

**SCTMG 2020****International Scientific Conference «Social and Cultural Transformations in the  
Context of Modern Globalism»****HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE COUNCIL ON RELIGIOUS  
AFFAIRS IN SOVIET RELIGIOUS POLICY**

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***Abstract***

The article analyzes the activity of the Council on Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR in 1965–1985. This state body operated on the principle of "top secret" and played a special role in the religious policy. The Council carried out a set of restrictive measures and controlled the activities of churches, ministers of religion and religious associations of believers. A special area of activity of the Council was "political and educational work" with the clergy and the study of its moods. The Council supervised the process of reproduction of clergy staff and took measures to streamline the admission to the seminary and ordination of parishioners. But the Council was also a center of information and analytical work on the study of religions and the level of religiousness of society. The powers of the Council included the right to make decisions on registration and de-registration of religious associations, on opening and closing prayer buildings and houses, as well as the right to monitor compliance with the legislation on cults. The Council checked the activities of not only religious organizations and ministers of religion, but also of state bodies and officials in terms of their compliance with the law. In the system of the state apparatus the Council carried out not only control and supervision, information and advisory functions, but also human rights functions, played a significant role in the protection of the rights of believers within the framework of the existing Soviet legislation on religious cults.

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## **1. Introduction**

In December 1965, a new state body was established within the Soviet state's system of government and administration, which was to play a crucial role in the implementation of religious policy in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

The establishment of the Council on Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR (hereinafter referred to as I.M. Council) did not arouse wide public interest in the country but received a resonance in the foreign press. In the following years, some foreign publications continued to show increased interest in the functioning of the Council, as the State Security Committee informed the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

## **2. Problem Statement**

In historical science, there are ambiguous assessments of the role of the Council in the religious policy of the Soviet state. Using the historical analogy, Odintsov (2002) saw in the activity of the Council the revival of the system of pre-revolutionary chief public prosecutor's office, because not a single question of activity of religious organizations could be solved without his participation (Odintsov, 2002). According to Stricker (1995), the Council exercised control over religious societies. Poselovsky (1998) argued that the Council had become an institution that persecuted and suppressed, making it difficult for believers to fight for their rights. The activity of the Council remains poorly studied, but is of scientific interest, as it allows not only to characterize the peculiarities of the state and religious policy during the last decades of the twentieth century, but also to explain the religious situation in modern Russia.

## **3. Research Questions**

In this article, the authors aim to analyze the complex of control and restrictive measures of the Council on religious affairs in relation to the activities of churches, monasteries, ministers of religion, religious associations of Christians as a subject of research. Of particular interest is the "political and educational work" with the clergy and the study of its moods, the observation of the process of reproduction of the clergy and measures to streamline the admission to the spiritual seminary and ordination of parishioners. The authors study the process of implementation of the Council's authority to make decisions on the registration and deregistration of religious associations, on the opening and closing of prayer buildings and houses, as well as the use of the right to exercise control over compliance with the legislation on cults. This body provided clarifications on the application of legislation on cults. The authors of this article tried to show the control mechanism of the Council on Religious Life in order to confirm or refute the opinion that this institution persecuted and suppressed, complicated the struggle of believers for their rights.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this work is to determine the role of the Council on Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR in the Soviet religious policy for the period 1965–1985, when the main

trends in the religious situation on the eve of perestroika reforms were formed. To confirm or refute the assumption that the Council carried out not only control and supervision, information and advisory functions in the state apparatus, but also human rights functions, i.e. participated in the protection of the rights of believers within the framework of the existing Soviet legislation on religious cults.

## **5. Research Methods**

The methodological basis of research makes a principle of historicism, adherence to the given principle has allowed to show in historical sequence evolution of mutual relations of the Soviet state and Russian Orthodox Church (further ROC) on an example of activity of Council on affairs of religions during the specified period. In work both general scientific (Structural-systemic, statistical, etc.), and specially-historical methods (diachronous, synchronous, comparatively-historical, etc.) were also used. Structural-systemic method was applied at studying of structure and principles of activity of Council on affairs of religions. The statistical method was necessary for revealing and fixing of quantitative changes of object of research (for example, condition of ROC). The diachronous method has allowed to analyze processes and phenomena of a religious life in historical sequence on a general historical background. Synchronous method helped to establish cause-effect relations between events and phenomena. The comparative-historical method was widely used in revealing the peculiarities of interaction and mutual influence of the state and the ROC through the prism of the activity of the Council on Religious Affairs.

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1. Historical role of the Council on Religious Affairs**

To clarify the historical role of the Council was possible on the basis of the analysis of archival documents, until recently inaccessible to a wide range of researchers. The documents of the Council contain information on the state of the religious network, the staff of religious ministers and their training in religious schools, religious ritualism, the organizational and financial and economic status of the church, the preservation of religious values, the status of believers in the USSR, etc. In the structure of the Soviet state bodies, the Council on Religious Affairs was subordinate to the Council of Ministers of the USSR, but fulfilled the instructions received from the ideological department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, carrying out its activities in contact with the KGB of the USSR, namely, with the department that was engaged in the fight against ideological sabotage (Maslova, 2005a).

### **6.2. Structure and principles of activity of the Council on religious affairs**

The structure of the Council on Religious Affairs was finalized by the mid-1980s. The central apparatus included: leadership, organizational and inspectorate department, department of Orthodox churches, department of Muslim and Buddhist religions, department of Protestant churches, Jewish religion and sects, department of Roman Catholic and Armenian churches, department of international relations, department of relations with Muslim countries, department of international information, department of statistics and analysis, legal department, the first department, general department. In

addition to the central staff, the Council had commissioners in the union and autonomous republics, krais and regions.

The work of the Council was based on the principle of "top secret". The Chairman of the Council in the order repeatedly put into effect the list of information not subject to publication in the open press, broadcasting on radio and TV. But already in the late 1960s, the leadership of the Council suggested that the Central Committee of the CPSU should make open the basic documents regulating the position of the church in society. This was motivated by the fact that local government officials, clergy and believers do not know the content of these documents, do not have proper understanding of the tasks and functions of the Council, which creates various conflicts between the authorities and the church.

### **6.3. Control over the number of religious associations**

The powers of the Council included the right to make decisions on the registration and deregistration of religious associations, on the opening and closing of prayer buildings and houses, as well as the right to monitor compliance with the legislation on cults. The Council checked the activities of not only religious organizations and ministers of religion, but also of state bodies and officials in terms of their compliance with the law. The given body gave obligatory prescriptions on elimination of infringements, raised a question on attraction of the persons guilty in infringement of the legislation, to disciplinary, administrative or criminal responsibility, gave explanations on questions of application of the legislation on cults.

The most important direction of activity of the Council was registration and deregistration of religious associations. From the point of view of the authorities, the fact of registration meant that the religious association, acting within the framework of the law, simultaneously becomes under its protection. But it is necessary to notice the fact that the order of registration became a means of state control over the religious life of the country.

The registration or deregistration of religious associations was completed by the Council's decisions based on the opinions of local authorities, which were prepared on the basis of applications of believers. The Council then informed religious societies or groups of believers about the decisions taken.

The dynamics of registration and de-registration of religious associations reflects the change in the course of the Soviet state in relation to religion and church. Thus, in the era of the "Khrushchev Thaw", when the Council did not yet exist, the deregistration became a mass campaign of closing churches. During 1960-1964 more than 40 % of the existing network of religious societies of the Russian Orthodox Church (further ROC) was removed from registration, i.e. annually ceased to exist on the average on 1270 parishes. In the subsequent years the number of religious societies removed from registration decreased: in 1965–1985. – Annually about 40, including during the decade from 1975 to 1985 this figure fell to 22 (Maslova, 2005b).

The registration of religious associations was resumed in the late 1960s (firstly, in Protestant, in the second half of the 1970s – Old Believers, Catholic, Lutheran and Muslim societies, in 1972, after a 20-year break, Orthodox) (Odintsov, 2002). But the closing of the prayer buildings continued.

In the mid-1970s, the situation changed, and the number of registered societies tended to grow due to the state's interest in the religious sphere of public life, which was confirmed by the adoption of the

USSR Constitution in 1977. The article on freedom of conscience (art. 52) recognized the importance of the principle of freedom of conscience for socialist society. The existence and activity of religious associations are beginning to be considered as a necessary condition for ensuring freedom of religion, and it, in turn, as one of the components of the complex of "human rights" (Odintsov, 2018).

From 1974 until the mid-1980s, the Council carried out an action to regularize the religious network with a view to bringing the functioning of all religious organizations within the framework of the law and ensuring the cessation of activities of those that do not recognize the legislation on cults. In the early 1980s, it became apparent to the leadership of the Council that the results of the action were contradictory, in part contrary to the original intentions.

As a result of the reduction in the number of registered religious societies (especially in rural areas), the positions of urban parishes were strengthened, the number of their parishioners increased, which caused a significant increase in cash income, as the population of "churchless" areas began to satisfy their religious needs in cities. A new phenomenon emerged – the urbanization of religious life.

On the one hand, the consolidation of religious societies as a result of the reduction of the religious network has strengthened them in material terms. On the other hand, the ability of believers to practice their religious needs was reduced. Therefore, as a result of refusals and deregistration of religious communities, there were cases of intersectionality of Orthodox believers, especially in cases when there were no conditions to satisfy their religious needs. Thus, refusals of local authorities in registration of Orthodox societies caused the problem of correlation between Orthodoxy and sectarianism. Where believers of the Orthodox faith had no opportunity to satisfy their religious needs in active churches, they became the object of sectarian missionary work.

In 1983, Chairman V. Kuroyedov reported to the CPSU Central Committee: "Many officials prefer not to notice the existence of illegal religious associations. Sometimes they put up with their illegal activities. Regardless of the real situation, they categorically reject the requests of believers to register their associations, considering it a concession of religion, a "minus" in ideological work. The situation is particularly intolerable in the Muslim cult. Unjustified refusals to register religious associations take place in relation to Orthodox and Catholic societies. Registration is often denied to the most loyal, patriotic believers, which creates tension and does not contribute to the cause of civic education of believers. (RGANI, 2011).

#### **6.4. Supervisory powers of the Council with regard to the activities of religious associations**

The Council paid special attention to the accounting and control of the financial and economic condition of the Russian Orthodox Church, the largest denomination in the country.

In documents of Council it was fixed annual growth of money receipts ROC. In this situation the Council in line with the state policy in relation to religion implemented a system of measures to restrict the financial activities of the church. The main objective of the restrictive measures was to curb the growth of the church's expenditures on the maintenance of ministers, staff, executive bodies, choirs, repair and maintenance of prayer buildings, and payments to religious centers.

The Council pursued a policy of using the financial resources of the church in the interests of the state. The state annually received from the Russian Orthodox Church up to 70 % of its gross revenue from

the sale of candles, in addition to income tax on the salaries of all categories of clergy and staff, land rent, building tax, insurance payments, contributions to peace funds and the protection of historical and cultural monuments. In some regions and autonomous republics of the RSFSR, these contributions from the Russian Orthodox Church accounted for more than 20 % of the gross church income (RGANI, 2011).

While exercising constant control over the financial activities of the Church, in April 1980 the Council of Ministers of the USSR applied to the Council of Ministers of the USSR to reduce the amount of taxation of ministers of religious cults and members of executive bodies of religious societies. The Council drew the attention of the highest state bodies to the situation of ministers of religion, which caused discontent among them, was regarded as an infringement of their civil rights, and was interpreted as discrimination against clergy in the USSR. In June 1980, the Soviet clergy was treated as discrimination against the clergy in the USSR. The Presidium of the Council of Ministers of the USSR accepted the Council's proposals to change the procedure for collecting income tax and rent from the clergy, which was agreed with the Ministry of Finance of the USSR despite the annual loss of the state budget of up to 3 million rubles (GARF, 2008).

#### **6.5. "Politics and education" with the clergy**

A special area of activity of the Council was "political and educational work" with the clergy and the study of its moods. The Council monitored the process of reproduction of clergy staff and took measures to streamline the admission to the seminary and ordination of parishioners. The Council studied the number of applicants to spiritual schools, motives for admission, age and educational level, national composition, membership in the Komsomol or the CPSU, the content of educational programs and cultural and educational work among seminarians, characteristics of teachers. The documents of the Council noted an increase in the number of those wishing to become seminarians. Among the applicants, the percentage of Komsomol members remained high, there were communists. For example, in 1985 54 % of applications belonged to Komsomol members (GARF, 2008). Not only the Seminary Commission, but also the authorized representatives of the Council participated in the selection of candidates.

Educational work with the Orthodox clergy was carried out by the Department for Orthodox Churches in various forms (conversations of commissioners with the clergy, meetings of bishops, clergy, executive bodies (executive bodies) with the heads of regions, regions and republics, holding seminars and meetings of the clergy, which were attended by industry specialists, scientists).

The study of the clergy's moods convinced the leadership of the Council that the overwhelming majority of priests showed loyalty to the political system of the country and society.

Of particular interest to the Council was the study of modern theology, reviewing of theological scientific works and the church periodicals. The Council coordinated the information-analytical work of a whole range of scientists in order to study the modernization of theology. More than 300 theological dissertations were studied annually.

## **6.6. Monitoring of compliance with Soviet legislation on cults**

The most important activity of the Council was to monitor compliance with the Soviet legislation on cults. In the 1960s and 1980s, the following were qualified as violations of the law: the participation of clergymen in the economic activities of the parish executive bodies, the commission of religious services in prohibited places, the sale of photocopies of icons, baptisms at home in the priests' homes, the involvement of children in church service, and the baptism of children without the consent of both parents. It is important to note that the Council has identified and stopped violations of the law by State officials who have infringed on the rights of believers, refused to register religious associations and satisfy legal requests, and made illegal demands. The Council condemned the illegal imposition of fines on priests by local authorities, etc.

The Council received numerous complaints from believers every year and required its employees to take all necessary measures to satisfy fair requests and complaints from citizens, effectively monitoring their timely and qualitative consideration and resolution.

In 1982 Kuroyedov, addressing the Central Committee of the CPSU with the next report, stressed: "The desire to solve purely ideological issues by administrative means, to replace the ideological struggle against religion with the struggle against the church and believers is deeply erroneous. (RGANI, 2011).

## **7. Conclusion**

1. The analysis of the activity of the Council on Religious Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers in 1965–1985 shows that its main content was determined by the policy of the Communist Party and the Soviet government, which at the time was not aimed at forcing the displacement of religion from the socialist state's social life, but at curbing the spread of religious beliefs and strengthening the position of the Russian Orthodox Church. In line with this policy, the Council implemented a set of restrictive measures to control the activities of churches, monasteries, worshipers and religious associations of believers.

2. But at the same time, the Council was the center of information and analytical work on the study of modern religions and the level of religiousness of society. Many of the conclusions contained in the documents of the Council were of a prognostic nature, determining the prospects for the development of the religious situation in the country for decades to come.

3. In the system of the state apparatus, the Council carried out not only control and supervision, but also informational, advisory and human rights functions. Historically, it is unreliable to consider this body only as an institution that controlled and limited the lives of believers. The Council played a significant role in protecting the rights of believers within the framework of the existing legislation on religious cults. In its annual information reports, the Council drew the attention of the party-state leadership to the development of the main political trend – strengthening the tolerance of the church and the clergy. The reproduction of religiosity in new generations was noted, but it was stressed that the modern believer is a citizen of the country who loves his homeland and has the right to meet his religious needs. This conclusion was constantly reflected in the documents of the Council.

4. The information on the religious situation in the country provided by the Council to the highest authorities encouraged the authorities to rethink the relations with the church and believers, which were radically changed in the second half of the 1980s.

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