was semi-compulsory. Thus Znanie lectures were sometimes used even as a kind of disciplinary penalty—absenteeism, tardiness, or other such sins could be redeemed by attending a generally edifying lecture.<sup>43</sup> The other branch of its activity was the network of adult education courses that was subordinated to the society, where alongside “supplementary education” in atheism, propagandists were trained. The first adult education courses in atheism in Estonia were set up in Tartu in 1959.<sup>44</sup>

The Scientific-Methodical Council of Scientific Atheism (SMC) operated under the leadership of the Znanie Society and coordinated questions of atheism. Like the ESSR Atheism Commission, it brought specialists from different occupations around one table and met four or five times a year. The first references to the

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*võimu all (1940–1990)* (Trade Unions under Foreign Rule (1940–1990)) (Tallinn, 2000), pp. 6 f, 113–21.

42 For the sake of clarity, the Russian name of the society is used here, as it is customarily used in English-language publications on Soviet ideology. The name of the Estonian branch was actually Teadus (Science).

43 Ants Sild, ‘Mälestusi ning küsimusi loengulise töö kohta’ (Memoirs and Questions on the Work of Lectures), *Kultuur ja elu* (2001), no. 4, pp. 30 f.

44 For a case study of atheist adult education courses in Tartu, see Rimmel, *Religioonivastane võitlus*, pp. 269 ff.

activity of the SMC date from the early 1950s,<sup>45</sup> though more serious work began in the late 1950s in connection with the atheist campaign. The function of the Council was to coordinate popular scientific lectures on atheism held within the framework of the Society, to monitor the quality of the lectures, and to publish new methodological materials. However, it was relatively ineffective, and the SMC did not have a very precise overview of the atheist work conducted in the ESSR. Still, the SMC had a unique position in atheistic propaganda—to a certain extent, the SMC functioned in the early 1960s as the institution that directed atheistic propaganda, since other units for atheistic propaganda work had not yet been created and the ESSR Atheist Commission had not justified the hopes placed in it. In later years, when these functions were taken over by new working units, the SMC became a discussion group that brought together the republic's atheist activists. At the same time, the SMC had practically no rights or opportunities to implement its decisions, and many of its plans never went beyond the discussion stage.

Atheism sections were subordinate to the SMC in the Znanie Society's municipal and raion organizations. The SMC recommended that they be formed of "people who are interested in scientific atheism and who are capable of giving lectures and presentations."<sup>46</sup> The level of activity in the sections and the quality of the lectures varied widely—sections functioned better in larger cities (Tallinn, Tartu) and more poorly in rural localities. Overall, atheism was a low priority among the society's relatively broad range of lecture themes (about 3 percent of the overall number of lectures).<sup>47</sup>

Municipal and raion ceremony commissions were formed in the early 1960s alongside the Znanie Society and the Party line of activity. The aim of these commissions was to inculcate new, secular Soviet ceremonies. At first, they operated "from one random occasion to another";<sup>48</sup> thus the idea of creating a central state organization to deal with the question of Soviet traditions was raised at the Znanie SMC meeting in 1963.<sup>49</sup> The ESSR Ceremony Commission, however, was not set up until the end of 1969, when it was formed under the aegis of the Council of Ministers. The aim of the new unit's work was formulated thus: "Conditions must

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45 ERAF f. 1, n. 148, s. 16, l. 1.

46 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 1680, l. 5.

47 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 1950, l. 76.

48 Riigiarhiivi Rakvere osakond (Rakvere Department of the State Archives, LVMA) f. 2iv, n. 1/1, s. 21, l. 7.

49 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 589, l. 35.

be created to incline people's emotional life towards secular ceremonies."<sup>50</sup> Regional ceremony commissions were also formed in the first half of 1971, which often meant merging different units that operated in the same field of activity, mostly under quite peculiar names (such as the Inter-Kolkhoz Ceremonies Council).<sup>51</sup> Regardless of the importance of new ceremonies in discouraging religion, this field of activity was extremely underfunded, which often led to curious situations. For instance, it was discovered that the funeral orchestras that served under the commissions performed with equal eagerness at both secular and religious funerals.<sup>52</sup> There were also serious problems in obtaining rooms and transportation, as a report from Jõgeva County indicates: "Our rooms are in very poor condition, and we have been freezing in them for three winters. Even believers have felt sorry for us because of how awful our rooms are in the cold of winter. Around 20 funerals for individuals were not held last year due to our lack of means of transportation. Thus about 1,000 rubles that we could have earned were lost, and on top of it all was the ideological side of the question, because most of the people whose funerals we could not accommodate turned to a priest."<sup>53</sup> The situation nevertheless improved during the 1970s, and modern vital records bureau registry office or "happiness palaces" were built in many places, where local activists who dealt with ceremonies converged.

The Council for Religious Affairs located in Moscow (formed in 1965 by uniting the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church, founded in 1943, and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, founded in 1944) was the most important of the units that dealt with administering religious life.<sup>54</sup> The council was represented by commissioners in the republics. The primary function of the commissioners was to mediate between the state and the churches—first and foremost so that the implementation of repressive policies would leave a legally correct impression, primarily due to foreign policy considerations. They were also responsible for gathering and analyzing information, shutting down congregations (and, on rare occasions, opening them), exercising control over cadre politics concerning clergymen, guiding the "patriotic activity" of churches, and resolving complaints. Even though commissioners were treated as equals of ministers and

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50 ERA f. R-1, n. 10, s. 800, l. 36. In Latvia, by comparison, this kind of organization had already been formed in 1964. Sergei Kruk, 'Profit Rather than Politics: The Production of Lenin Monuments in Soviet Latvia', *Social Semiotics* 20 (2010), no. 3, pp. 273 f (note 20).

51 ERA f. R-1, n. 10, s. 800, l. 5.

52 ERA, f. R-1, n. 10, s. 733, l. 44.

53 *Ibid.*, l. 65.

54 Tatiana Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia* (New York, 2002), pp. 15 ff.

they undoubtedly had a great deal of influence on the overall religious climate locally, the appointment as a commissioner was essentially a form of banishment. Almost all commissioners in Estonia came from some more important official position, and they had to steer a middle course in the spheres of influence of very disparate lines of force as they did their work. Estonia's commissioner had a relatively small staff, consisting of an assistant, a secretary, and two or three inspectors, among whom different religious associations were divided up. Thus the supervision of religion rested on the shoulders of the executive committees in cities and raions.<sup>55</sup> Executive committees, however, often saw this as an additional task that interfered with their primary activities.<sup>56</sup> Pre-planned activities did not initially take place in executive committees, and problems were resolved as needed. Yet during Khrushchev's campaign, five-to-20-member Local Committees for Religious Control (LCRC, literally "commissions for assistance for observance of religious legislation") were formed in association with executive committees throughout the USSR in 1963 to improve the situation.<sup>57</sup> Their aim was to ensure the lawfulness of the activity of congregations and the loyalty of clergymen, as well as the prevention of violations of the law. Since this work also proceeded on a "social basis", no noticeable change in quality resulted—the work of the committee often consisted merely of the report from its chairman to the commissioner, which was why "it has not been infrequent that local authorities have, on quite a few occasions, found themselves in awkward situations locally."<sup>58</sup>

The KGB's antireligious line of action was relatively distinct. It included massive coercion, the creation of a network of agents (it was interested primarily in collaboration with leading clergymen), and the neutralization of rebellious persons during the Stalin era. By the beginning of the Khrushchev era, however, the "official" churches (the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church [EELC] and the ROC) were already under the control of the "organs" to such an extent<sup>59</sup> that the management of churches was directed at specific people—suppression was limited only to individuals who stood out the most from the general masses, or alternately, such persons were forced to become agents. The state paid greater

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55 See Indrek Paavle, 'Administrative Sovietisation of ESSR at the Local Level in 1944–1953', *Estonia since 1944*, pp. 17–35.

56 ERA f. R-1961, n.1, s. 141, l. 119.

57 See Atko Remmel, 'Religiooniseaduste kontrollimise kaastöökomisjonid Nõukogude Eestis' (Local Committees for Religious Control in Soviet Estonia), *Ajalooline Ajakiri* 2011, no. 1, pp. 85–104; idem, *Religioonivastane võitlus*, pp. 102–62.

58 ERA f. R-1945, n. 1, s. 570, l. 2.

59 Jürjo, *Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti*, pp. 157 f.

attention to the monitoring and control and, if necessary, the neutralization of those religious associations or “sectarians” that were less submissive.<sup>60</sup> The KGB had a major influence on the CRA<sup>61</sup>—and reasonably close cooperation took place with the commissioners in Estonia as well. In fact, the rooms of the commissioner and of the KGB front organization *Iniurkollegiia* (Judicial Collegial Body)<sup>62</sup> were located in the same building.

## Essential Features of Antireligious Activity

### 1. Administration

For religious associations in the USSR, administrative requirements that might otherwise seem natural were used in a repressive manner. For instance, the aim of registering the congregation was not so much the creation of a legal entity along with corresponding rights and duties (religious associations had only limited rights) but instead better control over its activities. Unregistered religious associations were declared illegal. The conditions had to be met for registration: the *dvadtsatka*, a clergyman accepted by the state, and rooms for meeting. Meeting these three conditions, however, was not so simple.

The *dvadtsatka* denoted the minimum number of people for the formation of a congregation—20, with whom a property liability agreement was signed for placing a “cult building” (the main building for religious worship) and the corresponding fittings at its disposal. The list had to be approved by the commissioner and the local executive committee. In order to bring believers who had gone underground back under state control, after 1968 it was permitted to form a “religious group” with less than 20 members.

Like congregations, only registered clergymen were permitted to operate. They had to maintain a sufficiently low profile in their utterances in order to retain their place in the “registry”. Congregations were headed by a three-member board of directors that the clergyman himself was not allowed to sit on, in order to reduce

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60 Atko Rimmel, ‘Believers, Human Rights and Freedom of Speech in Soviet Estonia’ (forthcoming). For comparison with the Lithuanian KGB, see Arunas Streikus, ‘Lithuanian Catholic Clergy and the KGB’, *Religion, State and Society* 34 (2006), no. 1, pp. 63–70.

61 See Otto Luchterhandt, ‘The Council for Religious Affairs’, Ramet (ed.), *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, pp. 55–83; for Estonia, see also Jürjo, *Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti*, pp. 155 ff.

62 The *Inostrannaia iuridicheskaiia kollegiia* officially operated under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was the legal representative of Soviet citizens abroad.

the influence of the clergy. For economic matters, power rested with the auditing commission, which also included a representative of the local executive committee. In short, this meant that “the duty of the clergyman is to serve God and carry out religious ceremonies according to the wishes of the members of the congregation. And nothing more.”<sup>63</sup> Thus executive committees had the right to demand the replacement of both the board of directors and the auditing commission through repeat elections—yet clergymen and the congregations’ governing bodies themselves did not have that right.

Church rooms posed a major problem, because both sacral and secular buildings had suffered damage during the war, and congregations had to find other rooms for themselves. In some cases, that proved to be the deciding factor in registration. Even in the 1960s, finding suitable rooms remained a problem for congregations as well as the state, and thus the liquidation or merging of small congregations served state interests not just ideologically but also in practical terms. Most of the requisitioned church buildings were used as warehouses or clubhouses, while congregation buildings were converted into office or residential space. Many churches were nevertheless left to decay.<sup>64</sup> On the few occasions when a new congregation was formed (for instance, when a split occurred in an existing congregation), passing through the necessary gauntlet for finding rooms and registration could be an ordeal lasting for years.

Congregations that did not meet the state’s requirements were shut down during several waves of closures in 1945–46, 1949–52, and 1961–64. The rest of the time, congregations were deleted from the registry mainly when they had ceased to function. Postwar refusal of registration (that is, banning) affected mostly smaller religious associations and organizations that died out, merged with other movements, or started operating illegally.<sup>65</sup>

63 Eesti Ajalooarhiiv (Estonian Historical Archives, EAA) f. T-15, n. 1, s. 440, l. 9.

64 ERA f. R-1989, n. 1, s. 226, l. 21. See also Andrei Sõtšov, ‘Eesti õigeusu koguduste likvideerimine Nikita Hruštšovi ajal aastail 1954–64’ (Liquidation of Estonian Orthodox Congregations during the Nikita Khrushchev Era in 1954–64), *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* 11 (2007), pp. 126 f.

65 Jaanus Plaat, ‘Eesti vabakoguduste vastupanu nõukogude religioonipoliitikaline võrreldes luterliku ja õigeusu kirikuga (1944–1987)’ (Resistance by Estonian Free Congregations against Soviet Religious Policy Compared to the Lutheran and Orthodox Churches), Toivo Pilli (ed.), *Teekond teisenevas ajas. Peatükke Eesti vabakoguduste ajaloost* (Tartu, 2005), p. 133. See also Toivo Pilli and Tõnis Valk, ‘Ühest ateistliku töö meetodist: evangeeliumi kristlaste-baptistide palvemajade ja koguduste sulgemine Eestis 1945–1964’ (About a Method of Atheist Work: The Closure of Houses of Prayer and Congregations

Control over the everyday life of congregations was established primarily in cooperation with church administrations. Additionally, local activity was suppressed through constant meddling and the need to ask for permission for practically everything beyond Sunday church services. This included renovation and construction work, the congregation's general meeting, sermons given by guest preachers, Christmas and Easter church services, and the organization of gatherings at cemeteries to commemorate the deceased. The local feature in preventive policy was the "consultative seminars" that were held once or twice a year, invented by commissioner Leopold Piip in the mid-1970s, in which representatives of the executive committees introduced religious legislation to the clergy and the governing bodies of congregations, admonishing them to observe the legislation.

Passive "preventive work" was supplemented by more active control by the LCRC. Members of the committees were each assigned active congregations that they had to visit within a certain period of time (for instance, once per quarter). The rest of the time, they had to keep an eye on the work of the "subaltern" churches.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere, however, members of the committees operated more at random, and they visited churches only when there were sermons by guest clergymen or large gatherings of people. The main source of interest was the loyalty of sermons, although the number of participants was also of interest, because it was considered the primary indicator of the vitality of religion.<sup>67</sup> Gatherings at cemeteries to commemorate the deceased, Christmas, Easter, and the participation of young people under 18 years of age in religious proceedings were scrutinized more closely.

At this point it is appropriate to consider the most important aspect affecting everyday religious life—the confidentiality of the religious legislation, which simultaneously affected the activity of both believers and the units that bore responsibility for supervising their activities. In 1961, a regulation that enacted stricter rules governing religious life was introduced to the clergy on only one occasion in the presence of a representative of the executive committee, without permission to take written notes. After that, believers knew the religious code only by word

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of Evangelical Christians and Baptists in Estonia 1945–1964), Pilli (ed.), *Teekond teise-nevas ajas*, pp. 89–127.

66 EAA f. T-15, n. 1, s. 51, l. 1.

67 For this reason, the legend was widespread that the "names of believers were being recorded," but most likely this monitoring involved only notes on the loyalty/disloyalty of the sermon or the number of churchgoers, because identifying people would have been impossible on purely technical grounds, at least in city churches, while in the countryside everyone knew each other anyway. In addition, no such lists have been found in the archives.

of mouth, which meant that they became aware of the limits of their activities primarily by feeling them out and drawing conclusions from the ensuing warnings or penalties. The absurdity of the situation did not stop there. After the persons who dealt with religion in the executive committees had familiarized themselves with the regulation—also without the right to take written notes—it was classified as “confidential” and filed in the executive committee archives. The LCRC operational instructions were handled in the same way. Since cadre turnover was extensive, only the pertinent persons at that given time were shown the document. Later on, however, the documents were inaccessible, since many of the atheism activists were not employees of the executive committees. The result was a situation where both believers and the people who were supposed to monitor them had a relatively nebulous understanding of both the pertinent legislation and the limits of their own activity. Additionally, the members of the commissions were, for the most part, unfamiliar with the distinct religious features of the congregations under their “care”. In 1981, for instance, a member of the Kohtla-Järve LCRC tasked with overseeing the activities of local Adventists knew nothing about that religious movement, aside from what appeared in a seven-line article in the Estonian Soviet Encyclopedia.<sup>68</sup>

Another problem was the small number of atheist activists. Even though the point of having different working groups was to bring together people who were interested in the matter, in practice the same people still ended up in those groups due to either personal initiative or obligations deriving from their job (“social basis”). This blurred the boundaries of the commissions’ authority, and thus it often happened that units meant to engage in atheist propaganda dealt with monitoring churches, or they spread atheist propaganda under the aegis of monitoring compliance with state legislation. Even though proposals were made to combine the different units,<sup>69</sup> and in practice they did indeed operate together in some localities in the 1960s, the aspiration was to avoid this kind of symbiosis in the name of legal correctness (the “guaranteeing of freedom of religion” could not go hand in hand with atheist propaganda based on ideology). From year to year, the commissioners of the CRA used up immense amounts of paper for memoranda to keep the activity of LCRCs more or less within the framework of legislation. For believers, of course, these nuances in the general repressive atmosphere were of no importance.

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68 LVMA f. 2, n. 1, s. 38, l. 35.

69 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 589, l. 38–9.

But what happened if believers or clergymen overstepped the limits set by the state? The first and most widespread mode of chastisement was administrative penalties levied by the executive committees. Its mildest form was the oral or written warning. Fines of 10–50 rubles, however, were more typical (for instance, for assembling without registration). Local authorities quite often demanded strict penalties from the commissioners (for instance, shutting down a religious association or banning a clergyman from carrying out his duties). However, because foreign policy required unnecessarily inflaming the religious situation and because of the relative reasonableness of Estonia's commissioners, one-time severe penalties were mostly replaced by several moderate penalties, meaning fines or warnings.<sup>70</sup> Most of the penalized persons were from “wild” (unregistered) religious groups. The authorities usually had no trouble with the “domesticated” churches (ROC, EELC, legal Baptists). The reason for this was that, unlike the Catholic Church in Lithuania, Estonian churches were not connected to the nationalist or dissident movements,<sup>71</sup> and since the higher-ranking clergy had been forced to serve as agents of state security, the churches had already been largely neutralized in the postwar years. As organizations, however, churches were forced to their knees in the antireligious campaign of the 1950s and 1960s. Even so, this submission was not unconditional. Nor does it indicate that the churches supported the Soviet regime. Instead, it was quite conservative behavior as an organization—only a few isolated persons put up resistance. In 1986, for instance, five religious figures were penalized through administrative procedure, and only one of them belonged to a church registered by the state—the future archbishop of the EELC, Andres Pöder.<sup>72</sup>

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70 ERA f. R-1989, n. 1, s. 178, l. 115.

71 Jürjo, *Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti*, p. 177; Viktor Niitsoo, *Vastupanu*, p. 112.

72 ERA f. R-1989, n. 2, s. 69, l. 84. Pöder himself claims that there were enough such individuals to consider the entire EELC an organization opposed to the state: see Andres Pöder, ‘Kiriku liikmeskond vabanemisprotsessi osana’ (The Membership of the Church as Part of the Liberation Process), Velliste (ed.), *Usk vabadusse*; idem, ‘Väitlus: Kuidas püüda ajaloo sinilindu?’ (Debate: How to Catch History’s Bluebirds?), *Akadeemia* 24 (2012), no. 10, p. 1887. However, church historians and researchers of the resistance movement are rather skeptical towards such claims. See Riho Saard, ‘Aktiivsetest režiimivastastest Eesti luterliku kiriku kontekstis 1970. ja 1980. aastatel’ (On Active Opponents of the Regime in the Context of the Estonian Lutheran Church in the 1970s and 1980s), *Suomen kirkkohistoriallisen seuran Vuosikirja* 102 (2012), pp. 77–110; Rohtmets, Ringvee, ‘Religious Revival’, pp. 359 ff; Atko Rimmel, ‘Väärtuslik versta-post riigi ja kiriku suhete uurimisel’ (A Valuable Milestone in Researching Relations between Church and State), *Akadeemia* 24 (2012), no. 8, pp. 1507–15. The reactions of EELC clergy and their resistance to the antireligious campaign of the 1950s and

If the fines levied by the administrative commissions did not help, the commissioner had several options for taming clergymen: for instance, withdrawing permission to give guest sermons or to give any kind of sermons at all, or reassignment to another congregation (in most cases, a small rural one), which restrained the clergyman at least for a time. The commissioner's most severe means of punishment was the cancellation of the clergyman's certificate of employment or his deletion from the registry, which disobedient clergymen were occasionally threatened with and which, in some cases, was carried out. In addition to the aforementioned penalties, the more active believers could also be subjected to direct repressions that were, however, concealed behind various criminal accusations and therefore not connected with religion (such as betrayal of the fatherland or refusal to serve in the military).<sup>73</sup>

## 2. Economic Constraint of Churches

An important form of struggle against religion was the financial control of churches, which made it possible to keep churches relatively dormant. This control was based on two-faced legislation whose aim was to create the illusion of religious freedom. Even though the property of churches was nationalized, churches and houses of prayer were made available to congregations free of charge "to satisfy religious needs" in order to demonstrate freedom of religion. Instead, rent was collected for all "rooms not used for prayer" made available to congregations, that is, auxiliary buildings, offices, storage rooms, and other such rooms.<sup>74</sup> To this was added a tax on all the buildings at their disposal and a tax on the land covered by those buildings. In addition to this, the absence of rental income from rooms used for prayer was compensated for by a compulsory insurance tax, which was raised in 1963 nearly five- to six-fold. Since the insurance estimate depended on the size of the building, this tactic soon achieved the desired result due to the large size of churches and the ever-dwindling membership of congregations—state taxes exceeded the annual income of congregations or swallowed up a very large part of it. Congregations paid 25 kopeks/kWh for electricity instead of the four kopeks/kWh that ordinary consumers paid, while religious institutions of education paid 11 kopeks/kWh. In addition to all this, the rental rates and utilities for clergy were

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1960s are examined in Riho Altnurme, 'Eesti luteri kiriku reaktsioonid usuvastasele kampaaniale 1958–1964' (Reactions of the Estonian Lutheran Church to the Anti-Religious Campaign 1958–1964), *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* 17 (2013), pp. 89–114.

73 Remmel, 'Believers, Human Rights'.

74 ERA f. R-1989, n. 1, s. 76, l. 186.

four times higher than usual, and higher rates of income tax were applied as well (from 25–80 percent, depending on the income. For instance, the average income of the clergy in 1980 was reported to be “relatively small”, up to 200 rubles, and taxes paid on that sum were 70 rubles, whereas a “normal” Soviet worker paid only 20,20 rubles in tax on the same amount of income), and the higher income tax rate also applied to all church employees.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, many EELC and ROC leading clergy got their income tax rates reduced—in return for “good cooperation”—and in some cases this benefit also extended to people close to them.<sup>76</sup>

Yet another legal mode of extracting “tithes” for the state was semi-compulsory payments to a branch of the KGB, the Peace Fund of the Soviet Committee for Defending Peace. In order to avoid the impression of extortion, congregations sent the amounts collected to church administrations, from where they were transferred to the Peace Fund account.<sup>77</sup> Even though officially the amounts collected (around 100,000–150,000 rubles per year in total from all Estonian churches) went toward ensuring peace in the world, these sums were actually treated as the share paid by the churches for maintaining the CRA apparatus.<sup>78</sup>

In order to more effectively control congregations’ finances, starting in 1946, the regime required churches to deposit all their funds in the State Bank (Gosbank). No more than 50 rubles could be kept in the church treasury. To conceal the state’s heavy hand, the central governing bodies of churches were required to underscore this rule.<sup>79</sup> Donations could be accepted only inside the “cult building,” and all donations had to be registered by name.<sup>80</sup> However, due to the indifference of the executive committees and their ignorance of the legislation, congregations seem to have put up surprisingly strong resistance to economic restrictions. The ROC was more firmly under state control, and thus its congregations behaved more loyally. Many EELC congregations, on the other hand, set up a system of parallel bookkeeping to conceal funds from the authorities.<sup>81</sup>

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75 Ibid., s. 222, l. 6; Eesti NSV Rahandusministeerium, *Elanikkonna tulumaksu juhend* (Ministry of Finance of the Estonian SSR, *Instructions for Income Tax of Residents*) (Tallinn, 1968). Actually, a monthly wage of 200 rubles was quite a decent sum at that time.

76 ERA f. R-1989, n. 1, s. 102, l. 4, 29.

77 Ibid., s. 158, l. 21–2.

78 Ibid., s. 225, l. 161.

79 Ibid., s. 112, l. 42–3.

80 EAA f. T-15, n. 1, s. 954, l. 16, 24.

81 ERA f. R-1989, n. 1, s. 62, l. 47.

### 3. Use of Churches to Serve Foreign Policy

A special form of the “patriotic work” of churches was the “struggle for peace”. That was the term for the foreign relations of churches, conducted under the strict control of the CRA and the KGB. Its long-term objective was to disseminate disinformation about “religious freedom” in the USSR under the aegis of establishing contacts.<sup>82</sup> The success of this method is thought to be one reason why the Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign attracted so little attention in the West.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, however, even the chairman of the CRA, Vladimir Kuroedov, admitted that it was a “double-edged sword”—clergymen made themselves useful to the state only so that they could continue to do their work.<sup>84</sup> For clergymen, it was a choice between bad and worse. There is no reason to believe that this kind of role appealed to more than a handful of people—the local KGB assessed most of its church agents as “two-faced.”<sup>85</sup>

### 4. Soviet Ceremonies

The importance of ceremonies in supporting religious tradition was understood as early as the 1920s, when Soviet ceremonies started being created in Russia under the direction of Leon Trotsky. Inspired by this process, Estonian communists also declared: “If we want to fight against religious customs, we have to set up our own ways, proletarian customs in their place.”<sup>86</sup> These attempts soon died out and did not emerge again until Khrushchev’s antireligious campaign. After the war, the Estonian SSR was one of the first to come up with ceremonies that opposed church customs (“vestiges”): in 1957, the Paide Raion Komsomol Committee organized youth summer days aimed at secondary school graduates

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82 Jürjo, *Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti*, pp. 162 ff.

83 Dimitry Pospelovsky, *Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and Persecutions* (New York, 1988), p. 99.

84 John Anderson, ‘The Council for Religious Affairs and the Shaping of Soviet Religious Policy’, *Soviet Studies* 43 (1991), no. 4, p. 698.

85 Altnurme, *Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kirik*, p. 274. See also idem, ‘Foreign Relations of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church as a Means of Maintaining Contact with the Western World’, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 19 (2006), no. 1, pp. 159–65, and idem, ‘Peapiiskopi tagandamine aastal 1967’ (Dismissal of the Archbishop in 1967), Arne Hiob, Urmas Nõmmik and Arho Tuhkru (eds.), *Kristuse täisea mõõtu mööda: pühendusteas Jaan Kiivitile 65. sünnipäevaks* (Tallinn, 2005), pp. 66–78.

86 *Noor Tööline* (Young Worker) 5 (1922).

to counterbalance church confirmation.<sup>87</sup> These included different events: sports, dancing, hiking, and excursions, but also lectures on ideological themes (atheism, love of the fatherland, etc.). The organization of such events was mainly left to the Estonian Leninist Communist Youth League (ELCYL) and became one of the main manifestations of the atheist propaganda work of that organization. This method proved to be extraordinarily effective, and in 1960, it was reported that “broadly speaking, our battle against confirmation has been won.”<sup>88</sup> The 1960s can be considered the golden age of such summer festivals. Suitably complementing the summer days, the lecture course *The Young Person’s ABC*, intended for secondary school pupils, was added to the summer days in the mid-1960s. The course lectures were mostly held once a month and covered various issues related to becoming an adult: sexuality, beautifying the home, holding birthday parties, choosing one’s occupation, etc., while also including some more ideological talks, for instance about atheism.<sup>89</sup> Just as confirmation classes culminated with the confirmation ceremony, so the culmination of *The Young Person’s ABC* was the summer days’ camp.

Another field in which church and the state competed more intensely was connected to a person’s departure from life. Above all, public events at cemeteries to commemorate the deceased were an irritation for the authorities, since they brought together tens of thousands of people under the aegis of the church: the graves of loved ones were spruced up, and the clergyman’s sermon and choral singing gave the event a more organized form. To counterbalance them, secular gatherings started being organized at cemeteries, which, broadly speaking, differed only in that the sermon and choral singing were replaced with secular speeches and songs. The first such gathering was held in Elva in 1958.<sup>90</sup> The authorities began obstructing religious gatherings at cemeteries:<sup>91</sup> they dragged

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87 Gennadi Gerodnik, ‘Grazhdanskie i bytovye obriady (iz opyta Estonii i Latvii)’, *Nauka i religia* (1962), no. 7. Concerning Estonian ceremonies, see Marju Kõivupuu, ‘Transitional Rituals of Transition Society: The Case of Estonia’, *Folklore* xiii–xxi (2014) (forthcoming); Atko Rimmel, ‘Religioonivastase võitluse korraldusest Nõukogude Eestis’ (On Anti-Religious Struggle in Soviet Estonia), *Ajalooline Ajakiri* 125 (2008), no. 3, pp. 255 ff. The first postwar ceremonies originate from Latvia; see Rasa Paukštytė-Šaknienė, ‘Ritual, Power and Historical Perspective: Baptism and Name-Giving in Lithuania and Latvia’, *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 1 (2007), nos. 1–2, p. 117.

88 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 476, l. 60.

89 *Ibid.*, s. 1397, l. 25.

90 Raid, *Vabamõtlejate ringidest*, pp. 177, 178, 263, note 25.

91 ERA f. R-1961, n. 2s, s. 42, l. 27.

their heels in granting permits, advertising was banned, and the gatherings could be held only after the respective secular gatherings at cemeteries. This method also worked, and soon, religious gatherings at cemeteries became marginal. Try as they might, however, the authorities were not able to do away with religious funerals, which still accounted for 30–40 percent of all funerals even in the 1980s.<sup>92</sup> There were several reasons for this. First, most of the deceased were elderly, and their background was religious. Second, the state's organizational work was weak (as late as 1970, it was noted at a gathering of the State Council of Ceremonies that “the church can only be driven out by way of ceremonies, yet the care given by the state in looking after a person ends with his death, and the Council of Ministers should do something in this respect”).<sup>93</sup> Finally, there was the general repulsion that the “ceremony attendants” felt towards dealing with the topic of death. As a result, many curious incidents took place where a clergyman delivered the eulogy for a communist or a cross was erected at the grave of a Party member.<sup>94</sup>

Due to the opposition between the religious and the secular in the Stalin-era atmosphere of fear, by the early 1950s, wedding customs arrived at the point where everything that was thought to be associated with religion was abandoned—even white clothing and wedding rings. This led to steering clear of all manner of festiveness: the ceremony consisted only of registration at the local government offices and couples often went to register their marriage in their work clothes. This practice was abandoned in the late 1950s, since the main reason for the persistence of the church wedding was precisely the emotional commemoration of the event. A new set of wedding customs was developed according to the principle “socialist in content, national in form,” and thus Estonian folk customs were relied on to a great extent. Alongside atheism activists and officials of the marital status departments, university lecturers and employees of history museums, the ethnography museum and other cultural fields were enlisted to “update wedding customs.” Thorough work soon brought results—while church weddings still accounted for 30 percent of all weddings in the late 1950s, by the mid-1960s they had already become marginal.<sup>95</sup> In fact, the church wedding ceremony was supplemented by several types of weddings—alongside ordinary civil weddings were also more distinct types such as Komsomol, workers', or university students' weddings. The event became a Komsomol wedding by the fact that when ELCYL

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92 Raigo Liiman, *Usklikkus muutuvast Eesti ühiskonnast* (Religiousness in a Changing Estonian Society) (Tartu, 2001), p. 29.

93 ERA f. R-1, n. 10, s. 800, l. 5.

94 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 646, l. 34.

95 See Raid, *Vabamõtlejate ringidest*, table on p. 296.

members married each other, their comrades from the same organization were the organizers of their wedding, and the same was true of the other types of weddings mentioned respectively. These types of events nevertheless did not prove particularly viable. Ordinary civil weddings were more successful, because practically everywhere, a circle of wedding hosts managed to be formed out of suitable people, out of which professional wedding hosts soon evolved.<sup>96</sup>

The need to cover the entire life cycle with new customs led to the development of a custom called the children's spring days. This was an original idea worked out by Estonian atheist activists for kindergarten children and was put into practice for the first time in 1962. The spring days were supposed to be a "festive day in the life of a growing child who is starting to spread his wings for the first time for independent living."<sup>97</sup> The children enjoyed various performances and games while their parents listened to lectures on subjects like "health and nourishment" and "atheist rearing in the family."

These customs were not the only ones. Attempts were made to inject "socialist content" into the festive commemoration of a number of events in the name of "cultivating civic spirit". These included the presentation of a child's birth certificate, the registration of a child's birth, a person voting for the first time, the send-off to the army, the presentation of the keys to a new apartment, and the first day at a new job.

Most new ceremonies in the ESSR were initiated in 1957–62. By comparison, in the rest of the USSR, the importance of new customs was not highlighted until the early or mid-1960s. The emphasis on new customs—the attempt to replace religion instead of direct struggle and opposition—was a distinct feature and the strongest aspect of the struggle against religion in Estonia (and Latvia). While atheist propaganda in the form of lectures and newspaper articles created a generally hostile atmosphere towards religion, and the state's administrative measures made it very difficult for churches to continue their activities, new ceremonies did the actual work in discontinuing religious tradition—their connection to ideology was often not visible, and thus they were easier to accept.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, new customs lost their novelty and glitter in the 1970s and started to recede. Many

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96 Kaljo Oja (ed.), *Kaunilt, meeldejäädvalt: nõukogulikke kombetalitusi* (Beautifully, Memorably: Soviet Ceremonies) (Tallinn, 1965).

97 Inna Baturin, *Noorte traditsioonid* (Youth Traditions) (Tallinn, 1965), p. 120.

98 Concerning the retreat of Christianity from the norm to an alternative, see Lea Altnurme, 'Kristluse tähtsuse ja tähenduse muutus eestlaste seas 1857–2010' (Change of Meaning and Importance of Christianity among Estonians in 1857–2010), *Tuna* 16 (2013), no. 4, p. 45ff.

such “ersatz holidays,” however, did not take root at all or soon lost their original ideological content. For instance, youth summer days soon became an ordinary celebration of maturity that the state and the Party wanted to see as providing ideological instruction. Soviet Army and Navy Day, however, turned into “Men’s Day,” and so on.<sup>99</sup>

## 5. Atheist Propaganda

Alongside new customs, the other important direction was the holding of lectures on atheism, in which the Znanie Society played the primary role. The society’s atheism sections, which held around 1,000 lectures on atheism annually in the mid-1950s, reached an annual 3,000 lectures by 1964. For a time, there was an “inexplicable decline” in lectures (“Perhaps atheists no longer have anything to ridicule,” a member of an atheism SMC suggested);<sup>100</sup> thereafter, the atheism sections held around 5,000 lectures yearly during the atheist campaign in the 1980s.<sup>101</sup> The goal of the Znanie atheism SMC, that every person should listen to at least one lecture on atheism each year,<sup>102</sup> was of course never achieved. The relevant statistics are also not precise, because all sorts of other speeches were counted as lectures on atheism in order to earn the brownie points necessary in ideological work. As one local activist confessed: “If we do not record funeral orations as atheist lectures, then there would be practically nothing else”.<sup>103</sup> This kind of funny remark refers to a more widespread problem that Soviet Estonian atheism suffered as early as the late 1960s. New customs that initially were treated within the atheist paradigm as a method for breaking religious tradition soon began to dominate and became emancipated to the extent that they were no longer associated with the struggle against religion. Thus, the support they offered for the philosophical side of atheism also disappeared. Since religion was in a marginal position, people widely considered society to be atheist. Therefore, atheist propaganda seemed utterly pointless, and indifference towards both religion and atheism spread. Lectures given to propagandists on the topic “What is atheism?” bear witness to the blurring of the content and meaning of atheism for

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99 ERA f. R-3, n. 4, s. 205, l. 51.

100 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 816, l. 99.

101 Remmel, *Religioinivastane võitlus*, p. 214.

102 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 1390, l. 8, 11, 21.

103 ERAF f. 3303, n. 61, s. 34, l. 2.

the propagandists themselves.<sup>104</sup> As a reaction, the topic of “moral and positive content” of atheism emerged in the 1970s in place of the previous dull criticism of religion and the church. This was in turn replaced in the 1980s by the topics of the atheist upbringing of young people and the evolution of the ideology and activity of churches.

Considering all of this, the quality of atheist lectures was rather low, especially in the 1950s, when there was practically no methodological supporting material. For instance, the lecture “On the Religion of Marxism-Leninism,” held in 1956 at the Stalin Kolkhoz in Orissaare Raion, as one journalist described it, was made “so ploddingly that of the 116 people who attended the lecture, only two stayed to the end of the lecture—the local chairman and the deputy chairman!”<sup>105</sup> Nor did the quality change notably later on, since the entire system of atheist propaganda was caught in a vicious circle: ideological activity pursued during one’s spare time left little time for preparing lectures. This meant poor quality for atheist lectures and a poor reputation for atheist propagandists, which in turn did not attract new people to the cause. The activists already at work, however, were unable to prepare more, given their workload. “The need to improve the quality of lectures” is probably one of the most frequently expressed thoughts in the archival records of the Znanie SMC. This, however, does not mean that there were no good lecturers on atheism at all—there were simply very few of them.

Except for isolated television broadcasts and films of local origin, atheist propaganda in the Estonian SSR practically never used the possibilities offered by modern mass media. The theme of atheism was dealt with somewhat more on the radio, but even there it was discussed “mainly in connection with other problems of ideological struggle.”<sup>106</sup> The main problem was the lack of qualified personnel: “There are five or six people in the republic who are capable of appearing on the

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104 Because of the processes described here, the notion of atheism as the “absence of religion” or the “absence of a relationship with the church” is widespread in Estonia to this day. Cf. Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, ‘A Sacred Space Is Never Empty’: Soviet Atheism, 1954–1971’ (PhD-thesis, Berkeley, 2010), pp. 134 ff; Sonja Luehrmann, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Bloomington, 2011). On the effects of scientific atheism on beliefs in contemporary Estonia, see Ülo Valk, ‘Folklore and Discourse: The Authority of Scientific Rhetoric, from State Atheism to New Spirituality’, James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (eds.), *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science* (Leiden-Boston, 2010).

105 E. Mets, ‘Siduda loenguline propaganda kommunistliku ülesehitustöö praktikaga’ (Connecting Lecture Propaganda with the Practices of Constructing Communism), *Rahva Hääl*, 20 March 20, 1956.

106 ERA f. R-1989, n. 1, s. 156, l. 22.

radio and TV, but they are all so overloaded that they physically are unable to do so.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, alongside lectures, the ESSR’s press became the primary medium of atheist propaganda. Every year around 10–15 articles on atheism usually appeared in the press. An avalanche of aggressive articles, however, was unleashed during Khrushchev’s attack against religion—particular clergymen or congregations were attacked, and stories frequently appeared on the conversion of believers to atheism and explanations of various miracles. New customs were often propagated. Special columns on atheist topics were established in many newspapers (including “Today is Brighter than Yesterday” in the newspaper *Edasi* [Forward] and “The Light of Science Wins out over Ignorance” in the newspaper *Uus Tee* [New Path]). Most of these columns appeared once a month or once per quarter—at their peak in 1960, a total of 165 articles on atheism appeared in the Estonian press. Since the range of themes considered was relatively narrow and articles translated from Russian outnumbered original material, most of these columns had exhausted themselves by the end of the 1960s. In addition to articles, every year five to 10 popular academic books were published during the campaign. Later on, two or three such books were published yearly.<sup>108</sup>

Naturally, the educational system also had to help turn society atheist, although direct atheist propaganda was, for the most part, not spread until secondary school. The program was more subtle, meaning that questions of religion and atheism were considered suggestively within the framework of different subjects—primarily in history and literature, less frequently in chemistry and physics.<sup>109</sup> General practice was to address the theme of atheism once a year in order to get credit for the “atheist upbringing” required in curricula. This was most commonly done during homeroom lesson before Christmas. Sporadically, atheism courses or

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107 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 742, l. 48.

108 Atko Rimmel, ‘Ateismi ajaloo Eestis (XIX sajandi lõpust kuni aastani 1989)’ (On the History of Atheism in Estonia (From the End of the 19th Century to 1989)) (MA-thesis, Tartu, 2004), Appendix no. 9, list of Soviet-era atheist literature based on the *Chronicle of Articles and Reviews* and Appendix no. 10, list of Soviet-era atheist literature based on the *Chronicle of Books*.

109 Concerning ideological upbringing in school, see Eli Pilve, ‘Nõukogude noore kasvatamisest paberil ja päriselt: Ideoloogiline ajupesu nõukogude kooli(tunni)s 1953–1991’ (On the Education of Soviet Young People on Paper and in Reality: Ideological Brainwashing in Estonian SSR School Lessons 1953–1991), *Tuna* 16 (2013), no. 3, pp. 82–100; Anu Raudsepp, *Ajaloo õpetamise korraldus Eesti NSV eesti õppekeelega üldhariduskoolides 1944–1985* (Organization of the Teaching of History in General Education Schools in the Estonian SSR where the Language of Instruction was Estonian) (Tartu, 2005).

discussion groups were organized (especially in the 1960s) if an activist teacher was present, but none of these efforts operated for very long. More aggressive activities took place (periodically) in northeastern Estonia: “A teacher for carrying out atheist upbringing in school has been appointed to each school in Narva. All pupils from religious families are on file.”<sup>110</sup>

Ideological teaching was more visible in institutions of higher education. Alongside other “red” subjects, the compulsory subject “Fundamentals of Scientific Atheism” was added to the curriculum during the antireligious campaign, but the holding of lectures and the way the material was presented depended considerably on the overall intellectual spirit of the university, the availability of an appropriate lecturer, and the lecturer’s preferences. This course was continually given only at the Tallinn Polytechnical Institute<sup>111</sup> because Kuulo Vimmsaare, the leading figure in the field of atheism in the Estonian SSR, worked there in the Faculty of Philosophy.

The ideal of atheist propaganda indicated in Party decisions, however, was the personal conversion of believers, or the “individual approach.” Since this kind of activity was rather resource-intensive, it took place only sporadically and at the personal initiative of atheist activists, because specific requirements and supervision were lacking. Activities took place primarily along the lines of the Party. For instance, the children of religious families were identified in Ida-Viru County in the 1960s in a cooperation between Party and Komsomol committees and schools.<sup>112</sup> People who had deviated from the correct path could also be put under pressure in the workplace. To a certain extent, cooperation took place with the KGB in this regard. For instance, activists perused KGB materials before visiting a believer, which of course did not help: “As a fanatical believer, he stuck to his convictions, categorically refusing to listen to atheist viewpoints regarding the question under consideration.”<sup>113</sup> The main problem with the “individual approach” was that most propagandists did not have the faintest idea of how to carry out such work—the first methodological materials on such work were not published in Estonian until the mid-1970s. Thus, it is no wonder that practically all archival sources that mention the “individual approach” indicate that it was not used.

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110 ERA f. R-2048, n. 1, s. 1118, l. 35.

111 Helgi Sillaste, ‘Ateistlik kasvatustöö meie kodulinna’ (Work in Atheist Upbringing in Our Hometown), *Edasi*, 20 December 1975.

112 LVMA f. 2iv, n. 1/1, s. 20, l. 1.

113 ERAF f. 148, n. 47, s. 20, l. 46.

## Summary

The Party and state's attitude towards religion seemed to remain unchanged throughout the entire Soviet period. The utopian idea of a society free of religion remained the ideal. The strategies for achieving that objective, however, changed considerably during the Cold War period. The Stalin-era policy of terror and agreements with the churches was replaced in the Khrushchev era by an active campaign against religion. The campaign had three main directions: first the stifling of the activity of churches by administrative, legal, and economic means; then a propaganda war through the media; and finally, the disruption of religious traditions through the creation of secular equivalents. No change in and of itself took place in this scheme during the period of stagnation under Brezhnev—decisions adopted during the campaign remained in force, and the working units that had been created continued to operate (at least formally), though they were far less active than before. The new shift, which proved to be the last, was brought on by the policy of perestroika in 1988. As a consequence, religion once again began to be considered a (more or less) normal aspect of social life.

The religious policy implemented in Soviet Estonia reflects fairly precisely the USSR's changes in course according to the political needs of the day, even though Soviet Estonia's treatment of religion was more lenient than in some other regions of the USSR. This "leniency" was possible only in the absence of a problematic religious situation; therefore the aim of local religious policy was primarily to maintain the status quo. Since the long-term exhaustion tactics (replacing the Khrushchev-era policy, which aimed to finish religion off quickly) appeared to be working, there was in fact no problem with religion, and most of the time this topic was completely unimportant. Instead of the constant militant atheism demanded in Party decisions, activity was limited to monitoring the fading away of religious life and not troubling the waters with antireligious action. Thus, the state's religious policy in practice was actually far from homogeneous and often depended on the preferences of local officials.

The other distinctive feature of the Estonian SSR's policy on religion was its emphasis on new, secular Soviet ceremonies, which the Estonian SSR helped lead the way in developing until the mid-1960s. With the help of other methods used to suppress religion, new customs, whose connection to atheist ideology was generally not conspicuous, managed to make both church traditions and religious life utterly marginal by the end of Khrushchev's campaign. However, the fruit of this victory took its toll in the subsequent decades. There was no visible need for anti-religious activity due to the irrelevance of the church. In place of militant atheism,

state policy on religion instead caused public indifference to both religion and atheism. The brief atheist campaign of the early 1980s did not alter this situation.

Even though the state only partially succeeded in marginalizing the church and turning the population into militant atheists, the results (at least statistically) were noteworthy: while nearly 98 percent of Estonia's population was associated to some degree with the churches before the war (according to the 1934 census) and nearly a fourth of them are thought to have been active church members, by 1987—before the relaxation of religious policy—less than a fourth of that fourth remained active church members, meaning only around 5 percent of the population.<sup>114</sup>

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114 Remmel, 'Believers, Human Rights'; Plaat, *Usuliikumised, kirikud ja vabakogudused*, p. 221. An overview of the processes that have taken place in the religious landscape of once-again-independent Estonia is provided in Ringo Ringvee, 'Dialogue or Confrontation? New Religious Movements, Mainstream Religions and the State in Secular Estonia,' *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 3 (2012), no. 1, pp. 93–116.