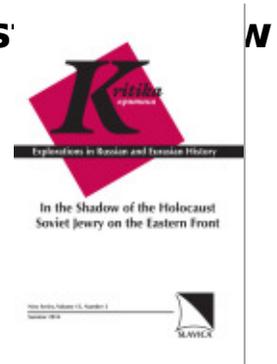




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Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, Nikolai Semenovich Gordienko, Susanne Fusso, Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock



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“The Confession of an Atheist Who Became a Scholar of Religion”

Nikolai Semenovich Gordienko’s Last Interview

VICTORIA SMOLKIN-ROTHROCK

For Nikolai Semenovich Gordienko (1929–2011), atheism was not just a personal conviction but a professional vocation. Among the most prominent professors of “scientific atheism” in the Soviet Union, Gordienko was also the author of the *Foundations of Scientific Atheism* textbook and a consultant to the political elite on religious questions.¹ Indeed, over the course of his

There are a number of people to whom I am grateful for helping to bring this manuscript to completion: Mikhail Iu’revich Smirnov, for facilitating the interview with N. S. Gordienko and for his support of my research; Susanne Fusso, for her initial translation of the interview, which motivated me to complete it; and Wesleyan University, especially the History Department, for providing the funding that made this research possible. I am also very grateful to this journal’s editors, for their initial interest in this somewhat unconventional piece of scholarship and for their generous and critical feedback, which undoubtedly improved the piece. Finally, I am grateful to Nikolai Semenovich Gordienko for his time and for his candid testimony, which deepened my own understanding of Soviet atheism as an ideological project. I wish our conversation could have continued.

The full transcript of this interview is available in the original Russian: Viktoriia Smolkin-Rotrok, “Interv’iu s professorom Nikolaem Semenovichem Gordienko,” in *Put’uchenogo: Nikolai Semenovich Gordienko*, ed. M. Iu. Smirnov (Moscow: Osobaia kniga, 2013), 25–61; and “‘Nasha zadacha—poniat’: Poslednee interv’iu N. S. Gordienko,” *Vestnik Leningradskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta imeni A. S. Pushkina: Nauchnyi zhurnal* 4, 2 (2011): 274–86.

¹ Gordienko’s *Foundations of Scientific Atheism* was used in “scientific atheism” courses across the Soviet Union, appeared in multiple editions, and was published in 15 languages of the Soviet republics. The last edition is N. S. Gordienko, *Osnovy nauchnogo ateizma: Uchebnoe posobie dlia pedagogicheskikh institutov* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1988). On atheism in Soviet education, see Michael Froggatt, “Renouncing Dogma, Teaching Utopia: Science in Schools under Khrushchev,” in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones (London: Routledge, 2006), 250–67; and Sonja Luehrmann, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

life, he was connected with every institution that managed Soviet spiritual life in both its religious and atheist variants.²

Gordienko began his teaching career during Nikita Khrushchev's antireligious campaign (1958–64) and went on to become chair of the Department of Scientific Atheism at the Herzen State Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad, a position he held for 25 years. In this capacity, he helped create “scientific atheism” as an academic discipline, as well as to formulate party policy on religion, in part through his collaboration with Moscow's Institute of Scientific Atheism.³ As one of the state's religion experts in Leningrad, he had regular contact with local Orthodox Church officials, the students and faculty of the Leningrad Theological Academy, the Leningrad State Museum of Religion and Atheism, and the local plenipotentiary of the Council on Religious Affairs. Hundreds of students passed through his classroom at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute, as well as the institute's Club of Militant Atheists (Klub voinstvuiushchikh ateistov [KVAT]), and they remember his lectures as the only place where they could learn about religion. Indeed, for most Leningrad youth, scientific atheism lectures and atheist clubs like KVAT (which organized debates with religious youth) were the only politically sanctioned spaces for dialogue on spiritual questions.⁴ Finally, it is important

² These included educational institutions (Gordienko's primary focus); state institutions (such as the Council on Religious Affairs, the organization charged with managing the legal and administrative, as opposed to the ideological, components of church–state relations); party institutions (such as the Party's Institute of Scientific Atheism, as well as local Leningrad party organs); cultural and social organizations, such as the Museum of Religion and Atheism and the Znanie Society; and of course, religious institutions, and the Russian Orthodox Church in particular, as Gordienko was one of the top official experts on Orthodoxy in the Soviet Union. It is also likely that Gordienko's work put him in contact with the security organs, although this did not come up in either the written sources or the interview.

³ The Institute of Scientific Atheism (INA) of the Communist Party Central Committee's Academy of Social Sciences (AON) (Institut nauchnogo ateizma pri Akademii obshchestvennykh nauk pri TsK KPSS) was founded by the 2 January 1964 Party Central Committee resolution “On Measures for Strengthening the Atheist Education of the Population” (O meropriiatiakh po usileniu ateisticheskogo vospitaniia naseleniia, *Partiinaiia zhizn'*, no. 2 (1964). The institute's primary tasks were to centralize atheist work and gather data on Soviet religiosity, develop a methodology for future research, and coordinate atheist education on a union-wide level with local organs. On the formation and work of the institute, see Iu. P. Zuev, “Institut nauchnogo ateizma (1964–1991),” *Voprosy religii i religiovedeniia: Antologiiia otechestvennogo religiovedeniia* 1 (2009): 9–34; and Viktoriia [Victoria] Smolkin, “Sviato mesto pusto ne byvaet: Ateisticheskoe vospitanie v Sovetskom Soiuzе, 1964–1968,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas: Debaty o politike i kul'ture*, no. 3 (65) (2009): 36–52.

⁴ As Mikhail Odintsov, a graduate of Moscow's Institute of Scientific Atheism and currently the representative of the Russian state's Plenipotentiary on Human Rights (Predstavitel' apparata Upolnomochennogo po pravam cheloveka), remembers, “No significant scholarly event in religious studies in the Soviet Union or contemporary Russia took place without his participation” (“Pamiati N. S. Gordienko,” in *Put' uchenogo*, 87).

to bear in mind that, often, the careers of atheist cadres did not end with the end of the Soviet Union and official atheism. In the post-Soviet period, some continued to work within the state apparatus as advisers on church–state relations; others continued academic careers within the framework of fields like sociology of religion, religious studies (*religiovedenie*), or cultural studies (*kul'turologiia*); while still others went on to play central roles in religious revival movements across the country. Atheist cadres, in short, used—and continue to use—the knowledge they acquired in the Soviet period to shape the conditions of post-Soviet spiritual life.



The professionalization of atheism was a logical development in the Soviet system, where atheist commitments were written into the Communist Party Charter. But career atheists like Gordienko were also the product of historical circumstances. Despite the common image of the Soviet Union as an atheist monolith, the reality was that there was no consistent political line on religion and, for most of the Soviet period, no centralized system for managing religion and atheism. Whereas militant atheism was required of party members, the state was founded on the secular separation of religion and politics, and individual citizens had the right to fulfill religious needs and observe religious rites.⁵ The Party's influence over state institutions, however, resulted in the oscillation of Soviet religious policy from repressive to permissive and back again.

Without a doubt, the communist project was hostile to religion, and the best-known element of Soviet religious policy is the militant antireligious campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s (organized by the press, the Komsomol, and the League of Militant Godless). One of the first political decisions taken by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution was the 20 January 1918 decree separating church from state and education from the church, the primary aims of which were to disenfranchise religious institutions by secularizing church land and property and to diminish religion's public presence by confining it to sanctioned religious spaces. As scholarship on the prewar period makes evident, however, early Soviet antireligious campaigns succeeded in some goals (severely diminishing the institutional authority of the Russian Orthodox Church and marginalizing religion in Soviet public

⁵ Catherine Wanner underscores this important distinction, writing, "though the state was to take a fairly neutral position toward religious organizations and practice, the Communist Party was to take a decidedly adversarial stance" ("Introduction," in *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Wanner [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012], 12).

life) but contributed little to the secularization of Soviet society.⁶ If the measure of atheist success was the production of a secular population, then the project almost certainly failed.

By the end of the 1930s, however, the campaign against religion ceased to be a political priority. Official atheism was dropped almost entirely at the height of the war, when Iosif Stalin, seeing religion's potential in mobilizing patriotism, restored the Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁷ But even before this rapprochement, Stalin had signaled a more pragmatic course on religion, which privileged state stability over ideological purity. With the shutting down of atheist periodicals and publishing houses in 1941 and the disbanding of the League of Militant Godless in 1942, Stalin practically dismantled the institutional base for atheist work.⁸ On the eve of Khrushchev's antireligious campaigns, then, the Party found itself without the necessary institutions or cadres to carry out its will.

The public narrative of Khrushchev's antireligious campaign projected the inevitable decline of religion, and the state aggressively pursued measures—administrative closures of religious spaces, legal pressure on religious organizations and believers, and unrelenting scientific enlightenment propaganda—to bring about the inevitable even sooner. But beneath the

⁶ On the argument that the early antireligious campaigns were aimed above all at the Russian Orthodox Church as an institution, see Georgii Mitrofanov, *Istoriia Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi, 1900–1927* (St. Petersburg: Satis, 2002). On the early Soviet antireligious campaigns from the perspective of the Soviet state and party, see William B. Husband, *“Godless Communists”: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917–1929* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1994); Luukkanen, *The Religious Policy of the Stalinist State: A Case Study. The Central Standing Committee on Religious Questions, 1929–1938* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1997); and Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁷ On the reversal of Soviet religious policy under Stalin, see Tatiana Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2002); Stephen Merritt Miner, *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); S. V. Bolotov, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' i mezhdunarodnaia politika SSSR v 1930-e–1950-e gody* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Krutitskogo podvor'ia, 2011); and O. Iu. Vasilieva, I. I. Kudriavtsev, and L. A. Lykova, eds., *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny 1941–1945 gg: Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Krutitskogo podvor'ia, 2009).

⁸ Although the League of Militant Atheists technically was succeeded by the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge (founded in 1948 and after 1963 renamed simply Znanie), this new institution was not charged with atheist propaganda as such but mandated to focus on political education and scientific enlightenment in general. The most comprehensive study of the Znanie Society is Michael Froggatt, “Science in Propaganda and Popular Culture in the USSR under Khrushchev, 1953–1964” (unpublished D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 2005).

ideological veneer, there was a growing awareness within the apparatus that administrative policies did not reduce religiosity, and enlightenment lectures did not convert listeners to the "scientific-materialist worldview."⁹ When "overcoming religious survivals" became part of "building communism," the state could only turn to the old *bezbozhniki*—themselves "survivals" of a former era. The Soviet press printed the conversion stories of famous apostates from Orthodoxy such as the theologians-turned-atheists Aleksandr Osipov and Evgraf Duluman, but what was needed was a new generation of trained cadres that could personally bring the atheist message into every Soviet classroom, workplace, and home. In this context, cadres with even minimal qualifications had opportunities for rapid career advancement. But atheist work also gave unprecedented access to the lived experience of religion, which, for these same cadres, complicated the official picture of Soviet society as a homogenous, modern, secular community.

Perhaps the most important thing cadre biographies reveal is that the Party's grasp on religion, both as a concept and as a social fact, was feeble at best. In as much as effective governance of spiritual life depended on the state's ability to "see" the population (borrowing James Scott's terminology), atheist cadres and the information they gathered and relayed to the center played an important role in the shifting relationship between politics and religion in the Soviet Union. If we are to understand how ideology transformed the Soviet spiritual landscape, we must pay attention not just to official policy but also to the individuals behind the bureaucracies. Personal records, and oral history in particular, offer access to the mechanics of Soviet governance and reveal the kind of information that cadres gathered and analyzed for the state. However, even as new scholarship addresses this gap and promises to complicate our understanding of Soviet institutions, the cadres remain faceless bureaucrats.¹⁰ In the case of official atheism, there are still many

⁹ On the ways the Khrushchev antireligious campaign changed atheist understandings of religion, see Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, "Cosmic Enlightenment: Scientific Atheism and the Soviet Conquest of Space," in *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture in Post-Stalinist Russia*, ed. James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 159–94.

¹⁰ Some recent work that incorporates personal records and oral histories has been critical in filling out, and even revising, conceptions of how Soviet institutions worked. See esp. the work of Nikolai Mitrokhin, a number of whose interviews with more than 100 members of the Communist Party *apparatus* have been published, as well as Nikolai Mitrokhin, "'Strange People' in the Politburo: Institutional Problems and the Human Factor in the Economic Collapse of the Soviet Empire," *Kritika* 10, 4 (2009): 869–96. See also Edward E. Roslof, "'Faces of the Faceless': A. A. Trushin, Communist Over-Procurator for Moscow, 1943–1984," *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 18/19 (2002–3): 105–25; Caroline Humphrey, "The 'Creative Bureaucrat': Conflicts in the Production of Soviet Communist Party Discourse," *Inner Asia* 10,

unanswered questions: Who were these professional atheists and how did they find themselves in this field? What did they know about religion coming in and how did their understanding of the religiosity they encountered on the ground change over time? What knowledge and skills helped ideology cadres navigate Soviet bureaucracies? How should we understand and use the information and recommendations they produced? Are the ethnographic and sociological material atheists gathered on the ground valuable sources for the historian? Finally, did the constant reports cadres sent to their superiors have any impact on policy? And if not, does this mean that atheist cadres and the knowledge they produced did not matter?¹¹



What is perhaps most striking about Gordienko's autobiographical narrative is how his own understanding of atheism's role in Soviet society changed over time. In the mid-1980s, Gordienko served as a consultant to Konstantin Mikhailovich Kharchev, the chair of the Council on Religious Affairs and a member of the state commission that coordinated the celebration of the Orthodox Millennium in 1988—a pivotal event in church–state relations under Gorbachev.¹² In 1989–2002, the critical years of post-Soviet transition, Gordienko was the chair of the Council on Religion and Atheism at the Leningrad branch of Znanie, which became a space for interconfessional dialogue and for educating post-Soviet citizens about religion.¹³ At the end of his life, Gordienko was perhaps best known for his testimony in the famous trial against the Jehovah's Witnesses, where he defended the freedom of conscience of a minority sect against persecution by the state and the Russian Orthodox Church.¹⁴

1 (2008): 5–35; Julie Fedor, “Chekists Look Back on the Cold War: The Polemical Literature,” *Intelligence and National Security* 26, 6 (2011): 842–63; and Amir Weiner and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Getting to Know You: How the Soviets Made Their Society Transparent,” *Kritika* 13, 1 (2012): 5–45.

¹¹ Sonja Luehrmann offers an innovative analysis of the sources and methods available to scholars of religion and secularism in the Soviet Union in *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹² Konstantin Mikhailovich Kharchev (b. 1934) was chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs between 1984 and 1989. The official state commission in charge of the Orthodox Millennium is distinct from the commission within the Russian Orthodox Church, which had been formed earlier and coordinated its work with the state commission.

¹³ Gordienko was a lecturer for Znanie for more than 50 years. The Council on Religion and Atheism is still active today, housed in the St. Petersburg Humanism Center (Gumanitarnyi tsentr), formerly the Leningrad House of Scientific Atheism.

¹⁴ On the history of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Soviet Union, see Emily P. Baran, *Dissent on the Margins: How Soviet Jehovah's Witnesses Defied Communism and Lived to Preach About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

What made possible Gordienko's professional trajectory and intellectual transformation? In many ways, Gordienko's is a model Soviet biography. Born in 1929 to a peasant family in the Khar'kov region of Ukraine, Gordienko was a poor provincial whose accomplishments were made possible by Soviet power, which rewarded the hard work of those with ideologically correct biographies. One of the cornerstones of Gordienko's life narrative was his love of learning: even as war and evacuation disrupted his education, he continued his studies and finished school with distinction after he returned home. In 1948, Gordienko was accepted into the Philosophy Department of Leningrad State University, which was filled with demobilized veterans, children of the urban elite, and "provincials from all corners of the country" like himself.¹⁵ When historical and dialectical materialism were introduced into Soviet higher education in the early 1950s, opening up new career prospects, graduate work became a more realistic option. Gordienko earned his university diploma in 1954, became a party member in 1955, and in 1956 defended his candidate-level dissertation.

As a party member with an advanced degree in philosophy, Gordienko had two possible career paths: he could enter the party or Komsomol bureaucracies and make a political career, or he could teach one of the social science subjects through which Soviet youth were educated in Marxism-Leninism.¹⁶ Gordienko's first position, teaching philosophy and ethics at the Leningrad Medical Institute, fit this second path; he might have stayed an institute instructor if not for Khrushchev's antireligious campaign, which created the need for instructors of "scientific atheism" and religion "experts" loyal to the state and its ideology.

In the 1960s, the Party adopted a more technocratic approach to governance that prioritized "concrete social research" and data analysis over coercion, and this transition from a "militant" to a "scientific" mode of governance gave new political significance to ideology as a tool of mobilization. By creating new institutions to study Soviet society, it also produced the conditions for what is now described as the rebirth of the social sciences.¹⁷ Current debates about

¹⁵ N. S. Gordienko, "Zanimat'sia tol'ko liubimym delom," in *Put'uchenogo*, 18.

¹⁶ M. Iu. Smirnov, *Religiia i religiovedenie v Rossii* (St. Petersburg: Russkaia khristianskaia gumanitarnaia akademiia, 2013), 269.

¹⁷ Examples include the Institute of Public Opinion (Institut obshchestvennogo mneniia) under *Komsomol'skaia pravda*; the Institute of Concrete Social Research in Moscow; and sociology sectors formed in the Academy of Sciences Institute of Philosophy and in the Party's Academy of Social Sciences. On the late Soviet revival of the social sciences, and sociology in particular, see B. A. Grushin, *Chetyre zhizni Rossii v zerkale oprosov obshchestvennogo mneniia: Ocherki massovogo soznaniia rossiian vremen Khrushcheva, Brezhneva, Gorbacheva, i El'tsina: Zhizn' pervaiia. Epokha Khrushcheva* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2001); A. O. Boronoev,

what to do with the “scientific atheist” past of contemporary Russian religious studies only attest to the continued tension between (ostensibly neutral) social sciences and (ostensibly politicized) ideology, as these influenced the day-to-day operations of Soviet governance.¹⁸ The final word, of course, always remained with power—but the Party depended on the knowledge that atheist cadres like N. S. Gordienko acquired on the job.



The following is a redacted translation of Nikolai Semenovich Gordienko’s final interview, arranged with the help of the Russian sociologist of religion Mikhail Iur’evich Smirnov. The three of us met in St. Petersburg on 17 June 2011, approximately five months before Gordienko’s death. Our conversation ranged from Gordienko’s family history and his trips abroad, what he knew about religion in his youth and how he came to atheism, the conditions that made possible his professional trajectory, to how he managed his relationships with party, state, and church functionaries. Gordienko also spoke about what it meant to be a “Soviet person,” about the fate of Soviet atheism, and about how the post-Soviet religious landscape looks through atheist eyes.

“I Really Liked to Study”

Nikolai Semenovich Gordienko (NSG): How did I end up in atheist work? It’s very simple. My ancestors were Cossacks from the Zaporozhian Sech. In the 1930s, they moved to the Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, Khar’kov oblast’. They both had only a fourth-grade education. My father didn’t show any signs of religiosity. My mother, of course, observed Christmas, consecrated kulich for Easter, and so on, but she would say, “I appreciate religion, but I can’t stand the church and the priests.” This was because she had a school friend, a priest’s daughter, who told her all kinds of stories about clerical life, about how what the priests taught them in school diverged from what went on in

ed., *Sotsiologiya v Leningrade—Sankt-Peterburg vo vtoroi polovine 20 veka* (St. Petersburg: Sankt-Peterburgskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2007); G. S. Batygin and S. F. Iarmoliuk, eds., *Rossiiskaia sotsiologiya shestidesiatykh godov v vospominaniakh i dokumentakh* (St. Petersburg: Russkii khristianskii gumanitarnyi institut, 1999); and Ol’ga Sveshnikova, “Iubilei Gerodota: Shestidesiatnicheskoe proshloe v zerkale sovremennoi sotsiologii,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 98 (2009): 97–110.

¹⁸ On Soviet sociology of religion, see M. M. Shakhnovich, “Otechestvennoe religiovedenie 20–80-kh godov XX veka: Ot kakogo nasledstva my otkazyvaemsia,” in *Ocherki po istorii religiovedeniia*, ed. Shakhnovich (St. Petersburg: Sankt-Peterburgskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2006); M. Iu. Smirnov, “Sovremennaia rossiiskaia sotsiologiya religii: Otkuda i zachen?” *Religiovedenie: Nauchno-teoreticheskii zhurnal*, no. 2 (2007); and Smirnov, *Religiia i religiovedenie v Rossii*.

their home. I grew up as an *oktiabrenok*, then a Pioneer. Then the war started. I left Ukraine with our last troops, spent time in Ashkhabad, in Tashkent, in Alma-Ata—in orphanages—and I tried to continue my education. I really liked to study, and I found an orphanage where I finished fifth and sixth grade. When I returned I, naturally, became a member of the Komsomol. I was the secretary of the school Komsomol Committee.

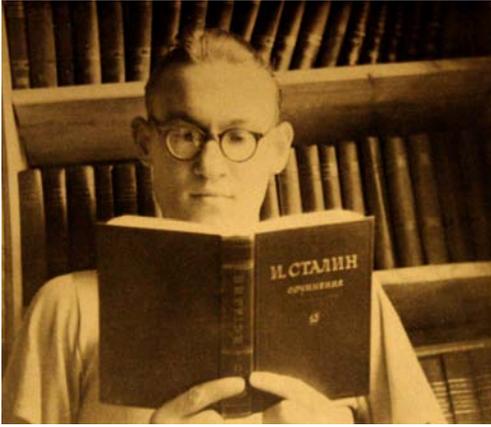
Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock (VSR): Were your parents party members?

NSG: No, no. My father started out as a worker and ended up as an accountant. He was an apolitical person, although he understood everything. He and Mama had two sons, and when I disappeared for two years during the war, they thought I had perished. Only my grandmother would say, “No, I know that my grandson is alive.”

My grandmother, it seems, somehow “encoded” [*zakodirovala*] my future. I was born on 25 January 1929, and they had to name me. My grandfather was a good friend of the local priest—they were as thick as thieves. In general, my grandfather always found friends under any regime. My grandmother says, “It’s my first grandchild, and I want him to be named Mikola.” Well, my grandfather goes to the priest, they have a few drinks, talk. My grandfather says, “Anna wants our grandson to be named Mikola.” The priest answers: “You know, Grigorii, the winter feast of Nikolai has already passed, and the spring one is still a long way off. The name has to come from the saint whose day is nearest to the birthday, so here are the names you can choose from.” Grandfather told my grandmother, and she says: “Oh, Grisha, you are a complete idiot. Just promise him two sacks of wheat.” Then, as now, you had to pay for christening. Nowadays the price list hangs in the church, but back then you would give one sack of wheat. “Just promise him two sacks,” she says. So he goes to the priest again, and then the priest agrees. It turns out that for two sacks of wheat you could call the child Mikola. And that’s how, contrary to church canon, I was named Nikolai.

I finished school with distinction. At Leningrad State University, I was in the Philosophy Faculty, in the Department of Logic. My thesis was “A. Ia. Vyshinskii’s Unmasking of the Sophistry of American Diplomats.” It was praised, they even said it was close to being a candidate-level dissertation. But for my dissertation I chose a different topic: a history of how logic was taught at St. Petersburg University. True, I later changed it. Why? Because the first teacher of logic at the university was Aleksandr Ivanovich Galich, Pushkin’s teacher in the Lycée.¹⁹ In Pushkin there is even the phrase

¹⁹ Aleksandr Ivanovich Galich (Govorov) (1773–1848) was a Russian philosopher who taught Russian and Latin at the Tsarskoe Selo Lycée, as well as philosophy and logic at the Pedagogical



N. S. Gordienko with Stalin's
Collected Works, 1950s
Reproduced with permission.

“my dear Galich.”²⁰ Galich was repressed for his unorthodox views, for departing from the church canons—there was a pogrom of the Kazan, St. Petersburg, and Moscow universities by a man called Runich, the Fursenko of that time.²¹ They banned Galich; he ended his life as the director of some archive and all his works were confiscated. I stumbled upon a whole collection of his confiscated lectures in the oblast’ archive. Until then, we knew nothing about these lectures. I

dug around thoroughly and [in 1956] defended my dissertation on “Aleksandr Ivanovich Galich’s Views on Philosophy and Logic.” When they found out about my work, they started to consider Galich the founder of the Philosophy Department of Leningrad State University. Since Galich was repressed for religious reasons, I became more deeply interested in that topic.²²

“Then Suddenly They Needed Someone to Teach Atheism”

A little while later, there was a party resolution that introduced the course on scientific atheism as a required subject in all higher educational institutions.²³ As usual, no one had bothered about this; then suddenly they needed someone to teach atheism. I was teaching philosophy at the medical institute,

Institute (in St. Petersburg University from 1819), and in 1822 was dismissed from teaching for what the church saw as an uncritical account of philosophical systems.

²⁰ The phrase “dobryi Galich moi,” is from A. S. Pushkin, “Poslanie k Galichu” (1815), *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 10 vols., 3rd ed. (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk, 1962–66), 1:141–45. I am grateful to Susanne Fusso for the reference.

²¹ Dmitrii Pavlovich Runich (1780–1860), administrator of the St. Petersburg Educational District, was known for persecuting many university professors for their ostensibly “anti-Christian sermons.” Andrei Aleksandrovich Fursenko was the minister of education and science of the Russian Federation from 2004 to 2012 and an advocate of religious education in schools. In 2012, he was a presidential aide in charge of research funds and grants, and he is currently the presidential administration’s curator of the Skolkovo Foundation. In 2010, Fursenko was, according to one poll, the least popular government official in Russia, disliked by 37 percent of the people.

²² See N. S. Gordienko, “Voprosy bor’by s teizmom v ‘Istorii filosofskikh sistem’ A. I. Galicha,” *Ezhegodnik Muzeia istorii religii i ateizma* 4 (Moscow and Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1960). Gordienko defended his candidate’s dissertation at Leningrad State University.

²³ The course was introduced in 1959 but not made into a requirement until 1964.

and since I was the youngest instructor they stuck me with everything. Ethics are introduced—you teach it; aesthetics are introduced—you teach it; scientific atheism is introduced—you teach it. Well, okay, so I have to do it. I became interested and turned my attention to Orthodoxy, and I chose the modernization of Russian Orthodoxy as my doctoral dissertation topic. In 1964, I wrote that dissertation. It was called “A Critical Analysis of Modernizing Tendencies in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy.”²⁴ I found a number of innovations that hadn’t been much publicized: the concept of “communist Christianity,” the “theology of revolution,” the “theology of peace,” and so forth. I developed quite a good relationship with the church milieu, and after that they helped me as I worked on several books.

Later, my book *Modern Ecumenism* became one of the first studies here of the topic.²⁵ There’s an interesting story about that book. I planned to write a book on “Russian Orthodoxy and Ecumenism,” but when I brought my proposal to the publishing house of the Academy of Sciences, they asked, “What is ecumenism?” I explained it to them. They said, “You know what, first do a book on ecumenism, and then on ‘Orthodoxy and Ecumenism.’” As a result, I published *Modern Ecumenism*. Somehow I found out that in our Leningrad Theological Academy someone from Ethiopia was defending a dissertation on ecumenism. I wondered if there was anything new in it and got the dissertation out of the library. It turns out that it’s my book, retyped, with two or three papers by Metropolitan Nikodim, who was in charge of ecumenism in the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁶ What’s more, one of the members of the dissertation committee was Father Sorokin, who is now the senior priest (*nastoiatel’*) of the Church of Holy Prince Vladimir.²⁷ I say to him: “Vladimir Ustinovich, how could this happen? You passed my atheistic book off as a theological dissertation. Take a look. Well, obviously you didn’t read either one. If you’d read them, [you would have noticed] there are atheistic phrases in it....” Sorokin answers, “Well look at that, the damn Ethiopian.” I say, “Just keep in mind, if they try to kick me out of atheism,

²⁴ This first version of the dissertation was preceded by the author’s participation in a collective monograph: N. S. Gordienko, V. I. Nosovich, and L. R. Kharakhorkin, *Sovremennoe pravoslavie i ego ideologija* (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1963).

²⁵ N. S. Gordienko, *Sovremennyi ekumenizm: Dvizhenie za edinstvo khristianskikh tserkvei* (Moscow: Nauka, 1972).

²⁶ Nikodim (Rotov), metropolitan of Leningrad and Novgorod (1929–78) was chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate (until 1972), president of the Christian Peace Conference, and patriarchal exarch of Western Europe.

²⁷ Archpriest Vladimir Ustinovich Sorokin (b. 1939) has been prior of the St. Prince Vladimir Cathedral in St. Petersburg since 1997. Ordained in 1965, Sorokin was rector of the Leningrad Theological Academy from 1987 to 1992.

I'll demand his dissertation to prove that this degree in theology was granted for my work."

When I finished my doctoral dissertation in 1964, my department returned it to me and said I had to take it to Moscow because they didn't have any specialists with sufficient training to evaluate my dissertation.

VSR: Where in Moscow?

NSG: The Institute of Scientific Atheism. At the institute they looked at it and said: "It's a good dissertation, but our deputy director is working on a similar topic. So first of all, let him have the title 'The Evolution of Contemporary Orthodoxy.' You'll think up something else later. And second, if you defend it, then his defense doesn't stand a chance. Yours is such a 'brick' with all kinds of archival documents, and his is a slim little popular pamphlet. You can defend yours after him. What's the difference? You just wait a year, and everything will go fine."

VSR: Who was considered sufficiently specialized to evaluate your dissertation?

NSG: The director of the institute.

VSR: Okulov?

NSG: Aleksandr Fedorovich Okulov, God rest his soul.²⁸ He said, "I'll take care of everything," but after that other person defended there were more problems. Okulov says, "It would be better if you defended in Minsk rather than in Moscow." Okulov had a friend there. I went to Minsk.²⁹ The discussion of the dissertation in the Philosophy Department was rather heated and peculiar. Just before that, a book had come out in that department called *The Philosophy of Contemporary Orthodoxy*.³⁰ The author later moved to Iaroslavl', may God rest his soul too. The historian Livshits was present at the

²⁸ Aleksandr Fedorovich Okulov (1908–93), Doctor of Philosophy, was director of the Institute of Scientific Atheism from 1964 to 1977. Okulov was a logger in Kirov oblast' in the late 1920s but quickly moved into cultural enlightenment and party work. He served as deputy director of the Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1951–64 and as editor of the journal *Voprosy filosofii* in 1959–60. For several decades, Okulov served as the ideological filter of the country's central atheist institution.

²⁹ Gordienko is referring to the Belorusskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni V. I. Lenina, Kafedra istorii filosofii, logiki, i nauchnogo ateizma.

³⁰ V. A. Molokov, *Filosofia sovremennogo pravoslaviia (Kriticheskii ocherk)* (Minsk: Vysheishaia shkola, 1968). Three years before this book appeared, its author defended his candidate's dissertation: "Kritika ideologii pravoslaviia i ee prisposobleniia v SSSR" (Belorusskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni V. I. Lenina, Kafedra istorii filosofii, logiki, i nauchnogo ateizma, 1965).

discussion; he was a very productive scholar.³¹ His criticism was that my work was substantial but not a work of philosophy. When that other book came out—he said—he couldn't understand anything, but when he read my work he could actually understand it.

VSR: So that means it's not philosophy?

NSG: Yes, that means it's not philosophy. After all, that other one was called "The Philosophy of Orthodoxy," but mine was "A Criticism of Modernistic Tendencies." Later he apologized to me a hundred times over, we became friends; I was the last person at his deathbed. I went to Minsk often and served on dissertation committees; many of my own students were there. But back then, they concluded that the dissertation was not philosophical and that I had to revise it. I did defend it, but not in 1964—six years later, in 1970. By that time, I was already the chair of the Department of Scientific Atheism, Ethics, and Aesthetics at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad. I had already published quite a lot.³²

"Our Scholarship Operated within the Limits of What Was Permitted"

VSR: What was your relationship to the Institute of Scientific Atheism?

NSG: I was a department chair of one of two departments of scientific atheism in Russia: at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute here [in Petersburg], and at Moscow State University. Moscow handled universities and methodological materials, and our department handled pedagogical institutes. My textbook for pedagogical institutes was published, and I also edited the one for schools. The Institute of Scientific Atheism also published [a textbook], *Scientific Atheism*, but Okulov was the editor of that. The party functionaries grabbed up all the topics and tossed me "Orthodoxy," but when the deadlines were approaching, it turns out this one hadn't done anything, that one hadn't had time. Okulov calls me in and says, "You know what, you write this topic, and this one, and this one." I said, "It's awkward." He said: "What's awkward about it? You'll get the honorarium, and they'll have their names on it." That's how I wrote half of that textbook as well.

VSR: And what is the title of the textbook?

³¹ Giler Markovich Livshits (1909–83) was a Soviet historian of religion and atheism, author of *Ateizm v drevnosti i srednie veka* (Minsk: Belorusskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni V. I. Lenina, 1959); *Ocherki istoriografii Biblii i rannego khristianstva* (Minsk: Vysheishaia shkola, 1970); and *Svobodomyслиe i ateizm v drevnosti i srednie veka* (Minsk: Vysheishaia shkola, 1973).

³² Gordienko's publications in that period include *Sovremennoe pravoslavie* (Moscow: AON TsK KPSS, Institut nauchnogo ateizma, 1968); *Kritika novykh tendentsii sovremennoho pravoslaviia* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1974); and *Pravoslavnye sviatye: Kto oni?* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1979).

*NSG: Scientific Atheism. Just Scientific Atheism.*³³ I think it went through five or six editions; it was published by Politizdat. I took part in many projects because I was department chair. The Department of Scientific Atheism at Moscow State was chaired by Mikhail Petrovich Novikov.³⁴

Every time the Institute of Atheism had to produce some kind of document they would call us in. They would call the rector's office of the Herzen Pedagogical Institute and say, send Professor Gordienko to Moscow for two weeks. No questions about whether I had to teach classes; who cares about classes! The Central Committee is summoning you, so just get on a train right now and go! Once we asked Okulov, "Aleksandr Fedorovich, this is really your institute's task and you have employees who can do it, so why do you call us in?" Okulov says: "You see, we are the *nomenklatura* of the Central Committee. If we create a bad document, they'll fire us or enter a reprimand in our record. But if it's you they'll say, 'Well, what can you expect from these senile professors? They did their best.'" We were their insurance, so to speak, and at times they really needed insurance. I'll give an example. The institute was given the task of analyzing the religious situation and predicting what would happen to religion. They call us in and say, "We need a document giving the prognosis for religion." Two pages—the Central Committee won't read any more—in ten days. They put us in what's now Rublevka—then it was Zhukovka—a settlement for academics, with all the amenities, a wooden cottage for each of us. We struggled there for ten days—not on the conception but mainly on how to pack it into two pages—and submitted it.

VSR: Was it just you and Novikov, or were there others?

NSG: No, there were about ten people.

VSR: Who took part, people from the Institute of Scientific Atheism?

NSG: From the institute and from the university. Mainly from the institute—it was their apparatus. They told us that the document reached Him Himself, he familiarized himself with it and said...

VSR: He—whom do you mean?

NSG: Well, the Chief Executive.³⁵ First of all, he considered this document "hysterical squealing," and second, he said, "If we mess around with religion

³³ A. F. Okulov, ed., *Nauchnyi ateizm* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1973).

³⁴ Mikhail Petrovich Novikov (1918–93), Doctor of Philosophy, was chair of the Department of History and Theory of Atheism and Religion at Moscow State University from 1969 to 1987.

³⁵ Gordienko is referring to N. S. Khrushchev.

the way these nitwits propose, we will need even more than five years to get rid of it."

VSR: More than five years?

NSG: Yes. Meaning, the bureaucrats thought that everything would be decided in five years.

VSR: When was that?

NSG: This was in the 1960s. There were many situations like this. Okulov had a peculiar way of doing things. He ran me around for six years with my dissertation, but he also never failed to invite me to participate in all the projects. Affectionately—I was younger than he—he'd call me "Hongweibing" [referring to a member of Mao's Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution] because if something came up and it wasn't yet sanctioned by the Party but had to be spotlighted somehow, he would bring me in. For example, at conferences and meetings I would speak up as an active supporter of dividing the course "The Foundations of Scientific Atheism" into two courses: "The Foundations of Religion" and "The Foundations of Atheism."

VSR: Were there opponents of that position?

NSG: There were objections in the Ministry [of Education] about whether we should be the ones to decide this question. They thought that the Central Committee should decide it. Why rock the boat when it was already worked out? Although people said that it made sense, the idea didn't pass.

The second issue that came up was figuring out the reasons for the existence of religion under socialism. Well, okay, there's the insufficiency of educational work; the tenacity of tradition, yes; the low qualifications of the propaganda cadres, yes. And that's it. Well, a complex phenomenon like religion can't survive just on that, because it is not only an individual phenomenon but a social one as well.

It got to the point that when they were celebrating the 70th birthday of one of the leading lights of scientific communism, a department chair and chairman of the Znanie Society of the RSFSR, his 70th birthday had to be commemorated with some kind of theoretical paper. I chose the topic "The Social Roots of Religion under Socialism." I proceeded from Marx's thesis that socialism is a transitional phase between capitalism and communism, and that it has elements of both. You need a long time in order for the remnants of capitalism to die out and for something real to grow out of those communist shoots. Since religion is the product of class society, these remnants of class society nourish religion. Therefore the existence of religion is not the result of insufficiencies in our work; it is the nature of socialism as

such. That paper caused a storm. Okulov said: “Nikolai Semenovich, so then it turns out that we too have class warfare?”

VSR: When was this, approximately?

NSG: At the end of the 1970s. My paper was a deviation from what was generally accepted, but it blew over. Okulov just quipped, “He really is a hongweibing ... but ultimately, it’s his right—it’s just an academic paper.” Our scholarship operated within the limits of what was permitted.

Church Politics and the “True Soviet Person”

NSG: I had very frequent contact with the church hierarchs because at one point I was the academic consultant to the chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs, Konstantin Mikhailovich Kharchev, and participated in the preparations for the celebration of the millennium of the Christianization of Rus’.

VSR: But that was already in the 1980s?

NSG: In 1988. When they had the first event celebrating the millennium in the Danilov Monastery, I was walking along the central path and Kharchev was standing there surrounded by journalists. “Here’s Gordienko,” he says, “he knows everything, ask him.” So I start answering their questions, thinking nothing would come of it. Suddenly, the next day I get a call from home in Ukraine: “We saw you on television. You were talking about the millennium as a festive occasion.”

Since I worked with the Council on Religious Affairs, I had contact with the church hierarchs and had good relationships with some of them, even with the still flourishing Metropolitan Iuvenalii.³⁶ I have an inscribed gift from him that says, “To my dear Nikolai Semenovich.” I knew Metropolitan Nikodim well and had great respect for him, although I had one unpleasant clash with him, when they were reorganizing the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism.³⁷ There had been renovations and he wanted to see the new exhibits...

VSR: When was this?

NSG: This was still in Soviet times [in the late 1960s—*VSR*]. The museum was still in the Kazan Cathedral; later they moved it. Nikodim and Sorokin

³⁶ Iuvenalii (Poiarkov), metropolitan of Krutitsk and Kolomensk (b. 1935), was chairman of the Synodal Committee on Canonization of Saints and head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate between 1977 and 1981.

³⁷ The State Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism was opened in 1932 in the Kazan Cathedral in Leningrad and run by the Soviet Academy of Sciences until 1961, when it was transferred to the Ministry of Culture.

wanted to see the new exhibition, so the director of the museum was there, and the deputy director of the museum's Orthodoxy section guided the tour (he's also no longer with us).³⁸ The local representative of the Council on Religious Affairs says to me, "You come, who knows what might happen." The guide is talking about the Russian Orthodox Church in 1905,



N. S. Gordienko (front left) at the Seventh Day Adventist Church, 1999
Reproduced with permission.

that the clergy participated in the Union of the Russian People [Soiuz Russkogo naroda], a Black Hundreds organization, and that the Synod decreed that the banners of that Union should be kept in the churches along with the church banners. At this point Nikodim says, "Stop, stop ... stop, stop. The church had no relationship with the Union of the Russian People at all." About the banners he says, "That didn't happen either." Then I get involved: "You know, there was a Synod decree both on the first question and on the second..." Nikodim says: "No, no, no, there was no such decree." Then the director diffuses the tension and says, "I know Nikolai Semenovich; you can't win in an argument with him; let's move along."

After we got through the exhibit, we sat down in the director's office over a glass of cognac, the director was telling some nice story, and the council plenipotentiary says to me: "Listen, why did you make of fool of yourself? It's no good that a learned metropolitan shamed you like that." I say: "You know what? Call the library and ask for *Tserkovnye vedomosti*, such-and-such issue, and show it to Nikodim." Well, he picks up the phone and in half an hour they bring him the issue. "Resolution of the Synod on Allowing the Clergy to Take Part in the Union of the Russian People" and a resolution "to keep the banners of the Russian People alongside the church banners." Nikodim comes, the council representative shoves it at him: "Your Grace, how could this happen, how could you fall on your face like that?" Nikodim leafs through it, and says, "Yes, but it doesn't say to require, it says to permit." The council representative responds: "Listen, if you say to your subordinates 'I permit you,' how do they understand that? As an order. And what about

³⁸ Gordienko is probably referring to M. I. Shakhnovich (1911–92), a prominent historian of religion and atheism who coordinated the work of the museum from 1944 through the 1960s.

the banners?” Nikodim says, “I didn’t even know anything about that.” The representative says: “So why did you shame yourself like that in public? You argued with an expert who *did* know about it.” But to be fair to Nikodim, this didn’t have any consequences for our relationship.

When he was down with his fifth or sixth heart attack—this was when they were electing a new pope in Rome, John Paul I—Nikodim was in charge of interchurch relations and he got permission to go to Rome.³⁹ He had to meet with the pope by any means. Right before that I was at his place. He was modest; it’s the ones today who live in palaces, but he had a little room in the Theological Academy divided into two sections. One section was his official office, and the other his bedroom. He received us from his bed. It was a difficult sight; he had diabetes. He made a claim for the post of the patriarch in 1971, but they ordered him to keep out of it [*ne voznikat*]. Pimen was appointed, a completely vacuous individual. Nikodim and Pimen later feuded, which got to Nikodim.⁴⁰ He was a truly learned, sensible man, irreproachable in all respects.

So there he was with his heart attacks and diabetes. He was rather heavy, but his arms were like matchsticks—a very ill person. But all the same he flew to Rome, and even though he was the last to arrive, he managed to arrange for the pope to receive him first among the non-Catholics. So it was time to drive there, but the car was stolen. By the time they got a replacement, there were traffic jams. At that time we didn’t know what traffic jams were. He’s sitting there in traffic, and he knows he is going to be late. It wasn’t as if the pope would wait for him, which meant he would be received at the end of the line. He got very stressed out, but he just made it to the entrance, got out, went upstairs, and managed to say to the pope that this would be his translator (that’s Lev Tserpitskii, who was then an intern at the Theological Academy at the Gregorian University in Rome).⁴¹ Nikodim just managed to say, “This is my translator,” and collapsed at the pope’s feet. The pope immediately gave

³⁹ John Paul I (1912–78) was elected to the papacy on 26 August 1978 and died 33 days later on 28 September 1978.

⁴⁰ Patriarch Pimen (Izvekov) (1910–90) was 14th patriarch of Moscow and head of the Russian Orthodox Church between 1971 and 1990. Patriarch Pimen became a monk at 17, a bishop at 47, and 3 years later an archbishop and a permanent member of the Holy Synod. In 1971, under Brezhnev, he became patriarch. As patriarch, Pimen worked closely with Soviet authorities. During *perestroika*, Orthodox activists considered Pimen unfit to take advantage of the new opportunities opening up to the church because of his failing health and history of compliance. In 1988, a group of religious dissidents urged him to step down, to make room for a new, more active leadership, but he refused. A year before his death, he was made a member of the Congress of People’s Deputies.

⁴¹ For an eyewitness account of this incident, see Lev (Tserpitskii), archbishop of Novgorod and Starorus, “‘On vsekhi nas podnial s kolen,’” *Tserkov’ i vremia* 7, 4 (1998): 20–23.

him absolution, they carried him into the chapel, but they couldn't resuscitate him. The emergency crew came, pronounced him dead, and he was brought back and buried here.

He was really such an impressive figure, and by the way the present patriarch [Kirill] sees himself as his student.⁴² Nikodim died in 1978, not even 50 years old, and they immediately tried to forget about him, and then it started—*Nikodimovshchina*, "renovationism in a new guise."⁴³ But Kirill spoke at the 100th anniversary of Nikodim's birth and said that Nikodim was a person who always went against the current and his main virtue was that he was a "true Soviet person." In what way is that a virtue? He had no relatives abroad, he had no connection with the nobility, his father was an agronomist, his mother was a rural schoolteacher. He went to a Soviet school. He was born in 1929—my contemporary, by the way—and he confidently considered himself a Soviet person. When he had disputes with the bureaucrats, he would say: "You are a Soviet citizen, and I am a Soviet citizen. I am defending the interests of the country just like you. Our affairs are different, but we both have the same concern for the country." He could tackle any problem because he understood the limits beyond which it wasn't worth trying to go. Kirill said that after [Nikodim], the next generation of bishops was quite different. The next generation was confident, not afraid. The new bishops saw themselves as completely Soviet people who were defending the religious interests of the country, which were just as meaningful as all other interests, and on that score I am in complete agreement with Kirill.

"We Were the Matrix from Which Everything Flowed"

VSJ: What were the connections between Soviet atheists and their foreign counterparts, especially in socialist countries?

NSG: I visited socialist countries: Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia twice, Poland, Bulgaria. In Bulgaria I even gave a month-long lecture course at the pedagogical university.⁴⁴

⁴² Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) (b. 1946) was archbishop of Smolensk from 1984 and metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad from 1991. Kirill was elected patriarch in 2009, the first patriarch to be elected after the end of the Soviet Union.

⁴³ "Renovationism" (*obnovlenchestvo*) refers to a reform movement within Russian Orthodoxy in which the "renovationists" (also referred to as "red priests") attempted to reconcile Orthodoxy with Bolshevism. See Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905–1946* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

⁴⁴ Atheist establishments within the socialist bloc included the Institute of Scientific Atheism of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences; the Department of Confessional Politics and Religious Studies of the Highest School of Social Sciences in Poland; the atheist sector of the Institute of Philosophy of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; and the Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of

VSR: Did the methods and experiences of atheist work cross over?

NSG: Of course.

Mikhail Iur'evich Smirnov [MIuS]: I'll add that besides sharing practical experiences, we had many students from East European countries studying in our departments of scientific atheism, and they would go home and become teachers. We were the matrix from which everything flowed.

VSR: And conversely, were you influenced by the practical work or research that was being carried out elsewhere?

MIuS: On the level of research, yes, because it was published in the academic periodicals. For example, Klohr—the famous researcher in the German Democratic Republic who directed the department of scientific atheism—and others came to conferences here and conducted theoretical seminars.⁴⁵

NSG: I taught in Prague, in Bratislava, in Blagoevgrad, and our books were translated.

VSR: How did the students receive you there?

NSG: You know, I have to tell you, whether or not you believe me, among the humanities disciplines that were taught, the course on “The Foundations of Scientific Atheism” was the most interesting subject.

VSR: Really?

NSG: Here in Russia, at any rate. Because it was rich in information. Many people knew nothing about religion; they were getting this information for the first time. We also introduced a tradition. The students had to do a paper, and I would say to them, “Kids, you can choose a topic, or you can do fieldwork: visit three churches and observe who is in the church, their age, sex, how they react to the liturgy and sermon.” I had a book come out based

Social Sciences under the Party Central Committee in East Germany. In addition to visits to foreign conferences and institutions, Soviet atheist institutions such as the INA and Znanie, coordinated congresses for foreign scholars at home. One of these international efforts, for example, resulted in the 1975 symposium for scholars of socialist countries, held in Moscow, on “Atheism and Religion in the Contemporary Battle of Ideas” (*Ateizm i religii v sovremennoi bor'be idei*), organized by the INA in coordination with the Academy of Sciences, the AON, and the Ministry of Education.

⁴⁵ Olof Klohr (1927–94) was an East German specialist in religion and the “scientific atheism” chair at the University of Jena in the 1960s. Like Gordienko, Klohr was charged primarily with preparing instructors and teaching courses on scientific atheism, but he also conducted sociological studies of religion in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) on behalf of the Party and state and remained active through the 1980s. See Bernd Schaefer, *The East German State and the Catholic Church, 1945–1989*, trans. Jonathan Skolnik and Patricia C. Sutcliffe (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 192.

on these materials.⁴⁶ The students went with interest, at first the historians and then others. Since the historians didn't know the mathematicians, the historians came back and said, "It's strange, there were a lot of students in the church listening attentively." The mathematicians said the same thing about the historians. Eventually the rector called me in and said, "What are you doing? I'm told you're chasing the students into church" [*gonish' studentov v khramy*].

VSR: Did you have problems because of that?

NSG: I explained to him: "In the city, the students are uninhibited and incognito. He goes into a church, nobody knows who he is. Imagine, he'll come to work in a village and teach the history of religion without ever having been [in a church]. It's not like he's going to go to the village church—how could a teacher go to church when one of the tasks of communist education is the inculcation of atheism? As a result, he's going to talk about something he knows nothing about, whereas here, in my lectures and seminars, I can explain if they don't understand something." The rector says: "There is some logic there. Get me a Bible, I'd like to skim through it." In general, there were no incidents except when we organized meetings with kids from the religious communities. We had Baptists, Adventists.

VSR: This was when?

NSG: This was in Soviet times, but in the 1980s.

VSR: Who organized these? The Department of Scientific Atheism?

NSG: Of course. We had a club. It was called KVAT, the Club of Militant Atheists. The objective was, first, teach students how to lecture and, second, familiarize them with local religious organizations. Hundreds of people gathered at some of our meetings on Malaia Koniushennaia Street, in the youth hall next to the Swedish church.

VSR: Did you participate in the Znanie Society?

NSG: Of course. For example, I was asked to write a book about religion in the anticommunist program.⁴⁷ There was interest in the situation abroad, especially if someone had visited the Western world and could bring some information from there. This all went through Znanie, and if you chose an attractive topic you could make money; these were paid affairs...

MIUS: ...and you did make money...

⁴⁶ N. S. Gordienko, *Chemu uchat s amvona* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1975).

⁴⁷ N. S. Gordienko, *Ateizm i religiia v sovremennoi bor'be idei: Kritika klerikal'nogo antikommunizma* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1982).

VSR: To make money, was it important how many people came to the lectures?

NSG: It varied. Sometimes. In Khar'kov, I came for a week to lecture, and one of the lectures was in the railway depot. Well, what's the difference, a depot's a depot. It's already after the end of the working day. I come, people are sitting there, machinists who had worked a whole 24-hour shift or two. They need to rest, but instead the management tells them: "If you don't go to the lecture you won't get paid today. Only tomorrow. And everyone who comes to the lecture will get paid today." The boss lays it out for them right there in front of me and leaves. They're sitting there, the men. I see they're looking at me, thinking: you're the last thing we need, you parasite, we worked two whole days here without relief. Well, I tell some anecdotes and everything I could remember from my visits abroad in a 40-minute lecture. I look at my watch. They said, "Comrade Lecturer, continue, it's interesting, we'll listen with pleasure." I lectured for another hour and a half, and they thanked me. Later I said to that boss: "Do you have any idea what you're doing? You're setting the audience against the lecturer. After one time no one's going to come again." So there were situations like that, and you could only get out of them by being creative.

"One of Our Obligations Was to Defend This Little Ideological Island"

VSR: Have your views changed in the 50 years that you have been studying religion and atheism? And if so, how?

NSG: My views did not change. It was Soviet times, I was a Soviet person, and I did not have any dissident ideas. I had no desire to protest. The principal difference between myself and many of my colleagues is that I was a Marxist then, and I remain one now. So far I have not seen anything in philosophy or religious studies that is more global than Marxism. Marx is a figure for the ages. As for atheism, everything that has been said about Soviet atheism is still happening in our country right now. All that nonsense is the work of the bureaucrats. Bureaucrats are a particular caste in any country: give a bureaucrat an instruction, and that's it. He'll move heaven and earth to not just fulfill that directive but to overfulfill it. Since religion was declared a survival of the past, an ideology that was to be replaced by Marxism, science, and so on, then you have to place your bets on Marxism. Religion is the domain of old folks, so are you going to wait until the old folks die out? You can't just do nothing; you have to act. All those repressive measures, strange as it may seem, were unconnected to the issue of religion in and of itself. The first secretary of the party *obkom* and a diocesan bishop sat in the



N. S. Gordienko, 2011
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same prison cell. The only difference is that one was falsely accused of being a “Japanese spy,” and the other of being an “American agent,” which meant they both deserved the “ultimate punishment.” All the church closures, exiling of the clergy, and so on, was never justified by our scientific thought or by normal people in general.

We accepted the thesis that religion is a temporary historical development, but we also remembered Marx’s words about how a great deal of time would be required to overcome it. We

remembered that this transition to a post-religious society would be the result of development, enlightenment, and so forth. We debated whether it was possible that the social roots of religion could exist in Soviet society, or if religiosity was only the result of our misunderstandings and deficiencies in ideological work. We debated everything. I hoped that ultimately this experiment would succeed. Although, of course, there were many absurdities. On the one hand, we would say that contradiction is the source of development, citing Hegel. On the other hand, we would come out decisively against any contradictions in our everyday life. Or we would say that existence determines consciousness but also say that with the help of conscious activity, one could change consciousness, including religion. I always tried to characterize both religion and atheism objectively, and if people asked me—if I had to state a preference—I would say that I prefer atheism. These days, though, I don’t have to state my preferences.

But one of our peculiarities, one of our obligations, was to defend the ideological positions of our state. The state was socialist, and Marxist ideology was its foundation. There was a good idea, here and in the West, that the Bible is not an encyclopedia. The Bible is a guide to salvation. If you want to find the way to salvation, read the Bible. If you want to understand the world, turn to science. These are completely different spheres, and to bring them into conflict would be medievalism. Now, when this medievalism is used, it only produces an allergic reaction in normal people. People see the chaos into which contemporary humanity has been plunged. Either you fight for the promise of a future 100 or 200 years from now—which is no longer our framework—or resign yourself and become a drug addict or drink alcohol or commit suicide. Or you plunge into your inner world, seek support in that

inner world. Then it doesn't matter what other people think about religion; for you it's a foundation, and it works. But it would be good if this impulse weren't immediately used by politicians, who see this as a means of distracting people from problems. The task of religious studies, as I see it, is to look at our contradictory reality and explain it, without agitating either for or against religion; to explain the reason for all this turbulence so that people can think through the existing options.

The Soviet position on religion included all this, but it was also concerned with defending its little ideological island. The Soviet Union was a little island, an experiment, and just as unsuccessful as Thomas More's, as Campanella's, as that of the Apostle James who created the first commune, which failed when a husband and wife kept some of their property for themselves. We came to see that humanity is very complex and the kind of evolution that can somehow change mentality may not take place for 70 years, 100, maybe not even in 200 or 300 years. Perhaps somehow we will overcome this bestial element in humanity. Now we see so much that is bestial, when children destroy their parents, kill each other over property.... This experiment did not work out. But nonetheless, there is hope that something like paradise can exist on earth. The church mocks this, they say paradise can only be in heaven—only the Jehovah's Witnesses say that paradise will be here on earth—but this dream remains. Well, so what if it's a dream! Ninety percent of life consists of illusions—we call this culture, ideology. This dream is a peculiar form of religion, in the sense that it is based on faith, on emotion, not on arguments or proof. We do not know, and will never know, whether there is something beyond the boundaries of the infinite universe. But there's nothing terrifying about it. We live 100 years but worry about what is going to happen in 500 years. This is also an illusion, but it keeps us afloat.

This is the confession of an atheist who became a scholar of religion.

Translated by Susanne Fusso and Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock

Dept. of History
Wesleyan University
Middletown, CT 06457 USA
vsmolkin@wesleyan.edu