

Moscow's Boiling Frog Approach to Secularizing Estonia and Latvia:

The Methods and Ideological Underpinnings of Soviet Anti-Religious Policy, 1945-1961

I. Abstract

Past scholarship on Soviet religious suppression in the Baltics has characterized the behavior of Khrushchev as primarily pragmatic and opportunistic, oscillating between tolerating religion and suppressing religion based on the changing political winds in Moscow. However, based on my analysis of Soviet policy vis-à-vis the Estonian and Latvian Orthodox and Lutheran Churches, I argue that Khrushchev's policy represents a unified continuation of Stalin's post-war approach to religion, whereby believers were corralled into national confessions which could be easily controlled and gradually weakened as part of a "boiling frog" strategy to eliminating religion in Baltic society. Additionally, I argue that it is unlikely Gorbachev, Stalin, or later Soviet premieres would have aligned on the "boiling frog" approach for purely pragmatic reasons, and that the continuity of this peculiar policy is best understood as a consequence of their shared Marxist-Leninist ideology.

II. On Churches Withering Away: Motivation, Method, and Goals

"If you drop a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will of course frantically try to clamber out. But if you place it gently in a pot of tepid water and turn the heat on low, it will float there quite placidly. As the water gradually heats up, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor, exactly like one of us in a hot bath, and before long, with a smile on its face, it will unresistingly allow itself to be boiled to death."

In this paper I argue that the Soviet leadership's somewhat eclectic anti-religious policies in the Estonia and Latvia reflect a view that, given the right conditions, religious institutions will allow themselves to slowly and peacefully wither away under socialist rule, like a boiling frog, or, in Lenin's view, the state itself.³ This view stands in stark contrast to the more well-known Soviet view, that religious institutions need to be rooted out forcefully and, often, violently, as seen in Stalin's anti-Orthodox and anti-Jewish purges.⁴ Fascinatingly, both Soviet approaches to religious suppression occurred simultaneously in Estonia and Latvia, where select religious institutions were allowed to wither away under Soviet oversight, while others were uprooted entirely. The motivating question for this paper is determining why, in the Soviet view, some religious institutions seem to fall into the "boilable frog" category and others into the "uproot entirely" category.

Estonia and Latvia are a uniquely apt case study for this due to their complex religious landscape, which caused the Soviets to deploy three distinct strategies: (1) Uprooting confessions entirely, (2) merging confessions together into larger national institutions, (3) preventing institutional access to key resources such that churches have to gradually scale back their operations. Different policies applied by the Soviets to different religious groups can, with

¹Notably, in real life, a frog will jump out of hot water before being boiled alive, much as religious institutions in Estonia and Latvia did not simply allow themselves to be eliminated without resistance. This paper does not discuss resistance to Soviet policies in great detail, but Soviet policies did not go unopposed.

² This quotation is a discussion of a fictitious priest's deconversion experience, so I felt it was apt. However, it appears that most real life deconversion experiences, like conversion experiences, are actually quite sudden. See Strieb and Keller, *The Variety of Deconversion Experiences: Contours of Concept in Respect to Empirical Research*.

³ Lenin, *The State and Revolution*.

⁴ See Pospelovsky, *Soviet Anti-Religious Campaigns and Persecutions*, for a thorough treatment of the motivations of these purges.

adequate care, be read to suggest different Soviet perspectives about those religious groups, rather than merely different political circumstances. I have elected to focus on the 1945-1961 period since, after 1961, the religious policies in the Baltic SSRs did not fundamentally change until the Gorbachev era.⁵ Additionally, I have elected to exclude Lithuania and Catholicism from the substantive analysis in this paper since the Soviet Union had a unique relationship with Catholicism, and as such, attempting to include Catholicism in the discussion will serve neither to do justice to the topic nor increase analytical clarity.⁶

While many religious groups in the Baltic are relevant to this discussion, only a relatively limited body of geographical and institutional knowledge is necessary to appreciate my arguments. Prior to the Soviet occupation, Latvia and Estonia were both primarily Lutheran countries, possessing nation-level Lutheran religious institutions.⁷ However, in the east of the countries, there was a significant Orthodox minority. These churches were associated with Russia, since most ethnic Russians in Latvia and Estonia remained Orthodox, but there was also significant indigenous participation in Orthodox churches. In fact, Estonia's Orthodox church was primarily composed of ethnic Estonians.⁸ The same eastern regions were also the long-time home of a minority of so-called "Old Believers" who had fled to the Baltics in the 17th century

⁵ This is covered full in Žilinskas, *Russia and the Baltics*. While there were political squabbles, especially related to the national Lutheran churches' willingness to be Soviet pawns in international religious organization, like the Christian Peace Council and World Council of Churches (these are covered especially well in Goeckel's *Soviet Religious Policy in the Baltics under Krushchev*), domestic policy remained stagnant after 1964.

⁶ As shown by archival research in Žilinskas and leaked documents used by Pospelovsky, the Soviet Union was concerned about the independent, external governance structure of the Catholic Church, and fought tooth and nail trying and capture crucial Catholic posts in Lithuania, which the Catholic Church duly resisted. I do not think discussing Soviet policy in Lithuania without discussing these squabbles is possible, but it is largely tangential to my argument, so I decided it was best to eliminate this discussion all together. Goeckel has done the same for similar reasons in *Playing Harmony in the Singing Revolution*.

⁷ Žilinskas.

⁸ Rimestad.

due to a liturgical dispute with the Russian Orthodox Church. To the south, Lithuania was almost entirely Catholic. In all three republics, due to the relative success of Anglo-American missionary work, there were also many congregationalist confessions—mostly Methodists and Baptists—and, most worryingly in Soviet eyes, small sects of Jehovah’s Witnesses.⁹ While exact numbers or difficult to come by, these data provide a rough sketch of the situation:

	Lutheran	Roman Catholic	Orthodox	Others
Estonia	78%	0%	19%	3%
Latvia	56%	24%	9%	12%
Lithuania	10%	80%	1%	9%

Figure 1, estimates of Baltic religious demographics, 1935. Reproduced from Rimestad.

This paper aims to prove two claims: (1) That the Soviet Union believed that the best approach to institutional, national churches, such as the Baltic Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Baltic Lutheran churches, was to allow the churches to wither away by gradually cutting off their access to resources and converts, but that the best approach to other churches was to stamp them out, and (2) that this view emerges primarily from the quirks of Marxism-Leninism’s views on nationality policy. I will prove the first claim empirically with reference to the Soviet Union’s policies in Estonia and Latvia between 1945 and 1961, and the second claim I will prove analytically, by demonstrating that it is unlikely the Soviet Union would have reached this policy through a pragmatic approach.

III. Case Study

⁹ Žilinskas.

This section makes the case that the policies of Khrushchev and Stalin both have the same telos of corralling believers into politically weak national churches which could be starved of resources while suppressing small and non-national churches. For the sake of clarity, I will present political developments roughly chronologically.

i. 1945-1953: Developments during Stalin's Final Years

After WWII, Stalin largely abandoned the policy of violently purging religious institutions. In fact, Stalin often praised the Orthodox Church, in particular, for its "patriotism" in the war.¹⁰ This should not be read to suggest that Stalin did not continue ferocious anti-religious policies. Newspapers were still mandated to publish inflammatory anti-theist articles,¹¹ and the go-to punishment for uncooperative clergy remained sentences to labor camps.¹² Additionally, during the mass persecutions carried out by Stalin in the wake of recapturing the Baltic Republics, clergy were often targeted.¹³

Consequently, so many clergy had either fled, been killed during WWII, sent to labor camps by Stalin, or otherwise coerced into becoming anti-theist polemicists, that religious institutions in Latvia and Estonia were a shadow of their former selves. Institutional ties had also been wrecked by the war, and many important churches, such as Klaipeda,¹⁴ lay in ruins. Consequently, the religious institutions Stalin sought to regulate, while popular, already had a severe lack of clergy and spaces where service could be held. This was furthered by the mass

¹⁰ Sõtšov, *The Ecumenical and Patriotic Activity of the Estonian Eparchy in the Context of Soviet Politics of Religion in 1954–1964*.

¹¹ Goeckel, *Soviet Religious Policy in the Baltics under Krushchev*.

¹² Pospelovsky.

¹³ Rohtmits and Tēraudkalns, *Taking Legitimacy to Exile*.

¹⁴ Žilinskas.

nationalization of churches, whereby highly symbolic churches were converted to grain silos and concert halls, and churches from small, non-national sects were occasionally handed over to Orthodox or Lutheran hands. Limiting religious venues even further, congregations were required to register themselves, and large numbers of churches found their registration denied. Finally, seminary was greatly restricted.¹⁵ Taken together, all of these policies put significant logistical constraints on religious institutions such that it was difficult to function, but none of these policies sought to root up national churches outright.

Notably, Stalin did not use financial means to restrict churches' ability to function. In fact, Stalin granted significant tax benefits to monasteries (primarily related to land taxes) and allowed clergy to reduce their onerous tax burden by filing as bachelors or childless.¹⁶ This is odd on face, but I think can be largely explained by a combination of the church registration system and political particularities. Churches that could be successfully registered primarily belonged to large, national institutions (i.e., Orthodox or Lutheran),¹⁷ and only traditionally wealthy churches (once again, Orthodox or Lutheran) could have had enough land to benefit significantly from these exemptions. Consequently, I understand this policy as Stalin attempting to incentivize smaller churches to join with these larger institutions in hope of kinder financial treatment.

Orthodox churches had, perhaps, the most unusual experience under Stalin. Having seen the writing on the wall during the chaos of the Bolshevik Revolution, in 1922 the Orthodox church in

¹⁵ Pospelovsky.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ As discussed by Altnurme in *Religious Cults*, this was due to explicit institutional favoritism. In *The Formulation of Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, Bociurkiw argues, based on leaked documents, that Soviet authorities tracked whether this favoritism was successful.

Estonia had petitioned Constantinople to become an autonomous church administered under the Patriarchate of Constantinople. This request had been granted, forming the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church. However, in 1945, when the Baltic Republics were occupied by the Soviet Union, the Estonian Orthodox church was forcibly reintegrated into the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁸

Taken altogether, Stalin's policies had a clear aim of consolidating churches, creating strong practical incentives for Protestant churches to join the national Lutheran churches, and forcibly unifying the Orthodox Churches. Simultaneously, logistical constraints greatly restricted these churches' ability to function, but the brunt of this campaign was felt by small churches, which were generally forced to shut down entirely.

ii. Not Such a "Thaw": Khrushchev's Policies as a Continuation of Stalin, 1953-1961

Khrushchev's thaw brought several changes to the Soviet Union's religious strategy in Estonia and Latvia. Most notably, inflammatory anti-theist propaganda was greatly curtailed,¹⁹ and the default punishment for subversive preaching was changed from labor camp sentences to decertification.²⁰ In a wave of apparent clemency, many churches were finally allowed to register, and many cooperative clergy were allowed back into Estonia and Latvia.²¹ I attribute the change in punishment and propaganda strategy to two causes. First, a recognition that the backlash and hostility generated from such explicit attacks was not productive, and second, that

¹⁸ Rohtmits and Tēraudkalns.

¹⁹ Goeckel, *Soviet Religious Policy in the Baltics under Krushchev*.

²⁰ Bociurkiw.

²¹ Žilinskas.

driving religious institutions underground would prevent them from being withered away by logistic restrictions, and, as such, it was important to keep churches above ground.²²

Allowing some clergy to return to Russia and churches to register is puzzling at first, but I think can be attributed to the *zeitgeist* of Khrushchev's early days. Troublesome clergy, like the Estonian Epistolic Orthodox Church in exile,²³ or important churches, like Klaipeda,²⁴ where not granted this clemency or registration. The thaw seemed to only allow registration and clemency in relatively unimportant cases, and as such, strikes me as religion being swept up in the broader anti-Stalinist movement, rather than a conscious attempt to foment stronger relationships with religious institutions. After all, as soon as Khrushchev was able,²⁵ these policies were entirely reversed, suggesting that this all happened contrary to Khrushchev's will.

In fact, while Khrushchev's policies seemed friendlier to religion than Stalin's on face, between 1958 and 1961 several far stricter logistical restrictions were put in to place which, as time went on, would greatly damage Estonian and Latvia religious institutions.

The first rung of suppression was restricting churches' access to finances. Stalin's tax exemptions were reversed, and monasteries and clergy were required to pay post-facto for the taxes they had been saved due to exemptions.²⁶ This caused many monasteries to be forced to close immediately.²⁷ Clergy were forced to pay their onerous taxes without preferential filing

²² Bociurkiw and Žilinskas both argue that this was a major concern for Soviet leadership.

²³ Rohtmits and Tēraudkalns.

²⁴ Žilinskas.

²⁵ All authors covering Khrushchev unanimously agree that reversal came as soon as Khrushchev had secured power in Moscow, but no sources discuss this in detail. However, given Khrushchev's militant anti-theism, I have no particular reason to doubt this.

²⁶ Sõtšov, Goeckel, *Soviet Religious Policy in the Baltics under Krushchev*.

²⁷ Žilinskas.

status, and taxes were raised on churches. Utility prices were also hiked for clergy and religious institutions.²⁸ Simultaneously, Soviet policies greatly restricted churches' ability to raise money. In one example among many, a Lutheran church had its ability to sell songbooks restricted since they were too profitable.²⁹

The second rung of suppression was restricting churches' access to proper certifications. This came in three forms. First, registration was revoked en masse from churches, such that while there were 22,000 registered churches in 1959, there were only 7,873 in 1965.³⁰ Additionally, while clergy no longer feared being sent to a labor camp, decertification was a far more innocuous punishment, which allowed Soviet officers to decertify clergy with impunity. As expected, both of these decertification drives were especially destructive for small, less institutionalized churches.³¹ Finally, where Stalin had merely restricted seminary, Khrushchev went further, closing many major Estonian seminaries, and restricting the remaining seminaries even further.³²

The third and final rung of Soviet suppression was restricting religious youth engagement. Catechism, Sunday School, and other elements of religious education were forbidden for children, and important rites like Baptisms and Confirmation were age-restricted to 30 and 18, respectively. In 1960, youth were forbidden from attending church services entirely.³³ While

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Goeckel, *Soviet Policy toward the Baltic Lutheran Churches and their Role in the Liberalization Process*. Pospelovsky reports that a church was closed down after becoming a popular illicit concert venues due to its excellent acoustics.

³⁰ Pospelovsky.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Žilinskas reports that, despite the extensive protests of the seminary students, it was not brought back.

³³ Žilinskas.

Stalin had restricted youth religious education,³⁴ such draconian measures such as preventing church attendance entirely or restricting key religious rites were new to the Khrushchev era.

All together, despite the apparent reversal of the thaw, the brunt of Khrushchev's policy is a stricter continuation of Stalin's policy: national, institutional churches were restricted logistically such that, as time went on, more and more churches were forced to close while, simultaneously, smaller churches were forced to either join national churches or be driven to extinction.

IV. Imperial Pragmatism or Marxist-Leninist Fanaticism? The Motivations Moscow's Two-Fanged Religious Suppression Strategy

The final question I aim to address is why *this policy*? Moscow had a number of other options at its disposal, such as oppressing all religions more strictly (as Stalin had before WWII), oppressing all religions equally, cooperating with all religions, or some other mix. While previous scholars have made pragmatic arguments as to why the Soviet Union tolerated national religious institutions, but not small religious institutions,³⁵ I seek to make the case that this policy is derivative of Marxist-Leninist ideology.

The Ideological Case

³⁴ Pospelovsky.

³⁵ These arguments are generally not especially in depth, and ultimately can be summarized as "oppressing smaller churches more causes less backlash, and we want to oppress churches." Bociurkiw posits that mid-level Soviet officials, interested in filling up church closure quota while minimizing friction, were incentivized to pick on small churches.

Lenin was both a militant anti-theist and a militant enemy of Great Russian³⁶ chauvinism. In Lenin's view, the Russian Empire had oppressed its subject nations, and the Great Russian people owed these oppressed nations a great debt. One way of paying that debt off could be to help these formerly oppressed, "backwards" nations achieve socialism, but Lenin stressed that this process must be voluntary, lest the Soviet Union repeat the mistakes of the Russian Empire. In service of this goal, Lenin included a clause in the USSR constitution permitting national SSRs to leave the union, which greatly aided the USSR's sudden collapse in 1991.³⁷³⁸ However, after Lenin's death, Stalin, in his role as Chief Commissar of Nationalities, successfully massaged Lenin's perspective into a policy more conducive to his vision of a culturally unified, socialist, and by extension, Russian USSR. Stalin argued that while nations have a national interest in their independence, as Lenin suggested, the proletariat was international, and the proletariat that just so happened to be in Russia had a vested interest in helping the proletariat that just so happened to be in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, or Kazakhstan achieve socialism.³⁹ Therefore, in a somewhat peculiar dialectic, on one hand a nation ought to develop its own distinctive, and independent culture, but on the other hand, the international (i.e., Great Russian) proletariat ought to intervene to make sure that culture is socialist.⁴⁰ While this policy might feel contradictory, or perhaps odd, the Soviet Union showcased a great commitment to it⁴¹, and

³⁶ In the literature, Great Russia is used to refer to what is genuinely meant by Russian, as opposed to Byelorussians or Ukrainians, who, in Lenin's view, were still Russians.

³⁷ Lenin's speeches and letters on the subject, which are quite explicit, as well as discussion on this by Soviet leadership are quoted extensively in Library of Congress, *The Soviet Empire: Prison House of Nations and Races*

³⁸ Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*.

³⁹ Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*.

⁴⁰ Slezkine does an admirable job laying out this somewhat counterintuitive philosophy in *The USSR as a Communal Apartment*.

⁴¹ Tsamarian and Ronin is an interesting sample of international-facing Soviet propaganda which explicitly argues that being a minority nationality in the USSR is great because of this policy.

radio Moscow regularly broadcast socialist-themed Kazakh throat-singing in furtherance of this process.⁴²

In this view, Estonia and Latvia have a fundamental, *national* right to *national* churches, insofar as those churches do not impede progress towards socialism. This implies that the traditional, national churches (i.e., Lutheran churches) must be tolerated at least in the short term, but Soviet intervention is legitimate insofar as that action assures the national churches are becoming more socialist (i.e., withering away). Similar reasoning can be applied to the Baltic Orthodox Churches. These churches are the national right of Russians living in the Baltics,⁴³ who are behind their Muscovite counterparts on the long road to socialism, and also need to have their church tolerated. However, since this is a *Russian* national church, not an *Estonian* national church, this is only legitimate insofar as these Orthodox churches are administered as part of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The extension of this view is that any non-national church, even if quite large, such as that of the Old Believers, is an anti-socialist organization which Moscow has no obligation to tolerate, and therefore must eliminate.

V. Conclusion

This paper has aimed to show that the Soviet Union took a two-pronged approach to religious suppression in Estonia and Latvia, where national churches were made to gradually decay, and other churches were uprooted fairly aggressively. The novel arguments I have

⁴² Slezkine.

⁴³ Logically, based on Stalin's one nation one church reasoning, this would imply that the Russian Orthodox Church would not be legitimate in Estonia or Latvia if there were no ethnic Russians.

presented are that (I) there is a fundamental continuity in religious policy between Khrushchev and Stalin, and (II) this continuity is a result, in at least some part, of ideology.

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