

The USSR: A Blend of Atheism and Religion

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Controversies are part of human history. They sharpen debate, define policy, move economies, and create wars. But of all the relevant controversies, the one that generates the most contradictions is the mixture of religion and ideology. And that is what was happening in the USSR.

During the two Russian socialist revolutions of 1917, and well after the creation of the USSR itself, thousands of Orthodox churches were pulled down by the Bolsheviks, in a succession of crimes against religion — and therefore against history — that brought down some forty thousand temples, leaving very few standing. They did not even take into account that Moscow had always sought to be recognized as the "Third Rome", after Rome itself and Byzantium: what mattered was to impose an atheist state.

But that was not what they obtained. The hardship, the hunger, and the semi-slavery that followed from the collectivist mode, maintained under brutal censorship and with no possibility of appeal to any metaphysical entity, might have provoked a great rebellion against the Soviet state itself, as fierce as or fiercer than the earlier overthrow of Tsar Nicholas Romanov.

This led the Party to an unexpected decision. When the revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin died, his successor Joseph Stalin determined that the body should be embalmed and displayed in a mausoleum in Red Square. There the people could make their pilgrimage to worship the new and only "god" then permitted, in substitution for the Orthodox God of tsarist times: Lenin became the repository of the people's faith, constantly visited beside his body in the mausoleum, converted into a religious temple *de facto*.

The mausoleum stands, as said, in Red Square. There too is the spectacular Saint Basil's Cathedral, built centuries earlier by order of Tsar Ivan IV, the Terrible (a tale holds that, once it was finished, he had the eyes of the architect who raised it put out, so that he might never again repeat anything so beautiful and marvelous). The cathedral, by its history and its location, was transformed from a place of worship into a symbol of the Soviet state, standing as it does before the mausoleum. It was the reminder that, notwithstanding the "god" displayed nearby, the grandeur of the atheist state still hovered over that agora. Consider, for example, that the military parades of the USSR — and today of Russia — took place and still take place there, with a perpetual symbolism of militarist character.

And the parading troops are regularly observed by the "demigods": the former General Secretaries of the Communist Party, successors of Lenin — Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko, and Gorbachev — and, after the fragmentation of the USSR, Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev. "Demigods" who declared themselves, some of them, followers of atheism, and say they follow it still; yet certain observed practices showed that even in them there remains a residue of religiosity or mysticism.

For example: at one point Leonid Brezhnev, who governed the USSR from 1964 to 1982 (and who began the Soviet-Afghan War), consulted the Bulgarian seer Vangelia Pandeva Gushterova, better known as "Baba Vanga" — the "Nostradamus of the Balkans" — who is said to have foretold the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Covid-19 pandemic, and a Third World War, among other events.

Here, then, is the proof of the human falsity that state intervention in the private lives of people represented, and represents, especially in matters of religion. Brezhnev was a human being. A despicable human being, it is true. But so human that he rejected Lenin and preferred Vangelia Pandeva Gushterova.

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