



Quantifying Religious Oppression: Russian Orthodox Church Closures and Repression of Priests 1917–41

ANNA DICKINSON

When the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 the elimination of religious belief was included among their policies for a new society. While Lenin's opposition to religion, in particular the Russian Orthodox Church, is well established, it is also known that no blueprint for antireligious policy had been prepared and after 1917 the attack on religion fluctuated according to priority, technique, perceptions of public opinion and internal party struggles. Thus while the eventual destruction of belief was, at least until 1941, always kept firmly in view, methods and religious policy varied.

We know the general pattern of antireligious campaigns after 1917, and much excellent work, particularly by Dimitry Pospielovsky, has charted the development of antireligious propaganda and the waves of antireligious policy. Although access to antireligious propaganda has always been fairly free, access to figures for physical antireligious activity has been less easily available. However, the opening of archives and hence the availability of Soviet statistics on church closures now makes it possible to quantify antireligious repression, at least as the Soviet regime perceived it.

One important way of quantifying antireligious repression is by recording the number of churches closed. The technique of closing churches was central to the antireligious arsenal of the Soviet state and the closure of churches was of tremendous importance to religion at the local level where it not only removed believers' ability to worship in the normal context but also provided a physical reflection of the official exchange of religious for secular values. Church closures, like more general antireligious repression, did not take place at a constant pace throughout the prewar period. The three main waves of church closure between 1917 and 1941 did not coincide with the waves in the general pattern of persecution. The statistics on church closures also reveal geographical variations in the severity of antireligious policy.

Political Developments in Antireligious Policy

A brief summary of antireligious policies will provide a background against which the quantification of repression can be understood. In 1917–18 the disestablishment process begun by the Provisional Government was radicalised and the church's land, buildings and schools were confiscated without compensation.¹ A severe decree was passed on the separation of church and state on 23 January 1918, and an instruction which enforced it in August.² Patriarch Tikhon (Belavin) (1865–1925)

publicly anathematised the Bolsheviks in the summer of 1918 and denounced them that October for ‘ruining’ Russia.³

In 1920 responsibility passed from a department of the Commissariat of Justice to an antireligious commission headed by Leon Trotsky under the authority of Agitprop and the Central Committee, and remained there until 1922. Trotsky’s responsibility for religious policy indicated both its centrality to Bolshevik cultural policy and the Central Committee’s disregard for the prejudices of those regarded as ‘culturally backward’.⁴

Despite recognition in 1921 that antireligious work should be educational, ‘constructive and long-term’,⁵ NEP saw no softening in the severity of religious policy. Trotsky attempted to gain the support of starving peasants for the confiscation of church valuables.⁶ Lenin’s letter to Molotov on the Shuya conflict underlined the cynicism of the regime’s policy, describing the Bolsheviks’ use of the plight of the starving as an excuse to kill ‘blackhundredist’ priests and seize church valuables, which were to contribute to the country’s gold reserves.⁷

Prerevolutionary divisions in the church were amplified by the confiscations crisis and developed into the Renovationist schism. Despite state support the Renovationist Church failed to attract widespread public support.⁸ In 1923 Tikhon declared loyalty to the Bolshevik regime in order to retain control of the church. After 1923 the church never again challenged the political supremacy of the communist regime. The Twelfth Party Congress in March 1923 called for an end to demonstrations antagonising believers⁹ and decided to compromise with Tikhon rather than with the unpopular Renovationists.¹⁰ Religious policy became more moderate over the next few months after Yemel’yan Yaroslavsky replaced Trotsky as the person responsible for religious matters.¹¹ An education campaign began, utilising journals like *Bezbozhnik* and *Ateist*, Komsomol film shows and parades, and the League of Militant Godless, seeking to educate rather than alienate the peasantry.¹²

However, after Patriarch Tikhon’s death in 1925 the regime prevented the election of a new patriarch by imprisoning most of those named as patriarchal *locum tenentes*. Finally they permitted the relatively junior Metropolitan Sergi (Stragorodsky) to take the post; he was permitted to return to Moscow from exile in Gor’ki after his declaration of unconditional loyalty to the regime in May 1927.

In 1928 the decision to proceed as quickly as possible to massive industrialisation, as well as the start of collectivisation of agriculture, brought the long-awaited confrontation between Soviet power and ordinary believers. A Standing Commission on Religious Questions (*Postoyanno deistvuyushchaya komissiya pri prezidiume VTsIK po rassmotreniyu religioznykh voprosov*) (SCRQ) was established in April 1929 under the All-Union Central Executive Committee (*Vsesoyuzny tsentral’ny ispolnitel’ny komitet*) (VTsIK)¹³ and was responsible for implementing the strict new laws on religion passed in the same month. A group of twenty believers (*dvadtsatka*) had to apply for permission to register as a religious association and take full responsibility for the church building. Priests were prevented from joining collective farms, deprived of social security rights and taxed at 75 per cent of their income.¹⁴ The government introduced the rotating five-day working week, destroying the distinction between Sundays and workdays. Atheist universities were established, there were antireligious classes in schools, and antireligious work was carried on by the Komsomol. The ‘Cultural Revolution’ also saw the pinnacle of the development of the League of Militant Godless.¹⁵

In 1936 the Stalin Constitution provided a legal framework for religious belief, apparently indicating that the time of haphazard attacks was over. The constitution

also ended official discrimination against priests who were once more legally entitled to exist and were allowed to vote. At the same time the rotating five-day week was abandoned. Meanwhile the (suppressed) results of the 1937 census indicated that 56 per cent of the population of the USSR defined themselves as believers, 42 per cent as Orthodox believers.¹⁶ The large number of religious believers recorded by the census made it clear to the regime that the all-out assault of the last ten years had failed to destroy the basis of religious belief in the USSR.¹⁷ A report written shortly before the Central Committee meeting of February–March 1937 and addressed to L. M. Kaganovich, A. A. Andreyev and N. I. Yezhov criticised the slackening of antireligious propaganda, complaining that the party and trade unions were too complacent about the elimination of religious belief.¹⁸ The most vicious phase of persecution took place from the spring of 1937; in the context of the Purges the attack on religion was renewed, churches were closed, priests imprisoned and executed and believers threatened and harassed.

Quantifying Antireligious Repression

Closure of Churches

The report of the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod for 1914 recorded that there were 54,174 churches in the Russian Empire, 38,220 of those within Russia itself.¹⁹ There is little material on the precise pattern of the assault on religion after 1917 and very little systematic work has been yet produced. The available information points to an initial series of church closures in 1917–18, when churches attached to schools and hospitals were closed. After the initial wave of closures a relatively slow process continued until 1928 when a concerted programme of church closures began. Vladislav Tsypin estimates that in 1928 more than two-thirds of the 1916 churches (over 30,000) remained open, but the ‘Cultural Revolution’ saw a massive attack on church numbers. In some areas the effect was dramatic: in Ryazan’ 192 churches were closed in 1929; in Orel *oblast’* there were no Orthodox churches left by 1930 out of a prerevolutionary total of 1,078; in Moscow there were 500 churches in 1928, of which 224 were left by 1 January 1930, and 87 by 1932.²⁰ An analysis of church closure dates in the city of Ivanovo supports Tsypin’s argument, indicating that one third of the churches were closed between 1917 and 1927, and the same number between 1928 and 1932.²¹ A guide to Moscow’s remaining active churches published in 1995 recording their closure dates in the Soviet era indicates that a third of the parish churches listed were closed between 1929 and 1934.²² Figures from an SCRQ report support this pattern: by 1937 57.5 per cent of the Russian Empire’s pre-revolutionary churches had been closed.²³

The third wave of church closures took place between 1937 and the outbreak of the Second World War. Davis has argued that by 1939 only 200–300 churches remained open throughout the entire Soviet Union.²⁴ Others go further: Fr Sergi Mel’nikas told an interviewer in 1995 that at the end of the 1930s there were about 100 active churches.²⁵ Odintsov, however, cites archival statistics which record that in 1936 there were 14,090 active churches in Russia, by 1938 3,617, and by 1940 950 within Russia’s 1936 boundaries.²⁶ Although Odintsov’s archival figures are not as dramatic as Davis’ or Fr Sergi’s they nonetheless indicate the severity of the antireligious programme of the 1930s and the rapidity of church closures.²⁷ Odintsov records that in the period from 1917 to 1936 25,440 churches were closed, a reduction in the total of 64 per cent (see Figure 1). If we accept Tsypin’s analysis and the figures from the

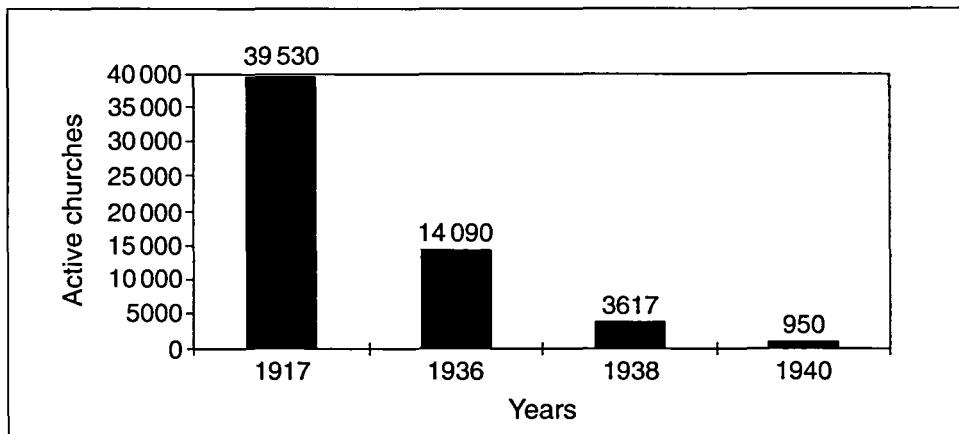


Figure 1. Active churches in Russia (1936 boundaries) – 1917–40 (source: M. I. Odintsov, *Religioznyye organizatsii v SSSR ...*, pp. 44–45).

SRCQ, half of these were closed after 1928.²⁸ Thus, combining the figures provided by Odintsov and Tsypin we can conclude that initially the closure of churches was reasonably slow (from 1917 to 1928 around 30 per cent of churches were closed, including those in schools and hospitals confiscated by the new regime); that by 1936, after collectivisation and the 'Cultural Revolution', 64 per cent of churches had been closed; that during the next two years of terror against religion this figure had risen to 91 per cent of prerevolutionary churches; and that by 1940 97.6 per cent of the churches open in 1916 were closed. According to these figures the most concentrated period of church closures was 1936–38²⁹ – a period which included the 'liberal' constitution and the 1937 census. Official insistence on freedom of conscience in the context of massive church closures and the widespread officially sanctioned murder of priests was therefore cynical and mendacious propaganda. The propaganda was not unsuccessful, however. Analysing the propaganda of the Soviet state Werth, for example, has argued that antireligious persecution was reduced after 1936.³⁰

Patterns of persecution of religion and church closures varied from area to area. My research makes clear the tremendous importance of local factors in determining the intensity of the antireligious attack. Although religion was everywhere savagely persecuted, in some areas the inefficiency of the local Party or the fact that the local government was focusing on other priorities enabled believers to retain more freedom to worship than in others. This relative religious freedom was most often retained in traditional centres of Russian Orthodoxy. The paucity of published information about church closures in the localities makes the overall picture difficult to determine. There is a secret 1936 report from the SCRQ which lists areas where a relatively large number of churches remained open. The area in which most churches remained open in 1936 was Ivanovo oblast' where 903 churches, 61.3 per cent of the prerevolutionary total, were still functioning. Other oblasti in which antireligious persecution had been relatively mild included Gor'ki (where 56.6 per cent of pre-revolutionary churches remained open), Moscow (53.4 per cent), Kirov (48.1 per cent) and Kalinin (46.6 per cent); by comparison, in Saratov oblast' only 6 per cent of the prerevolutionary churches were still functioning in 1936.³¹

There are difficulties in identifying the number of churches within Russia, and these difficulties are compounded when we try to calculate the number within the

USSR in 1940. The central problem is to ascertain the number of churches in those areas occupied under the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact. A vicious antireligious campaign running concurrently with an attempt to russify Ukraine meant that calculation of church numbers was often inexact. Tsyplin quotes a figure of 4,500 parishes on the eve of war, ‘almost all in the western areas’.³² Odintsov quotes a figure of 8,296 parishes in the USSR in 1940 (see Figure 2).

Persecution of Priests

The number of church closures is a significant reflection of the level and timing of religious repression in the Soviet state. After the closure of a church it was however possible for believers to continue to worship without the benefit of a church building, using private houses or areas in the locality. Less easy for a community of believers to recover from was the arrest or execution of the local priest. Memoirs and pre-archival material provide may important examples, but we have few sources for the overall number of clergy imprisoned or killed. As Michael Bourdeaux has noted recently, the Moscow Patriarchate has been slow to recognise the persecution of priests and only now is it producing a record of those executed and imprisoned.³³ We do not yet have centrally-collected information; however, reports produced in the early 1990s and local information are beginning to indicate the pattern of repression.

Figure 3, based on figures quoted by Metropolitan Kirill,³⁴ shows the timescale of repression of hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church. The pattern differs from that of church closures: there is no peak in 1928–29 when there were a large number of church closures. The peak in 1931, however, may simply reflect a delay in organising the trials of hierarchs already arrested. The most important fact revealed by the figures is the rising number of executions and imprisonments from 1935 to 1937. The terror against the higher clergy appears to have started before the purge of the rest of society.

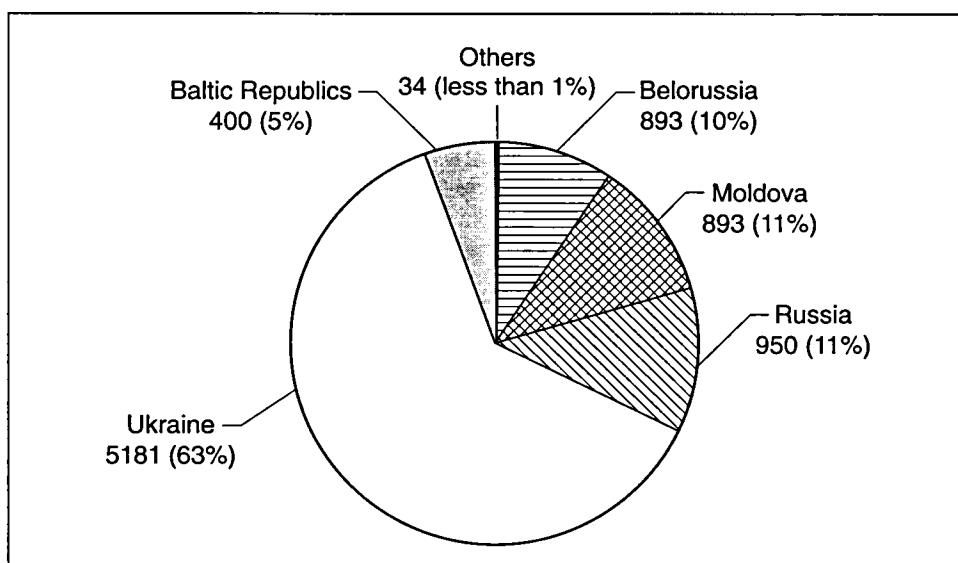


Figure 2. Russian Orthodox parishes in the USSR (1940) (source: Odintsov, *Religioznyye organizatsii v SSSR ...*, p. 36; ‘Others’: Kazakhstan (1), Kirgizia (1), Georgia (27), Tadzhikistan (2), Uzbekistan (3), Armenia (0), Azerbaijan (0)).

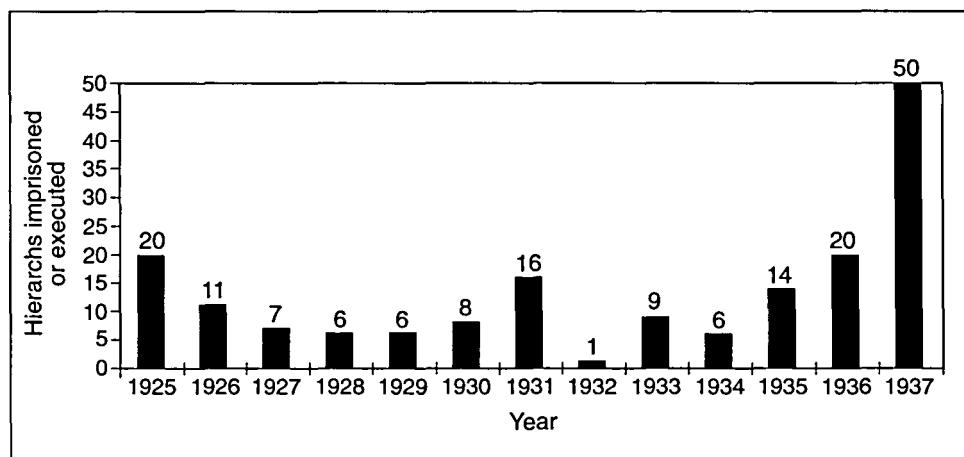


Figure 3. Imprisonment and executions of Russian Orthodox hierarchs 1925–37 (source: Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, 'The church and *perestroika*', p. 91).

Data on executions of priests collected in Ul'yanovsk (see Figure 4) show that most of them took place in the years 1937 and 1938, with far fewer executions recorded during earlier attacks on religion. Although the figures may be incomplete the overall pattern is quite clear. The large number of executions in 1938 can be partly attributed to several mass executions between January and April 1938 as the result of trials at the end of 1937; the execution of 55 priests on 17 February was the largest single such event.³⁵

On the eve of the Second World War there were 6,376 clergy in the Russian Orthodox Church, less than 10 per cent of the prerevolutionary figure of 66,140.³⁶ The hierarchy consisted of only four men: two metropolitans and two bishops. Figures on the Georgian Orthodox Church are similarly dramatic. In 1928 there were 13 bishops and 1,110 priests, but by July 1939 there were only four hierarchs (three

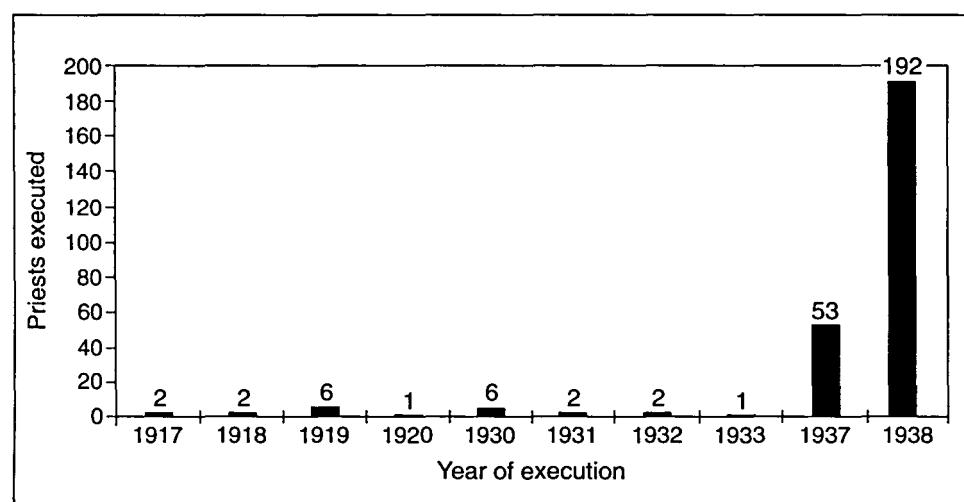


Figure 4. Priests executed in Ul'yanovsk 1917–1938 (source: Vladimir Dmitriyev, *Simbirskaya golgofa 1917–1938*).

bishops and the catholicos-patriarch), and 83 priests.³⁷ There are no reliable figures for the persecution of Russian Orthodox lay believers but evidence exists that their responses to the 1937 census were identified and recorded. Despite traditional assumptions it seems that in 1937 the majority of 'church activists' (members of *davadtsatki* and church councils) were men (64 per cent); 59.5 per cent of these church activists were over 50.³⁸ After 1941 this prominence enjoyed by men in local religious communities would decline as men left the villages to join the army.

Conclusion

Church closures took place primarily during three periods, 1917–21, 1928–32 and 1937–40. The closures of 1937–40 occurred at a time when political developments implied a relaxation of religious persecution. By contrast executions of clergy, while taking place throughout the Soviet period, were focused on the period 1937–39. It is also clear that the intensity of religious persecution varied from region to region. As late as 1936 some *oblasti* retained 60 per cent of their prerevolutionary churches, while the average number remaining was around 30 per cent. The findings indicate that local studies need to be carried out in order to chart the incidence of antireligious persecution across Russia and the USSR, but while it is clear that in some areas and at some times repression was more common and more violent, it is also clear that the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole found itself in a parlous state on the eve of the Great Patriotic War.

Notes and References

- ¹ Alekseyev, *Illyuzii i dogmy* (Moscow, 1991), pp. 10–16.
- ² Bohdan Bociurkiw, 'Church-state relations in the USSR', in Max Hayward and Fletcher (eds), *Religion and the Soviet State: A Dilemma of Power* (Pall Mall, 1969), p. 74.
- ³ Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917–29* (SHS, Helsinki, 1994), pp. 100–1.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, p. 101; Vasil'yeva argues that Trotsky came to control religious policy only after the 'Shuya incident' in March 1922: Ol'ga Yu. Vasil'yeva, 'Iz"yatiye tserkovnykh tsennostei v 1922 godu: nekotoryye aspekty problemy', in *Religiya, obshchestvo i gosudarstvo v XX veke: materialy konferentsii, Moskva 22–25 oktyabrya 1991 g.* (Moscow, 1991), p. 59.
- ⁵ Philip Walters, 'A survey of Soviet religious policy', in Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.), *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 8; Luukkanen, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
- ⁶ Walters, *op. cit.*, p. 8; Alekseyev, *op. cit.*, p. 202; *Izvestiya*, 23 February 1922.
- ⁷ Richard Pipes (ed.), *The Unknown Lenin* (Yale University Press, London, 1996), pp. 152–55 (Lenin's letter to Molotov).
- ⁸ Edward Roslof, *The Renovationist Movement in the Russian Orthodox Church* (doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1994), p. 100; see Geoffrey Freeze, 'Counter-reformation in Russian Orthodoxy: popular response to religious innovation, 1922–1925', *Slavic Review*, vol. 54, no. 2, summer 1995, pp. 305–39.
- ⁹ Luukkanen, *op. cit.*, pp. 141–42; Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 29–30.
- ¹⁰ Walters, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- ¹¹ Yemel'yan Mikhailovich Yaroslavsky (Minei Izrailevich Gubel'man, 1878–1943) was a consistent supporter of Stalin's policy, although according to Rosenfeldt he was never one of Stalin's 'inner circle' (N. E. Rosenfeldt, *Knowledge and Power* (Rosenkilde and Bagger, Copenhagen, 1978)). Luukkanen makes a powerful case for the change in religious policy being a reflection of the Bolshevik Party's political struggle:

- Luukkanen, *op. cit.*, pp. 161–68. Alekseyev argues that Stalin was directly involved from 1923 to 1924; Alekseyev, *op. cit.*, pp. 266–70; see also Peris, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
- ¹² Glennys Young, “‘Into church matters’: lay identity, rural parish life, and popular politics in late imperial and early Soviet Russia, 1864–1928”, *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, vol. 23, nos. 1–4, 1996, p. 383.
- ¹³ M. I. Odintsov (ed.), *Religioznyye organizatsii v SSSR nakanune i v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny, 1941–1945 gg.* (Moscow, 1995), p. 54.
- ¹⁴ Peris, *op. cit.*, pp. 126–27.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 125–27.
- ¹⁶ Felix Corley, ‘Believers’ responses to the 1937 and 1939 Soviet censuses’, *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1994, p. 407.
- ¹⁷ See David L. Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow 1929–1941* (Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 169–72; Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent 1934–1941* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), pp. 72–77, for evidence of continued, pervasive religious belief.
- ¹⁸ Cited in full in Ol’ga Vasil’yeva (ed.), *Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ i kommunisticheskoye gosudarstvo 1917–1941* (Bibleisko-bogoslovsky institut sv. Apostola Andreya, Moscow, 1996), pp. 316–20.
- ¹⁹ *Vsepoddaneishi otchet ober-prokurora syateishego sinoda po vedomstvu Pravoslavnogo ispovedaniya za 1914 god* (Petrograd, 1916), pp. 6–7.
- ²⁰ Vladislav Tsypin, *Istoriya Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi 1917–1990* (Moscow, 1994), p. 92.
- ²¹ List of Ivanovo churches closed from A. M. Tikhomirov, *Khramy Ivanovo-Voznesenska* (Ivanovo, 1996).
- ²² V. A. Sudarikov and S. V. Chapnin (eds), *Pravoslavnaya Moskva: spravochnik deistvuyushchikh monastyrej i khramov* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 36–123.
- ²³ Vasil’yeva (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 316 (archival reference: RTsKhIDNI f.89 op.4 d.80 11.31–36).
- ²⁴ Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Westview Press, Boulder, Co., 1995), p. 13.
- ²⁵ Petr Kotenok, ‘S veroi v pobedu’, *Orientir: Zhurnal Ministerstva Oborony Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, March 1995, p. 72; see also Vasil’yeva, who writes that in 1941 there were 3,021 Russian Orthodox churches of which only 21 were within the 1936 boundaries of Russia, 3,000 being in the territories invaded by the USSR under the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact: Ol’ga Vasil’yeva, ‘Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov’ v 1927–1943 godakh’, *Voprosy istorii*, no. 4, 1994, p. 41.
- ²⁶ Odintsov, *op. cit.*, is calculating in terms of the 1936 boundaries of Russia; within these boundaries in 1917 there were 39,530 churches. The figures he gives are actually for religious communities that were registered as responsible for a functioning church building.
- ²⁷ Odintsov himself makes the point, however, that the number he quotes was simply the number officially functioning. In the archival document the number of churches open in 1936 was given as 19,212, but the writer of the document distinguished between churches that were open and churches that were functioning (14,090). Odintsov, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- ²⁸ Figures from Odintsov, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–45.
- ²⁹ The figures from the city of Ivanovo do not support this generalisation: there the most concentrated period of church closures was 1928–35 when 13 churches were closed. These were of course urban church closures: in Ivanovo *oblast’* more than 60 per cent of the churches remained open.
- ³⁰ Alexander Werth, *Russia at War 1941–45* (Barrie and Rockliffe, London, 1964), p. 429.
- ³¹ A 1936 report on the situation of religious organisations in the USSR in Vasil’yeva (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 302.
- ³² Tsypin, *op. cit.*, p. 108; Vasil’yeva suggests 3,021 active churches in 1941, of which 3,000 were in the western territories: Vasil’yeva (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 298.
- ³³ Michael Bourdeaux at the conference ‘Religion and Society in Russia and the New States’,

Cumberland Lodge, 17 March 1999.

- ³⁴ Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kalingrad, 'The church and *perestroika*', in Igor Troyanovsky (ed.), *Religion in the Soviet Republics* (Harper, New York, 1991), p. 91. Vasil'yeva's evidence supports such a pattern. She records the number of priests in Leningrad falling from 79 in 1936 to 25 in 1938 and states that in 1938 there were only 6,376 priests throughout the USSR: Vasil'yeva, 'Russkaya Pravoslavnaya Tserkov' ...', p. 41.
- ³⁵ Vladimir Dmitriyev, *Simbirskaya golgofa 1917–1938* (Samara, 1996), pp. 45–50.
- ³⁶ Vasil'yeva (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 298.
- ³⁷ Gosudarstvenny Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f.6991 op.2 d.14 1.139.
- ³⁸ Vasil'yeva (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 317.