By the end of the 1920s the Saratov Volga region abounded with religious diversity. Along with the functioning of large confessions (Russian Orthodox, Catholic churches, Islam), there were a significant number of Protestant denominations and sects whose members were mainly the Volga Germans.


At the turn of the 1920s – 1930s, the authorities’ anti-religious measures towards the main confessions continued. At the same time, the Bolsheviks began to fight against other beliefs to which they had previously shown relative loyalty. The growing pressure of the state led to the strengthening of the religious movement.

Thus, such religious groups as betbrouders (praying brothers) and dancebrouders (dancing brothers) were especially active in resisting the authorities’ anti-religious policy. Betbrouders and dancebrouders were mentioned almost in all party reports and reports of the Union of Militant Atheists (hereinafter referred to as UMA) organizations. For example, in 1929, at the meeting of the National Minorities Subdivision of the Agitprop Department of the Communist Party Lower Volga Regional Committee, it was reported that the Yagodnaya Polyana district was covered by sectarianism by 75%.

In the report on the elections to local Soviets held in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the Volga Germans in 1927, it is said that on the day of elections in Markshtadt and Zelman cantons conferences of betbrouders were held “in order to distract people from the re-elections”. At the meeting of the Bureau of the Communist Party Regional Committee of the Volga Germans Republic on September 19, 1928, the issue of prohibiting betbrouders to have their conferences more than once every three years was discussed. In addition, the party faction of the Central Executive Commission was instructed to develop a special resolution so that an application for the permission to convene betbrouders’ conferences should be submitted no later than two months before its holding. It could give the opportunity to promptly inform the relevant cantonal Communist Party Committees, Regional Committee agitprop departments, and the UMA so that they should carry out anti-religious propaganda on the eve and during these conferences in places where they were planned to be held.

It was considered that in the Saratov Volga Region the most unreliable area in the “religious sense” was the Balashov District in which, among other religious groups, there were many Baptists. Baptists and some other denominations copied the main forms of the Bolshevik work and countered revolutionary holidays with new religious holidays. Youth and children religious organizations were set up: “Christomol” instead of the Komsomol (The Young Communist League); “Christian Seeds” or “White Pioneers” – instead of the Pioneer Organization (scouts). They actively promoted their beliefs in schools, technical schools and universities.

In 1928, when the authorities intensified their struggle against Baptists and other denominations and sects which existed on the USSR territory, a letter was distributed among Baptist communities, in which there were such lines: “We, the preachers of the Gospel...”

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4 Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii saratovskoi oblasti. [Saratov Region State Archive of Contemporary History] (hereinafter – SRSACH). F. 6160. Op. 1 D.6. L. 14. The Union of Atheists was formed in 1925 based on the society of the newspaper “Bezbozhnik” (Atheist) friends, established in 1922. In the second half of the 1920s the Union started active development, its structures were formed in the regions and primary organizations were created. Congress II renamed the “Union of Atheists” into the “Union of Militant Atheists”.

5 In 1929, Yagodnaya Polyana district, 90% populated by the Germans, was not part of the Volga Germans’ ASSR. See: SRSACH. F. 55. Op. 1. D 119. L. 24.


8 Ibid.


10 Ibid.

USSR, are in the Antichrist ring of fire <...>; in order to defeat the enemy we need to master his weapons, to study his techniques and methodology. We, preachers of the Gospel, must focus on studying atheistic press and literature seriously and thoroughly”12.

Baptists’ activities did not encounter any resistance among the population, but quite often, on the contrary, were encouraged and welcomed. For example, in 1928, in the village Kacheevka, Ekaterininsk District, the meeting of the Volga Region Baptists was held. As it was reported by the local atheists, they sang Baptist songs, “energetic, urging, and clearly of counter-revolutionary character”13. Baptists’ influence on the population in places of their residence was very great. In contrast, Soviet children’s mass organizations did not take hold with the population. In places where Baptists lived, children did not sing Soviet songs: “the father doesn’t allow”. On religious holidays children did not attend school. The fact is noted that when the Baptists prayed in the school in the evenings, “the head of this school did not interfere with them”, but even moved to another room. That is, the building of the Soviet school was made available to believers for religious events14.

Adventists were active in the Saratov Volga region too; they also published and distributed their literature. In the region there was a fairly large denomination of Mennonites. They were often deprived of voting rights as holding large farms, having complex machines, and using hired labor. So, for example, in the Arkadak volost of the Balashov district where Mennonites lived, 50 Mennonite Germans were deprived of their voting rights including both wealthy peasants and peasants of average means. As noted in the document, such a resolution agitated the local Mennonites, and at the meeting, they discussed the issue of emigration to America15.

From 1929, a powerful Mennonite emigration movement began. Over 13 thousand Mennonites organized the so called “Moscow sitting”, crowded around government offices and the German Embassy16, demanding permission to leave the USSR for Canada and the USA “to their brothers”17.

These events were described in the newspaper “Bezbozhnik” (the Atheist), in the article about the Mennonites “deceived by priest-kulak agitation” who tried to settle in other countries. This attempt was not successful, because in capitalist countries, where there is exploitation of man by man, ordinary Mennonite peasants had very hard time; a large number of their children died because of the epidemic, and then many Mennonites returned back to the USSR to build “a new, truly happy life hand in hand with all the working people of the USSR”18.

In 1929 – 1931 mass arrests of clergy were carried out. As a result, in many villages of the German Republic, there were no more priests, pastors and schulmeisters. Religious groups and organizations in villages of Beydek, Bauer, Shilling, Anton, and many others had to have “self-service”19. Nevertheless, the believers continued to practice their religion and conduct necessary rituals and services and tried to actively defend their church and faith. O.A. Let-

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14 Ibid.
16 At that time, the German Embassy represented the interests of the United States and Canada in the USSR.
17 For more details about Mennonites’ “Moscow sitting”, which ended in harsh repressions, see: Belkovets L.P. “Bolshoi terror” i sud’by nemetskoi derevni v Sibiri (konets 1920-kh – 1930-e gody) [The “Great Terror” and the fate of the German village in Siberia (late 1920s – 1930s)]. M., 1995, pp. 39–66.
18 O lyudyakh, ischuschkikh schast’ya v begstve ot mira [About people seeking happiness in flight from the world] // The Bezbozhnik, 1931. August 30, no. 47, p. 2.
senberger managed to trace the fate of many arrested and repressed in the 1930s priests of Catholic and Lutheran Churches20.

After National Socialists came to power in Germany, all Catholic and Protestant religious organizations in the Volga Region were accused of being connected with the Nazis and of aiding fascism21. For example, in the report of a special sector of the Volga Germans ASSR Prosecutor’s Office for 1935, it is said that in 1933 – 1934, class enemies hiding behind religious betbrouder communities actively tried to disorganize collective farms, incited the population against the Soviet regime and agitated for the emigration to Germany22.

One trumped-up case involved a group led by a betbrouder, “kulak” (a wealthy peasant) F.F. Gaas, who had previously been arrested in Saratov as the head of a betbrouders’ organization. The group consisted of 18 people, among betbrouders there was a Lutheran pastor V.N. Geptner. This group supposedly had a connection with a foreign spy Louise Mogereg who arrived in the Volga Region in 1934 as an antifascist and was arrested later. The “count-revolutionary” group was controlled from Nazi Germany. The purpose of the group was “to weaken political and economic power of the Soviet State and develop national feelings and sympathy in the Volga German Republic inhabitants towards Nazi Germany”, so that they, in case of a Germany attack on the USSR, would support the fascist aggressor.23

In the same year, another betbrouders’ group, which consisted of 6 people, was “exposed” and accused of actions aimed at disorganizing collective farms. According to the document, the “disorganization” was carried out by “distributing addresses among the population for receiving fascist aid; the group agitated against Communist Party activities and was connected with fascists”24.

In 1935, there were 14 fabricated cases in the Volga German Republic; more than 50 people were involved in them. Of these cases, 8 were about groups led by clergy and shulmeisters and 6 – by “sectarian preachers” (5 of them were betbrouders, 1 dancebrouder). All of them were accused of espionage, collective farm sabotage and counter-revolutionary activities25.

From January 1 to July of 1935, in the Volga German Republic, 10 priests were sentenced to: 10 years of imprisonment – 4 people; from 5 to 10 years – 3; from 3 to 5 years – 2; about 3 years – one person26.

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21 The USSR authorities related religious organizations and the “German fascists” because of the aid to starving people of the Volga region in 1933–1934. Food parcels and money transfers were sent to Catholics and Protestants by people of the same faith from abroad, including Germany, where the Nazis had just come to power. The aid came to religious communities and then was distributed among believers. Trying to strengthen his position in power, Hitler and his party unleashed an active anti-Soviet campaign accusing the Soviet authorities of hiding the information about the famine and starving their own people to death. The Soviet authorities denied that there was famine in the USSR. The result of the confrontation was a closed Decree of the Communist Party Central Committee of November 5, 1934, in which receiving aid from abroad was declared anti-Soviet, “fascist activity”. Those who received and distributed it were called “fascists and Nazi collaborators” and were subjected to severe repression up to the execution. For more details, see: German A.A. Nemetskaya avtonomiya na Volge. 1918–1941. [German Autonomy on the Volga. 1918–1941.] M., 2007, pp. 324–331.


24 Ibid. It is said here about the aid to the starving people, which, in agreement with the Soviet authorities, was sent by relatives or humanitarian organizations from Germany to the USSR to support the starving German population. For more details, see: German A.A. Nemetskaya avtonomiya na Volge. 1918–1941. [German Autonomy on the Volga. 1918–1941.] M., 2007, pp. 324–331.

25 Ibid. L. 85 ob.
“Religious elements” were accused of aiding fascism later too. For example, according to the report of the Volga Germans Republic Security Council even in 1936, it follows that in Marksshtadt, Balzer, Frank and other cantons, there was “a large church-sectarian movement”. Betbrouders and dancebrouders, who were called “fascist-national elements” in the report, “hiding behind the religious mask” carried out “count-revolutionary work”: the “dancebrouder” sect in Mariental canton disrupted farmers’ meetings in local collective farms, destroyed cattle and spoilt machines”27. [27]

Lutheran clergy and sect preachers extended their influence to the school too. In 1935, the Saratov Regional Communist Party Committee stated that in schools of the Volga Germans Republic “activation of pastors could be noted”; a pastoral service was broadcast on the radio; besides, pastors also organized confirmation of schoolchildren. “Some activation of Lutheral movement” was noted in villages of Marksshtadt, Unterwalden, Krasnyi Kut and other cantons of the Republic28.

St. Clement Catholic Cathedral in Saratov, the center of the Tiraspol Catholic Diocese, was finally closed in 1935. In the same year, the administrator of the Tiraspol Diocese southern part A.I. Frizon was secretly ordained by the Papal Apostolic Legate Michel d’Herbigny, but soon after that he was arrested and two years later – shot. The Tiraspol Diocese de facto ceased to exist29.

Lutheran Church in the Volga Region as an institution was also destroyed in the 1930s and ceased to exist officially. All provosts were arrested or exiled. In 1937, two last pastors in the USSR were arrested. In 1938, the last nine Lutheran Churches were closed30.

Mennonites were scattered and could not exist as a single community even during the collectivization31.

After serious repressions Baptists, betbrouders and dancebrouders went underground, but their activities were monitored by the NKVD Office for the ASSR of the Volga Germans. Its documents helped us get an idea of the scale of their illegal activities. The underground groups of Baptists, betbrouders, and dancebrouders even after their defeat continued to function in 7 out of 22 cantons of the Volga Germans ASSR, in 15 villages. There were 7 Baptist groups, 9 betbrouder groups and 4 dancebrouder groups. In 5 villages, two groups of Protestant denominations functioned simultaneously32.

On August 2, 1937, the Communist Party Central Committee issued a special resolution by which it was authorized to withdraw “leaders of the betbrouders’ sectarian German group” and replace German Republic NKVD officials by the “non-Germans”33. After that, traces of these religious groups could not be found in the local archives; most likely, dancebrouders and betbrouders in the Saratov Volga Region were finally liquidated.

In the mid-1930s, liquidation of Western Christian confessions, denominations, and sects was connected not only with the general anti-church policy of the state, but it also had a certain political implication. Since 1934, a “fascist” aspect was introduced into the struggle

against Western Christian confessions. The worse the relations between the Stalinist USSR and Nazi Germany became, the stronger this factor was: clergy and active believers were more and more accused of “fascist espionage”, “sabotage”, attempts “to overthrow the Soviet power” and ”help Germany seize the USSR”. In 1937 – 1938, during the NKVD “German Operation” 55 thousand Soviet people, mainly Germans, were arrested. About half of them were shot. In the same years, in the Volga Germans ASSR, about 6,7 thousand people were arrested; 3,6 thousand of them were shot. Among them, there was the majority of the clergy and active believers of Catholic, Lutheran, and other Western Christian churches.

Having officially stopped the activities of Western Christian churches, denominations, and sects in the Saratov Volga Region, the authorities were unable to destroy religious life. It continued semi-legally or illegally.

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Протестанты Саратовского Поволжья и антирелигиозные мероприятия власти (конец 1920-х – 1930-е годы)

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Автор статьи на основе впервые введенных в научный оборот архивных материалов рассматривает сопротивление протестантских религиозных групп на территории Саратовского Поволжья антирелигиозной политике советского руководства в период «великого перелома» (конец 1920-х – 1930-е годы). Антирелигиозная кампания осуществлялась в виде репрессий против служителей культов и верующих, изъятия храмов и молитвенных домов, антицерковной агитации и пропаганды и других антирелигиозных мероприятий. В статье рассмотрены формы скрытого и открыто сопротивле-
ния и методы борьбы протестантов. Показаны особенности антирелигиозной кампании в отношении западных христиан, вызванные их упорным сопротивлением и нежеланием отказываться от своих религиозных убеждений. Упорство западных христиан привело к разгрому их церквей еще в середине 1930-х годов, однако почти до конца 1937 г. в Немреспублике существовали подпольные секты (бетбрудеры, танцбрудеры и др.). В завершение статьи автор делает выводы, что уничтожение западнохристианских конфессий, деноминаций и сект в середине 1930-х годов имело определенный внешнеполитический подтекст, связанный с приходом к власти в 1933 г. национал-социалистов. В статье показана религиозная жизнь западных протестантов Саратовского Поволжья, пытавшихся отстоять свою веру в условиях агрессивного государственного атеизма, со всеми ее перипетиями, которая была существенно подорвана, но не сломлена окончательно и приобрела новые формы полугетального существования.

Ключевые слова: Саратовское Поволжье, Республика немцев Поволжья, антирелигиозная кампания, протестанты, религия, советская власть, национал-социалисты, 1920-е годы, 1930-е годы.

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Protestanten des Saratover Volgagebiets und kirchenfeindliche Maßnahmen der Staatsmacht (Ende der 1920er – 1930er Jahre)

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