

# opción

Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía,  
Linguística y Semiótica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

Año 35, 2019, Especial N°

# 21

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales  
ISSN 1012-1537/ ISSNe: 2477-9385  
Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



Universidad del Zulia  
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias  
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas  
Maracaibo - Venezuela



# The hybrid nature of the soviet rituals of the 1920's: Church traditions

**Lyudmila Viktorovna Tabunshchikova**

History Department of National History of the 20th-21st centuries  
Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don Russia, Rostov-on-Don,  
ul. Bolshaya Sadovaya 105, 344082,  
[liudmila.tabunshchikova@yandex.ru](mailto:liudmila.tabunshchikova@yandex.ru)

## Abstract

This article explores the periodicals of the 1920s, as well as the methodological literature of the Soviet era on the organization of new rituals, which enabled the author to trace the struggle of the government with the Church. In result, in the 1920s, there were three points of view on the role of state in the development of new non-religious rites: no state regulation, no regulation with strong state focus, and active state administration, development and subsequent introduction of new rituals by the state. In conclusion, civil ritualism was created in Soviet Russia during the anti-religious campaign of the 1920s.

**Keywords:** Soviet, rituals, anti-religious, campaign.

## La naturaleza híbrida de los rituales soviéticos de la década de 1920: Las tradiciones de la iglesia

### Resumen

Este artículo explora las publicaciones periódicas de la década de 1920, así como la literatura metodológica de la era soviética sobre la organización de nuevos rituales, que permitieron al autor rastrear la lucha del gobierno con la Iglesia. En consecuencia, en la década de 1920, hubo tres puntos de vista sobre el papel del estado en el desarrollo de nuevos ritos no religiosos: no hay regulación estatal, no hay regulación con un fuerte enfoque estatal, y administración estatal

activa, desarrollo y posterior introducción de nuevos Rituales por el estado. En conclusión, el ritualismo civil se creó en la Rusia soviética durante la campaña antirreligiosa de los años veinte.

**Palabras clave:** soviético, rituales, antirreligiosos, campaña.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Before the Revolution of 1917, christenings, weddings, and funerals of the Orthodox population were strictly regulated by the Church. In practice, this meant that it was almost impossible to give a name, get married, or bury a person without a priest, bypassing church rituals. The Soviet government completely changed this situation. One of the first decrees, issued even before the famous Decree on the separation of the Church from the state, was the legislative act aimed at fighting with church rituals. For instance, according to the Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR of December 18, 1917, On Civil Marriage, Children and Civil Registry Bookkeeping, official records of births, deaths and marriages were no longer made by the Church, but were transferred to local councils. Documents issued by church organizations were considered illegal.

The decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR of January 20, 1918, on the separation of church from state and school from church, stated that: Civil registration is conducted exclusively by civil authorities and bureaus of civil registration. The Soviet government was interested in the new ritualism from the first years after the Revolution and until the early 1930s. This interest was

revived during Khrushchev's era along with a new round of struggle against the Church – in the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. The article investigates these processes that took place in the 1920s, while other aspects of religious NEP – anti-Christmas holidays, iconoclasm, etc. are not considered in this paper.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of the so-called Religious NEP began after the collapse of the Soviet Union as part of general research on the history of church-state relations in the Soviet period. The monograph of Alekseev (1992) was the first one in this field. In this study, the author, for the first time in Russian historiography, considers the change in the religious policy of the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s from a totally new perspective. In this and the following paper *Illusions and Dogmas* Alekseev (1992) discusses the reasons for the existence of religious NEP in the Soviet state. According to the researcher, the first attempts of war against religion showed its complete futility, as a result of which the authorities were forced to search for new methods of dealing with the Church.

This problem was further analyzed by other researchers. In addition to the study of anti-Christmas campaigns considered in detail by Alekseev (1992), Krapivin (1997) explores the issues of so-called revolutionary names and the revolutionary Menologium in the anti-religious policy of the Bolsheviks. The role of Komsomol

organizations in creating and promoting anti-religious Soviet rituals was considered by (Slezin, 2017). On the contrary, Lebedeva (2017) focuses on the analysis of the red ritualism among the predominantly peasant population of Soviet Russia. The researcher concludes that these innovations of the Soviet government were not supported by the peasants, which the author of this article disagrees with.

Changes in the traditions of marriage registration in the first years of the Soviet state were studied in the work by (Belikova, 1925). The detailed articles by Sokolova (2013) consider the Soviet funeral rites in general and fire burials – crematoriums – in particular. Historian and sociologist Lebina (2018) focuses on the study of Soviet everyday life and uses the materials of the 1920-1950s to reveal the transformation of the Bolsheviks' policy in daily practices. Along with other aspects, the author touches upon the issues of everyday religiosity and, consequently, the practices of Soviet red christenings, fire burials and weddings in the registry office. Soviet rituals in particular areas are much better analyzed than the all-Russian ones, and this analysis was carried out by Slezin (2017), Tabunshchikova (2015), and others. Talking about international research, we should mention a monograph by German historian Malta Rolf who studied Soviet rituals and public holidays.

The author uses a large documentary material to show that the Soviet state was filling public holidays and rituals with ideology from the first days of its existence. Apart from M. Rolf, there are quite many international researchers who focused on this topic (Vargas-Hernández,

2016). Thus, the issue of the red rituals of the 1920s was quite thoroughly described in a number of publications, but so far there has been no large-scale research on this topic. This article uses the periodicals of the 1920s as the source base, as well as the methodological literature of the Soviet era. Such an approach allowed reconstructing the process of the state campaign against the Church which was carried out by borrowing some rituals.

### **3. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The methodological basis is represented by the principles of scientific objectivity, systematization and historicism, traditionally used in historical science. Application of these principles implies using a number of methods of scientific historical research. The historical-genetic method makes it possible to identify the historical roots of events, phenomena and processes related to the establishment of Soviet traditions, to understand that they are the product of the history of the Russian people and the specific features of their culture. The historical-comparative method makes it possible to identify and clarify the peculiarities of the situation, life, culture and daily activities of Soviet people in the cultural and historical context of Soviet Russia in the 1920s.

### **4. RESULTS**

The Soviet government began the campaign against church rites in the first years after the Revolution. In April 1918, Lenin signed a

decree on abolishing Easter bonuses. In 1924, the Moscow Council established two new public holidays – May 2 and November 8 instead of Epiphany Day (January 6) and Annunciation Day (March 25). In 1925, the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR reduced the number of religious holidays from ten to eight. New Soviet holidays and ceremonies were being formed along with the weakening of the old rituals. The public had already had some experience in creating civil rituals. According to the leading researchers, the first civil funeral was that of Nekrasov (December 1887).

However, civil ritualism was massively introduced only in 1923. In October of this year, the Central Committee issued a special order on anti-religious propaganda in villages, according to which it was recommended to replace religious rites with civil ones: religious holidays with civil work holidays (for example, harvest holidays), sacraments with civil ceremonies. The idea of a new ritual (as well as a festive culture) becomes part of the state campaigns on atheistic propaganda and the movement for a new life order. As a result, civil ceremonies such as the so-called red christenings, red weddings, and red funerals were introduced not only in the country but also in the city. The rite of christening is replaced by October and the naming rite, while the civil marriage was to substitute the church wedding, and communist funeral replaced the church one.

October Since 1923, the most widespread and popular civil rituals in the country were red christenings or October. Two

publications in the government mouthpiece – The Pravda Newspaper – in 1924 about this civil ceremony prove that this tradition was actively encouraged by the authorities. There was no significant variation in October scenarios. This event was celebrated not only by the parents and relatives of the newborn but also by all their colleagues. The grand ceremony was the same in most cases: the hall of a local club, the curious audience, solemn speeches of the officials, a report of a scientist about religion (e.g. Life and Revolution), the collective choice of the name for the newborn (or often several newborns) by voting, with minimal participation of the parents.

On November 2, 1923, The Trudovoy Don Newspaper described the choice of the name by the work team in this way: On October 29, in the club of the People's Communication Office there was the Soviet christening of a newborn of a minor non-Party employee of the communications district, Comrade (Belikova, 1925). The hall was packed with fellow workers ... Comrade Valenberg announced the alleged name of the newborn. Comrades! The Presidium of the meeting, in full agreement with the parents, suggests naming the child – the girl – Lenina, in honor of our dear leader Vladimir Ilyich! The audience swayed in their chairs, applauding enthusiastically. The meeting unanimously approved this name by voting. So, Comrade Valenberg concluded, long live the new member of our working family – Lenina Pavlovna!

According to the periodicals of the 1920s, popular names included Lenina, Oktyabrina, Iskra, Energiya, Kollektiva, Elektrina

and even (Belikova, 1925). Also quite popular were such names as Engels, Malentro, Chonddo (Special Forces of Donoblast), Kim (Youth Comintern) and Narkom (People's Commissar –Upon the agreement parents and the Presidium, Comrade Marchuk's first child was named Narkom. The thunder of applause and a flourish of trumpets expressed the delight of the audience. In the 1920s, self-October took place quite often and was actively promoted – the process of changing one's own church name to a revolutionary one.

For instance, a publication of those years describes that after a conversation about the new way of life, the workers' wives and female workers decided that self-October would be the measure to support this campaign. For this purpose, a special ceremony was organized, during which a whole group of female workers abandoned their old names and took new ones. After a few months, almost all of the self-October ones were called as before, and there were only one of the most persistent workers who had renamed herself from Avdotya to Revolution whom the local children continued to call Aunt Reva. Thus, in daily life, Aunt Reva was the only outcome of this curious event (Ibid).

It should be noted that this practice of inventing names was not new for Russia. In pre-revolutionary times, there were many so-called Seminary surnames – artificially created harmonious family names which from the end of the 17th century was given to the clergy instead of their original ones or if there was none. This was done by religious educational institutions of the Russian Orthodox Church. According to

philologist Lev Ouspensky (1962), this process could be explained by the fact that the clergy wanted to have appropriate names, that is, the ones that would bring them closer to the privileged classes and the nobles. Artificial nicknames were later inherited by a large part of the Russian educated class and became widespread. This is how the names of some prominent figures of the Church – Archpriest Valentin Amphiteatrov (1836-1908), Bishops Vladimir (Bogoyavlensky) (1848-1918), Vladimir Blagorazumov (1845-1914), etc., appeared.

However, in the Soviet period, this practice of changing the name was completely different. The population, brought up in church traditions, nevertheless, on the whole calmly perceived this innovation of the new government. The rite of October or red christening was often perceived as a replacement for the church ceremony. What is this, was neither christened nor October, unmarked! said one Soviet grandmother about her grandson. There were funny cases: in Moscow in the mid-1920s Communist parents were denied to conduct October: You are a party member and so is your husband, why do you want October? October is held for non-party people, for propaganda (ibid.)

Red weddings: Like christenings, church weddings in the 1920s were replaced by a solemn civil ceremony which was called the red wedding, and in many respects, it was similar to October. It took place in The House of the Peasant, the local theater, or the union building. The table of the Presidium was covered with red cloth. The audience included fellow workers and many other people watching. Officials delivered solemn speeches. A record about the marriage was made.

The officials read greetings and congratulations to the newlyweds and the gifts were presented, accompanied by the sounds of the international. Often, the newlyweds received written instructions from the workers. For instance, in Borisov, the following order was given to the married couple: Dear Mikhail and Nadezhda! Today, on the day when your family is formed, we wish you to live together well for the whole life, so that you, Mikhail and you, Nadezhda, and your future children will always be faithful support of the Soviet state.

You love each other. And love is a flame. After the official part, a festive ball was usually held. For example, in 1923, there was a Soviet wedding in Elizavetinskaya Cossack village, Rostov district. The newlyweds were the member of the Communist cell, Comrade Luganskoy, and Komsomol Comrade Shvets. The representatives of the local authorities gave congratulatory speeches at the wedding. The ceremony itself took place in the theater (Soleimani et al., 2014).

The description of the exemplary ritual of the red wedding in the town of Kineshma was published in Pravda, No. 4, 1925, and later mockingly retold by the ideologist of the red ritual, writer Veresaev: On December 26, 1924, a red wedding is celebrated in the Kozhevnik club. The small club is brightly lit. The large table is covered with a red tablecloth. At the table, there are the newlyweds, the chairman of the province executive committee, the register clerk, along with the members of the Party cell. Right in front of the audience, there is a portrait of Lenin. At last, the red wedding begins. The Internationale is

played. The hall is packed with people. It is difficult to make out the greetings of various organizations that congratulate the newlyweds.

One can hear the words of a comrade: You are showing the way to other non-party people. I am sure that the time will come soon when people will be happy without priests. The audience applauds. The young couple, as those starting a new way of life, is presented with two books – *The History of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) – RCP(b)* – by Zinoviev and *The Speeches and Articles by V.I. Lenin*. There are some more speeches and *The Internationale* is played again.

The church weddings of party members were criticized, up to being expelled from the party. Kuban peasant Suvorov, a member of the RCP (b) was severely reprimanded for failing to behave as a party member should because of having a church wedding. Red funeral. The ritual of red or communist, as it was often called, the funeral was also fairly simple: the factory where the deceased had worked appointed the administrators, the body was put near the factory gate on a hastily built platform, then speeches were given, and finally, the inevitable *International* was played. However, cremation was the most effective way to fight the Church regarding the tradition of funerals. Since the Orthodox Church considered burning the body blasphemous, the most radical means for the leaders of the revolution was to replace the traditional burial with the burning of the body. In the Soviet press, the propaganda of cremation began in the spring of 1918. In 1920, the first Soviet crematorium was built in Moscow.

However, this facility did not last long. The oven was built too quickly and was badly designed. It was inefficient and broke down soon. The Soviet authorities returned to the idea of cremation only in the late 1920s, when in 1927 a crematorium was opened in Moscow in the building of Seraphim Church in the Donskoy Monastery which was rebuilt according to the design of architect Osipov. The popularity of red rituals. Statistics on various areas of the country help to assess the popularity of red rituals among the population. In 1924, seven cases of the civil funeral were recorded in Rasskazovsky volost of the Tambov province, as well as two Octobers, 13 – unchristened babies, two Komsomol weddings, 30 cases of weddings without the church ceremony. In the first quarter of 1927, in the whole province, there were 13 Octobers, 35 red weddings and 9 civil funerals.

In the Don region, according to local periodicals, in 1923 there were 16 red christenings, seven red weddings, and three funerals without a priest. In 1924, in the Odessa registry offices, 60% of all registered children got revolutionary names (Kim, Ninel, Ucheba, Erica). In the churches of Leningrad, the number of christenings decreased in 1923-1925 by 25%, and the number of weddings – by 60%. In general, in Leningrad in the mid-1920s the total number of births, marriages, and deaths registered according to the civil procedure exceeded the number of those performed according to religious ceremonies. In Moscow, 56% of children were christened in 1925, and in 1927 this figure estimated 60%. There were 58 and 67% of church burials, and 21 and 16% of church marriages.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

Unlike other studies that consider only certain aspects of the topic, this paper focuses on the main Soviet rituals of the 1920s that were introduced as part of the anti-religious campaign –red weddings, October, red funeral, and revolutionary Menologium. The statistics for various regions of the Soviet Union show that in general, the population welcomed these innovations of the Soviet government, which refutes the conclusions of other authors on this issue. In this study, the authors identified the nature of the campaign, which was neither well-planned nor consistent. Unlike previous publications, this paper actively uses the publications of the 1920s, as well as the data from the periodical press of that time. However, this topic has not been thoroughly studied yet and requires further careful research to identify sources connected with the so-called Religious NEP.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

It can be said that the so-called civil ritualism was created in Soviet Russia during the anti-religious campaign of the 1920s and included October or red christening, red weddings and civil funeral which were to replace church rites. Aiming to destroy the Church, the Soviet government used church paraphernalia – sacraments were replaced by civil ceremonies and Menologium – with revolutionary names. The process of the formation of new Soviet holidays and rites began in 1923, although there had been some background to this

process. Statistics in various regions of the country show that red weddings and red christenings were the most popular with the population, while the red funerals were the least popular. In general, the population had a positive attitude towards the innovations of the new government. However, in the 1920s the Soviet government did not have a unified approach to the introduction of new non-religious rites.

## REFERENCES

- ALEKSEEV, V. 1992. **Is the assault on heaven called off? Critical essays on the history of the campaign against religion in the USSR.** Moscow: Young Russia Publishing Center. Russia.
- BELIKOVA, N. 2015. **Changing the tradition of marriage registration in the first years of the Soviet state.** In *State, Society, Church in the History of Russia of the 20th – 21st Centuries: Materials of the 14th International Scientific Conference, Ivanovo, And March 18–19, 2015: In 2 Parts.* Ivanovo: Ivanovo State University, Part 2. pp. 227-229. Russia.
- KRAPIVIN, M. 1997. **Real history of the Church: the authorities and the Church in Soviet Russia (October 1917 – the end of the 1930s).** Volgograd: Peremena. Russia.
- LEBEDEVA, L. 2017. **Red ritualism in the campaign against peasants' religiosity in the first decade of the Soviet state.** In *Lessons of History: 1917-2017. Materials of the Fourth Regional Christmas Educational Readings.* Penza: Penza Theological Seminary. pp. 84-87. Russia.
- LEBINA, N. 2018. **From colleagues and oranges.** Problems of fashion and style in Vasily Aksenov's early prose: a historian's view. *The Theory of Fashion: Clothing, Body, Culture.* Vol. 3, pp. 269-296. Russia.
- OUSPENSKY, L. 1962. **You and Your Name.** Leningrad: Lenizdat. Russia.

- SLEZIN, A. 2017. **The Light cavalry of Komsomol at the turn of the 1920s-1930s.** Questions of History. Vol. 12, pp. 36-46. Russia.
- SOKOLOVA, A. 2013. **It is impossible, it is impossible to bury new people according to the old tradition.** Notes of the Fatherland. Vol. 5, pp. 191-208. Russia.
- TABUNSHCHIKOVA, L. 2015. **Red ritualism in the territory of the Donoblast in 1923-1924.** Bulletin of the Orthodox St. Tikhon's Humanitarian University. Series: History of the Russian Orthodox Church. Vol. 6, pp. 85-94. Russia.





**UNIVERSIDAD  
DEL ZULIA**

---

## **opción**

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales  
Año 35, Especial N° 21, (2019)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.  
Maracaibo - Venezuela

[www.luz.edu.ve](http://www.luz.edu.ve)

[www.serbi.luz.edu.ve](http://www.serbi.luz.edu.ve)

[produccioncientifica.luz.edu.ve](http://produccioncientifica.luz.edu.ve)