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Protestants of Saratov Volga Region and Anti-Religious Activities of the Authorities (Late 1920s – 1930s)

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On the basis of the archival material introduced for the first time, the author considers the resistance of Protestant religious groups on the territory of the Saratov Volga region to the anti-religious policy of the Soviet authorities during the "Great Break" (the late 1920s-1930s). The anti-religious campaign involved repressions against clergymen and believers, destruction of temples and prayer houses, anti-religious agitprop and other anti-religious activities. The article shows the forms of hidden and open resistance and Protestants' methods of struggle. The author focuses on the features of the anti-religious campaign against Western Christians caused by their stout resistance and unwillingness to abandon their religious beliefs. The persistence of Western Christians led to the defeat of their churches as far back as the mid-1930s, but almost until the end of 1937, there were underground sects in the German Republic (betbrouders, dancebrouders, etc.). The author concludes that the destruction of Western Christian Confessions, denominations, and sects in the mid-1930s had a certain foreign policy implication associated with National Socialists coming to power in 1934. The article shows the religious life of the Western Protestants in the Saratov Volga region, who tried to defend their faith under the aggressive state atheism. It was significantly undermined, but not completely broken down and acquired new semi-legal forms.

Keywords: Saratov Volga Region; anti-religious campaign; Protestants, religion; Soviet authority; National Socialists; 1920s; 1930s.

By the end of the 1920s the Saratov Volga region abounded with religious diversity¹. 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 Germans².

¹ For details, see: *Yakovleva Zh. V. Religioznaya zhizn' v Saratovskom Povolzh'ye v 1930-ye gg.* [Religious life in the Saratov Volga region in the 1930s] // *Izvestiya of Saratov University. History. International Relations.* 2015, vol. 15, iss. 3, pp. 95–100.

² In modern foreign historiography of religion, the term "sect" is practically supplanted by the term "Free Church" ("Freikirche" in German). This applies not only to Western Christian, but also Russian Orthodox sects. See, for example: Wilhelm Kahle. *Evangelische Freikirchen und freie Gemeinden im Russischen Reich, in der Sowjetunion und den Nachfolgestaaten: Ein kleines Lexikon der Gestalten, Geschehnisse und Begriffe.* Gumpersbach: Friedens Bote, 1995. 187 s.; *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon. Internationale theologische Enzyklopädie.* Erster Band. Dritte. Auflage (Neufassung), Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht in Göttingen. 1986. S. 1359–1362; Hans Schwarz. *Freikirche.* // *Theologische. Realenzyklopädie.* Band XI. Familia – Futurologie. Walter de Gruyter. Berlin. New York, 1983. S. 510–563; Hans-Beat Motel. *Freikirchen // Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon. Lexikon der Sekten, Sondergruppen und Weltanschauungen. Fakten. Hintergründe. Klärungen.* Freiburg. Basel. Wien, 1990. S. 309–315 u. a.

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 policy³. Betbrouders and dancebrouders were mentioned almost in all party reports and reports of the Union of Militant Atheists (hereinafter referred to as UMA) organizations⁴. 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%⁵.

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"⁶. 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 discussed⁷. 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 held⁸.

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 Baptists⁹. Baptists and some other denominations copied the main forms of the Bolshevik work and countered revolutionary holidays with new religious holidays¹⁰. 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 universities¹¹.

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 in the

³ For details, see: *Litsenberger O.F.* Sekty "tantsuyuschikh brat'yev" i "gyupferov" v nemetskikh koloniyakh Povolzh'ya [Sects of "dancing brothers" and "huepfers" in Volga Germans' colonies] // Problemy istorii, yazyka I sovremennogo polozheniya [Problems of history, language and current situation. Proceedings of the International scientific conference, Anapa, September 20-25, 1995. M., 1996, pp. 347–356.

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.

⁶ SRSACH. F. 1. Op. 1. D. 1314. L. 7.

⁷ SRSACH. F. 27. Op. 1. D. 1545. L. 72.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ SRSACH. F. 55. Op. 1. D. 79. L. 48.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ SRSACH. F. 55. Op. 1. D. 79. L. 48 ob.

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-

¹² SRSACH. F. 55. Op. 1. D. 111. L. 38.

¹³ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Saratovskoi oblasti [Saratov Region State Archive] (hereinafter – SRSA). F. P-522. Op. 3. D. 73. L. 34.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ SRSACH. F. 1. Op. 1. D. 1315. L. 16; F. 27. Op. 4. D. 729. L. 13.

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 nemetskoj 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, ischuschikh schast’ya v begstve ot mira [About people seeking happiness in flight from the world] // *The Bezbozhnik*, 1931. August 30, no. 47, p. 2.

¹⁹ Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskiy arkhiv nemtsev Povolzh’ya [State Historical Archive of the Volga Germans] (hereinafter – SHAVG). F 849. Op. 1 o/d. D 834. L. 101; 104; 112.

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 Mozezges 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.

²⁰ *Lisenberger O.A.* Rimsko-katolicheskaya tserkov' v Rossii [Roman Catholic Church in Russia]. Saratov, 2001. Ch. 3, paragraph 6 – "Repressii protiv katolicheskikh svyashchennocluzhitelei v nachale 30-kh gg." [Repressions against Catholic clergy in the early 1930s], PP. 270–294; *Lisenberger O.A.* Evangelicheskoy-luteranskaya tserkov' i sovetskoye gosudarstvo (1917–1938). [Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Soviet State (1917–1938)]. M., 1999.

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.

²² SHAVG. F. 963. Op. 1 n/d. D. 5. L. 82.

²³ SHAVG. F. 963. Op. 1 n/d. D. 5. L. 82 ob.

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 SHAVG. F. 963. Op. 1 n/d. D. 5. L. 82 ob. – 83 ob.

²⁶ *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 Markshtadt, 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 spoil machines²⁷. [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 Markshtadt, 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

²⁷ SRSACH. F. 6160.. Op. 1. D. 6. L. 14.

²⁸ SRSACH. F. 6160. Op. 1. D. 6. L. 3, 14; F. 594. Op. 1. D. 52. L. 2, L. 5, L. 7.

²⁹ *Lisenberger O.A.* Rimsko-katolicheskaya tserkov' v Rossii. Istoriya i pravovoe polozeniye. [Roman Catholic Church in Russia. History and Legal Status.] Saratov: Volga Region Academy of Public Administration, 2001, pp. 277, 295.

³⁰ *Lisenberger O.A.* Evangelicheskoye lyuteranskoye tserkov' i sovetskoye gosudarstvo (1917–1938). [Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Soviet State (1917–1938)]. M.: Gotika. 1999, pp. 263, 278; *Kurilo O.* Luterane v Rossiye. XVI–XX vv. [Lutherans in Russia. XVI–XX c.] M., 2002, pp. 305–346.

³¹ For more details, see: *Evseev N.O.* Mennonity v Saratovskom Zavolzhye (1854–1942 gg.). [Mennonites in Saratov Zavolzhye (1854–1941)]: Thesis for PhD in History. Saratov, 2016, p. 239.

³² SHAVG. F. P-998. Op. 1 d.p. D. 101. L. 1–3.

³³ Rossiiskiy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoy istorii [Russian State Archive of Social Political History] F. 558. Op. 1. D. 57. L. 15 / Fond Stalina [Stalin’s Fund]. The document is addressed to the Chair of the All-Union Central Soviet of Trade Unions Organizational Bureau on Saratov area, Andreev.

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 shot³⁴. 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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2. *Kurilo O.* Lyuterane v Rossii. XVI–XX vv. [Lutherans in Russia. XVI–XX centuries]. Moscow: Educational Foundation “Lutheran Cultural Heritage” publ., 2002, 400 p. (in Russ.).
3. *Litsenberger O.A.* [Sects of “dancing brothers” and “hupfers” in the German colonies of the Volga region]. // Rossiyskie nemtsy. Problemy istorii, yazyka i sovremennogo polozheniya [Russian Germans. Problems of history, language and current situation]. Moscow: Gotika publ., 1996, pp. 347–356. (in Russ.).
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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 открытого сопротивле-

³⁴ *Okhotin N., Roginskiy A.* Iz istorii «nemetskoi operatsii» NKVD. 1937–1938 gg. [From the history of the NKVD “German operation”. 1937–1938]. // Nakazannyi narod: Repressii protiv rossiyskikh nemtsev [The punished people: repressions against Russian Germans]. М.,: Zven’ya, 1999, pp. 66, 67.

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 полулегального 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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Die Autorin des Artikels untersucht anhand von erstmals in wissenschaftlichen Umlauf gebrachten Archivmaterialien den Widerstand protestantischer Gruppen auf dem Gebiet der Volgaregion Saratov gegen die kirchenfeindliche Politik der sowjetischen Führung während des Großen Umbruchs (Ende der 1920er – 1930er Jahre). Die kirchenfeindliche Kampagne äußerte sich in Repressalien gegen Geistliche und Gläubige, in der Konfiszierung von Kirchen und Bethäusern, in kirchenfeindlicher Agitation und Propaganda und anderen antireligiösen Aktivitäten. Der Artikel untersucht die Formen des latenten und offenen Widerstands sowie die Formen des Kampfes der Protestanten. Die Züge der antireligiösen Kampagne gegen westliche Christen, hervorgerufen durch deren hartnäckigen Widerstand und die mangelnde Bereitschaft, ihren Glauben aufzugeben, werden aufgezeigt. Die Beharrlichkeit der Westchristen führte Mitte der 1930er Jahre zur Zerstörung ihrer Kirchen, doch bis Ende 1937 existierten in der Volgarepublik noch Untergrundsekten (Betbrüder, Tanzbrüder u. a.). Am Ende des Artikels kommt die Autorin zu dem Schluss, dass die Zerstörung der westchristlichen Konfessionen, Religionsgemeinschaften und Sekten Mitte der 1930er Jahre in einem außenpolitischen Bezug zur Machtübernahme der Nationalsozialisten 1933 zu sehen ist. Der Artikel stellt das religiöse Leben westlicher Protestanten in der Volgaregion Saratov dar, die ihren Glauben mit all seinen Wirrungen und Irrungen unter den Bedingungen des aggressiven Staatsatheismus zu verteidigen versuchten, und der zwar deutlich erschüttert, aber nicht ganz gebrochen wurde und zu neuen Formen in einer halblegalen Existenz fand.

Schlüsselwörter: Volgagebiet Saratov, Republik der Volgadeutschen, antireligiöse Kampagne; Protestanten, Religion, Sowjetmacht, Nationalsozialisten; 1920er Jahre; 1930er Jahre

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