

**Russian Life and Religion: A
Comparative Study Pre- and Post
1991**

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Abstract

It is of no surprise that a nation's government has much influence over its citizens in a political sense, an economic sense, a social sense and even a religious sense. This influence was especially vivid during the Soviet regime in Russia, which came to an abrupt end in 1991. This relationship between government and the lives of its citizens in Russia is what this paper hopes to uncover. First, the paper correlates age with the perceived advantages and disadvantages under each system of government. The results show a general trend of increased age being correlated with more positive responses towards the Soviet government and more negative responses towards the current Russian Federation. Next, support for each system of government is correlated with income and religious attendance. The results show that as income increases, support for the government in power increases as well while there does not appear to be any correlation with religious attendance. Last, church attendance and religious practices in the home are examined before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. These results show that there is a definite increase in church attendance *and* religious practices in the home after 1991, confirming the assumption that the Soviet government greatly hindered religion in the USSR.

Introduction

What kind of progress is possible for a country after twenty short years? Is this enough time to adjust to a completely foreign system of both politics and economics? Is it enough time to shift a country's society and social norms? And is it enough time to regain a religion that for seventy years, has not just been pushed to the side, but pushed out of the way entirely? These are just a few fascinating questions that can possibly be answered by examining the past Soviet Union and the current Russian Federation.

During the seventy years under Socialist rule in Russia, many aspects of Russian life were arguably suppressed (Grossman, 1994). Particularly during the Stalinist rule, many people abandoned their technical right to freedom of speech, for fear that the consequences could mean social ostracizing, prison, or even death (Grossman, 1994). Even so, millions lost their lives between 1936 and 1938 due to the "Stalinist purges" (Grossman, 1994). The same seemed to hold true for the alleged freedom of religion. Not only was it not easy to choose a certain religion, it was not easy to choose religion at all (Greeley, 1994). The official religion of the state was atheism, and those individuals who were looking to forward their interests in the government and their society were faced with either hiding their religious tendencies or getting rid of them altogether (Greeley, 1994). This held true with Marxist theory, in which the idea of Communism is based. According to Marxist philosophy, "In a humanistic, scientific society, there is no need for the spiritual crutches of the past" (Grose, 1967, p. 402). Lenin would later elaborate with the quote, "Religion is a sort of spiritual gin in which the slaves of capital drown their human frames" (Grose, 1967, p. 402).

The beginning of the war on religion in Russia, according to Pares (1949), began in the first Five Year Plan (1928-33) under Communist rule. The main objective of this plan included industrializing the country, gaining a stronghold over education, and more to the point of this paper, stamping out religion. Before this time, the constitution in Russia, in concerns to religion in the country, read: “Freedom of religious and anti-religious propaganda.” However, after the five year plan, only anti-religious propaganda was legal and this propaganda was used to its fullest. Slogans varied from the idea that Holy Communion encouraged drunkenness, to reports from airmen who claimed they flew through the heavens and saw no one. Although much of this propaganda seems exaggerated, the Soviet Party had one piece of propaganda that was wildly effective on the masses. This was their attempt to intertwine the church with the final and corrupt years of Tsardom. They reasoned that, after all, the monarchy fell for a reason (mostly due to public unrest with the government), and they used this fact to disenfranchise the church. Almost overnight, the churches were forbidden to provide or engage in any social activities (e.g. child day care, children’s organizations). Also, priests were treated like outcasts and most were not permitted to live in the towns. They were forced to live elsewhere and travel into town each day to do their work (Pares, 1949).

These often extreme measures undertaken by the Soviet regime begs the question of *why?* Why was eliminating religion such an essential component to the regime? According to Galinsky (2010), God and government fall into a very similar category pertaining to people’s loyalties and support. It is argued that when people live through a period when personal control is limited, they turn to established institutions (such as the church or the government) to guide their lives. In this case, the Soviets wanted to the

sole guiding light and sought to monopolize this role by disenfranchising all other sources of power and influence (Galinsky, 2010).

The idea, however, has been presented that the Russian Orthodox religion played a role in the fall of the Soviet Union. Garrard (2008) notes that religious themes are often overlooked when examining the Soviet era. When examined more closely, it seems that the inability of the Soviet regime to eliminate all signs of Russian Orthodoxy contributed to their fall, as well as the inability to detect growing resistance within the church (Garrard, 2008). In fact, upon the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Garrard notes that crowds of Russian citizens did not hold up signs saying свобода (freedom) or демократия (democracy). Instead, many hoisted up crosses that read “by this sign, conquer” (Garrard, 2008, p.242).

Overall, it is definitely important to take a look at the religious effects that the Soviet rule actually had on the citizens of Russia. Were the Soviets successful in stamping out religion in the short-term? How about in the long-term? These questions prove to be very difficult to answer, but the general literature supports the obvious dwindling of religious faith during the years under Soviet rule, as well as the current religious revival under the Russian Federation (Greeley 1994). Greeley (1994) cites a 22% increase in religious belief from 1994 to 2004. All respondents in the study admitted that first they were atheist, but stressed that they are no longer. This is a major increase in internal religious revival when compared to other Communist counties, such as East Germany that had only a 5% increase in religious belief (Greeley, 1994).

The history mentioned above, combined with more modern research on religion in Russia, helped to develop a goal for my research. The current paper seeks to uncover,

examine, and better understand these trends in both a political, economic, and religious sense. Politically and economically, it was hypothesized that support for either political or economic system (Authoritarianism/Socialism vs. Democracy/Capitalism) was largely dependant on a respondent's age. The older the participant, it seemed the more nostalgic people would feel for the old system, which stressed equal rights among citizens and provided a plethora of free social services such as extensive insurance for the elderly, work benefits, and free educational institutions (Pares, 1949). To many of these participants, the new idea of competition was a shock. They were at an age where economic competition was a foreign concept but necessary given their continually diminishing pensions under the new democratic system.

Another hypothesis generated for this study involved a link between government participation and economic prosperity, as well as between government involvement and religious practices. It was hypothesized that if participants had a high level of involvement in the Soviet government (pre 1991), they would subsequently be less likely to attend church or be involved in other religious practices, and their income would be higher. The reasoning here is that if a government is treating its citizens well, particularly in a monetary sense, these citizens would be more apt to follow the rules and ideology of that political system. I chose to also examine this trend after the fall of the Soviet Union (post 1991) and it was again hypothesized that greater support for the current Russian Federation would be linked with a higher income. However, greater support for the current government would be linked with greater church attendance since 1991, given that the current government has no ideology that would discourage its citizens from practicing their religion.

The last hypothesis was more general and it examined whether or not the Soviet government had an effect on church attendance and *private* religious practices in the home, over both the short and long-term. It was hypothesized that the Soviet Union did, in fact, stunt religion both in a public and private sense during their seventy years of rule. Also, it was hypothesized that in the last few decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been a resurgence of religious belief and church attendance throughout the former Soviet Union (Greeley, 1994). This hypothesis is probably the most interesting in the sense that it examines both public and private religious devotion. It is reasonable to say that many Russia citizens, during the time of the Soviet rule, would not attend religious services because it positioned them for both social and literal death. However, it also seems reasonable that if the citizens were truly devout, they would continue to practice their religion in their home, away from the eyes of their government watchdog. Nonetheless, these “reasonable” assumptions could not be further from the truth. A possible explanation for this lies in research that was noted earlier in this paper. According to Galinsky (2010), God and government can be fairly interchangeable entities. They both offer the same type of support in the wake of limited freedom and control in one’s life and therefore, increased support for one can mean a noticeable decrease for the other (Galinsky, 2010).

Methodology

The sample for this study consisted of Russian citizens between the ages of 42 and 73. None were immigrants; all participants were born in Russia and stated that they had lived in the country all of their lives.

The study was carried out from June 1 to August 8, 2010 in three major cities: Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yaroslavl (with the majority collected in Yaroslavl). In all, 28 surveys were completed and 25 were deemed acceptable to include in the study. The other three surveys were kept for possible future study because they provided more insight into how to improve the wording and effectiveness of the survey. Besides age, the surveys contained demographic questions that covered gender, nationality, religious denomination, and city and country of residency. The majority of participants were female, with 20 female responses and only 5 male responses. This over-representation of female respondents can be attributed to the line of work (social services) through which most of the surveys were collected. Of the 25 surveys, 23 participants provided their nationalities, and of those 23 participants, 20 specified that they were Russian. The other 3 participants specified that their nationalities were Ukrainian, Jewish, and Udmurt. Religious denominations were slightly more varied. Of the 24 participants who responded to this question, 18 specified that they were Orthodox, 2 Christians, and 4 atheists. Last, it is important to mention that the sample area of the study was incredibly small. Most surveys were collected in Yaroslavl, Russia, and 21 of the 25 responses specified that this was the participant's city of residency. The 4 "other" responses range from Moscow to the Udmurtia (a small republic of Russia).

The survey questions were designed to examine participants' views and behaviors, both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union, in various areas, such as religious and government involvement, social, economic, and political change, as well as income fluctuations during the 1989 transition. The survey asked 14 questions, some in a Likert-scale format, and others in an open-ended format.

The first four questions were quantitative and asked about the frequency of church attendance and religious practices at home, both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Respondents answered according to a scale that read: Several times a week, once a week, once a month, once a year, and never. No additional, qualitative data were provided for these particular questions. Procedurally, by including religious practices, along with church attendance in this section, the survey yielded more personal and detailed responses. It examined the extent to which a government plays a role in its citizen's lives and begs the question of whether or not it is possible for a government ideology to become so ingrained in its citizens that it shapes their actions, even in the privacy of their own homes. It was hypothesized that the answer to this question was "yes," and that both church attendance and religious practices in the home before 1991 would occur less frequently than they do today, given that Soviet ideology did not encourage religious involvement.

The fifth question was open-ended and qualitative. It sought to clarify and add detail to the previous 4 questions. I asked whether or not the participants had any interest in attending church services before 1991. This question was critical in getting specifics about how people felt about religion and attending religious services before the fall of the Soviet Union. It was hypothesized that there would be very little interest in general, either because of a personal non-belief or because of discouragement by the government.

The sixth question asked about whether or not the respondent's religious faith had faltered at any point in their lives. Given that 6 out of the 25 participants reported either being an atheist or having an atheistic upbringing, this question was discarded from analyses.

The seventh and eighth questions were quantitative and examined government involvement before and after 1991. Specifically it asked how involved the respondent was in the Soviet Government before 1991 (question 7) and how involved they are in the current Russian government (question 8). Respondents answered according to the following scale: Involved, moderately involved, rarely involved, and not involved. It was hypothesized that increased government involvement, in either system, would cause more favor for that government's ideology and religious behavior would reflect that (correlating with questions 1-4). In short, if respondents who reported high involvement in the Soviet government, they were expected to report attending church less often and practice religion in their homes less frequently.

The ninth and tenth questions were open-ended and qualitative and asked for the participants to list the advantages and disadvantages under each system of government (Soviet Union vs. the current Russian federation). It was hypothesized that older participants would list more advantages under communism and more disadvantages under the current system, while younger participants would answer in the opposite way.

The eleventh and twelfth questions were qualitative, but unlike the other qualitative questions, asked the specific question of how much income the respondent had before and after 1991. It was hypothesized that a higher income, either before or after 1991, would mean more support and involvement in the particular government (correlating with questions 7 & 8).

The thirteenth and fourteenth questions asked about the social and economic advantages and disadvantages under each system. Like question 6, these questions were discarded from analyses when it was noted that they were too similar to questions 9 and

10, and thus were repetitive.

The survey was developed 2 to 3 months prior to data collection in Russia. It was first drafted in English and edited to eliminate biased or leading questions. It was then translated into Russian by a single native speaker, as well as translated back into English by a second native speaker in order to ensure that meanings were not lost in translation. After several tests carried out in which a third native speaker was brought in to answer the survey, ensure the questions made sense and the answers to the questions were reasonable, the survey was deemed ready.

It is important to note at the beginning of the research project, that not many responses were successfully collected. It became evident that the subject matter of the survey was very personal and that many of the participants were untrusting of strangers. This is why most of the data were collected during the second half of the time span in Russia and that all the participants were people with whom I had developed acquaintances. I either worked with or met outside of work with every respondent in a social sense. The work of my participants was at a non-profit organization that provided volunteer work for social services (e.g. children's shelter, a hospital for women). Approximately 5 surveys were given to friends, ages ranging from 24-28 that were, in turn, given to their parents to complete (as this was the age group that was targeted by the survey). These surveys were usually returned to me within 2 or 3 days, while the other surveys were handed directly to the participant, either by me or by a translator, and it was explained only that the research was for a college study and that the answers would be anonymous. Given the superstitions of many Russians that were encountered in the first few weeks of data collection, it was important to stress to them that they had no

obligation to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. At this point, I left the respondents at an appropriate distance, and it took approximately 10-15 minutes for the survey to be completed.

When the surveys were returned, I placed them in a stack, without looking at them, to eliminate any initial biases I may have had about the individual participants and to avoid any negative responses from the participants. About half of the surveys were translated overseas, with the help of on-site translators who assisted me in my day to day work. The other half of the surveys was translated upon arriving back in the United States, by a native speaker and professor at The University of Alabama in Huntsville.

Results

The first hypothesis that stated that age should be correlated with both negative and positive responses towards Communism and negative and positive responses towards the current Russian Federation was tested by correlating age with these four factors. When age was correlated with the number of positive responses towards Communism, $r = .34$ and $p = .05$, indicating that older respondents generated more positive responses towards Communism. When age was correlated with the number of negative responses towards Communism, $r = -.11$ and $p = .31$. When age was correlated with the number of positive responses towards the current Russian Federation, $r = -.12$ and $p = .34$. When age was correlated with the number of negative responses towards the current Russian Federation, $r = .09$ and $p = .34$. Although the direction of the trends was consistent with the hypothesis, these data produced no statistically significant results.

The second set of hypotheses was tested by correlating income with government

support and government support with church attendance, both before and after the fall of Communism. When income before 1991 was correlated with government support under Communism, $r = .49$ and $p = .02$. When income after 1991 was correlated with government support for the current Russian Federation, $r = .52$ and $p = .02$. When government support under Communism was correlated with church attendance before 1991, $r = .05$ and $p = .40$. When government support for the current Russian Federation was correlated with church attendance after 1991, $r = .14$ and $p = .26$. While the correlations between church attendance and government involvement elicited no significant results, the correlation between income and government involvement did produce statistically significant results.

The third set of hypotheses resulted in statistically significant responses. Both hypotheses were tested by comparing both church attendance before and after 1991, as well as religious practices in the home before and after 1991. When comparing church attendance before 1991 to church attendance after 1991, $t = 4.38$ and $p = .01$. When comparing religious practices in the home before 1991 to religious practices in the home after 1991, $t = 3.16$ and $p = .01$. As shown in table 1, the mean of religious practices in the home and church attendance are greater before 1991 (The questions were measured on a scale where 1= several times a week and 5= never).

Table 1

	Religious Practices		Church Attendance	
Pre 1991	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
	4.12	1.48	4.28	1.10

Post 1991	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
	3.60	1.44	3.48	1.05

Discussion

When examining the results of the first correlation, the direction of the trend is correct in that older participants listed more advantages under the Soviet government and more disadvantages under the current Russian Federation. The results, however, were not statistically significant. A possible reason for this could be due to the small sample size. The survey was also limited in its wording and general order of the questions. By asking for advantages and disadvantages and asking the two questions, one after the other, it encouraged participants to be more objective. For example, if a participant technically favored the government under the Soviet Union, even they may feel the need to list at least one or two advantages under the current Russian Federation just because the question asked them. In revising the survey, it would be advised that, following these two questions, which of the systems the participants ultimately preferred would be asked. This would help to make the other two questions and their results much clearer.

The open-ended question provided some insight to the participant's thoughts when reviewing the most common responses. For the question of the advantages under the Soviet government, the most common responses were "free education," (n = 9) and "free healthcare/medicine," (n = 8). These responses are of little surprise, given that by the 1960's more than 70 million Soviet citizens possessed either a secondary or higher education and more than 65 million regularly attended some form of educational institution (Freeborn, 1966). Other less common responses for the advantages under the Soviet government included zero unemployment, stability, a sure future, and equality and

kindness among people. For disadvantages under the Soviet government, the most common responses were that there were not a wide variety of goods available (n = 4) and that Russia was a closed State and traveling abroad was difficult (n = 4) as well.

The most common response to the question of the advantages under the current Russian Federation was that the country is more open (n = 6). For the question about the disadvantages under the current Russian Federation, the most common response given was that the participants had to pay for education (n = 3). Other common responses here included no stability and corruption in the government.

The second set of hypotheses produced both significant and non-significant results. In regards to government involvement and education, there was a definite correlation between a participant's income and their involvement or support in the government during both systems. These results support the proposition that if an economic system provides a higher yearly income for people, they will link this economic prosperity with the governmental system in place, and thus be more supportive of that governmental system. With regards to government involvement and church attendance, there appears to be no correlation between the two.

The third set of hypotheses produced the most concrete results in the survey. When comparing church attendance before and after 1991, there was a noticeable and definite increase in church attendance after 1991. This result is not surprising given the atheistic views under the Soviet government. Sidorov (2000) examines the resurrection of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior after it was demolished by the Soviet regime. Construction on this church commenced before the rise of the Bolsheviks in Russia, and the cathedral was planned to be one of the largest in the world. However, in 1933, the

cathedral was demolished to make room for the Palace of the Soviets monument. This is but one example of the disregard given to religious institutions and affiliations during the Soviet era, and this ultimately led to decreased church attendance before 1991.

Furthermore, even when plans to rebuild the monument in the 1990's surfaced, there were several conflicting sides that halted this progress, showing how divided Russia remained after the fall of the Soviet Union and that there still remained sympathies and nostalgia for the fallen regime (Haskins, 2009). However, the question remains as to whether the lack of church attendance was due to a loss in religious faith or due to fear of the government (and ultimately a move towards more private religious practices).

This question is answered by tests of the third hypothesis, which compares religious practices in the home both before and after 1991. According to the results, there was a definite increase in religious practices in the home after 1991. Given these results, it is reasonable to speculate that it is possible for a government ideology (in this case the Soviet ideology) to become so engrained in its citizens, that it affects both their public and private lives. This argument is supported by Greeley's research data that found a 22% increase in religious belief after the fall of the Soviet Union. Together, these results support the concept that strict government control can have an internal effect on its citizens.

Only twenty years since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia continues to be a place of interest when examining economic and political institutions and the effect that these institutions had on their citizens. With the long-standing history of the Orthodox Church in Russia, the issue of church vs. state will likely continue to be a contentious subject for research and further study.

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