

Tetiana Yevsieieva

The Activities of Ukraine's Union of Militant Atheists  
during the Period of All-Out Collectivization, 1929–1933

The joint actions of the Communist Party leadership and local party organizations, trade unions, village councils, branches of the Committee of Poor Peasants, and organs of the State Political Administration (GPU—secret police) directed toward implementing all-out collectivization were unable to gain the support of the preponderant majority of Ukraine's rural residents. It became necessary to devise another way of organizing the peasants that would allow the Soviet government to establish effective control over them. However, the experience of creating non-party peasant conferences in the 1920s had demonstrated convincingly the danger posed to the Soviet regime by the very existence of peasant associations, however varied in character. They inevitably turned into organizations that could compete successfully with the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik).<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainian historian Oksana Hanzha maintains that during the period in question the Bolsheviks still held the reins of power only because there were no other political organizations in the countryside empowered to legally manage affairs in rural areas. The Bolsheviks' fear of losing control over rural regions was so great that they outlawed even the creation of poor peasant fractions at party conferences because the party's Central Committee was convinced that they might turn into nuclei of peasant unions.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, assistance in accelerating the pace of industrialization in the USSR and the socialist reconstruction of agriculture by intensifying the organization of state farms and collective farms was to be rendered by the Union of Militant Atheists of the USSR (SVB SSSR), created in 1925, and its republican branch, the Union of Militant Atheists of the Ukrainian SSR (SVB UkrSSR).<sup>3</sup> From 1929 onward, the Union came to be seen as something more than a propaganda

---

<sup>1</sup> Oksana Hanzha, "Ukraïns'ke selianstvo u borot'bi proty totalitarnoho rezhymu," in *Sutnist' i osoblyvosti novoi ekonomichnoi polityky v ukraïns'komu seli (1921–1928 rr.)* (Kyiv: Instytut istoriï Ukraïny NAN Ukraïny, 2000), 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> The Union of Militant Atheists of the USSR and its branch, the Ukrainian republic's Union of Militant Atheists, never existed as independent civic organizations. They were created as alternatives to religious communities and as auxiliaries to the state apparatus for the separation of church and state. The unions were conceived as "civic" levers intended to help eradicate religiosity, eliminate the church and clergy, and actively to construct a communist, atheistic way of life. During the Holodomor, local branches of the UMA and Committees of Poor Peasants became additional "civic" levers controlled by the Communist Party leadership to collectivize the village, extract grain, and complete the destruction of the church and clergy. UMA activity therefore focused mainly on the closure and destruction of churches and on economic and political campaigns in the city and the countryside, especially on promoting collectivization and confiscating grain and food from the peasants, as well as conducting loan campaigns to fund industrialization. Accordingly, the figures for loans and campaigns to build airplanes or submarines given in the text are copies of data from the officially designated all-Union industrial and financial five-year plan that the Communist Party leadership disseminated through the press. UMA members worked on the implementation of these all-Union plans along with other Communist Party and Soviet institutions. Consequently, the atheist activists also reprinted reporting and control figures in newspapers and magazines from official sources. The activists also had the right or simply found themselves compelled to participate in so-called socialist competition between branches to fulfill the industrial and financial plans. This involved proposing "counter-initiatives" and taking on "counter-obligations" to overfulfill the plans. The planners paid no attention to the actual desires and material capacities of workers in the towns and villages. In general, this was one of the means employed in Stalinist "whipping up" of the tempo of communist-led modernization.

organization, and the scope of its activities was expanded accordingly. The Second All-Union Congress of the SVB, held in June 1932, officially confirmed the three main forms of the Union's antireligious activity, which determined its evolution from 1929: 1) antireligious propaganda and agitation; 2) practical antireligious activity directly associated with socialist construction and the struggle for a new way of life; and 3) participation in local economic life and campaigns.<sup>4</sup>

The latter two forms garnered special attention at the congress. In particular, "practical antireligious activity" in the countryside entailed participation in the implementation of the law on minimum agronomic knowledge (*ahrominimum*) and the contracting (*kontraktatsiia*) of sown areas; assistance to the Soviet government in setting up collective farms and the exemplary fulfillment of state grain procurements by atheists; participation in the organization of "experimental farms"; the introduction of self-taxation; the struggle for the harvest; and the increase of sown acreage. Local atheist centers were also tasked with assisting in the distribution of state loan subscriptions, helping local economic agencies carry out the tractorization of agriculture, and collecting funds in support of actions initiated by the All-Union or All-Ukrainian Central Council of the SVB, such as the creation of the Bezbozhnyk (Atheist) tractor column, the construction of the airplane *Bezvirnyk Ukrainy* (Atheist of Ukraine) and of the submarine *Voiovnychi bezvirnyk* (Militant Atheist), assistance in implementing popular education measures, and the like. The conference advised closing churches and eradicating religiosity among residents of national minority districts as part of ongoing activity, inasmuch as this was associated with administrative measures.<sup>5</sup>

The principal method that made it easier to unite peasants and control them effectively was socialist competition, introduced, to be sure, "at the initiative of the SVB centers themselves." The crux of this method lay in the mandatory organization by atheists of competition among centers in implementing the party's directives, thereby ensuring that economic and political campaigns would be carried out in the countryside. In organizing such "socialist competition," every center, as part of an extra-party civic organization, was obliged to coordinate its activities with the local party center, Komsomol (Communist Youth League) organization, cultural committee of a trade union and a cooperative, and the administrative board of a club, village building, or reading room. The promotion of socialist competition among local SVB centers and their coordinated activity were considered the main prerequisite of the success of the atheist movement.<sup>6</sup>

For the purpose of instituting comprehensive control and circumventing a formal approach to proposed initiatives, every center was obliged to maintain a meticulous record of its activities. A written agreement in three or four copies was mandatory. Two copies remained with the drafters of the document. The third copy was forwarded to the immediate superior atheist organization (centers were obliged to send it to the county or district (*okruha*) council; agreements between district councils were forwarded to the All-Ukrainian Central Council), and the fourth copy was sent to the editorial board of a local newspaper or the semiweekly journal *Bezvirnyk* (Atheist) or, as a last resort, to the editorial board of a wall newspaper. The main requirements of the agreement on socialist competition were clarity, concreteness, and accuracy.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, no. 10 (1929): 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

That is, each center was obliged to issue a challenge to launch socialist competition, and it could address itself only to a particular atheist center.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, every local SVB center was obliged to maintain card files or journals (logbooks). They could be group ones (if a specific task were assigned to a small group of individuals, brigade, etc.) or individual ones (when a task was assigned to a single atheist). It was also necessary to maintain summary report cards on achievements and shortcomings in the participation of the entire center in the competition, and all records were to be maintained clearly and systematically.<sup>8</sup> In practice, the activities of SVB members in Ukraine looked different.

In the USSR, all religious confessions were regarded as profoundly hostile from the standpoint of the ideology of socialist construction, as well as harmful to the class consciousness of the proletariat and peasantry. To some degree, then, the pace of collectivization and the fulfillment of the first Five-Year Plan depended on the successful replacement of Christian traditions with Soviet ones. This pertained above all to the most important Christian holidays—Christmas and Easter. The Bolsheviks were painfully aware that during festive liturgies every priest spoke of God being love and of Christ’s enjoining the faithful to love their neighbors as themselves. Moreover, the language of the parables and Scripture spoken from the church pulpit reminded people of the Commandments “Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s house,” and the Christian catechism treated the nonpayment of wages as a mortal sin, in the same category as murder.

Not infrequently during their sermons, the most courageous priests openly called a spade a spade, describing the class struggle as fratricide and industrialization and collectivization as “anti-Christian construction” that would inevitably bring on the Last Judgment. For example, in the spring of 1929 the Reverend Ladoha, a priest from the village of Dmytrushky in the Uman region, blessed harvested grain as protection from famine and concealed some in a special chest. He tried to convince the peasants that “There will be a famine this year, and whoever does not have blessed grain will die of starvation.”<sup>9</sup> Such remarks were not lost either on the peasants, who were already on the brink of starvation, or on the village activists on whom the government depended.

The Soviet authorities therefore adopted a “methodical” approach to the destruction of such genetic traits of Ukrainian culture as innate religiosity and attachment to rural life (*anteizm*, man’s union with nature), which permeated the consciousness of both peasants and intellectuals, as well as the unique traditional way of life of the Ukrainian village. The creation of the requisite conditions involved the use of all possible ideological and practical methods. Proclaiming, first and foremost, that a member of a collective farm was not yet a socialist, that his participation in the cooperative association (*artel*) was just the beginning of his socialist reeducation, and that this “socialist reeducation” was a new and distinctive type of class struggle,<sup>10</sup> the official press created the appropriate propagandistic atmosphere. Emphasizing the inhumane exploitation of colonial peoples by their capitalists, who, like “vampires, sink their fangs into the throat and suck the blood of unfortunate, tormented, and starving victims,” the journal *Bezvirnyk* mercilessly

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38–39.

<sup>10</sup> *Pravda*, 27 November 1932.

“exposed” “foreign slander” about the persecution of religions in the USSR, Soviet dumping practices on the global market, and the existence of forced labor. Citing Stalin’s words about transforming labor in the construction of socialism on the basis of free socialist competition “into a matter of honor, glory, courage, and heroism,” the journal sought to convince the “workers of the world” that “in the country where workers are the masters of construction and of the state, the very word ‘forced labor’ is the height of impudence and absurdity.”<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet government sought to transform labor on collective farms into a heroic cause and thus to build a socialist order with the aid of so-called new socialist methods introduced by atheists: labor for the collective, socialist competition and shock work, collective responsibility for fulfilling plans, undertakings to overfulfill plans (*zustrichni plany*), public auxiliary teams (*buksyry*), the delivery of all harvested grain to the state, etc.<sup>12</sup> These “modern” methods, if implemented on a daily basis by atheists, were supposed to eliminate religion completely from the life of the peasantry.

First and foremost, the Soviet government focused its efforts on eliminating the Christian calendar of field work traditional to Ukraine. The Ukrainian peasant followed a distinctive philosophy of the earth; he venerated his land as a great, mysterious, and sacred possession. For the peasant, the land held much more promise and mystery than the vast heavens above. Thus, separation from one’s native land meant alienation from the very foundations of life, from the reservoir of one’s vitality, just as separation from one’s native land in the Old Testament put people at risk of becoming alienated from their God. In cultivating his land, the Ukrainian peasant often prayed devoutly to the tilled earth, and he always sowed his fields with his head uncovered. He completed the sowing by laying out a beautiful cross by the side of the road, a clear sign that it was intended to bless the land, the field, and the future harvest.<sup>13</sup> Every year the fields were blessed by a priest, services pleading for rain and deliverance from pests were held, and so on.

The industrialization of the land by the collective farm system was meant to deprive the Ukrainian peasant of his sacred relationship with the holy land, divest the land of any spiritual significance for the peasant, and turn the peasant into a proletarian indifferent to the object of his labor. In view of this, the practical aspect of the matter was bolstered by a solid legal foundation. On 30 August 1930, the AUCEC (VTsVK – All-Union Central Executive Committee) and the CPC (Council of People’s Commissars) approved a special “Statute on Voluntary Societies and Associations,” obliging the latter “to take an active part in socialist construction in the USSR” (Article 1). In that connection, the activities of societies and organizations were to be in harmony with the “state plan of the national economy and social and cultural construction” (Article 3).<sup>14</sup> In January of the following year, the Moscow leaders obtained support in Kharkiv. The resolution of the CPC of the Ukrainian SSR titled “On the Spring Agricultural Production Campaign for the Year 1931” predicted that its implementation would secure the decisive victory of total collectivization in Ukraine and the liquidation of the kulak stratum as a class in the main

---

<sup>11</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, no. 4 (1931): 2–3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 7–8: 16.

<sup>13</sup> S. Iarmus', *Dukhovnist' ukrains'koho narodu* (Winnipeg, 1983), 193–95.

<sup>14</sup> Z. Sokoliuk, “Tserkva i derzhava v SRSR, zokrema v URSR,” in *Zbirnyk prats' Iuvileinoho konhresu (Naukovyi konhres u 1000-littia khryshchennia Rusi-Ukraïny)* (Munich, 1988–89), 808–9.

districts of collectivization.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the government compelled, by force of law, all central and local Soviet and public organizations in the Ukrainian SSR to ensure that their activity consist mainly of providing comprehensive assistance to the implementation of all-out collectivization.

Following in the footsteps of the higher party leaders, Emelian Yaroslavsky declared on behalf of the Central Council of the SVB USSR that the union headed by him did “not have any special line that would differ from the party line. The Central Council proclaims and develops those directives that are issued by the party.”<sup>16</sup> As of March 1931, the membership of the Union of Militant Atheists of Ukraine stood at 1.4 million. Accordingly, the Union, one of the largest civic organizations in the countryside, was assigned the duty of direct participation in carrying out production tasks and the plans outlined by the party and government. Above all, peasant atheists were obliged to show initiative in converting their villages to collective farming, shoring up old collective farms, recruiting new groups of independent farmers to them, and mobilizing collective farmers and the poor and middle peasant masses in the countryside to fulfill and overfulfill the tasks of the spring agricultural production campaign. Thus, rural soviets, SVB centers based at collective farms, state farms, and villages, and atheist activists not only had to know the details of the plan for the sowing campaign throughout the county as well as in their own collective farm, state farm, and village, but all of them without exception were also obliged to draft concrete plans of their participation in conducting the sowing campaign, forming brigades of shock workers, and verifying that tasks were carried out.

In addition, it was anticipated that the atheist would be the “initiator” of collective undertakings to overfulfill the plan and implement collective plowing in a single furrow, as well as the spring sowing of extensive tracts of land. He was also supposed to strive actively to apply measures aimed at increasing crop yields, implement the law on minimum agricultural knowledge, and carry out the prompt 100-percent cleaning and chemical dressing of the seeds of spring crops. Along with the exemplary completion of agronomic measures, members of atheist centers were obliged to strive, together with other organizations, to ensure that these measures were completely carried out by an entire village, collective farm, or state farm.

At the same time, SVB centers were supposed to take the most active part possible in establishing special schools for the eradication of “agro-collective farm illiteracy” and providing such schools with antireligious propaganda, as well as ensuring that villages were massively enveloped by so-called agricultural propagandistic work. Village buildings and reading rooms were slated to become centers for popularizing party-established tasks for the sowing campaign and disseminating agronomic knowledge, and the wall newspaper was to be the “militant organ for mobilizing the masses.” In order to strengthen proletarian leadership in the development of the collective farm system, particularly on newly created collective farms, the government issued a resolution mandating that two thousand workers be dispatched there, including many of the “finest worker atheists.”

The preparation and execution of the sowing campaign on collective farms lasted from the end of December to early May. During that period, SVB centers had to undertake mass anti-

---

<sup>15</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, no. 2 (1931): 1.

<sup>16</sup> E. Iaroslavskii, *Ocherednye zadachi antireligioznoi propagandy (Doklad i zakliuchitel'noe slovo na II plenumе TsS SVB SSSR)* (Moscow: “Bezbozhnik,” 1930), 15.

Christmas and anti-Easter measures in addition to their agricultural work. But at the start of the first Five-Year Plan, the monthly anti-feast campaigns were a formality and had little effect. After the editorial board of the journal *Bezvirnyk*, the official mouthpiece of the Ukrainian SVB, conducted a review of county newspapers in Right-Bank, Left-Bank, and Steppe Ukraine covering the period from 20 December 1930 to 15 January 1931, its members complained in the journal that newspapers were either completely disregarding the struggle against religion or were paying insufficient attention to it. As a result of this situation, “the last Christmas holiday was marked by absenteeism and the slaughtering of cattle for drunken celebrations and marketing, which is especially criminal at a time when we are faced with the task of accelerating the development of cattle breeding.”<sup>17</sup> The editors also noted that the Melitopol-based newspaper *Radians'kyi step* (Soviet Steppe) “was also silent, even though there have been more than a few reports in this period about the slaughtering of cattle by bloodsuckers. The Selydove county newspaper [now in Donetsk oblast] *Za sutsil'nu kolektyvizatsiiu* (For All-Out Collectivization) was also silent, even though there are quite a few Mennonite sectarians in the county. Until 7 January, the newspaper of the Orikhiv REC (RVK – Raion (County) Executive Committee), *Lenins'kym Shliakhom* (Along Lenin’s Path), also had not published a single line about the anti-Christmas campaign, even though the criminal slaughtering of cattle here and there in the county is reaching horrific proportions: in the village of Preobrazhentsi, the bloodsucker Peredyrii slaughtered fifteen sheep.”<sup>18</sup> Also criticized for negligence in carrying out the anti-Christmas campaigns was the newspaper *Kolektyvist Buryshchyny* (The Collectivist of the Burysh Region), which published antireligious material “only on 10 January, along with a report stating that the head of the Mykhailivka village council not only disrupted the organization of Red cavalcades (*chervoni valky*)<sup>19</sup> of state grain procurements but also overlooked the fact that the local priest had not been taxed appropriately, and the village Komsomol member Svyryn hospitably gave a room in his house to the priest. In the utter absence of antireligious activity, the priest held festive services in the church at Christmas, and after the service he drank graciously with the Komsomol member Svyryn.”<sup>20</sup> The situation was roughly the same during the Easter holidays. Instead of engaging in the “most energetic work,” a significant proportion of young people continued to attend the festive liturgy, consumed *pasky* (Ukrainian Easter bread), *krashanky* (boiled eggs painted in one uniform color for Easter), and the like.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, no. 3 (1931): 44–45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> The Red cavalcade (Russ. *Krasnyi oboz*) was a large-scale organizational and politico-economic action of transporting harvested grain to elevators, grain-collection stations, and port warehouses. It was practiced by the Soviet authorities in 1931–33 as an ideological accompaniment to the mass transportation of confiscated grain in columns of trucks or carts decorated with red flags and political banners. The cavalcade was intended to demonstrate the victory of socialism and the collective farm system. In actual fact, the Red cavalcades were Stalinist requisition detachments that deprived farms of seeds, even for sowing. Used in the grain-procurement campaigns, the Red cavalcades often took away grain at night so that starving peasants would not block them. The Communist Party authorities introduced “socialist competition” among collective farms and counties and even among individual farmers for the best organization of Red cavalcades, publicizing such competition through the press and the Soviet apparatus. Newspapers covered these actions, publishing promotional or critical articles and photos of long “columns” organized by members of local party cells, Committees of Poor Peasants, and the Komsomol, with the participation of members of the Union of Atheists. The same organizations also formed so-called auxiliary brigades (*bukyrni bryhady*) that engaged in household searches and seizures, forcing farmers to fulfill completely the commitments “voluntarily made” when they “joined the socialist competition.” Such “competitions” in the confiscation of grain increased mortality among the starving peasants.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

In practice, the peasants were becoming increasingly convinced that a prosperous life on a collective farm was impossible; on the contrary, they believed that they would soon end up on the edge of survival, both physical and spiritual. During this period, the authorities increased their propaganda pressure by intensifying administrative measures aimed at closing churches. The methods by which these measures were implemented were not all that varied. The most common ones were bankrupting religious communities through tax levies, refusing to reregister them, or pressuring believers to leave the *p'iatydesiatka* (a religious community numbering fifty members). Below is an extract from a complaint dated 5 August 1932 that was submitted by authorized representatives of the Catholic community of Yarmolynets and Skazyntsi in Yarmolynets county, Vinnytsia province (present-day Khmelnytskyi province): “As soon as we bring in a [Catholic] priest, the county authorities refuse to register him, even though the community pays taxes on time. They usually pull the files of the [Catholic] church out of the archive, study them captiously to see whether the community is fulfilling all of the county authorities’ demands, and then promise to register the [Catholic] priest within an hour or two, the next day, and the like. And in the end we are given an order to go away because we will be arrested, both we and the [Catholic] priest.”<sup>21</sup> During the process of reregistering Orthodox communities, the authorities frequently used the device of registering them under another orientation—a patriarchal community as a synodal one, or the reverse, etc. Another practice was to levy an inordinately high tax on a religious community “from the building and income” and later fine it for late payment and inventory the property of the faithful, even though this was officially prohibited by a circular issued by the People’s Commissariat of Finance of the USSR on 20 February 1931.<sup>22</sup>

One particularly effective method of closing a church, or at least preventing services from being held, was the authorities’ deliberate violation of the agreement on the use of churches concluded between county executive committees or village councils and religious communities. A local county executive committee or village council would order a religious community to repair its church by the shortest possible deadline (a month, a week, or sometimes three days). The actual condition of the building was not taken into account when such a demand was made, and the faithful were not permitted to raise funds for the purpose.

The most widespread method used in the struggle against religion in rural areas was to exert financial pressure on priests or abuse them physically. Here is one telling example: At the beginning of 1932, the Reverend Ksenofont Vankevych from the village of Kalytyntsi, Yuryntsi county, Khmelnytskyi province, submitted a complaint to the Prosecutor’s Office of the Ukrainian SSR concerning the actions of the local authorities. In 1931 he had been taxed 117 *karbovantsi* (rubles). The priest had paid this amount and then submitted several requests, without result, to the local village council to issue him a receipt indicating that he had deposited the funds in the State Bank. After the complaint was received by the borderland Yuryntsi RVK, the village council issued a receipt. But on 2 August local Komsomol members grabbed the priest in the middle of the Sunday service and brought him to the village council, where they shouted “Place all your money on the table” and physically abused him the whole day. The matter might have ended tragically for the priest if the inspector of the county militia had not stopped by the village council that evening. He sent the Reverend Vankevych to a doctor, who

---

<sup>21</sup> Tsentral’nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv vyshcheykh orhaniv vlady i upravlinnia Ukraïny (hereafter TsDAVO Ukraïny), f. 1, op. 7, spr. 171, ark. 36–36<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 171, ark. 120.

stated that the priest had large, fresh bruises on his chest and back as well as a punctured eardrum.<sup>23</sup> For several days the priest recovered from the beating and later submitted a declaration to the county executive committee and the Prosecutor's Office, requesting a refund for the levied tax and a receipt. Instead, the village council again demanded money. The matter reached the courts, but the local Komsomol members were not punished for their hooliganism. A circuit court session, taking into consideration that "all of them are poor peasants, collective farmers, have admitted their guilt, and present no danger to society," handed down a sentence of conditional imprisonment for a term of two years each. Since they had been under arrest for some time, this was counted as time served, and they were released.<sup>24</sup>

A priest arriving to take up his pastoral assignment often had to clear his predecessor's debt, either real or dreamed up. There were widespread cases where the head of a village council openly refused to reregister a religious community, citing the presence of 90–95 percent of collectivized farmsteads in the village, and threatening in front of witnesses to levy inordinately high taxes or even murder a priest who dared to remain there.<sup>25</sup>

Toward the end of 1930, one method of "antireligious activity" aimed at closing churches became very widespread. It is described in a complaint submitted to the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs—secret police) of the Ukrainian SSR by the head of the Holy Synod of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Pimen. "Atheists are appearing in villages: together with local youth and the village council, they hold a meeting and issue a resolution on closing the church. Then they take the keys to the church from the local priest or head of the religious community. They enter there, sing the 'Internationale,' and close down the church, and they demand that the priest not serve in the temple and not serve the occasional religious rite in the parish. The atheists called this procedure a 'Red wedding.' All the churches in the Artemivka district were closed in this way. From the priest of the Mykolaiv church they took away the *antymins* [silk cloth covering the altar] (it was trampled on the spot), the myrrh and the Holy Sacraments, and two sacerdotal vestments, even though these articles are not considered church property. They are issued by the bishop and are returned to him after the closure of a church. In addition to blasphemy, the atheists suggested to the priest that he move out of the church residence immediately. In the month of February he ended up on the street with his family."<sup>26</sup> Church antiquities that constituted cultural and historical treasures, such as ancient liturgical books and decorative embellishments on icons known as *oklady* (fashioned out of silk, silver, gold, and precious gems), were transferred to the State Trading Company (*Gostorg*) to be sold abroad. An insignificant proportion of church property was passed on to archives and antireligious museums. But, pursuant to coordination with the "appropriate organs," the preponderant majority of church property was simply burned on the spot.<sup>27</sup>

Despite all these difficulties, Ukrainian villagers tried to protect their sacred objects until the last possible moment. Between 1931 and 1933, a steady flow of complaints made their way to the Department of Cults at the Secretariat of the Presidium of the AUCEC, protesting the actions of local government bodies and demanding an end to lawlessness and the return of

---

<sup>23</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 177, ark. 138.

<sup>24</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 177, ark. 140–42<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 179, ark. 267, 269.

<sup>26</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 173, ark. 64.

<sup>27</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 173, ark. 76–77.



confiscated churches. For example, the 135-strong religious community of the Church of the Holy Protection in the village of Karpivtsi, Proskuriv county (in present-day Khmelnytskyi province) wrote a letter to the AUCEC protesting the confiscation of its church (converted to a movie theater) and requesting the right, based on the law of freedom of conscience, to hold services there.<sup>28</sup> The religious community of the Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God in the village of Yurkivka tenaciously championed its church and priest's residence and demanded the return of 300 *karbovantsi* in land rent levied illegally in 1931–33. The parishioners' efforts came to an end only after the AUCEC instructed the county executive committee to inform the community that its request had been examined and left unanswered.<sup>29</sup> Hundreds of similar examples may be cited.

The disgruntled peasants, who were being forced to renounce their ancestral traditions, faith, and culture, as well as their personal dignity and self-respect as individuals and tillers of the soil, began to leave the collective farms en masse. As usual, the Communist Party leadership reacted with brutality. Stalin's speech at the All-Union Conference of Industrial Workers, held in 1931, in which the Soviet leader dropped an eloquent hint about the impossibility of slowing down the pace of collectivization, signaled the intensification of pressure on the peasants. During the sowing campaign of the "second Bolshevik spring," atheist organizations had already had occasion to combine the intensification of the collectivization campaign with antireligious propaganda (including lectures of atheistic content and marches organized by members of atheist centers to collective farms where believers were predominant). According to an atheism correspondent's report, "the SVB center at the Dzerzhinsky Cooperative in the village of Zachepylivka, in Chervonohrad county, initially had 83 members, but by the end of the sowing season the entire collective farm became atheist. After making preparations, the "Dzerzhinskyites" organized atheist brigades and linked five collective farms into a civic atheist front, establishing an SVB center in each. The report goes on to say that the priest resided on the outskirts of the village, where the members of the Lenin Cooperative lived. The dominant attitude in that quarter was that there would be no collectivization. But the members of the atheist front held a "Red wedding," and 93 percent of all farmsteads joined the collective farm. Afterward, atheists from the Chervonyi Shliakh (Red Pathway) collective farm in the same village organized a joint investigation of farming done by independent farmers and the collective farm. As a result, most of the independent farmers "became convinced at first hand" of the superiority of collective farming and joined the collective farm."<sup>30</sup>

Finally, prior to the sowing season, the five collective farms extended their front to the village of Ulianivka. The atheist brigade exposed the "bloodsuckers" on the collective farm who had owned between 30 and 40 dessiatines of land before the revolution. There was also a priest in this village who had lived for several years in a publicly owned building. He had a harmonium, and believers frequently gathered in his home. The atheist brigade evicted him from his residence, turned it into a collectivists' building, and created an SVB center in the village. According to a report published in *Bezvirnyk*, 90 percent of the village was successfully collectivized following this action.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 171, ark. 71.

<sup>29</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 177, ark. 107.

<sup>30</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 9–10 (1931): 43.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

The constant mobilizations of atheist activists and the creation of local SVB centers throughout the countryside, from which they pumped out grain in 1931, intensified the famine and fundamentally eased both the process of completing collectivization and the organizational consolidation of collective farms in 1932–33. For example, in 1932, as part of its antireligious month, the Poltava municipal council of the SVB published 10,000 slogans pegged to the Easter period and distributed 5,000 of them to village councils, collective farms, and schools throughout the province. It organized 25 brigades (consisting of 58 people) for mass antireligious activity in the countryside. The Kharkiv municipal council of the SVB sent brigades of lecturers to fifteen villages as well as to some counties of the province. For its anti-Easter month, the Dnipropetrovsk municipal council of the SVB mobilized seventeen such brigades. Individual village councils, such as the administrative board of the Shliakh Lenina (Lenin’s Pathway) collective farm of the Bahlai village council in Volochyske county, Vinnytsia province (present-day Khmelnytskyi province) or the Proletarskyi bezvirnyk (Proletarian Atheist) commune of the Tarasivka village council in the Pervomaisk region (in present-day Mykolaiv province) even disbursed funds for awarding the “best atheist shock workers who completed the speediest preparations for the sowing and overfulfilled the meat-procurement plan.”<sup>32</sup>

According to *Bezvirnyk*, in 1933, during the church holiday periods, there were no more incidents of absenteeism or idleness. To offer just one example, the Brigade of Atheists named after the Central Council of the Union of Militant Atheists of Ukraine, which was based at the Chervonyi khliborob (Red Farmer) collective farm of the Lypne village council in Dobrovelyckivka county, Odesa region (present-day Kirovohrad province), completed the sowing in five days instead of the seven forecast by the plan. Where others sowed between 2.5 and 2.7 hectares (ha), brigades of militant atheists sowed 3.5 ha. Collective farms located in various counties of Kharkiv province—Dykanka, Kobeliaky, Pyriatyn, Onufriiv, Hadiach, Lyptsi, and others—also performed shock labor in the fields, regardless of the inclement weather in some counties. In Nova Vodolaha county, a *subotnyk* (Saturday of volunteer work) was also organized during Easter week, when local officials headed out to a shock-work potato planting. In the village of Kozhartsy, Chyhyryn county, Kyiv province, collective farmers performed shock-work sowing during the Easter holiday.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the socialist reeducation of peasants on collective farms consisted of forcing them to work practically without pay on weekends and religious holidays. As a rule, the sowing campaign would turn smoothly into the harvesting and grain-procurement campaigns, and atheists were obliged to be “shock workers” in those spheres of work as well.

During the anti-Christmas campaign of 1932, atheists based at many collective farms carried on “antireligious activity” not only via the arts, such as the staging of antireligious plays and dramatizations, or by organizing mass competitions to recruit new members to the Union of Militant Atheists from among local peasants. They also celebrated Christmas with a Red cavalcade of state grain procurements and the collection of sowing material with the assistance of auxiliary brigades.

The resolutions of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) [CC AUCP(B)] “On the Grain-Procurement Plan and the Development of the Grain Trade by

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., nos. 5–6 (1932): 41.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., nos. 9–10 (1933): 25–26.

Collective Farms” and “On the Meat-Procurement Plan and the Meat Trade by Collective Farms, Collective Farmers, and Laboring Independent Peasants,” together with the law “On the Single Agricultural Tax of 1932,” opened up a wide range of opportunities for SVB centers to engage in unregulated activities. In early June 1932, the Central Council of the SVB of Ukraine circulated a letter to all its organizations and centers based on collective farms, MTSs (Machine-Tractor Stations), and state farms, ordering them to work according to party and government resolutions and mobilize the masses to fulfill the assigned tasks. Atheists were obliged “to rally the collective-farm masses even more closely around the Leninist Communist Party and organize the collective-farm trade in grain and meat, as well as the grain procurements.”<sup>34</sup>

Besides exploiting the peasants, these resolutions became an effective weapon in the struggle against priests who refused to abandon their parishes or continued, along with their parishioners, to fight for their churches. Even though village priests did not engage in agriculture, did not keep any domestic animals, and often did not own either a house or a plot of land, they were ordered to make payments in kind, such as meat, grain, fowl, or eggs, amounting to an annual tax. As a rule, local organizations of the Worker’s and Peasants’ Inspectorate responded to complaints by declaring that “confiscatees” should also pay such a tax. Whenever someone sent an official query to Grigorii Katunin, Inspector of Cults at the Secretariat of the Presidium of the AUCEC (as in the case of a letter from the inspector of cults at the Kyiv OEC [Oblast (Provincial) Executive Committee]), he would inform the letter-writer that the instructions and resolutions of provincial executive committees should be followed with regard to the question.<sup>35</sup> In essence, local authorities were granted broad scope for abuses. The fact that a priest and his family did not have a farmstead of their own was no obstacle to levying nonrefundable special-purpose contributions (advances) in keeping with the instruction of 7 January 1933 issued by Tsentrosoiuz (Central Union of Consumer Cooperatives of the USSR) “On the Collection of Contributions from Individuals Who Do Not Have the Right to Be Shareholders of a Consumer Cooperative.” For example, on 31 December 1932 the Kuchakiv village council of the Boryspil county executive committee sent the priest I. Sukhodolsky a demand for payment within 24 hours of such advances totaling 150 *karbovantsi* to the Kuchakiv Consumer Cooperative Society. He paid half the requested amount at once and the rest on Christmas Eve, 6 January 1933. Between these dates, the Reverend Sukhodolsky twice asked the Boryspil county executive committee for explanations and a refund. On 17 March 1933, he received a letter ordering payment of an additional 150 *karbovantsi*.<sup>36</sup> The terrorized priest then sent a telegram to the AUCEC requesting an explanation of the reason for which the tax had been levied, but this time he refrained from asking for a refund. Unable to endure this kind of pressure, Ukrainian clerics left the priesthood en masse.

In 1932 the Union of Militant Atheists also treated the issue of supplying the state with grain with all the earnestness at its command. Since Ukraine had completed only 38 percent of the annual grain-procurement plan by 21 October 1932, the IV Plenum of the Central Council of the Union of Militant Atheists of Ukraine issued a categorical directive on the struggle for grain to all organizations: “Atheist organizations are to pay close attention to the issue of conducting current economic and political campaigns: harvesting, procuring grain, realizing loan

---

<sup>34</sup> “Postanovy partii ta uriadu v tsentr bezvirnyts’koï roboty,” *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 11–12 (1932): 5–6.

<sup>35</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 8, spr. 128, fols. 101–2.

<sup>36</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 8, spr. 129, ark. 116–18.

subscriptions [involuntary loans to the state], and autumn sowing.”<sup>37</sup> Atheist organizations were assigned the task of following up on the 18 November 1932 resolutions of the CC and the CCC (Central Control Commission) of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine (CP[B]U) concerning the purge of a number of party organizations accused of sabotaging the fulfillment of the grain-procurement plan; the resolution of 20 November passed by the CPC of the Ukrainian SSR “On Measures to Strengthen Grain Procurements”; and the resolution passed jointly on 6 December by the CPC of the Ukrainian SSR and the CC CP(B)U “On the Blacklisting of Villages That Are Maliciously Sabotaging Grain Procurements.”<sup>38</sup>

The Central Council of the SVB of Ukraine bolstered its directives by pointing to its own conscientious implementation of the party’s directives. At the agricultural and manufacturing commune Proletarskyi bezvirnyk under the council’s sponsorship in Pervomaisk county, Odesa province (present-day Mykolaiv province), its members fulfilled the 1932 grain-procurement plan ahead of schedule by 106 percent. Afterwards, the commune assisted the neighboring villages of Tarasivka, Bandurka, and Oleksandrivka, working there mostly on religious holidays.<sup>39</sup> Following in the footsteps of their leadership, atheists took an active part in the campaign. For example, on 9 October 1932 the Polovianka village council of Pryluky county in Chernihiv province, which had completed only 16 percent of the grain-procurement plan, held a “Red cavalcade” for grain procurement and delivered 410 poods of grain to the grain-collecting station.<sup>40</sup>

In order to ensure that the future harvesting campaign would be completed in the shortest time possible, a resolution of the Plenum of the CC and the CCC of the AUCP(B) adopted in January 1933 called for the creation of special political departments at MTSs and state farms, as well as of new SVB centers within these departments, and for the strengthening of existing ones. These institutions became convenient and absolutely compliant tools for carrying out the will of the party.

By the start of the 1933 harvest all SVB centers, as required, had “carried through” the joint resolution passed by the CPC USSR and CC AUCP(B) on 24 May 1933 “On the Raising of Fallow Lands and the Organization of Grain Collection,” as well as the resolutions adopted at the June plenum of the CC CP(B)U and the speeches made there by Stanislav Kosior and Pavel Postyshev, making every effort to promote them among collective-farm brigades. In addition, atheists were obliged to subordinate mass agitation activity to the tasks of the harvesting campaign and the grain procurements, as well as to the struggle against the “pilfering of collective-farm grain.” During lunch breaks, atheists were required to hold antireligious discussions and readings of antireligious literature for collective farmers. In those villages that had “shock brigades,” they sought to attach their own propagandists in order to turn all brigades into truly “shock atheistic” ones.

The announcement by the general secretary of the CC AUCP(B) of a special decision on the introduction of an “atheistic five-year plan” in September 1932 and the liquidation by 1937 of all religious confessions and of various external manifestations of religiosity in the USSR

---

<sup>37</sup> “Bezvirnyky v borot’bi za khlib,” *Bezvirnyk*, no. 24 (1932): 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 21–22: 40.

further activated the atheist movement.<sup>41</sup> During the 1933 harvesting campaign and grain procurements, several new methods were introduced. First, atheists were officially required to include the following antireligious points in agreements on socialist competition: full work attendance during religious holidays, explanatory and educational antireligious activity, the boycott of churches and sects, organized departures from religious communities, the rejection of all religious rites, and daily participation in verifying the effectiveness with which these agreements were being fulfilled.<sup>42</sup>

Second, they began carry out mass closures of churches under the pretext that they were needed for storing grain. The use of the “Red wedding” had sparked a wave of complaints about violations of Soviet legislation by local administrations, and the Department of Cults at the AUCEC was constantly obliged to issue instructions concerning the return of churches to citizens. The fact that churches were not designed for storing grain, which simply rotted there, was ignored. What was important was that this allowed atheist activists to hold general meetings of cooperative associations or collective-farm brigades right in the fields and adopt “collective decisions” on undertaking to overfulfill grain procurements and deliver grain to churches on a “temporary” basis. This practice, introduced in 1931, became widespread in August 1933. Hundreds of minutes of meetings held by rural collectives not only date to the last days of August 1933 but are also identical in content (except for the different names of collectives and surnames of collective farmers).<sup>43</sup> As a rule, general meetings of cooperative associations or brigades discussed and approved two items: the challenge to enter into a socialist competition and the opening of a collectivists’ building in a church; additionally, they would approve the use of churches as grain-collecting stations.<sup>44</sup> It was also mandatory to draw up minutes containing the requests of “broad circles of collective farmers, hired laborers, poor peasants, and middle peasants” and collect signed petitions for the closure of a church. A meeting of the presidium of the local village council would then be convened to ratify the “resolutions of collective farms and petition registers.” Next, an extraordinary session of the presidium of the county executive committee would be held, after which the provincial executive committee would adopt the relevant decision and send a file with all the minutes of meetings to the AUCEC.<sup>45</sup>

During the grain procurements, militant atheists were also obliged to “expose wrecking on the part of kulaks and religious people.” Together with Communist Party and Komsomol organizations, atheist centers established checkpoints for the protection of fields, mown fields, haystacks, grain storehouses, and control posts that systematically inspected threshing and controlled the delivery of grain from threshing machines to grain storehouses. Not a single grain was supposed to fall into the hands of starving peasants who had no desire to work on collective farms, especially where clerics, members of their families, or the parish clergy were concerned. All cases involving the detention of the aforementioned category of individuals were immediately reported in the press. For example, at the Chervonyi partyzan (Red Partisan) collective farm of the village council of Pisky, Kozelshchany county, Kharkiv province, the atheist and circuit patrolman Ya. Vdovychenko detained a woman named Persakova, the wife of

---

<sup>41</sup> *Martyrolohiia ukrains'kykh tserkov u chotyr'okh tomakh: dokumenty, materiialy, khrystyians'kyi samvydav Ukraïny*, comp. and ed. Osyp Zinkevych and Taras R. Lonchyna, 4 vols. (Toronto; Baltimore, 1987), 1: 306–7.

<sup>42</sup> O. Turhan, “Robota bezvirnykiv pid chas zbyral'noi,” *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 11–12 (1933): 13.

<sup>43</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 171, ark. 206–7; spr. 173, ark. 54, 62.

<sup>44</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 9, spr. 28, ark. 7.

<sup>45</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 9, spr. 28, ark. 1–4.

a dekulakized former church elder. As the journal *Bezvirnyk* reported, “She was picking ears of collective-farm rye not even for speculation but purely for the purpose of wrecking, as the rye was still completely unripe.”<sup>46</sup> In the Myrhorodyschany village council, also in Kharkiv province, “churchgoers who were sending their children out to pick ears of grain were exposed, and the former deacon P. P. Bilosh was also caught red-handed in this malicious wrecking, and in the village of Hotva the kulak Sheludkova, the deacon’s wife, was caught picking ears of grain.”<sup>47</sup>

“Exposing wrecking before the masses” also involved the confiscation of foodstuffs from priests and members of religious communities. Here are a few typical examples: On 2 November 1932 the Okhtyrka REC, responding to an inquiry from the Administrative Department of the AUCEC, reported that “no one evicted the cult server M. I. Koreniiov in the village of Zhuravne from his apartment; no one confiscated grain and potatoes from him. Citizen Koreniiov himself left the village and moved to the small town of Hrun because earnings are better there.”<sup>48</sup> In early February 1933, the Ovruch village council conducted a search (naturally, without any orders or identifying witnesses) in St. Basil’s Monastery, where, “according to current information, kulak grain was being stored.” According to the inspection document, the following items were uncovered: 32 kg of rye, 47 kg of wheat, and 140 kg of melted wax. Of course, everything was confiscated. According to instruction no. 1404-3 issued by the county executive committee’s Procurement Department, the wax was transferred to the Ovruch county consumers’ union.<sup>49</sup>

In the village of Kanivtsi, Kopaihorod county, Vinnytsia province, a church elder hid some grain in the church. In the Oborona krainy (Defense of the Country) collective farm in Verkhnia Teplianka county of Donetsk province, a stockman named Avershyn, who was a Baptist, “stole” collective-farm grain worth 1,500 *karbovantsi* and bought himself a horse with that money. Forty poods of grain were also found hidden in his house. Eight domestic mills and oil presses were “uncovered” in the homes of his coreligionists. A Baptist named Ivan Kovaliov from the Nyzhnia Herasymivka village council, together with his fellow churchgoers, even organized a “nocturnal cavalcade of handcarts” to the Trudove kozatstvo (Toiling Cossackdom) collective farm. All of them were prosecuted for “stealing” grain and punished.<sup>50</sup>

According to tradition, the Communist Party rewarded its loyal helpers. It did not overlook them even as the 1933 campaign was drawing to an end. Here is a brief account of how the collective-farm dignitaries in the village of Hrushky, Odesa province, celebrated an atheist holiday. “On 8 October the collective farms in the village of Hrushky celebrated the day for distributing the results of their labors. The celebrations took place in the large yard of the Fourteenth of October collective farm, a homestead that had once belonged to a priest. Comrade Bilous, the head of the political department of the Hrushky MTS, was at the podium. A delegation of the oldest gray-haired collective farmers, headed by the best shock worker and atheist, Comrade Rudenko, offers the political department a loaf of white bread weighing 16 kg—a present for Bolshevik-style leadership. Following the meeting and reports, four MTS trucks solemnly drove the earned grain to the best shock worker and atheist, Todon Rudenko,

---

<sup>46</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, no. 14 (1933): 28.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 177, ark. 111.

<sup>49</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 8, spr. 128, ark. 130–31.

<sup>50</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 1–2 (1933): 50.

one of the founders of the Bezvirnyk [Atheist] collective farm. On top of the trucks is a poster: he and his family accumulated 672 workdays. He receives 403 poods and 25 pounds of grain. Besides him, 30 more shock workers/atheists, members of the SVB, solemnly received hundreds of poods.”<sup>51</sup>

However, the goal of industrialization required more than simply the extraction of grain. Despite the Bolsheviks’ ardent desire to eradicate commodity-money relations entirely, the socialist modernization of the economy required financing. Since there was no possibility of obtaining credits in the West (the Soviet Union had refused to honor loans issued by previous governments and had nationalized the property of foreign capitalists), the Bolsheviks were obliged to search for domestic reserves. Those reserves turned out to be cash loans to the state, and atheist centers in villages became convenient and reliable instruments for their multiplication. In view of the fact that loans for the needs of the Five-Year Plans and defense coincided with the most difficult years of the Holodomor, 1932–33, we offer as detailed an account as possible of this process.

As early as 1930, during the second plenum of the Central Council of the SVB USSR, Emelian Yaroslavsky reported the following: “SVB centers in local areas have often conducted fundraising for tractor columns. Here and there, the collection quota for a tractor column was overfulfilled by ten times.”<sup>52</sup> The collection of funds for the fulfillment and overfulfillment of the state loan plan was a heavy burden for the hungry Ukrainian peasants. Meanwhile, members of religious communities not only had to subscribe to them but also to make other obligatory payments. For example, the Liatychiv (present-day Letychiv) county executive committee (in present-day Khmelnytskyi oblast) threatened a local religious community with the closure of its church, thereby forcing it to purchase, in the space of a few days, two bonds valued at 500 and 700 *karbovantsi*, respectively.<sup>53</sup> The village council of Stara Vodolaha, threatening confiscation of the property of the priest and leading church members, forced them to buy a bond on behalf of the church in the amount of 300 *karbovantsi*.<sup>54</sup> On 21 August 1931, the Krasnopillia REC compelled the members of a local religious community to purchase bonds worth 400 *karbovantsi*.<sup>55</sup> The archival collection of the AUCEC contains thousands of such examples.

At the same time as the Soviet state intensified pressure on those who were unwilling to build socialism in the collective, it also was exploiting the peasants who had joined collective farms. In late May 1932, even before the launch of the “Fourth Culminating Loan” was officially announced, “a wave of demands increased among the laboring masses” for the issuance of the loan, and organizations of atheists and individual activists joined the subscription campaign. In July 1932, the Central Council of the SVB USSR issued an appeal to republican unions to promote loans worth 14 million *karbovantsi*. Republican organizations thus had to support the Moscow center’s initiative “with enthusiasm.” In the July issue of *Bezvirnyk*, the Central Council of the Union of Militant Atheists of the Ukrainian SSR announced that Ukrainian atheists had undertaken to sell “Fourth Culminating” bonds worth 2.54 million *karbovantsi* to independent

---

<sup>51</sup> “O. T. pershi v raioni,” *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 17–18 (1933): 39.

<sup>52</sup> E. Iaroslavskii, *Ocherednye zadachi antireligioznoi propagandy (Doklad i zakliuchitel'noe slovo na II plenum TsS SVB SSSR* (Moscow: Bezbozhnik, 1930), 31.

<sup>53</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 172, ark. 123.

<sup>54</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 172, ark. 160.

<sup>55</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 172, ark. 122.

farmers, seasonal workers, members of the unorganized urban population, and collective farmers.<sup>56</sup>

Following in the footsteps of the Central Council, local SVB organizations in Ukraine had to show “enthusiastic” support for the “demands of the laboring masses” of the USSR for the new loan issue. The Mykolaiv organization pledged to raise half a million *karbovantsi* with the support of the militant atheists in the Mykolaiv area. Atheist “assault” tractor brigade no. 1 of the fifth sector of the state farm Komunist Lozivshchyny (Communist of the Lozova Region) promised to organize a ten-day drive to equip a neighboring collective farm with harvesting equipment and to deposit the monies raised in the “Fourth Culminating” fund. The Vinnytsia provincial council pledged that loan subscriptions to the tune of 600,000 *karbovantsi* would be sold throughout the region through the efforts of local atheists.<sup>57</sup>

However, such pledges often failed to produce real results. As early as mid-August, the Central Council of the SVB was forced to admit that the atheists’ fulfillment of their assigned tasks was unsatisfactory. Information submitted to the council on amounts raised did not indicate in which social sectors the loan subscriptions had been sold, nor were they confirmed by savings-bank agencies. Virtually no provincial organizational bureau had coordinated the campaign with agencies of the People’s Commissariat of Finance, which were supposed to assign certain sectors to the atheists. Some members of the Odesa and Kyiv atheist organizations even commented that “the atheists are in over their heads. Their job is to struggle against religion; as for selling loan subscriptions, this is the business of financial agencies alone, and organizations of atheists cannot be turned into financial bodies.”<sup>58</sup>

This “opportunistic head-scratching,” as I. Matsiievych, managing secretary of the Central Council of the Ukrainian SVB, called it in his reporting article, temporarily enabled religious communities to refuse to take part in the delivery of funds that were beyond their capacity. In its issue of July 1932, *Bezvirnyk* reported that “the cowardly sectarians in the Barkove hamlet of the Preobrazhenka village council in Tomakivka county, Dnipropetrovsk province, were jeopardizing the fulfillment of the loan target. As of 30 July, out of the projected 4,225 *karbovantsi*, only 1,100 had been subscribed to. They declared: ‘We have lived without a loan and will continue to live without one.’”<sup>59</sup> The journal continued: “In the Novo-Karhopil hamlet of the Harbuzivka village council in the Tomakivka region, because of the agitation of local Evangelicals, not only independent farmers but also collective farmers were lagging behind in their loan subscriptions.” The same state of affairs existed in the hamlet of Kaltoshchanske.<sup>60</sup> The Orthodox community in the village of Zhyhailivka in Trostianets county, Kharkiv province, which was finally registered after a lengthy interval, had also initially refused to purchase bonds. As of 1 September 1932, Ukrainian atheists had carried out only 9 percent of their assignment (230,000 *karbovantsi* out of the projected figure of 2.54 million).<sup>61</sup>

On 5 October, the CCA (TsKS - Central Commission for Assistance) to State Loans and Savings Operations at the Presidium of the AUCEC, commenting on a speech delivered by a

---

<sup>56</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 13–14 (1932): 41.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> I. Matsiievych, “Borot’ba i peremoha bezvirnykiv Ukraïny,” *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 7–8 (1933): 8.

<sup>59</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 17–18 (1932): 39.

<sup>60</sup> This hamlet was founded by families of exiled kulaks.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*



representative of the Central Headquarters of the SVB, noted that atheists had failed in their undertakings to sell loan subscriptions. The greatest “gaps” were seen in Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv provinces.<sup>62</sup>

The Central Council of the SVB and the Central Headquarters adopted the following decisive measures: Through special consultations, they obtained the participation of all atheists, all the way down to centers and groups. Through savings banks, they designated concrete areas of work for them and dismissed “opportunists,” replacing them with “comrades capable of working.” Through the efforts of provincial centers, they organized “assistance” to counties, collective farms, MTSs, and state farms, sending auxiliary brigades to counties that were “lagging behind.” There is no need to explain how things turned out for the already starving peasants.

Naturally, the introduction of these measures increased activity to a “proper” pace. By the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution, the Poltava municipal council of the SVB had reported on the fulfillment of its task by 175 percent (instead of 41,000 *karbovantsi*, it sold loan subscriptions amounting to 76,842 *karbovantsi*); it had undertaken to overfulfill the plan by 50,000 *karbovantsi* and organized an additional 60 atheist brigades. Pyriatyn county in Poltava province fulfilled 533 percent of its task (160,000 *karbovantsi* instead of the projected 30,000). As a result of shock work and the creation of 150 brigades, the atheists of Bilopillia county in Kharkiv province raised 244,000 *karbovantsi* instead of the projected 35,000. The indicators for the Mykolaiv (then part of Odesa province) municipal council of the SVB were also high: instead of the projected 75,000 *karbovantsi*, it raised 105,000. It also challenged the cities of Kherson, Odesa, and Zinovievsk (present-day Kirovohrad) to a socialist competition. In the city of Mykolaiv and its suburban area, eighteen support stations were established to render assistance to lagging centers, state farms, MTSs, and collective farms.<sup>63</sup> The Zachepylivka SVB center in Chervonohrad county [present-day Kharkiv province], which had sold bonds for the “Fourth Culminating Loan” to the tune of 51,000 *karbovantsi* (200 percent of the task) by 1 October 1932, was placed on a redlist.

The Lekert collective farm in the village of Fedirky in Volochysk county, Vinnytsia province [present-day Khmelnytskyi province] not only completed its assignment by 120 percent but also undertook to overfulfill it by 50 *karbovantsi*. During this campaign, atheist brigades overfulfilled their task by 650 *karbovantsi*, and each atheist subscribed to the loan on the basis of 25 completed workdays. The collective farm achieved these “successes” thanks to a socialist competition in which atheist brigades participated most actively. After completing the placement of loan subscriptions, the SVB center challenged the centers in the villages of Kurnyky, Zavoliiky, Konivka, and Tarnorudy to follow its example.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to exerting pressure on the peasantry, the compulsory purchase of loan subscriptions became one of the most effective means of bankrupting priests and closing churches. Below I list a few examples among the many recorded in archival materials.

In 1932 Grigorii P. Katunin, the official in charge of religious affairs at the Secretariat of the AUCEC, received a memorandum from Oleksandr Mykolaiovych Zoprafsky, an ailing sixty-

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., nos. 7–8 (1933): 9.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., nos. 21–22 (1932): 40.

year-old prisoner incarcerated in a forced-labor building (BUPR) of the Poltava Prison Administration (PTU), who had been the parish priest in the village of Martynivka, Okhtyrka county [present-day Sumy province], for thirty-five and a half years. In 1931 the Martynivka village council ordered him to pay a one-time tax in the amount of 236 *karbovantsi* and 45 kopecks and to purchase bonds worth 280 *karbovantsi*. He was given twenty-four hours to comply. The priest was unable to pay or borrow the indicated sum on such short notice, as the combined sum of 516 *karbovantsi* and 45 kopecks comprised his entire yearly income, on which the Financial Inspection Service usually levied an annual tax of between 50 and 60 *karbovantsi*. For “untimely payment of taxes and anti-Soviet agitation,” the Reverend Zoprafsky was sentenced by the Okhtyrka People’s Court to two years’ imprisonment, stripped of his rights for five years, and banned from residing on the territories of the former Kharkiv, Sumy, and Poltava districts for a period of three years.<sup>65</sup>

Here is another example. On 1 July 1932, Archbishop Serhii of Kyiv forwarded a complaint to the Department of Cults of the Kyiv District Executive Committee from the priest serving at the Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God in the village of Domontiv, in the former county of Zolotonosha in Kyiv province [present-day Cherkasy province]. In his complaint the priest was protesting the actions of the local authorities, who had proposed that the religious community purchase a loan subscription in the amount of 700 *karbovantsi*. The community refused, citing the 19 February 1931 directive of the People’s Commissariat of Finance that forbade the purchase of securities by religious communities. Nevertheless, the local authorities forced the priest and his parishioners to pay the monies, threatening them with deportation, forced labor, and confiscation of property.<sup>66</sup>

Based on the results of the campaign, during a meeting on 10 December the Presidium of the Central Council of the SVB approved the following: “To place on a ‘redlist’ and award a bonus to the Kharkiv SVB organization, which instead of 504,000 *karbovantsi* raised 1,287,700 *karbovantsi*, and the Dnipropetrovsk organization, which instead of 275,000 *karbovantsi* completed the task in the amount of 463,300 *karbovantsi*. For shock work with regard to the loan, cash bonuses of 200 *karbovantsi* each are to be awarded to the responsible secretary of the Kharkiv organizational bureau, Comrade Lutsyshyn, and the Dnipropetrovsk secretary, Comrade Borodin, as well as buttons recognizing them as the best shock workers. Bonuses are to be awarded to the atheist shock workers Comrades Mymokhid, Domnich, and Biskin, who produced exemplary indicators in fulfilling assigned tasks in Kharkiv province. The provincial organizational bureaus of Kharkiv and Dnipropetrovsk provinces are to be awarded bonuses of 500 *karbovantsi* each.”<sup>67</sup>

“For overfulfilling assigned targets, cash bonuses are to be awarded as follows: 250 *karbovantsi* to the Poltava council of the SVB (which, instead of 41,743 *karbovantsi*, raised 86,000 *karbovantsi*), and 500 *karbovantsi* to the Bilopillia [present-day Sumy province] council of the SVB (244,000 *karbovantsi* instead of 35,000 *karbovantsi*). Comrade Hurych, secretary of the Mykolaiv municipal council of the SVB, is to be awarded 150 *karbovantsi* for overfulfilling the task of securing loans (105,000 *karbovantsi* were raised instead of 50,000 *karbovantsi*; in addition, a subscription drive in the amount of 700 *karbovantsi* was carried out among the

---

<sup>65</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 177, ark. 91–92.

<sup>66</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 8, spr. 128, ark. 186.

<sup>67</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 1–2 (1933): 19.

workers of the Martí factory). Also, 350 *karbovantsi* are to be placed at the disposal of the Mykolaiv municipal council for awarding bonuses to the best atheist shock workers.”<sup>68</sup>

On 20 December 1932, the Central Council of the Union of Militant Atheists of Ukraine was in a position to send the following report to the CC CP(B)U and the Central Council of the SVB USSR: “The Union of Militant Atheists of Ukraine, having launched mass shock work, has fulfilled its assigned task of selling subscriptions to the ‘Fourth Culminating Loan’ by 100 percent. Loan subscriptions have been distributed among independent farmers, collective farmers, and the unorganized population in the amount of 2,540,295 *karbovantsi* and confirmed by agencies of the Savings Bank; among workers of enterprises and mines, the bond target has been oversubscribed by 2 million *karbovantsi*.”<sup>69</sup> It turned out suddenly during this meeting that Ukraine, exhausted by starvation, could supply more, and the Central Headquarters announced an all-Ukrainian undertaking to overfulfill the plan by 4 million *karbovantsi*.<sup>70</sup>

The next merciless looting of the Ukrainian countryside paved the way to the overfulfillment of the assigned target by 125 percent by 10 January 1933. But the tally showed that in the independent farming sector “only” 85.5 percent of bonds had been sold, and 85.7 percent in the seasonal labor sector. The leadership of the atheist movement immediately focused all attention on these “lagging sectors.” More than a thousand atheist brigades and hundreds of auxiliary groups were created throughout the villages of Ukraine. By 16 January, the CCA at the AUCEC was already declaring that the republican Union of Militant Atheists had achieved highly positive results in the sale of loan subscriptions. From 1 February and 1 March 1933 the CCA announced “creditor day,” and the Central Council of the SVB USSR proclaimed an all-Union relay competition. The shock implementation of this measure was accompanied by a propaganda campaign in which workers and collective farmers “were apprised of the harm to each of them of spending their savings on religious rites, holidays, and the church instead of lending them to their own proletarian state in order to strengthen the economic and political might of the laboring masses.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, during the “creditor day” period, bonds in the amount of 15,000 *karbovantsi* (in cash) were sold in Pervomaisk county in Odesa province (present-day Mykolaiv province). In the village of Vorontsivka, Novo-Dniprove county, the Eighth of March Brigade of female atheists sold bonds in their village valued at 9,000 *karbovantsi*, etc.<sup>72</sup>

At a summarizing session of the Executive Bureau of the Central Council of the SVB of Ukraine held on 22 May 1933, activists of the Ukrainian atheist organization of the SVB were awarded the “button of the state credit shock worker,” certificates, watches, and fairly substantial cash bonuses according to a resolution passed by the CCA attached to state credit and savings offices at the Presidium of the CCA USSR. Zhurov, the representative of the Central Council of the SVB USSR, passed the relay flag to the Central Council of the SVB of Ukraine for overfulfilling the bond subscription to the “Fourth Culminating Loan.”<sup>73</sup>

Along with the “Fourth Culminating Loan,” atheist centers resolved the question of organizational and financial reinforcement of the SVB’s membership rolls and verification of

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., nos. 7–8 (1933): 10.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., nos. 11–12: 30.

work done by collective-farm centers. During the “creditor day” period, a considerable proportion of centers retired their members’ debt arrears for the second half of 1932 by 100 percent.

Atheist activists successfully exploited the experience gained from their “antireligious” activity and from carrying out the sowing, harvesting, and state grain-procurement campaigns of 1932 during the drive to raise loan subscriptions for the Second Five-Year Plan, which were also sold mostly in the collective-farm sector and to seasonal laborers.<sup>74</sup> Plans were drafted to enlist the “foremost organizers of mass cultural events” (*masovyky*) in the independent farming sector during the harvesting campaign so as to produce better results.

At an expanded session of the Executive Bureau of the Central Council of the SVB of Ukraine held on 23 May 1933, which was also attended by managing secretaries of SVB provincial councils, the municipal councils of Poltava and Sumy, representatives from the Lenin and Dzerzhinsky county councils of the Kharkiv SVB, representatives of large factories in Kharkiv, and the sponsored N Regiment, concrete instructions were issued with regard to the sale of loan subscriptions for the Second Five-Year Plan. The Central Council of the SVB USSR assigned the Ukrainian organization the task of raising 4.5 million *karbovantsi*, and the latter promptly undertook to overfulfill the plan by raising 5 million *karbovantsi*.

This sum was divided among the various provinces as follows:

Province	Independent farmers	Collective farmers	Seasonal workers	Unorganized population	Total
Kharkiv	405,000	578,000	348,000	260,000	1,991,000
Odesa	405,000	467,000	60,000	208,000	1,140,000
Kyiv	135,000	156,000	29,000	130,000	450,000
Dnipropetrovsk	85,000	157,000	116,000	167,000	525,000
Vinnitsia	100,000	300,000	100,000	100,000	600,000
Donetsk	35,000	80,000	235,000	52,000	402,000
Chernihiv	76,000	79,000	-----	77,000	232,000

The table below reflects the raising of loan subscriptions for the Second Five-Year Plan as of June 1933, when the Holodomor reached its apogee:

Province	Target (in <i>karbovantsi</i> )	Sold as of 30 June	% Completed
Kharkiv	1,591,000	623,691	39.2
Odesa	1,110,000	954,890	83.2
Kyiv	450,000	205,390	45.6
Dnipropetrovsk	525,000	512,961	97.7
Vinnitsia	600,000	83,227	13.8

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., no. 13 (1933): 20.

Donetsk	402,000	42,221	10.6
Chernihiv	232,000	45,835	19.7

In its July chronicle, the journal *Bezvirnyk* expressed indignation at the fact that Chernihiv, Vinnytsia, and Donetsk provinces, which were exhausted by starvation, “were lagging behind disgracefully” in all sectors. As of 30 June, nothing had been sold among the “unorganized urban population” of Chernihiv and Donetsk provinces. In order to eliminate these “gaps,” auxiliary brigades from “leading” spheres were immediately dispatched to those provinces, and during the last ten days of June the situation was rectified:

Province	Target: Independent Farmers	Sold	Target: Unorganized Population	Sold
Kharkiv	405,000	260,000	157,757	157,400
Odesa	405,000	208,000	17,870	47,225
Kyiv	135,000	130,000	37,705	17,990
Dnipropetrovsk	86,000	167,000	76,250	91,685

In general, as was subsequently noted in an official report, an additional 645 lectures and discussions were held, 107 new SVB centers were organized, the ranks of atheists swelled to 4,885 members, and membership and international dues were collected from 494 individuals. But out of the entire sum of 2,468,880 *karbovantsi* raised throughout famine-ravaged Ukraine by 30 June 1933, only 156,950 *karbovantsi* were raised in cash, while the rest were paid by subscription.<sup>75</sup>

From the standpoint of the party leadership, this was a shortcoming in the work being done by atheists. The Central Council of the SVB of Ukraine promptly announced a month of all-out effort (*shturm*) from 1 to 31 July to drum up loan subscriptions, and by 4 July, 4,425,357 *karbovantsi* (98.2 percent of the target) had been raised. Once again, the builders of socialism were not satisfied with the result during the month of “all-out effort,” which had not produced the necessary outcomes, that is, tasks were neither completed nor overfulfilled. The *Bezvirnyk* chronicle reported with dissatisfaction: “1,956,477 *karbovantsi*—this is what the atheists of Ukraine can boast about on the loan front. This indicates that the SVB organizations did not treat the month with all gravity, did not consider the political importance of the timely completion of selling loan subscriptions. Mass activity was lacking. From the beginning of the campaign until 30 July, 790 lectures and conversations took place. Only 145 of this number coincide with the month of all-out effort. Yet even those results were achieved thanks to the leading provinces: Odesa—145 percent; Dnipropetrovsk—101 percent; Kharkiv—84.4 percent; and Vinnytsia—78.6 percent. But Donetsk and Chernihiv provinces are not extricating themselves from their failures. Chernihiv province has 20.1 percent target completion, and Donetsk 14.1 percent. Kyiv province is also lagging behind, having completed only 63 percent of the plan.”<sup>76</sup> The Soviet

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., no. 14: 27.

authorities once again set to work on the lagging provinces. “For the disgraceful lag” they were issued a severe reprimand and placed on a “blacklist,” to which several counties in Kharkiv province were added: Krasnohrad, Kobeliaky, Velykyi Burluk, Trostianets, Hlobyne, Pechenihiy, Chuhuiv, Sakhnovshchyna, Drabiv, Chornukhyne, Lubny, Lozivske, Opishnia, Myropillia, and Zinkiv. It was suggested to the county councils in these districts to implement the most decisive measures and eradicate the shortcomings, no matter what.<sup>77</sup> It is difficult even to contemplate the fate that awaited the doomed residents.

In connection with the Ukrainian atheists’ fulfillment of the undertaking to overfulfill the target of loan subscriptions for the Second Five-Year Plan, on 20 August the Central Council of the SVB of Ukraine sent a report to the CC CP(B)U and the Central Council of the SVB USSR: “The Central Council of the SVB of Ukraine fulfilled the undertaking to overfulfill the target of loan subscriptions on 20 August. A total of 5,095,224 *karbovantsi* was raised. Along with selling loan subscriptions, we reinforced county councils and SVB centers, and we created new ones in those counties where they did not exist. A total of 1,082 lectures were delivered, 297 centers were organized, and 6,593 people became members. We are continuing to work on the loan and associating it closely with preparations for the harvesting campaign.”<sup>78</sup>

“Managing secretaries of SVB provincial councils who overfulfilled the task—Comrades Lutsyshyn, Borodin, and Shashlov of Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odesa provinces, respectively—have been put forward to the Central Council of the SVB for an award. Also put forward for an award by the Kharkiv provincial organizational bureau were the atheist centers of Poltava, Bilopillia, Balakliia, Hradyzk, Pyriatyn, and Nova Vodolaha counties. The Vinnytsia, Kyiv, and Chernihiv provincial councils of the SVB lagged behind in their target achievement.”<sup>79</sup>

Along with financing industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture, the peasants were obliged to strengthen the defense capability of the Soviet Union. For the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution, the SVB of Ukraine presented the Red Army with the airplane *Bezvirnyk Ukraïny* (Atheist of Ukraine).<sup>80</sup> The Soviet navy also required modernization. Therefore, in addition to completing the fundraising for the aircraft, the peasants were forced to hand over money for the building of the submarine *Voiovnynchyi bezvirnyk* (Militant Atheist).

It was simply beyond the starving peasants’ power to provide voluntary support for the endless “initiatives of the laboring masses.” In May 1932, the Central Council and Central Headquarters of the SVB of Ukraine circulated a letter to all SVB provincial and county councils stating that the “tempos” of the military loan launched in Ukraine were “impermissibly sluggish.” Attention was focused on the fact that a number of organizations of the SVB USSR had achieved and overfulfilled the target numbers ahead of schedule, for example, the SVB of Kazakhstan by 154 percent, and Vologda by 400 percent. But Ukraine, instead of raising the 500,000 *karbovantsi* earmarked for the submarine by 25 April, had raised only 66,177 *karbovantsi*.<sup>81</sup> As expected, for lagging behind, the SVB of Ukraine was once again placed on the blacklist, and an auxiliary brigade from the Russian city of Vologda was sent to Ukraine,

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., no. 15: 29.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, nos. 17–18 (1932): 33.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., nos. 9–10: 42.

where it achieved the target figure ahead of schedule by 400 percent. Toward the end of its letter, the headquarters of the Ukrainian SVB issued the following categorical demand: “By 20 May, liquidate the shortcomings with the aid of shock-work methods, [socialist] competition, and a mutual living link, as well as through the press, radio appeals, and auxiliaries.”<sup>82</sup>

The use of a “mutual living link” and auxiliaries very quickly produced the desired effect. Pacesetters adept at raising funds for the submarine appeared as early as July 1932. For example, the bureau of the SVB center based at the Technical College of Ship Mechanics in Mykolaiv overfulfilled the target figure for raising funds by 44 percent. Together with the trade-union committee and collective of the Komsomol, it organized a community auxiliary for the Kherson Agricultural Institute, which had fallen seriously behind in its fundraising tasks. By 12 May, the Lebedyn county council of the SVB had overfulfilled the target figure by raising 2,412 *karbovantsi* instead of 500. A general meeting of the Olenivka state farm in Krasnyi Kut county deducted earnings for 1 May: 386 *karbovantsi* were handed over for the submarine *Voiovnychi bezvirnyk*.<sup>83</sup> As of 3 November 1932, the total amount of contributions earmarked for the submarine stood at 2,000,241 *karbovantsi* (the total target figure was 2 million).<sup>84</sup>

Such “sophisticated” mechanisms, designed to reduce the Ukrainian peasantry to poverty, both material and moral, could not fail to bear fruit. Stripped of their private property and barely alive because of prolonged starvation, the peasants were turned into obedient executors of the party’s will. But outward submission was not enough to secure the stable existence of the Soviet totalitarian regime. More was required: to break the peasants’ spirit and uproot the active inner principle, whose power was determined by its freedom from the influence of external forces. That is why, along with terror by famine, the Soviet regime single-mindedly pursued spiritual destruction and the imposition of spiritual pollution and self-disrespect. Its purpose was to devour the soul.

During the period of the “Torgsin gold fever,” starving people plundered village cemeteries. Many Ukrainian villages were very old, their history dating back several centuries. Over the centuries, cemeteries became the final resting places of people from various social strata, ranging from ordinary peasants to wealthy individuals. According to tradition, the deceased were buried with all their personal articles, such as precious ornaments, weapons, crosses, etc. The famine deprived many people of feelings of respect toward their own ancestors. Ancient graves were excavated, and all the valuables contained in them were removed. At first, grave robbing took place surreptitiously, at night, but as the famine escalated, this was done openly, in broad daylight. In fact, there was no particular need to conceal this terrible crime, for cemeteries were considered part of the Christian tradition, and the Soviet authorities did not object to the looting that took place at gravesites. On the contrary, cemeteries were also turned into a “field of ideological struggle for a bright future” and the class struggle of the toiling masses. Thus, looting in cemeteries became widespread, along with the looting that went on at the farms of more prosperous peasants and in churches. Western capitalist countries then eagerly purchased this looted gold and other jewelry.

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., nos. 13–14: 42.

<sup>84</sup> *Bezvirnyk*, no. 3 (1933): 29.

Often the Soviet government itself initiated robbery. An eyewitness to the tragedy, a female resident of the city of Pereiaslav-Khmelnitskyi, P. O. Vyryvska, recalled: “Before the famine, the wooden church at Yarmarok Cemetery was dismantled and demolished. Wealthy young ladies were buried next to the church. They had gold rings and earrings. The bandits demolished the church and took all the gold from the coffins.”<sup>85</sup> Small churches or chapels where funeral services took place were attached to cemeteries. Graves with marble or cast-iron headstones marked off by brick enclosures were often situated next to them or simply inside the fence surrounding an ordinary church. Often, several generations of local priests or lords of the manor of a given village were buried there. When churches were being dismantled, local authorities were faced with a dilemma: should they move the ancient graves or level them? For example, in January 1932 the Troitske county executive committee (Kharkiv district) sent the Department of Cults at the Secretariat of the Presidium of the AUCEC a secret letter with a request for relevant instructions.<sup>86</sup> On 15 February 1932 H. Katunin, the official responsible for religious affairs, explained to the committee that “graves around a chapel closed in accordance with a resolution of the Secretariat of the Presidium of the AUCEC and designated for cultural and educational purposes can be leveled.”<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, such cases were a daily occurrence in Ukrainian villages during that period.

After graves were excavated, the remains of the deceased were left exposed in the open or lying next to yawning, empty pits. Even wooden crosses were taken away for firewood. But the looted cemeteries provided a new kind of “benefit,” as open graves soon began to be filled with new bodies—those of famine victims. Starving peasants were too weak to dig fresh graves for their dead relatives or neighbors. It was all they could do to drag the body of a deceased person to a cemetery and drop it into an empty, looted grave without benefit of a funeral service.<sup>88</sup> If the local authorities could not expel a neighborhood priest, they did their utmost to prevent him from carrying out the funeral rite. For example, on 18 April 1932, acting on behalf of the Chuhuiv eparchial administration, Bishop Havryil requested the inspector of cults at the Secretariat of the AUCEC to annul the illegal directive issued by the Saryi Soltiv county executive committee forbidding the exarch from conducting services for the dead at cemeteries.<sup>89</sup> Over time, burials without benefit of prayers became a sad new tradition.

Suicides became a routine phenomenon of rural life during the Holodomor. Those driven to this act, which is forbidden by Christian tradition, were usually despairing women whose husbands had been arrested and sent to labor camps or who had lost their children in their heroic struggle against famine. They would close off chimneys, doors, and windows, light the stove or build a fire on the clay floor in the middle of their house, and die from carbon monoxide poisoning. Others set fire to their houses. But the most widespread method of killing oneself was hanging. Among those who opted for this method were village activists and leaders called *desiatykhatnyky* and *p'iatykhatnyky* (people responsible for monitoring the activities of their fellow villagers).<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> *Holodovka. 1932–1933 roky na Pereiaslavshchyni: Svidchennia*, comp. Iu. V. Avramenko and V. M. Hnatiuk (Pereiaslav-Khmelnitskyi, Kyiv, and New York: Vyd-vo M. P. Kots', 2000), 57.

<sup>86</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 172, ark. 73.

<sup>87</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 172, ark. 74.

<sup>88</sup> S. Stariv, *Strata holodom* (Kyiv: Ukraïnoznavstvo, 1997), 186–87.

<sup>89</sup> TsDAVO Ukraïny, f. 1, op. 7, spr. 171, ark. 199.

<sup>90</sup> Stariv, *Strata holodom*, 221–22.



Thus, the Union of Militant Atheists of Ukraine was an effective lever for carrying out collectivization in the Ukrainian countryside. It was precisely the activities of mass atheist centers that led to the ultimate closure and dismantling of the preponderant majority of churches and the destruction of the syncretic Christian calendar governing field work and the traditional way of life in Ukraine's rural regions. For a long time, Ukrainian peasants were denied both their sense of being their own masters and the awareness that they possessed unique dignity as human beings and tillers of the soil, thanks to which they had always felt themselves part of an independent, ancient community that could be destroyed only by deliberate aggression. The devaluation of Ukrainian spiritual values during the Holodomor of 1932–33 also cost their descendants dearly: many current problems in Ukraine are the direct result of the struggle waged in those years against religion and spirituality. Ukraine faces a long road back to the church and to a sense of personal dignity.

*Translated from the Ukrainian by Marta D. Olynyk*