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Legislative Initiatives of the Soviet Power in the Field of Religious Policy: 1917-1920s

Abstract

The article analyzes first decrees of the Soviet power that laid the foundations for its religious policy directed against the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Adopted in 1918, 'Decree on the separation of church and state and school from church' declared all property owned by churches the property of the people and transferred it to immediate control of the local Soviets of Workers' and Peasants' Deputies. The church saw in the decree an act of religious persecution. The population also received the Decree negatively: there were meetings of believers in towns, and also numerous processions in support of the Church, some (for instance in Tula and Omsk) shot by the Red Guards. Despite protests of the church hierarchs and the

population, onslaught of the power continued. In August, 1918 the Resolution of the People's Commissariat of Justice 'On carrying out of the "Decree on the separation of church and state and school from church" ' was issued, which detailed the procedure for transferring church property from local Soviets to believers. The property not intended for liturgical purposes was immediately confiscated, as well as capitals of former religious departments and church societies or religious ones. The resolution allowed two weeks for withdrawal of capital. However, in fact, the process took years. Hunger of 1922 brought about a new round of church assets confiscations. Although the Church was the first to responded to the public plight and allowed clergy and parish councils to part with objects of value that had no liturgical purpose in order to help the starving, in February 1922 the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) passed a resolution on confiscation of church valuables: local Soviets were to confiscate all precious metals without exception. The article lists data of the local Soviet agencies accumulated in the People's Commissariat of Justice throughout 1919-1920, concerning the execution of the task in hand; its analysis confirms that popular reaction to closing the churches and using them for other purposes was mostly negative. The author argues that despite the aspirations of the Soviet power to destroy the ROC as an All-Russian organization by depriving it of its property and legal rights, the implementation of these plans drew on, thanks to activities of population and parishioners, who shouldered the responsibility for preservation and maintenance of church property and resisted confiscations of church buildings for other purposes. The power had to resort to active actions, and even force.

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Keywords

Historical sources, archives, Decrees, Soviet power, Russian Orthodox Church, separation of church and state, antireligious policy, confiscation of valuables.

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