INTRODUCTION

Issues such as good and evil, conscience, justice, and retribution found a reflection in the historical mission of religion. . . . This is why people do not grow tired of it for 1000 years. Marxism also presented itself as a general theory of humanity, a new civilization, the image of the new man. The bid was certainly serious, but life revealed its problems. All the reproaches made about socialism-communism found their reflection in the authority and standing of atheism. Atheism [was] the new civilization’s calling card.


On April 29, 1988, at the height of perestroika, the general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, made the unanticipated decision to meet with Patriarch Pimen (Izvekov) and the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church. This was the first official meeting between the leader of the Soviet Communist Party and the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church since 1943, when Joseph Stalin summoned three Orthodox metropolitans to the Kremlin in the middle of the night to inform them that after more than two decades of repression, the Orthodox Church could return to Soviet life with the blessing of the state. The direct impetus for Gorbachev’s meeting with the patriarch was the approaching millennium of the Christianization of Rus’—an event commemorating Grand Prince Vladimir’s adoption of Christianity in 988 as the official religion of Kievan Rus’, which gathered his diverse lands and peoples into a unified state. Gorbachev’s motives for meeting with the patriarch were not unlike Stalin’s—which is to say, they were political. Just as Stalin had broken with two decades of antireligious policy in order to mobilize patriotism at home and appeal to allies abroad in the midst of a catastrophic war, Gorbachev was attempting to harness Orthodoxy’s moral capital at home and court political favor with Cold War adversaries in order to regain control over perestroika—which by early 1988 was not only losing popular support but also being challenged from within the Soviet political establishment by Communist Party conservatives as well as nationalists across the Soviet Union’s titular republics, including Russia itself.

In his address, Gorbachev noted that his meeting with the patriarch was taking place “on the threshold of the 1000th anniversary of the introduction of Christianity in Rus.” This event, he announced, was now going to be commemorated “not only in a religious but also a sociopolitical tone, since it was a significant milestone in the centuries’ long path of the development of the fatherland’s history, culture, and Russian statehood.” Gorbachev acknowledged
the deep “worldview differences” between the Soviet Communist Party and Russian Orthodox Church, but emphasized that Orthodox believers were nevertheless “Soviet people, working people, patriots,” and, as such, entitled to all the rights of Soviet citizenship “without restrictions,” including “the full right to express their convictions with dignity.” During the meeting, Gorbachev also called on the church to play a role in the moral regeneration of Soviet society, “where universal norms and customs can help our common cause.” Finally, Gorbachev promised the church unprecedented concessions: the return of religious buildings and property that had been nationalized by the Bolsheviks following the October Revolution, permission for religious instruction of children and charity work, the elimination of restrictions on the publication of religious literature and the Bible, and the liberalization of the restrictive laws that had governed Soviet religious life since the revolution. The new legal framework, adopted in 1990, endowed religious organizations with juridical and property rights, and restricted state interference in religious affairs. But what turned out to be the most consequential revision was the new prohibition on the Soviet state’s funding of atheism—a provision that effectively ended the long marriage between Communism and atheism in the Soviet Union.2

Gorbachev’s meeting with the patriarch transformed the Russian Orthodox millennium from a narrowly religious event marginal to Soviet public life into a national celebration sanctioned by the Soviet state. This unexpected and dramatic shift in the Soviet position on religion turned out to be consequential, and raises a number of questions: Why did Soviet Communism abandon its commitment to atheism? Was there a relationship between the two political divorces that took place in the Soviet Union’s final years—the divorce of Communism and atheism, and the divorce of the Soviet state from the Communist Party?

_A Sacred Space Is Never Empty_ is a history of Soviet atheism from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 until the return of religion to public life in the Soviet Union’s final years. The Bolsheviks imagined Communism as a world without religion. The Soviet experiment was the first attempt to turn this vision into reality. When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, they promised to liberate the people from the old world—to overcome exploitation with justice, conflict with harmony, superstition with reason, and religion with atheism. As they set out to build the new Communist world, they rejected all previous sources of authority, replacing the autocratic state with Soviet power, religious morality with class morality, and backward superstition with an enlightened, rational, and modern way of life. In their effort to remake the world, the Bolsheviks sought to remove religion from the “sacred spaces” of Soviet life. They renounced traditional religious institutions, theologies, and ways of life, offering in their place the Communist Party and Marxism–Leninism—a party that claimed a monopoly on power and truth, and an ideology that promised
to give new meaning to collective and individual life. Yet despite the secularization of the state, the party’s commitment to atheism, the vision of radical social transformation through cultural revolution, and several antireligious and atheist campaigns, Soviet Communism never managed to overcome religion or produce an atheist society. Indeed, as Gorbachev’s ultimate reversal on religion and atheism makes clear, religion remained a problem for the Soviet project until the end—a problem that atheism proved unable to solve.

This book argues that in order to understand why religion posed a problem for Soviet Communism, we need to shift our attention from religion to atheism. It is certainly true that the official Soviet position on religion remained remarkably consistent from the Bolshevik Revolution until the USSR’s dissolution. Atheism, however, was reimagined in fundamental ways, with critical consequences for the Communist Party and the Marxist-Leninist ideology in which it grounded its legitimacy: from the antireligious repression and “militant atheism” of the early Soviet period, to Stalin’s rapprochement with religion in 1943, to Nikita Khrushchev’s remobilization of the campaign against religion and turn to “scientific atheism,” to Leonid Brezhnev’s retreat
from ideological utopianism in the late Soviet period, to Gorbachev’s break with atheism and return of religion to public life in 1988. The book follows how the Soviet state’s definition of religion informed its production of atheism, and how the engagement with both religion and atheism transformed how the state understood Soviet Communism. Soviet atheism, then, has its own history—one that is intertwined with, yet distinct from, the history of religion.

But what is “religion”? Scholars of religion have suggested that no definition remains stable across time and space—a claim that extends beyond the Soviet case. Indeed, since the nineteenth century, when scholars began to study religion as a distinct attribute of human experience, the definition of religion has transformed from the assertion that it is a universal fact that exists in different forms in all human societies to the proposition that religion does not exist beyond the scholar’s own imagination. The customary understanding of religion, born in the modern age, locates it within individual belief (rather than, for example, in ritual practice, tradition, or the authority of religious institutions and clergy). But definitions of religion are neither neutral nor universal. As Jonathan Z. Smith observes, religion is not a “native category” but instead one “imposed from the outside”—historically, from the position of Christian Europe. Religion, then, is defined by history as well as by those who deployed the category for distinct analytic—and often also political—purposes.

For the history of Soviet atheism, however, the theoretical questions about the definition of religion are secondary, since regardless of whether or not religion is a human universal, those who comprised the Soviet atheist apparatus—party and government officials, ideology theorists and propaganda cadres, social scientists, cultural workers, and enlightenment activists, among others—took for granted that religion existed, and that it was antithetical to Communism, posed a danger to the Communist project, and therefore needed to be exorcized from Soviet life. Their engagement with religion, and their evolving understanding of what it meant about the Soviet path to Communism, needs to be analyzed. Although various definitions remain significant for understanding Soviet atheism (including religion as belief in the supernatural, a force that binds and integrates communities, or a disciplinary instrument), what is most relevant to this history is that the atheist apparatus positioned religion as something alien and rooted in the old world: the ideology of a former sociopolitical order, false worldview, and obsolete way of life. For Soviet atheism, religion—inasmuch as it survived in the new world—was a problem that needed to be solved, although how the atheist apparatus understood the problem changed over time in critical ways and with significant consequences.

This book argues that for Soviet Communism, religion represented, above all, an obstacle to its monopoly on political, ideological, and spiritual authority. Over the course of the Soviet period, the atheist apparatus learned that in order
to bring about a world without religion, it was not enough to simply exorcize religion from the center of political, social, cultural, and everyday life. It was also necessary to fill Soviet Communism’s sacred space with positive meaning. To analyze the process through which the meaning and function of this sacred space was produced, contested, and revised, the book is organized around three sets of oppositions: the political opposition between the party’s commitment to ideological purity and state’s pursuit of effective governance; the ideological opposition between religion, superstition, and backwardness and science, reason, and progress; and the spiritual opposition between emptiness and indifference and fullness and conviction. These three oppositions can be seen as a set of critical problems that Soviet Communism had to solve as it did the work of building the new world.

The political opposition—between ideological purity and effective governance—forced the party to answer the question of what kind of state Soviet Communism should produce. As the oscillations between ideological and pragmatic commitments throughout Soviet history show, this question was never answered definitively. With regard to religion in particular, Stalin provisionally reconciled this opposition in 1943, when, after more than two decades of erratic antireligious and atheistic campaigns, his rapprochement with religious institutions was a compromise on ideological purity for the sake of political security and social mobilization during the war. The ideological opposition—between religion and science—highlights the party’s effort to answer the question of what kind of society Soviet Communism should produce, and dominated the debates of the Khrushchev era. Whereas “building socialism” under Stalin was above all a political project to create the economic infrastructure and social cohesion of a modern socialist state, “building Communism” under Khrushchev was an ideological project to produce a rational, harmonious, and morally disciplined Communist society. Within this framework, religion, which had been passively tolerated since the war, again became a problem, though the nature of the problem changed. Religion was no longer a political enemy; it was an ideological opponent. Finally, the spiritual opposition—between indifference and conviction—reflects the party’s effort to define what kind of person Soviet Communism should produce. This question haunted the Soviet project from its inception, but it became the central preoccupation of the atheist apparatus beginning in the mid-1960s, when Brezhnev’s rise to power brought an end to Khrushchev’s ideological utopianism. Soviet atheists became aware that the sacred space they fought so hard to liberate from the old faiths, rather than becoming atheist, simply remained empty. How to fill this sacred space with atheist conviction was the fundamental question facing the atheist apparatus for the rest of the Soviet period.

In the late Soviet period, atheists also became aware of a new phenomenon: ideological indifference. Atheists saw symptoms of indifference in the
growing political apathy, ideological hypocrisy, moral decay, and philistine individualism that they believed were spreading through Soviet society, especially among the youth. Indifference seemed more pervasive than any commitments Soviet citizens had either to the old faiths or to Communism, and it was harder to fight because it did not have institutions, clergy, or dogma. As atheists tried to understand why indifference had become a mass phenomenon, the stakes of their inability to produce atheist conviction came into focus: if they failed to fill the sacred space at the center of Soviet Communism, it would be filled by alien ideologies and commitments—since, as the Russian proverb goes, “a sacred space is never empty.” Atheism, then, was a mirror that reflected Soviet Communism back to itself by forcing it to contend with the significance of religion for the Soviet project over the course of its historical development.

Communism and Religion

Ideologies have long been compared to religion. In this respect, Soviet Communism, while distinct, is not unique. Already after the French Revolution, the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville observed that despite its antireligious rhetoric, revolutionary ideology “assumed all aspects of a religious revival”—so much so that “it would perhaps be truer to say that it developed into a species of religion, if a singularly imperfect one, since it was without a God, without a ritual, or promise of a future life.”6 Much like Tocqueville, many of those who have compared ideologies to religion were critics who used the analogy to condemn revolutionary projects as radical and irrational.7 In interwar Europe, intellectuals who opposed the rise of Communism, fascism, and Nazism produced the concept of “political religion” to underscore that these new ideologies embodied a qualitatively different breed of politics: a politics that demanded a total commitment of body and soul.8

Communism was at the center of this narrative.9 With regard to Soviet Communism in particular, its religious—or more precisely, antireligious—aspect was considered one of its central features. Indeed, from the Vatican's 1937 denunciation of “atheistic Communism” to the Cold War mobilization against “godless Communism,” atheism has often been cast not just as a component part of Communism but as its very essence.10 It should be surprising, then—given the prominence of the comparison of Communism to religion and centrality of the Soviet case to that narrative—that we still have few studies that explain why the Soviet position on religion and atheism changed over time.11

How scholars have interpreted the history of religion and atheism in the Soviet Union itself has a history—one that reflects both the historical and academic context in which scholarship was produced. Since the Second World War, when Soviet studies began to take shape, scholars have produced three
narratives about religion and atheism under Soviet Communism. The first narrative, dominant during the Cold War, focuses on antireligious repression; the second, prevalent in the years immediately following the dissolution of the USSR, examines the role of atheism in the broader project of utopianism and cultural revolution; and the third construes Soviet religious policy as a form of secular modernity. These three narratives cast Soviet Communism as a totalitarian “political religion,” a failed utopia, or a variant of secularism. In this sense, they are about more than religion and atheism; they speak to questions about the very nature of Soviet Communism.

The first narrative, produced in the first years following the October Revolution, largely by foreign observers visiting the Soviet Union and Russian émigrés set the parameters of how Soviet Communism would come to be understood, especially during the Cold War. Even before the October Revolution, the Russian religious intelligentsia decried the millenarianism of Russian revolutionaries and denounced socialism as a false faith. After 1917, Russian émigrés—perhaps most prominently the religious philosophers Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948), Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), and Nikolai Trubetskoi (1890–1938)—continued to frame Soviet Communism in religious terms. In his influential book The Origin of Russian Communism, originally published in 1937, Berdiaev wrote that Communism’s “militant atheism” and “implacably hostile attitude” to religion was “no accidental phenomenon,” but “the very essence of the communist general outlook on life.” The fact that it professed “to answer the religious questions of the human soul and to give a meaning to life” made Communism more than a “social system” or “scientific, purely intellectual theory.” With its ambition to encompass the totality of human experience, Communism was “intolerant and fanatical,” and as “exclusive” as any religious faith.

The writer René Fülöp-Miller, reflecting on his journey to the USSR in the early 1920s, observed that while “Bolshevism has almost always been regarded purely as a political problem,” the problem extended “far beyond the narrow horizon of political sympathies and antipathies.” He noted that Bolshevism “doctrines offer not the vague hope of consolation in another and better world, but precepts for the immediate and concrete realization of this better world.” For Fülöp-Miller, the party’s radical intolerance of other creeds—including and perhaps especially religion—was “a specifically sectarian characteristic.” The “furious hostility” of Bolshevism to other creeds was “one of the surest proofs that Bolshevism itself may be treated as a sort of religion and not as a branch of science.” Indeed, Fülöp-Miller contended, it was precisely in the Bolsheviks’ “war against religion” that “the religious character of Bolshevism [could] be most clearly discerned.” This made the Bolsheviks not a political party but rather a millenarian sect. Narratives shaped by these early encounters with Bolshevism cast a long shadow, and shaped the image of Soviet Communism through much of the twentieth century.
Many of the early academic studies of religion in the USSR focused on the repression of religious institutions and believers—and for good reason. Soviet Communism devastated religious life in the USSR. The Bolsheviks destroyed religious institutions, nationalized religious property, imprisoned and murdered clergy and believers, uprooted religious communities, and confined religious life to an increasingly narrow private sphere. Still, in focusing on the repression of religion, these studies paid less attention to how atheism was imagined as a distinct political, ideological, and spiritual project. Studies of religious repression therefore tell us a great deal about the destructive impact of the Soviet state's engagement with religion, but much less about its productive side—how the Soviet project sought to address the functions and questions it inherited from religion, and how it assessed the successes and failures of antireligious and atheist strategies for producing an alternative cosmology and way of life.

A second wave of literature—largely produced in the late and post-Soviet period, when the Soviet archives were finally opened to researchers—turned its attention to atheism. Influenced by the “cultural turn” in the humanities and social sciences, these studies examined atheism within the broader framework of Bolshevik utopianism. At stake was the bigger question of the degree to which the party and its ideology penetrated the Soviet soul. To get at this, studies centering on religion and atheism explored the institutions and cadres charged with producing and disseminating ideology—the Communist Party, the Communist Youth League (Komsomol), and the League of the Militant Godless—and how these organizations conceptualized and inculcated atheism. What they show is that despite the mobilization of institutions and propaganda for the atheist project in the 1920s and 1930s, militant atheism made little impact on how ordinary people imagined and lived their lives. These studies are essential to revealing both the logic and the limitations of the atheist project in its early stages. Their focus, however, was on the early Soviet period, whereas the postwar and particularly post-Stalin periods—when Soviet atheism was developed as a theoretical discipline and institutionalized on a mass scale—remained largely unexamined. Some recent studies have offered valuable insight into the distinct spiritual landscape of the late Soviet period, yet most work that extends into the postwar era has concentrated less on the ideological transformations within the Soviet project than on how the Soviet project affected specific religious groups.

The third wave of scholarship on religion and atheism in the USSR has shifted attention from antireligious repression and atheist propaganda to looking at Soviet Communism through the lens of secularism. These studies draw an important distinction between secularization as a social process and secularism as a political project. Moreover, rather than considering the Soviet project in isolation, this research analyzes it comparatively alongside various models of the secular, from the French laïcité to secularism in Turkey and India. Informed by the theoretical claims of anthropology, sociol-
ogy, and religious studies, these studies characterize secularism as a disciplinary project concerned with effective governance and the formation of rational citizen-subjects. They propose that whereas the modern secular state presents secularism as neutral with regard to religion, the secular is in fact a productive category grounded in both Christian tradition and European history. When deployed by the state, secularism defines and regulates religion by delineating the proper boundaries between private passions and public order. Within this framework, religion becomes—as Talal Asad argues—something “anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, practiced in one’s spare time, [and] inessential to our common politics, economy, science, and morality.”

In conversation with this literature on secularism, scholars of the Soviet case frame it as a variant of secular modernity. Even as they note its peculiarity, they point to the shared foundation of both liberal and Communist engagements with religion as political projects: both assume religion is backward and irrational, and is therefore a threat to political and social stability—especially when it transgresses beyond the private sphere, which secularism delineates as its proper realm. Indeed, the liberal assumptions of secularism are the backdrop against which illiberal ideologies like Communism have been understood—which returns us to the concept of political religion. What made Communism peculiar to early observers like Fülöp-Miller and Berdiaev—which is to say, what made it like religion—was precisely the violation of the boundaries established by the modern liberal state, in which (irrational) religious passions were to be kept out of (rational) politics, and hence out of public life.

Finally, Soviet atheism has also remained marginal in the flourishing scholarship on late socialism, which seeks to understand socialist society’s gradual loss of faith in the Communist project, while at the same time complicating the depiction of late socialism as an era of “stagnation.” These studies stress the creativity and dynamism of late socialist culture, and analyze the complex subjectivities it produced. Still, inasmuch as this literature is interested in Soviet ideology, the focus has been largely on discourse and consumption rather than on ideological production. Scholars of the early Soviet period have recently shifted attention from ideological discourse to the institutions and mechanisms of ideological production in the Stalin era. But ideological production in the late Soviet period is only now beginning to be explored.

At stake in the investigation of Soviet ideology is the question of whether or not ideology mattered to the Soviet project and experience, and the picture that emerges suggests that by the late Soviet period, it largely did not. To be sure, by the Brezhnev era official ideology appeared ossified, with scientific atheism arguably the most stagnant dogma of all. Yet if we examine the debates within the ideological apparatus, which often took place behind closed doors, we get a different view. By revealing the architecture and internal logic of ideological production, this book suggests that ideology in general and atheism in
particular mattered—even in the late Soviet period, when most Soviet people no longer took it seriously. Indeed, as this book shows, they mattered precisely because most Soviet people were indifferent to Soviet atheism as a worldview and Soviet Communism as an ideology, presenting the party with a serious political dilemma.

To return to the history of Soviet atheism, the three stories scholars have told about the relationship between ideology, religion, and atheism in the USSR—that the Soviet project was a political religion, failed utopia, or particular version of secular modernity—when taken separately are incomplete, and when taken together confirm, but do not illuminate, the transformations in Soviet approaches to religion and atheism. Without a doubt, these narratives highlight essential features of the Soviet project: the Soviet project was repressive from beginning to end, though the objects of repression changed; Soviet utopianism, including its atheist component, indeed failed if measured by the Soviet state’s own definition of success; and the Soviet project did produce the kinds of secular institutions and subjects that make the Soviet state comparable to other modern states. Yet seeing these narratives as distinct rather than entangled stories masks the complexities and obscures the contradictions that, this book argues, are critical to understanding how the Soviet state approached its engagements with religion and atheism, and why these approaches changed over time. By examining how the Soviet state conceptualized and deployed “religion” and “atheism” in different historical contexts for different political, social, and cultural projects, this book unpacks the contradictions that shaped, and ultimately undermined, the coherence of Soviet Communism.

What Is Religion?

The founders of Soviet Communism—Karl Marx (1818–83) and Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924)—did not write much about religion. What they did write was folded into the greater story of humanity’s progress toward Communism. For Marx, history was the unfolding narrative of humanity’s interaction with nature, and historical materialism—the philosophical foundation of Marxism—explicitly rejected religious explanations of historical development. Marx argued that whereas religion offered transcendent falsehoods to explain earthly misery, historical materialism unveiled the political, economic, and social origins underpinning the injustices of the existing order. “Once the other-world of truth has vanished,” Marx wrote, the task of history was to “establish the truth of this world.” Philosophy worked “in the service of history” to overcome human alienation and offer answers to the questions about life in this world. In this way, “the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.” But philosophy was not enough. As Marx put it, “The
philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”

Marx did not so much reject religion as propose a new world in which religion was unnecessary. Religion, for Marx, was an early form of consciousness, and therefore a false consciousness. As Marx put it, “Man makes religion, religion does not make man.” Religion, therefore, was “the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has lost himself again.” It was a reflection of the world, and because the old world itself was “reversed,” its reflection—religion—was “a reversed world-consciousness.”

For the ruling classes, religion was a tool to subjugate the working masses. For the masses, it was, “at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering,” and therefore also a balm that alleviated their agony. It was “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions,” and in this sense—in Marx’s famous formulation—“the opium of the people.” Yet in alleviating people’s agony, religion blinded the masses to their own human dignity and agency. Once humanity became conscious of its true essence, it would discard religious illusions, since “to call on [the people] to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions.” To abolish religion as the “illusory happiness of the people” was, in actuality, “the demand for their real happiness.” By “discard[ing] his illusions,” a person would “move around himself as his own true sun.” Communism, then, would bring an end to the economic misery and political injustice that lay at the heart of all conflict, alienation, and suffering—the social roots of religion—and create a just and harmonious world where the powerful could not oppress, and the people would have no need for an illusory balm to alleviate their pain.

In many ways, Marxism’s dismissal of religion reflected a broader nineteenth-century optimism—embodied in the era’s new ideologies in general and socialism in particular—about the liberating potential of science, especially as it could be applied to society. The new ideologies considered religion to be a philosophical framework for making sense of the world that reflected a specific stage of historical development. Science, however, had revealed that religion was no longer an adequate explanation of how the world works (nature) or how to live in harmony with others (culture). The emergence of the social sciences in the nineteenth century was intimately connected with a faith that they could explain how the world worked and humanity’s place in it better than religion. These new sciences—from Auguste Comte’s (1798–1857) positivism, to the “utopian socialism” of Charles Fourier (1772–1837) and Robert Owen (1771–1858), to the “scientific socialism” of Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820–95)—were not just political but also moral projects. Comte saw positivism as a “religion of humanity” that could solve the problem of human conflict by figuring out
a scientific—and hence rational—approach to achieving social harmony once and for all. As Gareth Stedman Jones argues, “Socialism” in its different varieties presented itself as the universal replacement for the old religions of the world built upon a new ‘science’-based cosmology and a new ethical code, so that Marxism was “designed both to complete and replace Christianity.”

For Marx and his followers, socialism was a new truth, a better answer to the world’s questions, a better solution to social problems, and a better way for the individual to overcome alienation and achieve moral actualization. The problem with religion, then, was not that it claimed to offer universally true answers to life’s questions. The problem was that it offered the wrong answers, which left humanity in a subjugated and alienated state.

In sum, Marx at the same time took religion seriously, since he saw the criticism of religion as “the premise of all criticism”—and not seriously enough, since he considered the criticism of religion as “in the main complete” and therefore not a problem that required further philosophical engagement. As Marx and Engels—put it in the Communist Manifesto, “The charges against communism made from a religious, philosophical, and, more generally, idealistic position were “not deserving of serious examination,” since it did not “require deep intuition” to understand that consciousness was the product of material conditions. The religious problem was, at its foundation, socioeconomic, and so was its solution.

Lenin was less concerned than Marx with religion as a philosophical or social phenomenon. His approaches to religion were above all dictated by political objectives. In “Socialism and Religion” (1905), his most developed statement on the subject, Lenin followed Marx in casting religion as a form of “spiritual oppression” that was “merely a product and reflection of the economic yoke within society.” Like Marx, Lenin decried the passivity fostered by the religious promise of heavenly reward, because it blinded the proletariat to its agency and thus the path to revolution. “Rather than being drowned in ‘spiritual booze,’” Lenin wrote, “the slave should be conscious of his slavery and rise to struggle for his emancipation.” But Lenin made an important distinction between the state’s and party’s position on religion. He insisted on the secular separation of church and state as a necessary component of modernization: “Complete separation of church and state is what the socialist proletariat demands of the modern state and the modern church. . . . The Russian revolution must put this demand into effect as a necessary component of political freedom.” He envisioned religious communities as “absolutely free associations of like-minded citizens, associations independent of the state.” The state, in short, was to be indifferent to religion, so long as religion remained “a private affair.” Lenin juxtaposed the state’s indifference to religion with the party’s demand that party members not only reject religion but also profess atheist conviction. “So far as the party of the socialist proletariat is concerned,” Lenin argued, “re-
ligion is not a private affair.” The party was “an association of class-conscious, advanced fighters for the emancipation of the working class,” and as such “cannot and must not be indifferent to lack of class-consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs.”

Yet even as Lenin demanded strict ideological discipline of party members, he was, above all, concerned with politics and maintaining the party’s hold on power. Though he allowed that “science can be enlisted in the battle against religion,” he explicitly spoke out against repression and discrimination on religious grounds. Instead, he demanded that Bolsheviks help believers see through the “religious fog” with “purely ideological and solely ideological weapons.” For Lenin, Marxism was an ideology grounded in reason, and he saw propaganda as the means for spreading Communism and bringing forth a world without religion. But propaganda was only an aid to the political revolution, which would, in transforming the economic and political base, in turn transform the social order as well as the people’s consciousness and way of life. “No number of pamphlets and no amount of preaching can enlighten the proletariat, if it is not enlightened by its own struggle against the dark forces of capitalism,” Lenin wrote. “Unity in this really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for the creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven.” The party, in Lenin’s view, had to weigh the benefits of ideological purity against the imperative of expanding party ranks and securing political power. Indeed, Lenin instructed party members to avoid prioritizing the religious question, and not “allow the forces of the really revolutionary economic and political struggle to be split up on account of third-rate opinions or senseless ideas, rapidly losing all political importance, rapidly being swept up as rubbish by the very course of economic development.” The main task was making revolution in the name of Communism; once Communism was constructed, religion would simply wither away.

For Lenin, moreover, Communism was, emphatically, not a religion. In his polemic with the so-called God-builders—a group that included prominent Russian Marxists like Aleksandr Bogdanov (1873–1928), a member of the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party; the writer Maxim Gorky (1868–1936); and Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875–1933), the future head of the Soviet Commissariat of Enlightenment—Lenin denounced the effort to construct a socialist “religion of humanity” as a despicable “flirtation” with God (koketnichan’e s bozhen’koi). As Lenin put it in his 1913 letter to Gorky, “God-seeking differs from God-creating or God-making and other things of the kind, much as a yellow devil differs from a blue.” Since all religion, “however pure, ideal, or spontaneous,” was an “ideological plague,” any Bolshevik who “preached against God-seeking” by offering workers a socialist God was “prostitut[ing] himself in the worst way” and engaging in “necrophilia” (trupolozhstvo). As Lenin saw it, the distinction between Communism and
religion was not trivial. Whereas religion was an irrational illusion, Communism was a science grounded in reason; whereas religion appealed to the supernatural to reveal the wonders of the universe, Communism relied on materialism to explain the workings of nature; whereas religion turned to the transcendent to solve the problems of this world, Communism placed agency in the hands of people. Communism was not a religion, form of politics, or philosophy because it transcended religion, politics, and philosophy, and transformed the world in its totality through revolution.

What Is Atheism?

As faithful Marxists-Leninists, the Bolsheviks did not anticipate religion to be a serious obstacle to their project of revolutionary transformation. They understood, of course, that seizing political power would not immediately transform society, but they had faith in the Marxist model of historical development according to which religion would inevitably wither away. From the outset, however, there was a distinct tension between the Bolsheviks as Marxists committed to atheism, and the Bolsheviks as modernizers for whom secularization was a central tool for building a modern state. Whereas the Bolshevik Party Charter required an atheist conviction of party members, Lenin's first goal, following the Bolshevik seizure of power, was to establish a secular state in which religion was separate from politics, education, economics, medicine, and the law. Lenin saw the old regime's confessional order as a feudal holdover that underscored Russia's backwardness vis-à-vis Europe. For Lenin, the new order had to become secular (and therefore modern) before it could become atheist (and therefore Communist). The consolidation of political power and construction of a socialist economic base were the preconditions for the creation of a modern Communist order.

But what of atheism? If Marx and Lenin wrote little about religion, they wrote even less about atheism—largely because they considered it unimportant to the revolutionary unfolding of history. For both Marx and Lenin, religion had no autonomous power: since it was part of the "superstructure," its existence depended on the economic and political "base" that nourished it. Without the capitalist foundation and religious institutions that exploited the masses in its service, religion would simply disappear—along with private property, class divisions, the family, and the entire bourgeois capitalist edifice. Neither Marx nor Lenin ascribed much significance to atheism as a philosophical position, since appeals to reason could have no effect on the masses as long as they were trapped in miserable conditions and blinded by religious illusions. Only eliminating the socioeconomic roots of those conditions that required illusions would lead the masses to atheism. Atheism, then, was always the product of Communism; it did not produce it.
How, then, did the Bolsheviks imagine the disappearance of religion and arrival of atheism after the revolution? In theory, the Bolshevik understanding of religion and atheism in the new Communist order was remarkably simple. In his book *How Gods and Goddesses Are Born, Live, and Die* (1923), Emelian Iaroslavskii (1878–1943)—who, as the founder of the League of the Militant Godless and editor of the journal *Bezbozhnik* (*Godless*), became the leading Bolshevik voice of Soviet atheism—saw atheism as the final chapter in the story people told themselves about the world and their place in it.

Following the nineteenth-century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), whose anthropological conception of religion was also the basis of Marx’s thinking, Iaroslavskii argued that religion always had “earthly roots,” and deities were simply the reflection of the human communities that produced them. As communities became more complex, so did their stories, which also reflected their more advanced stage of development. For this reason, different peoples across the world without direct contact with each other (but in comparable stages of development) produced similar gods. Iaroslavskii posited that whereas in its early history humanity had trembled in ignorance at nature’s power and created gods to make sense of and tame the elements, soon the time would come when humanity would recognize itself as the ultimate source of authority, and then it would no longer need to populate the heavens with powerful supernatural deities. Just as “there was a time when people did not know any religion,” Iaroslavskii explained, “now the time has come when millions of people are breaking with religion and rejecting it.”

Religion, then, was not eternal or transcendent but instead the product of history. It had been born, lived through its historical stage, and under Communism would die.

What became clear after the October Revolution was that religion was not going to die a natural death. The unfolding of history would require the active involvement of the Bolshevik Party. The Bolsheviks understood religion as a phenomenon that consisted of three components: the political, grounded in religious institutions; the ideological, embodied in a false worldview based on the belief in the supernatural; and the spiritual, encompassed in the values, practices, and customs that made up the ineffable dimension of everyday life, or *byt*. The party’s engagements with religion reflected this understanding. To address religion as a political phenomenon, the party deployed a militant ant clerical approach that used administrative regulation and political repression to circumscribe the autonomy of religious institutions, marginalize religion in public life, and undermine its political power. To address religion as an ideological problem, the party relied on propaganda, education, and enlightenment to inculcate a scientific materialist worldview. Finally, to address religion as a spiritual problem, it used the tools of cultural revolution to transform traditional ways of life into the new Communist *byt* (*novyi kom munisticheskii byt*).
At the same time, relying on Marxist-Leninist theory to make sense of how and why Soviet approaches to religion and atheism changed over time obscures the specific historical circumstances in which the party had to make decisions and form policies. While it is a truism to say that the Communist revolution did not come with a blueprint, it is nevertheless worth underscoring that the Soviet project had to work out its relationship to religion and atheism not just in theory but also in history. Marx was dead, Lenin died in 1924, but the Soviet project endured for another seven decades. Marxism-Leninism constituted the conceptual framework through which Soviet atheists made sense of religion, but they were also influenced by their own experiences with religion on the ground. As history moved forward and the revolution receded ever farther into the past, Soviet atheists had to figure out how Marxism-Leninism could help them answer the questions and solve the problems of their immediate reality, which remained contradictory and imperfect.

Over the course of the Soviet period, the party’s three conceptions of religion—as politics, ideology, and spiritual culture—coexisted, but not without tensions and contradictions. In part, this was because Soviet priorities changed over time, and in part it was because Soviet power managed religion and atheism through different institutions, which operated according to their own distinct logics. Indeed, behind its monolithic façade, Soviet power was a complex edifice comprising party, government, security, and cultural organizations. The party’s mandate was to guide the political development of the Soviet project according to Marxist-Leninist ideology, as well as to cultivate political discipline and ideological consciousness among party cadres, and the Soviet masses more broadly. The task of the government bureaucracy was to execute the will of the party through the state’s administrative apparatus. The charge of the security organs was to police political and ideological orthodoxy in order to protect the system from internal and external enemies. The work of cultural institutions was to shape Soviet society by cultivating enlightened, rational, and disciplined subjects.

Each of these institutional frameworks—party, government, security, and culture—had different objectives when it came to religion and atheism, and different strategies for achieving those goals. The party’s ultimate goal, made explicit in its charter, was to produce an atheist society free of religion. The task of government organs—most prominently, the government councils on religious affairs—was to manage the relationship between religious institutions and the state, as well as to manage religion on the ground using legal and administrative means. The task of security organs was to neutralize opposition, which included religious organizations and believers perceived to be anti-Soviet through extralegal means, including terror. But the primary focus of this book is on the cultural organizations that managed both the theoretical and practical aspects of atheist work. Concentrating on the theoretical side of atheist production were institutions such as the Leningrad State Museum of Religion.
and Atheism (Gosudarstvennyi muzei istorii religii i ateizma, or GMIRA), founded in 1931; the departments of Scientific Atheism created in the country’s top universities and institutes under Khrushchev; and, after its establishment in 1964, the Institute of Scientific Atheism (Institut nauchnogo ateizma, or INA) of the Central Committee’s Academy of Social Sciences (Akademiia obshchestvennykh nauk pri TsK KPSS, or AON). The practical work of disseminating atheism fell to enlightenment organizations such as the League of the Militant Godless (Soiuz voinstvennykh bezbozhnikov), which functioned from 1925 until 1941, and the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge (Obshchestvo po rasprostraneniu politicheskikh i nauchnykh znani, or Znanie), which was established in 1947 in part to take over the atheist work of the league. In pursuing their distinct objectives, these institutions often worked against each other, and sometimes even against broader Soviet aims. Even if party, government, security, and cultural organizations had the same overarching goal—building Soviet Communism—they had different priorities. Their specific objectives—ideological purity, effective governance, neutralizing opposition, and cultural transformation—competed with one another, which made Soviet engagements with religion and atheism inconsistent, and frequently counterproductive to the success of the Soviet project.

Finally, it is worth noting that when the party used “religion” as a general term, it was often implicitly speaking about Orthodox Christianity and the Russian Orthodox Church. This was both because Orthodox Christianity was the majority confession, constituting about 70 percent of the population at the turn of the century, and because of the deep historic ties between the Orthodox Church and the Russian state. Other religious groups—Muslims, Jews, Baptists, Buddhists, Catholics, or any of the numerous other religious confessions present in the USSR—were typically named explicitly. Much as Russians were the Soviet Union’s unmarked ethnic group, Russian Orthodoxy was the unmarked religion. This is significant because it informed the logic of Soviet atheism’s internal development, leading Soviet atheists, for example, to shift attention from combatting the church and its dogma to replacing religious rites and rituals—a sphere that is particularly significant in Orthodox Christianity, but considerably less so in many of the USSR’s other confessions. Because of the centrality of Russian Orthodoxy to the party’s engagements with religion and atheism, critical themes—specifically, the connection between religion and nationalism inside the USSR, and the role of religion in the international context, especially during the Cold War—are less prominent in this book, though they are, of course, ever-present in the Soviet Union’s history.

Communism’s Calling Card

*A Sacred Space Is Never Empty* begins by tracing how the Bolsheviks approached religion under Lenin and Stalin, from the revolution in 1917 until
Stalin’s death in 1953, using legal and administrative regulation, extralegal repression and terror, and militant atheist propaganda. It argues that against the background of the Bolsheviks’ claims about building a new world, remaking society, and transforming human nature, religion remained, in the early Soviet period, above all a political problem. While in theory militant atheism was considered an important weapon on the religious front, in practice it consistently remained secondary to other objectives: political consolidation, economic modernization, and social stability. Religion mattered to the Bolsheviks inasmuch as it constituted a threat to Soviet power, and by the end of the 1930s—with the political power of the Orthodox Church as an institution nearly destroyed—they believed that threat to have been effectively neutralized. From this point, the continued existence of religion in the Soviet Union would be on the state’s terms. Stalin set those terms in 1943, when his wartime reversal on the religious question and creation of a government bureaucracy to manage religious affairs formalized a new framework for Soviet engagements with religion that remained in place for the rest of the Soviet period. Stalin’s last decade in power was a period of relative stability on the religious front, whereas the decline of political support for atheism made it largely invisible in public life.

The book then follows how the revolution’s promise to remake the world mapped onto the revolution’s “second act,” when, following Stalin’s death, Khrushchev sought to place the Soviet project on new foundations by announcing that the USSR had entered the new stage of “Building Communism.” For Khrushchev, political de-Stalinization, economic modernization, and ideological mobilization were all part of the effort to return revolutionary vitality to Marxist-Leninist ideology. Communism’s arrival, Khrushchev proclaimed, was imminent; the “grandchildren” of the revolution—the young people coming of age in the 1960s—would live to see it. Yet religion remained a stain on Soviet modernity, an alien ideology inside Soviet Communism. Since religion remained a fact of Soviet life, and since Khrushchev, a true Communist, believed it to be fundamentally incompatible with Communism, atheism returned to Soviet life. Under Khrushchev, the party mobilized an extensive antireligious campaign, closing nearly half the country’s religious spaces, instituting repressive constraints on the autonomy of religious organizations and clergy, and investing unprecedented resources into creating a centralized atheist apparatus. Moreover, Soviet atheism was redefined: since religious institutions were now considered politically loyal and even patriotic, religion became an ideological problem, a “survival” to be eradicated from Soviet consciousness through enlightenment. In the Khrushchev era, then, the militant atheism of the early Soviet period was renounced in favor of a scientific atheism.

In the Brezhnev era, the continued failure of religion to “die out,” even after the party’s best efforts to hurry the process along with antireligious measures, forced atheists to confront the complex reality of lived religiosity, and to
reconsider their definition of religion and approaches to atheist work—again. The atheist apparatus had to recognize that even if, in theory, Communism embraced individual life from the cradle to the grave, what this meant in practice—in Soviet lived experience—still remained unclear. In the late Soviet period, atheists increasingly came to see religion not just as a political and ideological problem but also as a spiritual problem. They believed that this lived religion, deeply embedded in worldviews and ways of life, could be overcome only with a spiritual atheism that addressed not just institutions and beliefs but also morality, emotions, aesthetics, rituals, and community experience. While initially the Soviet definition of atheism was simply what was left once the gods were chased out, the atheist apparatus came to realize that it had to move beyond a negative definition and produce a positive atheism that could fill the empty space left behind.

But the paradox of Soviet atheism is that despite its centrality to Communism in theory, in practice it was never clear what it was, how important it was, or who exactly was in charge of defining it and spreading it to the masses. As unwitting caretakers of the Soviet soul, Soviet atheists found themselves continuously searching for new answers to the religious question. In the process, Soviet Communism’s battle against religion came to be seen as a battle for atheism. In this sense, Soviet Communism tried to transform atheism into its opposite: a set of positive beliefs and practices with a coherent spiritual center.

Atheism, at its core, rejects the idea that transcendent or supernatural forces have power over the natural world. In the Soviet context, atheism underpinned Communism’s most radical and utopian premise: the promise that humanity could master the world, and that injustice and evil could be overcome in this life rather than the next. But Soviet atheism was also about power, a tool for undermining competing sources of political, ideological, and spiritual authority—political institutions that were not the Communist Party, ideologies that were not Marxism-Leninism, communities that were not the Soviet people, and ways of life that were not the Soviet way of life. In contesting competing claims to truth and authority, Soviet Communism assumed the burden of providing its own answers to life’s questions and solutions to life’s problems. In this way, atheism became the battleground on which Soviet Communism engaged with the existential concerns at the heart of human existence: the meaning of life and death.

Soviet atheism’s effort to compete with and ultimately transcend religion sheds light on how Soviet Communism framed the battle between the old and the new, and how this conception shaped approaches to winning Soviet minds, hearts, and souls. This book, then, is about how the party discovered that it had to become a church and the revolutionary attempt to turn an ideology into a religion—not just in theory, but also in history. Following the particular
meanings and functions of atheism through Soviet history makes visible the broader significance of atheism to Soviet Communism. Atheism was Communism’s “calling card” because it was the precondition for its arrival: a testament of individual conviction in Communism’s political, ideological, and spiritual truth and authority. If atheist conviction did not fill the sacred space of Soviet Communism, the commitment of Soviet citizens to Communism would remain provisional, and the Soviet project incomplete.