

# Resolutions of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee as a Source on the History of Religious Policy of the RSFSR in the Early 1930s

<sup>1</sup>Evgeny Drobotushenko, <sup>2</sup>Svetlana Andreeva, <sup>3</sup>Sergey Karasev, <sup>4</sup>Yulia Lantsova, <sup>5</sup>Andrey Filimonov

**Abstract.** *The article analyzes some Decrees of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the regulating issues related to religious policy. The author notes that there are no serious special scientific publications containing a comprehensive analysis of a significant number of Decrees of All-Russian Central Executive Committee (All-Russian Central Executive Committee) up to this day. Based on this, the basis of the study were archival sources, namely documents of State Archive of Russian Federation. Decrees regulated ultimately various issues: management, protection of monuments, etc.*

**Keywords:** *religious policy, church, Decrees, Circulars, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, early 1930s.*

## I. Introduction

The history of religious policy of Soviet state at different stages of its historical development became the subject of scientific analysis. However, not all of its aspects are studied equally and are reflected in research. Thus, the question of characteristics of Decrees of Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee remained somewhat aloof from the serious scientific analysis. They covered various aspects of state's religion policy. Separate legal regulations or norms were characterized partly.

## II. Literature Review

First publications analyzing legislation of the USSR in relation to religions date back to 1920s. They were started by the work by A. *Vvedensky* "The Church and the State (Essay on Relations between the Church and the State

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<sup>1</sup> Transbaikal State University, Faculty History, Chita, Russia

<sup>2</sup> Autonomous non-profit educational organization of higher education of the Central Union of the Russian Federation, Siberian University of consumer cooperation, Transbaikal Institute of entrepreneurship, Faculty of technology and management, Department of social and cultural service and tourism, Chita, Russia

<sup>3</sup> Irkutsk National Research Technical University, Institute of Extramural Education, Department of General disciplines, Irkutsk, Russia

<sup>4</sup> Transbaikal State University, Faculty History, Department of history, Chita, Russia

<sup>5</sup> Transbaikal State University, Faculty of Economics and management, Department of management, Chita, Russia

in Russia in 1918-1922)". It cannot be said that this work specifically focuses on laws, but interaction itself is analyzed based on norms of Soviet legislation of initial period at the same time.

One of first special works was the book by *L.P. Dyakonov* "Soviet Laws on the Church," published in 1926. Like all works of that period, it had a lauditive character in relation to the Soviet power and was permeated with a negative attitude towards religion. at the same time, the publication attempts to characterize policy of Soviet state in relation to religion through analysis of norms of law.

In 1930 a book by *N. Orleanskyi* appeared "The Law on Religious Associations of the RSFSR and current laws, instructions, circulars with separate comments on issues related to separation of church from state and school from church in the USSR".

Works mentioned above provide a lot of interesting material, but they look at history until mid-20s. XX century. a later period was reflected in work of *I.R. Shafarevich* "Legislation on religion in the USSR" published in Paris, in the famous émigré publishing house of Russian book YMCA-Press in 1973. Generally speaking, this is a report to the Committee on Human Rights on Freedom of Religion in the USSR. The book is interesting, it contains a number of regulations of the Soviet Union regulating various aspects of the country's religious policy. However, many acts are not reflected in the publication.

In later Soviet times, a whole series of publications will appear from the work by the former Chairman of the Council for Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (from 1960 to 1965), and then Chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs at the Council of Ministers of the USSR (from 1965 to 1984), Mr. *V.A. Kuroyedov*. They represent a generalized analysis of legislation of the USSR regarding religion until early 1980s.

Quite a lot of various **regulatory acts** on issues were published in separate compilations. Undoubtedly, the basis for analysis of the initial Soviet period is a compilation of documents collected by *P.V. Gidulianov*, which had been supplemented and published for several times. It presents main legal acts up to 1926.

In the future, such compilations will be edited by V.A. Kuroyedov, having undergone more than one edition. Their copies will also be published abroad.

It should be noted that some modern researchers did not stay aside from addressing issues. The most interesting is the work by *O.B. Prikazchikova*, "Activities of the Central Permanent Commission on Cult issues (1929-1938)", a number of works, including volumetric dissertation research by *A.S. Kochetova*. An interesting analysis of the legal framework on religious issues is given by I.M. Sovetov. Various analysis of degree of completeness within the framework of the problem field of this article is found at some other authors.

### III. The chronological framework of the article

The chronological framework of the article was chosen due to the fact that the well-known Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR as of April 8 "On religious associations" appeared at the very end of the third decade of the 20th century, *in 1929*. After its appearance, the authorities' approach to regulating activities of

religious communities in the territory of the country is changing dramatically. Note that this Decree has become the major one for several decades. Thus, it became the basis for instruction “On registration of religious associations, prayer houses and buildings as well as on registration procedure for executive authorities of religious associations and religious workers”, approved by the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR on October 31, 1968.

It should be said that a number of researchers end one and begin the next stage of history of relations between government and religious organizations exactly from the moment of appearance of the mentioned Decree, — the stage of history of religious policy of the Soviet Union. Until that moment, there was a relatively calm period for religion in the country. Some researchers do not stop on his description at all, only mentioning this "quiet" time. In separate works, one can find references to the fact that there were still persecutions against religion.

The second chronological border is determined by us at the *end of 1933* and the *beginning of 1934*, when the Constant Commission on cults was established at the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the USSR.

#### **IV. The Decrees**

Changes in state policy are tied with appearance of famous Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR of April 8th, 1929. But yet on January 24th, the Circular Letter "*On measures on enhancement of antireligious propaganda*" appeared. The mention of this circular is found in papers of some researchers, but it is referred to as an order, a resolution or a Decree in some publications. In the above-mentioned circular, religious organizations are referred to as “legally operating counter-revolutionary organizations”.

The basic act, which determined the policy of Soviet state regarding religion for a long time, will nevertheless become the Decree as of April 8, 1929. It will be operational (with changes) until the end of the Soviet period.

The Decree defines foundations for existence of registered religious associations, introduces a number of prohibitions, for example, on creation of mutual benefit societies, cooperatives, production associations, provision of material assistance to their members, organization of children's, youth, and women's assemblies, teaching of religious dogmas, etc.

It should be said that Decree itself did not directly talk about mass closure of monasteries, temples, prayer houses and chapels, but it was traditionally since its appearance that it was customary to count most serious persecutions of religion in the USSR.

In some publications there is a remark that the Decree of April 8, 1929 marked the beginning of formation of “religious legislation” of 1930s. The concept of religious legislation "as a whole is not used in special literature, it is usually talked about legislation regulating existence of religion within the state.

On May 1929, the XIV All-Russian Congress of Soviets took place, which adopted amendments to the Article 4 of the Constitution of the Republic. In Article 4, “freedom of religious and anti-religious propaganda” has been replaced by “freedom of religious confessions and anti-religious propaganda”.

The significant amount of government action on normative regulation of religious policy falls to the beginning of 1930s of the XX century. The fundamental type of regulatory legal acts here were precisely decisions of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR. The implementation of norms in practice was carried out through activity of cult commission (the commission on religious worship) at the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR.

At very beginning of 1931, the Decree of All-Russian Central Executive Committee “On Instruction of the Constant Committee under Presidium of the Central Executive Committee on Cults *‘On the Procedure for Implementing Law on Religions’*” appeared. This act prescribed objectives and composition of a religious association, emergence and expenditure of funds, executive authorities, activities of assemblies and conventions, registration and liquidation in sufficient detail,

The instruction replaced religious associations; it canceled a number of regulations in terms of supervision. These are Decrees and circulars of the PCIA and PCJust.

On May 30, 1931, the Decree of Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee *“On establishment of Cult commissions”* appears. The full title is “On approval of Provisions on the Permanent Central and Local Commissions for Consideration of Religious Issues”.

The purpose of the commission was in "...monitoring correct behavior of locations lawfully associated with cult, instructing subject authorities, giving them instructions and explanations.

Preliminary consideration according to ideas of district executive committees and city councils of cases on opening and closing of prayer buildings.

Solution of questions about the Decree of religious congresses.

Consideration of complaints against actions of district executive committees and city council on: termination of contracts, taxation and rent of land, giving a solid task, labor service, land issues, etc.

The account of all religious societies and groups of believers and compiling reports on them.

Note that there are some discrepancies regarding the date of appearance of this Decree in literature. Traditionally, it belongs to May 30, O.B. Prikazchikov, however, speaks about approval of provision by a Decree of May 31, referring to “The compilation of laws and orders of the RSFSR's Workers' and Peasants' Government No. 27 of 1931.

The first date, though, seems to be more truthful.

The question of preservation of religious buildings was raised more than once within the framework of Decrees of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, and acts mentioned were not necessarily devoted to religious issues.

Thus, on August 1, 1933, the Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of CPC ***“On Protection of Historical Monuments”*** appeared. According hereto, it was possible to use historic buildings only on the basis of lease agreements that were concluded by People's Commissariats on Education of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and departments of public education in territories, regions and cities. Many temples and chapels also belonged to historic buildings. In accordance with the Decree, all contracts were to be concluded before October 1, 1933, and the list of monuments was to be made no later than October 1.

In the future, this Decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee will be supplemented by a clause, according to which, in addition to contracts for use of “prayer buildings,” religious associations will have to keep funds in State Savings Banks.

It is necessary to separately note regulations on procurement of food by cult workers. There were several of them adopted in early 1930s. So, on December 19, 1932, the Decree of All-Russian Central Executive Committee ***“On procurement of butter, milk and cheese”***, the Decree ***“On compulsory supplement of the State with potatoes”***, and on March 26th of the same year the Decree ***“On meat stocking by cult workers”*** were adopted. All these acts were reduced to fact that all cult workers were obliged to donate food to the state. If implantations and available livestock fell under category of “kulak farms”, it is obvious that they were de-kulakized; otherwise, cult workers acted as sole peasants of a particular region.

## **V. Circulars and circular letters**

A significant role for implementation of religious policy of the Soviet state was played by circulars or circular letters along with Decrees of the Central Executive Committee, which specified certain provisions or focused attention on shortcomings of implementation of standards in practice, indicating need to eliminate them. An example of such a circular may be a circular dated November 15, 1933 addressed to “local religious commissions”. It noted that

*“In practice, local authorities on religious issues still observe cases of elimination of religious buildings of architectural and museum significance without agreeing on matters of reconstruction...”*

*“...It was offered to PCEs of ASSRs, KraiPEDs, RegPEDs, TownPEDs to select permanent representatives for attending meetings of cult commissions on closure and transfer of religious buildings. All disputable cases should be reported to the Museum Department”.*

The property is being taken to local or central museums in accordance with the Decree of All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the PCC dated April 8, 1929, published in Bulletin No. 2 of the Permanent Central Commission on Cult Issues.

A major change will occur in 1934, when the Permanent Committee on Cults will be established under the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR. The all-union body has replaced a republican commission.

## VI. Conclusion

Thus, Decrees of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee were the main legal act regulating religious policy in the USSR at the considered time. Their appearance is directly related to activities of cult commission (the commission on religious cults) under the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR, which existed until 1934. It should be noted that some of them have been thoroughly analyzed, there are also ones little-known to general public.

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