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Letter from the Editors:
MSU Undergraduate Historian v. 12 (2026)

It is with gratitude and excitement that we announce the publication of the twelfth volume of Michigan State University's history journal, *The Undergraduate Historian*! We would like to acknowledge the previous editors, Trey Davis and Anna LePage, for their work in revitalizing the journal after a period of inactivity. We are proud to be part of a legacy of supporting undergraduate historical research at MSU and hope it may continue long after we leave.

We would like to express our deep gratitude for the guidance of our faculty mentor, Professor Ethan Segal, who offered excellent advice and trusted our decisions on the processes of submission calls, accepting papers, offering revisions, formatting, and sending the journal to print. We could not have asked for a more diligent or supportive advisor.

We are thankful to the professors who distributed our call for submissions to their classes and to everyone who submitted their papers for review. Thank you to Kara Hwang, Ryan Bean, John Eichholz, Riya Jacob, Lillian Towery-Collins, Zachary Gioppo, Joyce Peterlin, Calvin McKenna, Delaney Grant, and Nicole Butkovich for their contributions to the journal and for putting in the work to revise their papers in such a limited span of time. An additional thank you to Kara Hwang is warranted for her assistance with the journal's formatting.

Thank you to Julie Taylor with the MSU Libraries' Publishing Services for her work in printing the journal. We love the library! And we also gratefully acknowledge the History Department, led by Chairperson Michael Stamm, which

provided the funds to have the journal printed and has supported our club's activities over many years.

We are excited for Grace Hyde to join Katherine Dyal as co-editor for the journal in the 2026–2027 academic year. Student support and action are vital to the perpetuation of undergraduate publishing projects, and we hope for the continued passion, drive, and support of future editors and contributors for many more volumes in the future

Lastly, thank you to the reader, for investing your time in this copy of *The Undergraduate Historian*. We hope you enjoy the papers collected here and their reflection of the passion and dedication of Michigan State's history students.

Sincerely,

The Editors,
Katherine Dyal and Cass Bennett

**Modern Ways to Grind Your Teeth for White Shine:
The History of Toothpaste and Ideas of Modern Hygiene in Korea**

Kara Hwang

Abstract

Toothpaste, or *chimaboon*, was first introduced to Korea by Japan in the early twentieth century, and it soon became a popular consumer product. This paper examines the establishment of toothpaste in Korean society as a household staple, tracing its development through newspaper advertisements and articles from the time. The study highlights how toothpaste was framed both as a hygienic necessity and a marker of modern life. It also discusses the intersection between the capitalistic agendas of toothpaste companies and the nationalistic efforts of Koreans that allowed toothpaste to be easily adopted as the modern norm in Korea. The history of toothpaste and toothbrushing practices in Korea reflects broader social and economic transformations, where cleanliness and health were equated as desired characteristics of modernity.

Introduction

Toothbrushing was a new phenomenon in Korea introduced sometime in the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century. The idea of toothbrushing itself is by no means a modern invention. Records exist as early as 3,000–5,000 BCE, when ancient Egyptians concocted a paste, more in the form of powder, to clean out food residue from their teeth. Chinese and Indians were also reported to have used a brush made of animal fur to rub and clean their teeth.¹ There are written records from seventeenth century Korea recognizing the importance of rubbing one's teeth to remove calculus—more commonly known as tartar—and a number of prescriptions for cleansing one's mouth, but those may not be sufficient to serve as traceable evidence of an early conceptualization of toothpaste such as we are familiar with today.²

We now perceive standardized and almost uniform commodities of toothpaste and toothbrush as household staples. In the United States, the nineteenth-century development of toothpaste is well known. A dentist known as Dr. Peabody added soap to the toothpowder in 1824, and John Harris added chalk in 1850, bringing the early form of toothpaste closer to that of today. Colgate became the first company to mass produce toothpaste and sell it in individual containers in 1873. Then, in 1892, Dr. Washington Sheffield devised a way to put the paste into a collapsible tube, giving birth to what we now ubiquitously recognize as a tube of toothpaste.³ They were often sold with toothbrushes of varying sizes.

These modern forms of toothbrushing products were certainly new to Koreans. Korea at the time was going through rapid changes, with ever-increasing foreign influences that pressured the country to modernize and adopt capitalistic material culture, which resulted in rapid political, social, and economic changes. Amongst the influx of new ideas and changes was the

¹ Park Joon-bong, "Development of oral brush and maintaining of oral hygiene," 680; Lippert, Frank, "An introduction to toothpaste - its purpose, history and ingredients," 1.

² Park Joon-bong mentions Choi Jin-hwan's 1961 paper on *Dongui Bogam* [동의보감] (1613), a loyal physician Heo Jun's book that compiled Korea's medical practices. According to Choi, late Chosun possessed some dental knowledge and forms of aids to better clean one's teeth. Park does not elaborate further on what exactly did the prescription entail. Furthermore, it is not commonly referenced as evidence to Korea's foundation of toothpaste nor is it close to the modern form of toothpaste that this paper discusses.

³ Park, "Development of oral"; Lippert, "An introduction to toothpaste."

formation of the notion of modernity. Like any other social concept, the idea of modernity was a social invention, coined, circulated, and reinforced by people. Modernism was what characterized the seemingly mighty Western world, the developed and advanced culture that Koreans sought to emulate. This was a sentiment strongly shared by Japan, a country that sought to “westernize” in an attempt to rapidly modernize, a country that has been casting its shadows on the Korean peninsula for decades, a country that, eventually in 1910, coerced Korea into signing a treaty that rendered Korea its colony.

It is not surprising, then, that the first form of modern toothpaste was brought to Korea by the Japanese. Selling Japanese toothpastes in Korea not only generated capital, which is an important asset in modern capitalistic society, but also provided the Japanese Government-General with the opportunity to intervene in Korean’s health and hygiene habits to more effectively control the population. For Koreans, toothpaste was one of numerous other newly introduced modern habits they should now follow. This paper explores the role of toothpaste in defining new standards of hygiene and cleanliness in early twentieth century Korea. Consumer product advertisements and newspaper columns of the time speak to the prevalence of the notion of dental hygiene and its contribution to defending modernity, even if the audience may have been limited to those who were urban, educated, and economically comfortable.

The Teeth Grinding Powder: Lion *Chimaboon*

Chimaboon [치마분; 齒磨粉] was what Koreans called toothpaste in the early 20th century, at the advent of the new product of the modern world in the Korean peninsula.⁴ “Chi” (齒) meaning teeth, “ma” (磨) indicating the action of grinding or rubbing, and “boon” (粉) for powder, *chimaboon* was a powder that one used to grind—or to rub—their teeth for cleaning purposes. Although the exact date is unclear, the first form of modern toothpaste brought into Korea was the Japanese “Lion *Chimaboon*” (라이온 치마분; ライオン齒磨粉). The name of the new product was also taken straight from the brand, and Koreans started calling

⁴ Japanese kanji uses “齒” instead of “齒.” In hanja, however, they are pronounced the same, “*chi*.” In this paper, I made use of both as they are written in original source document.

any product for cleaning one's teeth a *chimaboon*.⁵ As early as 1910, the Lion company vigorously advertised for its *chimaboon* in *Mailshinbo*, a daily newspaper.

Since the beginning of the Japanese colonial occupation starting in 1910, Korean-language newspapers were banned, except for *Mailsinbo* (毎日申報), published by the Government-General of Korea. Along with *Kyungsung Ilbo* (京城日報) in Japanese and *Seoul Press* in English, *Mailsinbo* was one of three official daily newspapers and were the only means through which Koreans were able to access the news about the world for the next 10 years.⁶ Through this monopolization of the press, it is not hard to imagine that Japan was able to effectively disseminate its political agenda to the people of its newly acquired colony. Japan as an empire aspired to cultivate a healthy and productive population that would best support its modern state; to the Japanese colonial empire, the health of the population was directly related to the health of the country, in which an individual's body is considered not only to belong to him or herself but also to the nation.⁷ Lion *Chimaboon* served as a great vantage point for Japanese colonizers, as it stood for a sanitizing product that everyone from a modern country should employ for personal hygiene—one of the basic requirements of being a modern citizen.⁸

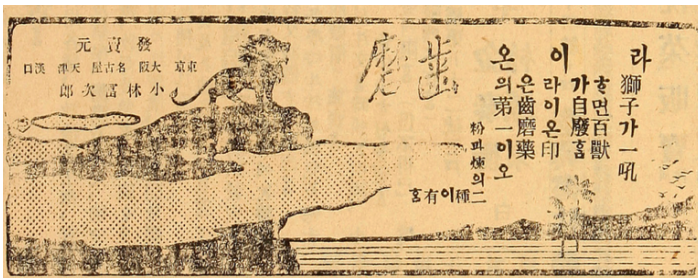


Figure 1

⁵ Jung Eun-jin, "The Establishment and Cultural History of Sino-Korean Word 'Chiyak (Toothpaste)': The initial study about Vocabulary History from Cultural and Historical Perspectives," *The Studies of Korean Language and Literature*, no. 73 (May 2022): 289–327.

⁶ "Mailsinbo" [매일신보], Historical Terms in History Textbooks, *History Net*, National Institute of Korean History, accessed December 7, 2025, https://contents.history.go.kr/front/tg/view.do?levelId=tg_004_1860.

⁷ Eom Jin-ju, "A Study of hygienic products advertising discourse in 1910~1930 - Focusing on Lion tooth power products," *The Journal of Language & Literature* 72, (2017), 236.

⁸ Eom, "Study of hygienic products," 228-229.

Figure 1 is an advertisement for Lion *Chimaboon* that was featured in *Mailshinbo* at least 15 times between December 1910 and April 1911, and Figure 2 is another advertisement that was featured at least 18 times from April to September 1911.⁹ It is worth noting that these early forms of advertisement mostly included words to describe the product rather than visuals. Figure 1 features a roaring lion on a cliff, evoking bravery rather than cleaning one's



Figure 2

teeth. Figure 2 shows three girls in traditional Korean clothing, hanbok, holding the rectangular Lion *Chimaboon* package. Neither of the advertisements show the act of toothbrushing nor the desired shining teeth. For those who were illiterate, which was quite common among Koreans at the time, there would be nothing to motivate them to purchase the *chimaboon*—or to even know that *chimaboon* is a product being advertised and used to clean one's teeth.

Eom Jinju, a Korean language scholar, examined how the language used in Lion *Chimaboon* advertisements contributed to the discussion of hygiene in colonial Korea.¹⁰ She explains that products like soap and toothpaste, at the time of their introduction to Korea, were considered health and hygiene items, closer to medical

⁹ Both the advertisement and statistics are based on search result for “라이온 치마” [Lion *Chima*] on Korea Newspaper Archive (<https://www.nl.go.kr/newspaper/index.do>), a digital newspaper archive in Korea, hosted by National Library of Korea. “Gwang-go, lion chima” [광고, 라이온齒磨; Advertisement, Lion *Chima*], *Maeilsinbo*, December 16, 1910; “Gwang-go, sajain lion chima” [광고, 獅子印라이온齒磨; Advertisement, lion marked Lion *Chima*], *Maeilsinbo*, April 2, 1911.

¹⁰ Eom, “Study of hygienic products,” 230.

products than our current perception of them as daily necessities.¹¹ In this sense, *chimaboon* veered from the traditional discussion of medicine as a cure for an ailment to a preventative measure for potential issues like cavities.¹² Combined with the Japanese colonial government's goal to modernize Korea to better support and strengthen the Japanese empire, directions in the Lion *Chimaboon* advertisements defined *chimaboon* as modern and thus a product Koreans should consume and utilize in their daily lives to better themselves.¹³



Figure 3



Figure 4

In her paper, Eom translates and analyzes a number of Lion *Chimaboon* advertisements. Figure 3 reads that the use of Lion *Chimaboon* can prevent dental diseases and would make one's teeth as bright and shiny as that of the lion, although it is not disclosed how or why the quality of lion's teeth is so desirable.¹⁴ Figure 4 is

¹¹ Eom, "A Study of," 223.

¹² Eom, "A Study of," 222-223.

¹³ Eom, "A Study of," 232.

¹⁴ Translation was featured in: Eom, 231. The picture is from the newspaper advertisement: "Gwang-go, lion chima" [광고, 라이온齒磨; Advertisement, Lion Chima], *Maeilsinbo*, December 6, 1911.

made up of four different Lion *Chimaboon* advertisements juxtaposed, all displaying men in Western suits and ties, often with glasses and nicely combed hair—the prototype of ideal modern men.¹⁵ Eom argues that the language in these Lion *Chimaboon* advertisements show that people of the time added the value of beauty (shining white teeth) to its original medical benefits (prevention of cavities). Accentuated Western modernity in advertisements also support that both such aesthetic and hygienic standards were the defining characteristics of a modern society.

With that in mind, we can revisit Figure 1 and Figure 2. The words may support the ideal benefits of using Lion *Chimaboon* as Eom mentioned. The use of images of a roaring lion may serve to accentuate the shining white teeth one should aspire to have. In a broader sense, however, the imagery of the lion could be a form of branding, which makes the brand itself memorable. The company being named after the bravest and strongest animal in the West—as opposed to its Eastern counterpart, the tiger—also parallels the common practice of equating a quality of the West as being modern of the time. In fact, the name of the company is “ライオン,” which reads as “rion.” The same applies when the product is written in Korean, “라이온.” In Figure 2, while the three women are dressed in traditional Korean attire, they are sitting on chairs around a round table covered with a tablecloth. Chairs and high tables were Western inventions introduced to Korea, which were considered staples of modern households at the time. Korea traditionally enjoyed sitting on the ground with low tables. Moreover, the embroidery on the tablecloth more closely resembles Western floral patterns than Korean ones. Additionally, Western attire was an essential component for modern men, but the same degree of modernity was not applied to women. For women, simple and modest clothing became increasingly desirable for common people. From this perspective, Lion *Chimaboon* fashioned itself from its early stages in Korea as an essential part of modernity through advertisements.

Korean Product: Jangbaek *Chimaboon*

Starting in the 1920s, newspapers by Koreans started to be published again. *Chosun Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo* were two of the

¹⁵ Image captured from: Eom, 239.

earliest and most active publications. On August 25, 1924, a Korean newspaper *Dong-A Ilbo* printed an article titled “長白齒磨粉 미국에서조선인이제조” [Jangbaek *Chimaboon* produced by a Korean in the U.S.]. A day after that, an advertisement for the product, Jangbaek *Chimaboon*, took up a lower right corner of page three in the four-page daily newspaper. Between August 26, 1924, and May 23, 1925, at least 75 advertisements for *Jangbaek Chimaboon* were printed across *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*.¹⁶ On September 21, 1924, and May 16, 1925, the *Jangbaek Chimaboon* was even given as a winner’s prize for sports events.¹⁷ After the spark of seemingly robust promotion, however, Jangbaek *Chimaboon* did not make another appearance after its last newspaper advertisement, nor was it featured in any other newspaper other than *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*.¹⁸ Other than the total of 78 appearances across the two newspapers, there was no trace of Jangbaek *Chimaboon* to be found.¹⁹

Though short-lived, advertisements for Jangbaek *Chimaboon* attest to Koreans’ interest in promoting and consuming products that were made by Koreans over those by foreigners. In the 1920s, Koreans started advocating the use of Korean-made products, a movement now known as “*mulsanjangryeo-oondong*” [물산장려운동]. It was not a coincidence, then, that there was an effort to create an essential product like *chimaboon* by Korean hands and advertise it as such in hopes of getting greater consumer interest. Appealing to nationalistic ideals is a strategy that O’Hagan attributes to Sweden’s Stomatol toothpaste and its success as well. O’Hagan argues that Stomatol fashioned itself as a contributor to

¹⁶ The number is based on key word search result of “장백치마분” [Jangbaek *Chimaboon*] on Naver News Library (<https://newslibrary.naver.com/search/searchByDate.naver>). This is an online newspaper archive hosted by Naver, featuring digitized newspapers by *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, *Maeil Kyungjae*, *Chosun Ilbo*, and *Hankyoreh*, from March 5, 1920 to December 31, 1999. As text-recognition of the newspapers is not perfect, the keyword search result the webpage has yielded may not be complete. Regardless, for the purpose of this paper, the analysis is based on the search results on the website.

¹⁷ “Chamgadanche Yishipsa” [參加團體二十四; 24 participating groups], *Dong-A Ilbo*, September 21, 1924; “Kidae-ui ileun whatda!” [期待의일은왔다!; The waited day has come!], *Chosun Ilbo*, May 16, 1925.

¹⁸ This is based on key word search result on Korea Newspaper Archive (<https://www.nl.go.kr/newspaper/index.do>), another digital newspaper archive in Korea, hosted by National Library of Korea. It provides 107 different newspapers published between the years 1898 and 1960s that discontinued their publication. *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* are active to this day and thus not available.

¹⁹ I was not able to find anything else on numerous online searches, both in Korean and hanja.

everything that was to be Swedish, from following the popular trends to family and household practices, religious and cultural holidays, and national sports.²⁰ Similarly, Jangbaek *Chimaboon* appears to have tried to fashion itself as the nation's new leading *chimaboon* producer.

朝鮮人の新發明인 衛生的的、經濟的
長白齒磨粉 自作自給の大精神下에서最
히衛生的、經濟的의長本位로歐米諸醫學大大家の新研究藥
品을摘拔하여合理的、로製造한이長白齒磨粉은從來
外來品에匹敵이無한良品이고左의特効가有함이다。
口中消毒、腐敗豫防、殺菌力、熱氣除却、白齒
力、口中清快

齒牙는營養攝取의門戶을이다。齒の不潔은口中에도
는微菌을發生케하고따라齒根을腐敗케하여蟲齒、神
經痛、胃腸病等모든病因을誘發한다。齒의清潔保
全은健康의根本이을이다。

京城府公平堂百拾壹番地

米國紐育
太平洋商會
京城出張所

電話光化門局(二三二番
振替口座京城二三六一六番

萬物이
更新하는
도남과우리
의나라가차라
름이다남과가차
라면自給自給이第一
急務이요自給自給을야
면國產獎勵가必要함
니다朝鮮民族이
어디長白齒粉을
國產품의一分子인
가을인지아주시오

東洋一大粉不都總流
金西(故安)謹啓

白齒粉

會商洋平大育經義米
第一二二門化美高電
若六一六三一城京善德

金國產賣局
時化經品賣局
外經品賣局及
藥店及藥

Figure 5 and Figure 6

²⁰ Lauren Alex O' Hagan, "Modernity, beauty and the Swedish "way of life": lifestyle marketing in Stomatol toothpaste advertisements, 1910–1940," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 14, no. 4 (2022): 424–452.

The majority of the Jangbaek *Chimaboon* advertisements that I was able to find were copies of figure 5.²¹ Newspapers in Korea frequently employed Chinese characters—hanja, the Chinese semantic characters with Korean phonetic pronunciations. Literacy was largely limited to those who were privileged enough to receive sufficient education to read the thousands of characters that might be used in a paragraph full of hanja words, and patrons of newspapers were probably confined to those living in urban settings and economically comfortable enough to purchase newspapers daily. To the majority of Koreans, hence, *Jangbaek Chimaboon* being a Korean product may not have made much of a difference, nor did it make it more affordable.

However, for urban upper-class Koreans, the idea of modernity was a luxury to be exploited. In 1925, an advertisement that looks like Figure 6 made at least 15 appearances in both *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*.²² Here again, a man in a suit, tie, glasses, and fashionable hairstyle makes an appearance. Unlike the men featured in the aforementioned Lion *Chimaboon* advertisement that Eom refers to, this man seems less like a user of the toothpaste he is promoting than a person who is advising others to use the toothbrush he is pointing at. The image also suggests that he is a doctor, or someone of status and credibility, a successful modern man that all Koreans should aspire to be. The last line of the written words reads: “Please do not forget that *Jangbaek Chimaboon* is one of the domestic products [made in Korea].”²³

For educated Koreans who are economically comfortable enough to afford modern lifestyle, as well as for those who carry with themselves a sense of defiance towards the Japanese colonists and a sense of pride towards the nation for Koreans, *Jangbaek Chimaboon*’s advertisements would have perfectly served their purpose. Although it is unclear why it was unable to continue its advertisements, or whether the company itself lasted any longer, *Jangbaek Chimaboon* reflects Koreans’ desire to produce a product that is rendered necessary for a modern lifestyle with their own hands, as well as the dedication to uphold the status of modernity and cleanliness.

²¹ “Jangbaek-chimaboon” [長白齒磨粉]. Advertisement. *Dong-A Ilbo*, August 26, 1924.

²² “Jangbaek-chimaboon” [長白齒磨粉]. Advertisement. *Chosun Ilbo*, February 11, 1925.

²³ “Jangbaek-chimaboon,” *Chosun Ilbo*, February 11, 1925.

Hygiene in the Domestic Sphere: Wives' Column

One of the earliest Korean newspapers, *Chosun Ilbo* had a column titled “Domestic Wife” [가정부인; Gadyeongbuin]. As could be assumed from the title of the column, Domestic Wife aimed at providing adequate information for household wives, on whom childrearing, cleanliness, and household health depended. From 1924 to 1958, Domestic Wife was regularly published and often serialized on the upper right corner of page 3 of four-page *Chosun Ilbo*.²⁴ *Chosun Ilbo* fashioned itself as a national newspaper, which presented an equal, if not greater, number of sections for columns and culture as compared to news or politics. As a Korean newspaper under Japanese colonial rule, it sought to not only convey information but also thoughts and ideologies the publishers deemed necessary to cultivate a modern nation.²⁵ The absence of debatable politics, and without the base of academic discussion, journalism was required to be able to fill every hole.²⁶ For that, none other than cultural columns would have been the best vent for journalists to express their thoughts without much external scrutiny.

Choi Eun-hee, Korea's first female reporter, took charge of the Domestic Wife column. About 40 percent of the columns appear to have been written by the editorial team within *Chosun Ilbo*, while the rest were written by external contributors whose names are often not disclosed. Some of the writers were male, and some used pseudonyms instead of their own, but Choi Eun-hee was the editor in charge of planning and organizing the column.²⁷ The column's intended audience would have been women, often with a household to take care of and young children in need of parental care. However, they may have been limited to urban, educated, and upper-middle-class women, as literacy was a luxury to many in lower economic social status or rural areas, especially for women. Additionally, while the Domestic Wife column is almost entirely written in hangul—the Korean writing system—and hanja words are accompanied with hangul phonetics, neither the ability to read

²⁴ Kim Mee-young, "A Study on 'Ga-Jeong-Bu-In-Ran', the Fixed Column in Chosun Ilbo about the Korean Housewives's Daily Lives, in the Period of Japanese Imperialists ruled Korean Peninsula," *The Journal of Korean Modern Literature* 16, (2004): 221–278, 222.

²⁵ Kim, "A Study on," 228–229.

²⁶ Kim, "A Study on," 232.

²⁷ Kim, "A Study on," 230.

nor the luxury of purchasing newspapers regularly were shared experiences for all.



Figure 7

On October 8, 1926, Domestic Wife printed an article with a title that roughly translates to: “About teeth, the most important for beauty and hygiene” (Figure 7).²⁸ According to the author of the column, tooth brushing is crucial in cleaning one’s body, and thus children should be instructed how to brush their teeth and taught it as a life-long habit from an early age. She argues that the Koreans’ traditional use of salt to rinse out residue in the mouth is bound to be repulsive, which explains young children’s potential defiance to brushing their teeth. She emphasizes that a mother should hand toothpaste and a toothbrush to their children as early as the age of four, teaching them how to brush their teeth on their own.

Her point about Koreans using salt to take care of their oral hygiene is a widely accepted fact in Korean dental history. Historians and dentists alike agree that there is historical evidence of Koreans using salt to mimic the effect of anti-inflammatory disinfection—although their depth of knowledge is open to debate.²⁹ What is interesting about the column, however, is that it sets the tone that renders the use of salt as an obsolete practice and toothbrushing as modern and thus superior. The column underscores that toothbrushing is an essential element in modernity, a lifestyle that requires cleanliness. Because the use of toothbrush and toothpaste is categorized as such, Korean traditional salt rinsing had to be downgraded into a more primitive and obsolete position and thus inferior—regardless of its actual benefit, if any.

The author of the Domestic Wife column also states that “[toothpaste] is nothing more than a supporting product to

²⁸ “Miwa wisaeng-ae gajang joongyohan ni-ae daehan ju-ui (5)” [미와위생에 가장중요한 니에 대한 주의(五); About teeth, the most important for beauty and hygiene], *Choson Ilbo*, December 26, 1926.

²⁹ Eom Jin-ju, “A Study of,” Park Joon-bong. “Development of;” Lippert, Frank. “An introduction to.”

toothbrush that helps clean our teeth,” and explains that the forms it comes in—powdered or “already mixed with water”—do not make any difference as long as the toothbrush is in good quality.³⁰ The toothbrush should have hard bristles, and two of such, each with bristles arranged in opposite directions, should be employed at a time to clean both the inner and outer side of teeth. A considerably accurate diagram of a teeth arrangement with two toothbrushes positioned as described is included at the end of the article. It can be concluded that the Domestic Wives column was not only responsive to social issues but also informational. In fact, little over 70 percent of the articles published in the column were dedicated to topics of hygiene, childrearing, and education. As a communicative point for women of the time, Domestic Wife served as a means through which some women (often those with privilege) maneuvered the ever-changing modern world they lived in.

The image displays four distinct advertisements from a 1926 issue of Choson Ilbo. The top-left advertisement promotes dental hygiene, emphasizing the importance of brushing teeth three times daily with a high-quality toothbrush. It includes a small illustration of a woman. The top-right advertisement is for '부인' (Lady) brand products, featuring a woman sitting on a box. The bottom-left advertisement is for '대드리싸움' (Daidrissau) by '엄근수' (Eomgeon-su), showing a man and a fish. The bottom-right advertisement is for '화동' (Hwado) by '엄근수' (Eomgeon-su), showing a woman and a child. Each ad contains Korean text describing the products and their benefits.

Figure 8

³⁰ “Miwa wisaeng-ae....” Choson Ilbo, December 26, 1926.

Although not much is known about it in comparison to Chosun Ilbo's Domestic Wife, *Dong-A Ilbo* also had a "Wife" column. Figure 8 is an article printed in Wife on October 8, 1926, with a title roughly translated to: "Dental hygiene, tooth brushing three times a day."³¹ It provided information on tooth enamel and ailments that food residue on teeth can cause. It recommends brushing one's teeth at least three times a day, after every meal if possible. It also highlights how toothbrushing should be made a habit, once again confirming that modern cleansing practices should be incorporated into daily routine. The fact that the purely informational text is written in a women's section reinforces the fact that in the construction of modern society, cleanliness was an absolute necessity for one's household, which lay in the domestic sphere where women were meant to dwell. For upper-class women who had a respectable household to maintain, learning about the newest trends and various methods to maintain their household's modernity would have been important. The importance of modern toothbrushing serves as a great example of discussions that happened among these women.

Conclusion

Newspaper researcher Kim Myoung-hwan writes that advertisements in daily newspapers in twentieth-century Korea are great reflections of the people's desire. Following advertisements on personal beauty products from the 1920s to 1970s, he traces the changing standards of beauty and desired physical qualities of the time.³² The most popular products ranged from: soap and shampoo in the 1920s; beauty products and makeup, as well as plastic surgeries to reshape one's body starting in the 1950s; formulas to gain fat for a fuller look in the 1970s. Though it may be a bit of a stretch, it seems quite significant that advertisements for consumer products, which supposedly followed and reflected social change in people's desires, started with personal hygiene products like soap and shampoo then quickly moved on to beauty. Kim's paper does not mention toothpaste but does show the idea that cleanliness was directly related to modernity in early twentieth-century Korea. In a

³¹ "I-ui wisang yangchijileun haro saebeon" [이(齒)의 위생 양치질은 하루 세 번; Dental hygiene tooth brushing three times a day]. *Dong-A Ilbo*, October 8, 1926.

³² Kim, Myoung-hwan, "The desires for "Beauty Body" of Koreans exposed at the newspaper ads," *Journal of Seoul Forkloristics* no. 4 (2017): 129–161.

way, being modern required being hygienic, which started from cleansing one's body with modern products—including toothpaste and toothbrush.

From its advent in Korean society, toothpaste was a product that endowed a quality of modernity to its users. Japanese colonizers and Korean nationalists alike wanted to allure the public to the benefits of their products, both in their usefulness in cleaning one's teeth as well as in cultivating that modern cleanliness. Daily newspaper advertisements served as a great outlet for all parties to express their aspirations, whether it be to promote the toothpaste products or to educate others on how to maintain their personal hygiene—or to enlighten the public on how to exhibit properly modern characteristics.

The word *chimaboon* gradually gave its way to *chiyak* [齒藥], in which “*yak* [藥]” means medicine. A linguist Jung Eun-jin, exploring the cultural and etymological development of toothpaste in Korea, explains that *chiyak* was seldom used to describe a remedy for curing teeth-related maladies. At the same time, *chimaboon* moved from powdered form to tubed paste, the character “*boon*” became irrelevant, as well as obtaining not only cleaning function but also strengthening teeth health. By the middle of twentieth century, according to Jung Eun-jin, Koreans started using the hanja word *chiyak*, the only Chinese character combination used in Korea.³³

Now, in the twenty-first century, toothpaste and toothbrushes have become staples in every household around the world. While there is a quality of cleansing one's body attached to it, it is considered more of an essential part of one's life. Teeth brightening solutions are also getting popular, seemingly reflecting the trend of seeking out ways to attach aesthetics to a body part once the base of cleanliness has been achieved. In that sense, *chimaboon*, the earliest form of modern toothpaste in Korea, serves as a great lens through which the construction of modernity as a social ideal can be examined.

³³ Jung Eun-jin, “The Establishment....”

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The Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan: A Defensive Measure Turned Catalyst for Soviet Dissolution

John Eichholz

Abstract

This article explores the defensive nature of the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 by the Soviet Union amid domestic turmoil and Cold War tensions. Motivated by stabilizing Central Asia and resisting Western encroachment, the invasion revealed deep-rooted issues within the Soviet power structure. Internationally, the invasion drew widespread condemnation. Ironically, the invasion that was meant to secure the Soviet position in Central Asia ended up contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The consequences of the invasion serve as a lesson illustrating that imperial overreach can collapse even the strongest nations from within.

Background

After the assassination of the Afghan leader Nur Muhammad Taraki in October of 1979, Afghan revolutionary Hafizullah Amin seized power in Afghanistan. The Soviets, fearing instability in Afghanistan from the regime change, responded quickly. On December 8, 1979, a Soviet airborne unit landed in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. Over the next nineteen days, their presence grew as the Soviet military prepared a strategic strike. On December 27, Soviet troops stormed the Darulaman Palace and killed Amin, replacing him with the Soviet-backed Babrak Karmal as President.¹ What followed was a decade-long war against resistance groups in Afghanistan to secure Soviet influence in Central Asia. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979–1989) was a defensive attempt to secure influence in Central Asia amid Cold War tensions that ultimately exposed the limits of the USSR's national power and weakened their political system, contributing to the dissolution of the USSR. The invasion revealed the shortcomings of the Soviet military and exacerbated both domestic and international political issues. These factors eroded Soviet stability and reputation, accelerating the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union's relationship with Afghanistan leading up to the invasion was one of strategic investment and growing Soviet entanglement. The Soviet Union had a semi-close relationship with Afghanistan since the Afghan-Soviet treaties of 1921 and 1931 were ratified, but this relationship was mostly confined to routine matters of diplomacy. However, the relationship between the two nations became more significantly intertwined in 1954, when the Soviet Union began heavily investing in the Afghan economy.² Before the invasion, the USSR was Afghanistan's primary weapons supplier and had supported 70 development projects to industrialize Afghanistan. The Soviets financed factories, electric stations, highway construction, and other new industrial

¹ Collins, Joseph J. 1980. "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Methods, Motives, and Ramifications." *Naval War College Review* 33 (6): 55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44642132>, 53-55.

² Central Intelligence Agency. 1986. "Current Afghan-Soviet Relations." *Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Electronic Reading Room*. Accessed November 10, 2025. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP91T01172R000300070018-4.pdf>, 1.

projects to bolster the Afghan economy.³ In addition to being involved in the economy, the Soviets were heavily involved in Afghan politics.

Before Taraki was in power, Mohammed Daoud was the president of Afghanistan. President Mohammed Daoud, an Afghan nationalist⁴, sought to limit Soviet influence in Afghanistan despite their economic support by improving relationships with Iran and Pakistan.⁵ Taraki and his political faction desired to be aligned with the Soviet Union and saw Daoud as anti-Soviet. In April 1978, Daoud was ousted from power by Taraki in a coup. After which, Amin became Taraki's second-in-command, later becoming the Prime Minister in Taraki's government. However, Amin was not popular with the Soviets or Taraki, as they believed he was too abrasive and risky to the "whole leftist experiment" in Afghanistan.⁶ The Soviets advised Taraki to remove Amin and suggested replacing him with Babrak Karmal, a more level-headed Soviet-leaning Marxist, but Amin acted first and had Taraki assassinated. Following this event, Afghanistan started falling more and more into a destabilized state under the brutal rule of Amin. Amin's government lost public support, causing resistance groups to form across Afghanistan, and this political instability prompted the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.⁷

Historiographical Analysis

The study of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is a unique subject as the event sits at the intersection of Cold War studies and Middle Eastern studies, leading to many different viewpoints on the Soviet motivations and the effects of the occupation. Joseph Collins points to Cold War-influenced geopolitical gains as a source of motivation for the Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation. Collins raises the possibility that concern over Central Asia from a Soviet perspective stemmed from a desire to protect its southern

³ Goldman, Minton F. 1984. "Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan: Roots and Causes." *Polity* 16 (3): 385. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3234556>.

⁴ Hyman, Anthony. "Nationalism in Afghanistan." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 308. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/stable/3879829>.

⁵ Goldman, "Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan" 385.

⁶ Goldman, "Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan" 387-388.

⁷ Payind, Alam. 1989. "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 21 (1): 119-120. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/163642>.

border and its “quest for an ocean access, and its more recent concern over the Suez-Indian Ocean-Pacific route,” as it was an attractive asset for trade to the Soviet Far East.⁸ While I agree with the notion that the Soviets were deeply concerned about stability on their southern border, the second part of his claim that mentions trade route access does not seem as a plausible motive in justifying the invasion of Afghanistan. Collins himself states that “we give too much credit to the Soviet ability to control the future” when he references other arguments that cite Persian Gulf oil as the Soviet motive for invasion.⁹ It seems reasonable to apply this logic to his claim that the Soviets were aiming at Afghanistan as a starting point to begin growing its influence out into other Middle Eastern countries for trade route access, considering the fact that Afghanistan is land locked and does not have access to the Indian Ocean. For this reason, this argument does not seem as a significant reason for Soviet military intervention.

However, this is not the only argument presented by Collins. Collins emphasizes Soviet fears of an Islamic-based takeover of the government by the insurgent groups as another point of motivation for the Soviets to interfere in Afghanistan militarily.¹⁰ Losing control over Afghanistan to insurgents who are fighting foreign domination would be an embarrassing loss to Soviet influence over the region as a whole. This perspective argues that the Soviet leadership was likely acting preemptively in Afghanistan to prevent the collapse of a friendly government, supporting the view that invasion was primarily a defensive measure.

Other historians such as Alam Payind agree with the notion that the Soviet Union was motivated by possible strategic leverage from having influence over Afghanistan. Payind writes that the Kremlin “often created opportunities and then capitalized on them” when it came to its foreign policy towards Afghanistan.¹¹ In this school of thought, it is believed that Soviet actions were not limited to just reactions to perceived dangers coming from the US, Islamic revolutionaries, or other threats to Soviet influence in Central Asia. Payind argues that the USSR knowingly took risks concerning the situation in Afghanistan as a means of capitalizing on its position within Afghanistan. Rather than framing the invasion as purely

⁸ Collins, “The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan,” 57.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Payind, “Soviet-Afghan Relations” 108.

defensive or reactive, Payind offers another point of view that Soviet policy towards Afghanistan was also focused on taking active, and sometimes risky, steps to maintain influence in Central Asia.¹² This broader take on Soviet motives claims that the Soviets were not backed into a corner which forced them to invade, but instead, they invaded to secure the stability of the pro-Soviet regime on its southern border. By taking the risk of invading a foreign country, this perspective concludes that the Soviets were acting on the situation before it left the sphere of Soviet influence and power, rather than responding to a current threat.

Contrasting the views of these two historians, there are a select few scholars who disagree entirely with the idea that the military intervention was defensive in nature at all. Political science scholar James D. J. Brown argues that the invasion was primarily influenced by taking steps towards economic gain related to the oil reserves in the Persian Gulf. He claims the decision to invade Afghanistan was irregular considering the existing pattern of Soviet foreign diplomacy, which reveals the Soviet “reluctance to commit Red Army units directly” in the Third World (nations not aligned with the U.S. or USSR).¹³ Brown claims that the threats of “external aggression [were] largely fictitious, invented by the Soviets to justify their intervention” in Afghanistan to gain control over the Afghan government, and consequentially, make strides towards Soviet influence reaching the oil-rich Persian Gulf.¹⁴ This point of view argues that the stark difference in the pattern of previous Soviet non-intervention militarily paired with the claim that the threat of external aggression was a Soviet propaganda point to justify deployment of Soviet troops (to both their own population and the international stage) is evidence that the decision to invade Afghanistan was not a Soviet defensive measure. As a result, Brown concludes, the “extraordinary surge in oil prices...From \$17.50 in January 1979... to \$40 by November” was a strong economic incentive to Soviet leadership to take the risk of invading.¹⁵

In reviewing the work of these scholars and others, it is apparent the historiography of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has changed over time, incorporating other fields of research such

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Brown, James D. J. 2013. “Oil Fueled? The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29 (1): 70. doi:10.1080/1060586X.2013.778543.

¹⁴ Brown, “Oil Fueled” 70.

¹⁵ Brown, “Oil Fueled” 58.

as economics. Collins wrote his article in 1980, Payind in 1989, and Brown in 2013. It appears that before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent opening of Soviet archives, scholars believed Soviet intervention was influenced by Soviet expansionism and taking defensive measures to protect Soviet influence and position within Central Asia. After the USSR dissolved and scholars from other fields began analyzing the event, the scholarship shifted to claim the Soviets had a greater economic incentive other than defense of a friendly regime to commit troops to invading Afghanistan.

Comparing these viewpoints with my thesis, Payind's work appears to most closely align with my argument, claiming that the Soviets were primarily motivated by taking active measures to secure and stabilize its strategic position within Afghanistan. While there are differences in our arguments, they both claim the Soviets were attempting to secure a stronger position in Afghanistan, and do not believe that economic incentive was the primary motivation. Additionally, my thesis directly contrasts with Brown's argument, who dismisses defensive motivations of Soviet leadership to argue instead for their economic incentives to secure influence in Afghanistan and move towards the Persian Gulf from there.

Invasion Primarily Defensive in Nature

The decision to invade Afghanistan was primarily a defensive action committed by the Soviets in order to stabilize their southern border and to reduce the threat of U.S. encirclement and influence. In a phone call between N.M. Taraki and Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin before the coup by Amin, Taraki gives a grave outlook on the future of his nation. He claims to Kosygin that "Herat will fall this evening or tomorrow morning and be completely in enemy hands" and requests Soviet personnel and weapons to be given to fight the insurgency.¹⁶ The fall of Herat would have been a major blow to the Afghan government, as it was home to a large Afghan population and key military resources such as airfields.¹⁷ This call to the Soviet government alerted them to the

¹⁶ Taraki, Nur Mohammed, and Alexei N. Kosygin. 1979. "Telephone Conversation between Soviet Premier Alexei N. Kosygin and Afghan Premier Nur Mohammed Taraki." *Wilson Center Digital Archive*. Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113141>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

unstable situation within the nation, with Kosygin asking “what foreign policy activities or statements” would be helpful for the Taraki government, but they did not immediately offer military action.¹⁸ It was only after Taraki was overthrown that the Soviets decided to begin a large-scale military intervention.¹⁹

To the Soviets, having Amin in power was a threat to both Soviet influence in Afghanistan and the stability of the nation itself. When Amin took power, the Soviets saw him reduce the power and influence of the Soviet-favoring Central Committee of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (CC PDPA) and promote “repression...directed towards active participants in the April revolution” and people sympathetic towards the Soviet leadership and influence in the nation.²⁰ Repressing those who supported the Soviet Union was likely a cause of great concern in the Politburo for the future of the USSR relations with Afghanistan. By taking the presidency by force and beginning an era of repression against political opponents, Amin contributed to the destabilization of the Afghan government and weakened his reputation with Soviet officials.

Fears of Western encirclement and U.S. encroachment in Afghanistan and Central Asia also played a significant role in convincing the Soviets to enact defensive measures. In a letter from the Politburo, the highest Soviet executive committee, to allied socialist countries, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union cites a “gross interference on the part of several powers into the affairs of Afghanistan” as a reason for concern.²¹ While the U.S. is not outright mentioned in this statement, it is clear the U.S. is the power being referenced here. Amin also made the situation more dire for the USSR in terms of promoting the growth of American influence in the nation. Amin attempted to “mend relations with America” as he shifted Afghanistan’s foreign policy strategy by concluding the previous Afghan presidents’ policy of harassing the American

¹⁸ Taraki, Nur Mohammed, and Alexei N. Kosygin. “Telephone Conversation.”

¹⁹ Payind, “Soviet-Afghan Relations” 120–121.

²⁰ Andropov, Y., A. Gromyko, B. Ponomarev, and D. Ustinov. 1979. “Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to CC CPSU on the Events in Afghanistan on December 27–28, 1979.” *Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War*. National Security Archive. Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/r11.pdf>.

²¹ Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Politburo. 1979. “Message to Soviet Ambassadors on the Invasion of Afghanistan, Attachment to CPSU Politburo Decree #177.” Wilson Center Digital Archive. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/message-soviet-ambassadors-invasion-afghanistan-attachment-cpsu-politburo-decree-177>.

embassy in Kabul.²² This change in the previous pattern of Afghan leadership from actively fighting against American influence to becoming less opposed to it signaled a threat to the Soviet hold over Afghan politics on a global stage. This Cold War-era fear of encroachment on Soviet territory by the United States explains the defensive actions taken by the Soviet state, considering the Soviets interpreted Amin's government to be turning away from anti-American foreign policy. After some months of Amin's rule and deliberations in Moscow, Soviet leadership decided that in "the interests of maintaining [their] national security, it [had] become necessary to render additional military assistance to Afghanistan."²³ The fall of Taraki and the chaos resulting from overthrowing a nation's government paired with the rise of Amin and his repression of pro-Soviet Afghans threw Afghanistan into disorder. As a result, the Soviets began a defensive military operation to secure the nation and their influence within it.

The defense incentive to stabilize Afghanistan outweighs the economic rationale Persian Gulf oil had for the Soviets to invade. CIA analysis of Soviet air base positions within Afghanistan and air force capabilities show that, even when using optimum flight patterns, Soviet aircraft could not reach targets deep in the Persian Gulf.²⁴ By invading Afghanistan, the Soviets would gain very little in terms of strategic leverage over Gulf oil. Even after constructing a new airfield in southwestern Afghanistan, most Soviet aircraft would not be "within operational range of Persian Gulf targets."²⁵ For this reason, it is unlikely that the Soviet leadership would take the risks and costs associated with conducting military operations in a foreign country for such little increase in strategic value. The invasion is indicative of an attempt to exert influence over the country's politics and stabilize the border.

Limitations and Issues Revealed

The invasion revealed numerous issues within the Soviet system such as uncertainties with Soviet leadership, limitations of

²² Andropov, Y. "Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Central Intelligence Agency. 1983. "Wall Street Journal Article of 26 April 83 on Afghanistan." Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Electronic Reading Room. Accessed November 10, 2025. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t00287r000701010001-4, 1>.

²⁵ Central Intelligence Agency. "Wall Street Journal Article", 3.

the military, and political weaknesses on a national level. The military effort in Afghanistan showed concerns within Soviet leadership that led to a damaging of Soviet reputation internationally and domestically. Soviet leaders who led the military “did not even have a correct assessment of the unique geographical features” of Afghanistan, which slowed the invasion and limited the military significantly.²⁶ This lack of assessment over the geography of Afghanistan reflected broader systemic issues within Soviet leadership and decision-making. Leaders created and approved plans to invade Afghanistan without ensuring that they had accurate information about the geography of the land they would travel through. The orders of “incompetent leadership...diminished operational effectiveness”²⁷ within Afghanistan. As a consequence of weak leadership and lack of sufficient intelligence, the effectiveness of the invasion was hindered. Further, these issues demonstrated that the “invincible” Soviet army was not as invincible as once believed.²⁸

Along with issues of decision-making based on incomplete intelligence, the exposed corruption within Soviet leadership was a significant blow to Soviet legitimacy. Within Afghanistan, some Soviet military leaders were involved in a black-market network of illegal Western goods and even engaged in “illegal sales of military equipment” to Afghans.²⁹ These instances of black-market purchases and arms sales by leaders highlight that the Soviet administration’s corruption was rooted in the government’s bureaucratic structure. It exposed a system that lacked the oversight required to prevent instances of corruption from occurring. Corruption within the higher ranks of the military indicates a reduction of discipline, which reduces the effectiveness of the military operation and harms the moral legitimacy of the Army.

²⁶ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. 1988. “Letter on Afghanistan. May 10.” Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War. National Security Archive. Accessed November 6, 2025. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/r21.pdf>, 1.

²⁷ Central Intelligence Agency. 1984. “Soviet Problems, Prospects, and Options in Afghanistan in the Next Year.” *Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Electronic Reading Room*. Accessed November 6, 2025. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP09T00367R000300200001-3.pdf>, 20.

²⁸ Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash. 1999. “The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union.” *Review of International Studies* 25 (4): 694. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20097629>

²⁹ Central Intelligence Agency. 1984. “Domestic Costs to the Soviet Regime of Involvement in Afghanistan.” *Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Electronic Reading Room*. Accessed November 10, 2025. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00287R001401010001-6.pdf>, 4.

Issues with the efficacy of Soviet military leadership are embodied by military logistical shortcomings that the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan revealed. First, a weak supply system inhibited military strength and lowered morale among Soviet forces deployed in Afghanistan. The operation “highlighted serious deficiencies in the military supply system and in Soviet military medicine.”³⁰ Possibly affected by having insufficient information about the geography of Afghanistan, the Soviets were limited by an inefficient supply chain system that impacted how soldiers received items such as food, medical supplies, ammunition, clothing, and more. In addition to an inability to provide for Soviet soldiers, the needed facilities built within Afghanistan—such as airfield runways, housing, and oil pipelines—were “barely adequate” for the Soviet forces deployed.³¹ A critical weakness in the Red Army was revealed—they were poorly equipped and poorly maintained. This flaw reduced the operational capacity of the military and further damaged the military’s reputation.

The Soviet Army faced failure in its invasion of Afghanistan while fighting local resistance groups. The failure to destroy these organized resistance efforts, such as the failed Panjsher VII campaign, significantly reduced Soviet troops morale and angered leadership in Moscow, who were growing tired of the poor performance of the military in Afghanistan.³² In its failure, Moscow saw the Soviet Army as weak and ineffective. By failing to defeat the local resistance groups, the Soviets prolonged their own involvement in Afghanistan. This, paired with an already weak supply system and leadership structure, hurt troop morale. The Red Army troops’ morale had dropped significantly as a result of lacking resources and failing in campaigns. In 1987, the “number of desertions in the armed forces [was] growing” and the confidence of the military dropped significantly.³³ These numerous issues within the military effort weakened the Red Army and illustrated that even

³⁰ Central Intelligence Agency. “Soviet Problems, Prospects, and Options,” 20.

³¹ Central Intelligence Agency. 1987. “The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan.” Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Electronic Reading Room. Accessed November 10, 2025. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP08S01350R000300950001-0.pdf>,

³² Central Intelligence Agency. “Soviet Problems, Prospects, and Options,” 18.

³³ Tsagolov, Kim. 1987. “Colonel Tsagolov’s Letter to USSR Minister of Defense Dmitry Yazov on the Situation in Afghanistan, August 13, 1987.” *Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last War*. National Security Archive. Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/r20.pdf>, 5.

small groups of semi-organized resistance fighters could fight off an invading power as strong as the Soviet Union.

Collectively, these failures revealed that the USSR lacked the cohesive leadership, military capability, and political discipline required to sustain a prolonged invasion, which accelerated the erosion of Soviet national power and reputation that ultimately contributed to the USSR's collapse.³⁴

International and Domestic Reactions to the Invasion

The weaknesses and issues of the USSR that the invasion of Afghanistan brought to light were noticed on an international level. Nations around the world condemned the USSR for its invasion, and the U.S. in particular was a strong advocate against the USSR's military intervention. U.S. Vice President Walter Mondale addressed the U.S. Olympic Committee calling for a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, citing "barbaric use of lethal gas" and claiming that "more than 100 other nations" called for the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan.³⁵ This address signals how the United States government condemned the invasion and used their position as a major world superpower to address the USSR's invasion on the world stage. This address would negatively affect the USSR in international politics considerably due to more than 100 countries showing condemnation for their intervention.³⁶

This notion is supported by a condemnation letter from the European Parliament of 16 January 1980. The Parliament called for the immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan, similar to the U.S. backlash, and asked members of the Parliament to "act in cooperation with all governments who condemn this flagrant act of aggression."³⁷ This was significant for the USSR and its position internationally because political opposition fomented against them so long as they were involved in Afghanistan. The European Parliament condemnation also argues the 1980 Moscow Olympic

³⁴ Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash. "The Afghanistan War," 699.

³⁵ Mondale, Walter. 1980. "U.S. Call for an Olympic Boycott: Address by Vice President Mondale to the United States Olympic Committee." Wilson Center Digital Archive. Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123796>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ European Parliament. 1980. "Resolution on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan." 16 January 1980. In *Oral Histories*, 2022. JSTOR. Accessed November 4, 2025. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.34608388>, 1.

Games should be reconsidered if Soviet troops were not withdrawn.³⁸ The Olympic Games were used as political leverage by Western nations in an attempt to have the Soviet Union end its military operations in Afghanistan.

Along with condemnation, the Soviet Union faced heavy economic sanctions from many Western countries. Such sanctions “endured much longer than any sanctions imposed after other Soviet international misdeeds,” showing that Western leaders and international organizations particularly disliked Soviet military intervention in Central Asia.³⁹ These sanctions reduced the USSR’s economic strength, which was already supporting the war effort.

Paired with economic sanctions, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan also caused “increased Western, Chinese, and Japanese defense efforts.”⁴⁰ Due to their military intervention in a foreign nation, China and Japan increased defensive spending as they interpreted their invasion as expansionist and aggressive.⁴¹ Fearing Soviet military advances elsewhere, these nations boosted funding to their defense sectors. Cold War tensions were already increasing Western fears of Moscow, and their invasion only heightened what the West feared: an expansionist Soviet Union.

Internationally, the invasion of Afghanistan brought condemnation, economic sanctions, and political isolation to the Soviet Union. Domestically, the invasion also attracted widespread criticism. As mentioned before, the failures and limitations of the Red Army decreased soldier morale appreciably. This was felt within the USSR as well, with “Anti-militarism [becoming] strong in the non-Russian Soviet republics,” as that is where a majority of the deployed Soviet soldiers came from.⁴² Soviet citizens, wearied of losing people to the war effort, began protesting for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. This heightened internal discontent with Soviet authority and damaged the reputation of both the military and government in the eyes of some Soviet citizens.

Some citizens took active stances against the government, despite the dangers of opposing Soviet authority. One citizen, Vladimir Danchev, “altered official news broadcasts...to express

³⁸ European Parliament, “Resolution on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” 2.

³⁹ Central Intelligence Agency. “Soviet Problems, Prospects, and Options,” 23.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash. “The Afghanistan War,” 698.

opposition to Soviet involvement” in Afghanistan over radio.⁴³ The open criticism of the Soviet involvement reveals that the propaganda that was being used to justify military intervention was appearing unsuccessful in convincing the people. Dissent and opposition were growing in the USSR, leading to the Soviet government losing legitimacy and eventually collapsing in 1991.

Conclusion

The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989) was an attempt to defend Soviet influence in Central Asia amid Cold War tensions that exposed weaknesses of the USSR’s national power and delegitimized the Soviet government, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the USSR. The military effort in Afghanistan revealed major issues within Soviet leadership that led to a weakening of Soviet reputation internationally and domestically. Collectively, these failures revealed that the USSR lacked the cohesive leadership, military capability, and political discipline required to sustain a prolonged invasion. These revelations accelerated the erosion of Soviet national power and reputation that ultimately contributed to the USSR’s collapse.

Internationally, the invasion brought widespread condemnation, prompted heavy economic sanctions from Western countries, and worsened fears that Moscow was turning toward aggressive expansionism. This political isolation damaged the USSR’s ability to cooperate with other nations in areas such as trade and diplomacy. Domestically, Soviet citizens grew increasingly frustrated with the casualties and the lack of clear progress, leading to protests and open criticism of the war effort. The fact that Soviet propaganda could no longer convince portions of the population was paired with a growing internal discontent with Soviet authority.

As a whole, the military shortcomings, international backlash, and domestic reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan revealed that the Soviet Union’s political and military systems were far more fragile than they appeared to be. Rather than securing Soviet power in Central Asia, the military intervention exposed the USSR’s vulnerabilities, accelerating the erosion of the USSR’s national strength and legitimacy and ultimately contributing to its collapse. The invasion was intended to be a

⁴³ Central Intelligence Agency. “Soviet Problems, Prospects, and Options,” 22.

demonstration of the Soviet Union's power, and it is ironic that taking this defensive measure ended up contributing to the fall of the USSR. It serves as a historical lesson that imperial overreach can destabilize even the strongest nations.

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Designing Antisemitism: How England Set the Precedent Eight Centuries Ago

Ryan Bean

Abstract

King Edward I's unprecedented decision to expel all Jewish people from England in 1290 CE marked the end of a centuries-long deterioration of Jewish rights due to mounting antisemitism. During this period of deterioration, many of the tropes and manifestations of antisemitism still seen today originated or rose to prominence in England. By providing a chronological narrative of the history of medieval England's Jewish population, this paper primarily explores the origins of popular manifestations of antisemitism and tells an often overlooked story. By comparing the antisemitic behaviors of medieval England to those of Nazi Germany and the contemporary world, this paper also draws lines of continuity throughout large portions of history.

Introduction

In 1880 CE, German journalist Wilhelm Marr published *Zwanglose Antisemitische Hefte*; contained within its text was the first known printing of the word “antisemitism”.¹ Today, it seems nearly impossible to avoid the term. Antisemitism—that is, the expression of hatred toward Jewish people—and controversies related to it are covered by mainstream and underground news media alike, local and national.² Outside of references in the news, those conscious of popular modern history ought to be familiar with the word and the ideology it represents as well. Images of slanted swastikas, concentration camps, striped pajamas, and Star of David patches swim up in the minds of those familiar with the worst of ideological fanaticism. Of the history of antisemitism, certainly, the atrocities committed by the Third Reich (1933–1945) stand in the foreground of modern perception. Given less attention, however, is the millennia-long history of antisemitic precedent that paved the Third Reich’s way. Notably, the Polish-Jewish community’s pre-war status as the largest community of Jews in the world, and consequently its being one of the Third Reich’s main victims, is largely explained by a long history of expulsion. During the Middle Ages and well into the early modern period, nearly all Western European countries expelled their Jewish populations, who in turn emigrated into a more tolerant Eastern Europe.³ The earliest of these expulsions occurred in England, under Edward I, in 1290 CE. Leading up to their expulsion, the Jewish people of England were subjected to a number of new discriminatory practices and stereotypes for the first time. Many of these practices and stereotypes continued into the modern era, and many continue today.

This paper aims to illustrate that many of the tropes and manifestations of antisemitism seen today got their start or rose to prominence in medieval England as a result of ecumenical enjoining and English kings’ deliberate sequestering of their Jewish subjects in order to better meet their financial needs. It also intends to prove that antisemitism has not existed in isolated instances but has

¹ Gotthard Deutsch, “Anti-Semitism” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* vol. 1, ed. Isidore Singer (Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901-1906), 641.

² “Defining Antisemitism,” U.S. Department of State. Accessed Feb 9, 2026.

³ Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky, “Marginalization and Expulsion,” *Britannica*. Accessed Feb 9, 2026.

existed with continuity throughout long swaths of history. Pursuant to these goals, this paper consists primarily of a comprehensive history of medieval England's Jews, from their arrival to their expulsion, with specific comparative points at the end. The main text is arranged chronologically so as to provide ample context and explanation for the emergence and rise of antisemitism in medieval England. We start as early as 74 CE.

Before the Norman Kings: 74–1066 CE

It is not exactly known when Jewish people first settled in England. Jewish historian and editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Cecil Roth, asserts first that Jews may have lived in and formed significant communities in Roman-occupied England, and second, that they disappeared as Rome withdrew from England around 410 CE.⁴ Roth's evidence for his first assertion is typical of scholars of Judaic history: the massive number of Jewish captives taken into slavery after the First Jewish-Roman War (97,000 according to contemporary historian Josephus)⁵ makes it likely that, by means of the Roman slave trade, Jews spread far and wide into the lands held by the Roman Empire around the time (c.74 CE), including Great Britain. Corroborating this idea is the archaeological discovery of a Judean minted coin found in London, dating from the early 2nd century CE.⁶

Assuming Roth's first assertion is correct and Jewish slaves *were* brought to England after the First Jewish-Roman War, this may very well have led to the start of antisemitism in England. Josephus' account of the war makes it clear that the Romans viewed Jewish people as a lesser race. To clarify, the Romans believed that *all* the people they conquered were inferior, but they seem to have been particularly frustrated by Jewish resistance to Roman rule, which they claimed was not paralleled by any of the other "barbarians" they had conquered.⁷ A later writing by Josephus details certain sanctions granted to Roman Jews, which Josephus interprets as evidence of Roman respect and consideration for the

⁴ Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in England* 3rd ed. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964), 2.

⁵ Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston (1737), ch. 9 para. 3.

⁶ Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 1.

⁷ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, ch. 16, para. 4.

Jews.⁸ Tessa Rajak, however, casts serious doubt on this “Roman respect,” arguing not only that the sanctions are not evidence of any consideration for Jewish people but that many Roman charters not included by Josephus in his writing were actually purposeful attacks meant to antagonize Jews.⁹ The attitude of antisemitism these attacks represent could easily have extended into Roman-occupied England, marking the ideology’s advent in the nation, though no evidence has been found yet to prove it.

Roth’s second assertion, that whatever Jewish people *did* live in England during this time must have disappeared after the Romans left, is dubious. He claims a lack of evidence pointing toward the existence of Jews in England during Anglo-Saxon rule (410–1066 CE) as the basis of his belief, but despite his claim, there *is* evidence of Jews living in England during this time. To be sure, the evidence is scant, but it is important to appropriately acknowledge it. The evidence is as follows:

In the *Excerptions of Ecgbriht* [sic], from 740 CE, multiple references are made to Jews. Specifically, one canon ordered “That no Christian presume to Judaize, or be present at Jewish feasts”.¹⁰ As Archbishop of York, Ecgbriht’s chief concern would have been those living in his diocese. Therefore, one can assume that this canon presupposes the existence of a Jewish community residing in York during the first half of the eighth century. However, the text lacks any specification on the matter. It could instead be interpreted as referring to foreign Jews, either as travelers themselves or as people English travelers might encounter. Thus, Ecgbriht’s canons neither prove nor deny the existence of Jewish communities in Anglo-Saxon England, but they do stand as early evidence of segregationist beliefs in England regarding Jewish people.

A second thread of evidence pointing towards the existence of Anglo-Saxon era Jews in England: Pope Gregory I (c. 540–604), in his letters, complained of and condemned the sale of Christians as slaves to Jewish people in modern-day Northern France.¹¹ A plethora of sources have confirmed the practice of large-scale trade

⁸ Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston (1737), book. xiv, ch. 10.

⁹ Tessa Rajak, “Was There a Roman Charter for the Jews?” in *The Journal of Roman Studies* vol.74 (1984), 107–23.

¹⁰ Ecgbert of York, “The Excerptions of Ecgbriht” in *A Collection of the Laws and Canons of the Church of England* vol.1, trans. John Johnson (Oxford, 1850), 218.

¹¹ Joseph Jacobs, ed. *The Jews of Angevin England: Documents and Records* (London, 1893), 3.

between the northern coast of modern-day France and Roman-occupied England, including the Pudding Pan shipwreck, which dates to the second century CE.¹² Some sources, rather bizarrely, assume that the lack of written records from the Anglo-Saxon period means that this trade must have just abruptly ceased. Logically, this makes little sense, and there *have* been archaeological discoveries proving that trade across the English Channel continued during the Anglo-Saxon period. The excavations at Hamwic, for example, found pottery imported from Belgium and Northern France.¹³ This clearly establishes that trade continued across the English Channel after the Romans had left, and given Pope Gregory's remarks on Jewish people in the north of France, it would not be bizarre to assume that *some* may have travelled on these trade routes to Great Britain. Furthermore, given their possible existence on the island *during* Roman rule, it would not be a stretch to suggest that some free Jewish families or communities simply remained in England after the Romans left.

Relative Prosperity: 1066–1215 CE

Evidence of the presence of Jews in England becomes indisputable shortly after the Norman Conquest of 1066 CE. William of Malmesbury, a historian contemporary to England's three Norman kings, recorded that William the Conqueror had "transferred" Jews to London from the French city of Rouen sometime during his twenty-year reign.¹⁴ Whether he had invited these Jewish people cordially or not is unknown, but evidence establishes the Norman kings as behaving favorably towards their Jewish subjects. For example, the Conqueror's son, William Rufus, albeit in an isolated occurrence, seems to have treated the new Jews of London with regard. He, in a sort of witty exchange, challenged them to argue with Christian priests, claiming that if they won the argument, he himself would convert to Judaism.¹⁵ It is also possible that Jews sought refuge under Rufus from a wave of anti-Jewish

¹² Michael T. Walsh, *Pudding Pan: A Roman Shipwreck and its Cargo in Context*, (University of Southampton, 2006), 2.

¹³ Jane Timby, "The Pottery" in *Excavations at Hamwic* vol.2, ed. P. Andrews (Council for British Archaeology, 1997), 207.

¹⁴ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings* vol.1, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors, R.M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), 563.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*.

violence that claimed the lives of thousands of European Jews in 1096 CE, prompted by the First Crusade, suggesting at least some higher level of tolerance toward Judaism in England under William Rufus as compared to the rest of Europe.¹⁶ Rufus' brother and the last of the Norman kings, Henry I, continued to protect England's Jewry.

Henry's reign marked the beginning of a century of relative privilege afforded to the Jews of England. Sometime during his 35-year reign (1100–1135 CE), Henry I issued a charter protecting, and even expanding, certain rights for Jews that Christians did not benefit from, including fair trial rights and an exemption from tolls.¹⁷ Henry I's grandson, Henry II, who ruled from 1154 to 1189 CE, went on to expand the fair trial rights his grandfather had granted English Jews in his charters, making them more in line with Talmudic law.¹⁸ These charters should not be taken as evidence that antisemitism did not exist in twelfth century England, however. In *A History of Jews in England*, Cecil Roth clarifies that the English Jewry still faced incidents of persecution during this period, especially during the Anarchy, which, as it sounds, was a period marked by massive failures of law and order.¹⁹ Rather, the Henrys' charters raise questions about motivation. Why did the kings protect the Jews? Why did the kings protect the Jews more than the Christians? Christians of the time spoke enviously of Jewish people.²⁰ By all accounts, Jews seem to have been favored by the kings and were more successful than their Christian countrymen. Why? The answer: money.

In medieval Europe, the act of lending money with interest, known as usury, was prohibited to Christians. The First Council of Nicaea (325 CE) expressly banned *clergymen* from lending money with interest, but it was already expected that no Christian would practice usury.²¹ Eventually, at the Third Lateran Council (1179 CE), usury was banned for *all* Christians.²² Jews, however, were not prohibited from moneylending, consequently becoming vital to

¹⁶ Roth, *A History of Jews in England*, 6.

¹⁷ Jacobs, ed. *The Jews of Angevin England*, 212–214.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 214–215; Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹ Norman P. Tanner, trans. and ed. "First Council of Nicaea" in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* vol.1 (Georgetown University Press, 1990), canon 17.

²² Norman P. Tanner, trans. and ed. "Third Lateran Council" in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* vol.1 (Georgetown University Press, 1990), canon 25.

kings, clergy, and others in need of money loans. Prominent Jewish financiers funded abbeys and kings' expenses, acted practically as treasurers for the Crown, and built their houses of stone,²³ much to the chagrin of many Christians who could not afford such materials.²⁴ The ability to practice usury skyrocketed some Jews to the upper classes of medieval English society outside of the nobility. One notable Jewish financier, Aaron of Lincoln is estimated to have been the wealthiest person in England when he died in 1185 CE.²⁵ The rising wealth of the Jewry was not without penalty, however. Disproportionate tallages (medieval taxes) were levied on Jews to fund the kings' expeditions, including the Crusades. The Crusades stirred antisemitic feelings while jealousy of Jewish moneylenders' wealth added fuel to the fire.²⁶ Furthermore, because Christians saw usury as sinful, it can be expected that Jewish moneylenders were seen as doing dirty work. With this combination of factors, it was during this period that the popular stereotype that Jews are particularly greedy people came into existence. After adopting this belief, many jealous Christians turned to violence.

At Richard I's coronation, a riot broke out and eventually turned to target the London Jewry neighborhood. A large portion of the Jewry's population was massacred, either by being beaten to death, stabbed, or burned alive after rioters lit Jewish people's thatched roofs on fire and surrounded their homes so they could not flee.²⁷ In response, King Richard issued a charter (1190 CE) reinforcing and confirming the rights and privileges granted to English Jews by his father and great-grandfather, Kings Henry II and Henry I, respectively.²⁸ Again, this does not necessarily mean Richard I was especially fond of the Jews. Rather, it suggests that during Richard's reign Jewish people were still of the utmost importance to the Crown. The sovereign had innumerable ways to squeeze money out of the English Jewry and did so frequently. To aid in keeping track of Jewish assets and in order to more effectively tax them, a separate treasury, later known as the

²³ "Jews' House," Visit Lincoln, accessed Feb 9, 2026.

²⁴ Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 11, 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

²⁷ Jacobs, ed. *The Jews of Angevin England*, 100–102.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134–136.

Exchequer of the Jews, was organized in 1194 CE.²⁹ The benefits of an organization of the Jewry's finances became especially apparent to Richard I when he was held captive on his return from the Third Crusade. England's Jews were made to pay 5,000 marks of Richard's ransom, a contribution over three times the size of the entire city of London's.³⁰

The late twelfth century was marked by the dichotomy between increasing antisemitism, fueled by the Crusades, jealousy, and Pope Innocent III's rhetoric, and increasing protections and regulations of the Jewry, motivated by the kings' fiscal needs.³¹ In 1201 CE, King John I once again confirmed the liberties of Jews that had been granted by Henry I a century earlier. This time, John charged the Jewish population 4,000 marks for the charter.³² Clearly, at the turn of the millennium, the English Jewry was no more than a checkbook for the King. Financially, they were under great pressure, but socially, excepting minor isolated incidents, they were relatively still at ease. This would change in the thirteenth century.

Magna Carta and Changing Tides: 1215–1275 CE

King John's reign was, in short, a failure. In 1204 CE, John lost Normandy to the King of France. To fund his campaign to take it back, King John taxed England's Jewish population for 66,000 marks, imprisoning and torturing those who failed to comply.³³ Economically crippled and left defenseless by the 1181 CE assize of arms, which forbade Jewish people from holding weapons, Jews were the target of much violence when civil war broke out in 1215 CE.³⁴ This time, the King offered no new charters of protection. In fact, 1215 CE might be marked as the very year in which events started to unfold that would send England's Jews on a sharp decline towards their expulsion in 1290 CE.

The Magna Carta (1215 CE), now widely regarded as one of the first stepping stones of modern democracy, was little more

²⁹ Ibid., 156–158.

³⁰ Joseph Jacobs, "England" in *The Jewish Encyclopaedia* vol. 5, ed. Isidore Singer (Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901-1906) 164; Jacobs, ed. *The Jews of Angevin England*, 162.

³¹ Ibid., 186.

³² Ibid., 212-215.

³³ Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 35–36.

³⁴ Jacobs, ed. *The Jews of Angevin England*, 75; Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 36.

than a peace treaty when King John was forced to sign the document by a group of rebellious barons. Among the Magna Carta's provisions were protections for barons and knights, emphasizing ideals of fairness and justice.³⁵ Also included in the provisions were two clauses addressing Jews, both of which limited their ability to collect interest on loans. Technically, the Magna Carta only prohibited the collection of interest from the heirs and widows of men who had died before they could pay, so Jewish moneylenders were still left with plenty of opportunities, but these opportunities were beginning to shrink.³⁶ Why? The rollback of Jewish usury rights hints at the reason: the frustrations that Christians debtors had toward their moneylenders. As these frustrations grew, they led to the emergence of another popular Jewish stereotype still seen today: that Jews are behind other peoples' economic hardships.

In the same year the Magna Carta fulfilled the demands of frustrated Christian debtors (1215 CE), the Fourth Lateran Council, convened in Rome, introduced a canon ordering that all Jews be distinguished by clothing.³⁷ England obeyed in 1218 CE. The regents of child King Henry III issued an edict requiring Jews to wear a patch of linen on their breast in order to avoid miscegenation.³⁸ This was the first instance of Jews being required to wear patches, but it would not be the last. Starting here, in 1218 CE, Jewish patches underwent an evolution in England that ended with a similar form and color to those employed by Hitler and the Third Reich over 700 years in the future, a topic to which I will return later.

Apart from the development of these patches, the same King Henry's long reign also saw the most extreme exploitation of Jewish finance yet. Cecil Roth estimated that, in the thirty years after Henry III came fully into power in 1227 CE, some 250,000 marks had been squeezed from the English Jewry.³⁹ To ensure steady funding for his rule, Henry III initially allowed Jews certain legal privileges and, despite never re-confirming the charters of the Norman kings, protected some Jewish rights. However, as

³⁵ "Magna Carta, 1215," The National Archives, trans. The British Library.

³⁶ Ibid..

³⁷ Norman P. Tanner, trans. and ed. "Fourth Lateran Council" in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* vol.1 (Georgetown University Press, 1990), canon 68.

³⁸ D'Blossiers Tovey, ed. *Anglia Judaica* (Oxford, 1738), 82.

³⁹ Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 44–46.

antisemitism mounted throughout the country, Henry's administration eventually brought the Jews into a new era of subjugation. Language in the London Eyre of 1244 CE reveals the evolution of the kings' relationships with the Jewry of England. Whereas the Norman kings, in 1201 CE, referred to Jews as being "...just as our own property,"⁴⁰ the London Eyre of 1244 CE plainly stated that "...Jews belong to the king".⁴¹ The difference here is small, but noteworthy. The word "as" in the first quotation is one of comparison: Jews were to be treated *like* the king's property, but were not literally the king's property, which actually exempted them from tolls and allowed them to move freely.⁴² Obviously, the second quotation, forty-four years after the first, states clearly that Jews *were* in fact considered property of the king. Surely, this slight change would have been nothing controversial given the accelerated rate of antisemitism in England during the thirteenth century, but it marks a precedential change in how the Crown viewed the Jewry, effectively lowering the status of English Jews comprehensively. It is not a shock, then, that nine years after Jews were labeled as property of the Crown in the *London Eyre of 1244 CE*, the first Statute of the Jewry was enacted.

The statute, enacted by Henry III in 1253 CE, invaded nearly every facet of Jewish life. First and foremost, the statute begins by officially stating that "...from the hour of birth every Jew, whether male or female, [should] serve Us in some way".⁴³ With this codification, from the King's perspective, the English Jewry was nothing more than a tool to be used with little regard. Coupled with the *London Eyre* claim that Jews were property of the king, the 1253 CE Statute of the Jewry completes the subjugation of Jews under the authority of the Crown. The statute continues with clauses that require Jews to pray quietly in synagogues, wear an identifying patch, and pay tithes to their local Christian church. The statute also prohibits Jews from eating meat during Lent, criticizing Christianity, moving to a different town without special permission, and engaging in sexual intercourse with Christians.⁴⁴ The wording of the statute

⁴⁰ Jacobs, ed., *The Jews of Angevin England*, 213.

⁴¹ "The London Eyre of 1244", British History Online, eds. Helena M Chew and Martin Weinbaum (London, 1970), article 277.

⁴² Jacobs, ed., *The Jews of Angevin England*, 213–214.

⁴³ J. M. Rigg, ed. *Select Pleas, Staris, and Other Records from the Rolls of the Exchequer of the Jews, A.D. 1220–1284* (London, 1902), xlix.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*.

makes it clear that Jews were considered a problem, a burden, an annoyance, a threat. One particularly vicious threat Christians erroneously believed their Jewish neighbors posed was the blood libel, the first instance in England occurring in 1144 CE.⁴⁵ These rumors, which claimed that Jews were ritualistically murdering Christian children and using their blood for sacrificial purposes, spread throughout the nation and struck panic into Christian hearts and minds. With conspiracies like these sweeping across medieval England, what, then, was there to do about the Jews? In one of the first acts of his reign, Henry III's son, Edward I, enacted a second Statute of the Jewry (1275 CE).

Being Pushed Out: 1275–1290 CE

The 1275 CE statute completely banned English Jews from usury, barring many communities from their largest source of revenue. The order for Jewish people to wear a patch was reconfirmed in the statute as well, specifying this time that the patch should be made of yellow felt in the form of two crossed tablets (representing the Ten Commandments).⁴⁶ The statute's description of the patches is especially reminiscent of Nazi Germany's, and by the statute's other clauses, the rife antisemitism that had evolved in England is made clearly apparent. It should not be taken as evidence toward any lack of antisemitism on Edward's part, therefore, that his 1275 CE statute includes provisions to allow Jews to continue to function in England. Rather, this is probably owed to Edward's astute leadership and hesitation to fully dismiss Jewish moneylenders, who had been so beneficial in the past. The 1275 CE Statute of the Jewry calls for the protection of Jewish bodies and property and calls for Jews to be allowed to farm and merchandise undisturbed.⁴⁷ The segregation of the Jewry was to continue, but, possibly in recognition of the great benefits prior kings had enjoyed from the wealth of the Jewish moneylenders, Jews were allowed to continue residing in England. To ensure that they would, Edward had to allow them access to means of living other than usury: the aforementioned farming and merchandising. To make up for the lost benefits of Jewish usury and taxation, King Edward turned to the

⁴⁵ Jacobs, ed., *The Jews of Angevin England*, 19.

⁴⁶ Record Commission, "The Statutes of Jewry" in *The Statutes of the Realm* vol.1 (London, 1810), 221.

⁴⁷ Ibid..

growing enterprises of Italian usurers.⁴⁸ In fact, the emergence of these Italian usurers may have even empowered Edward to ban his Jewish subjects from usury in the first place. If that *was* the case, this decision paints Edward's antisemitism all the clearer; rather than continue to take money from Jewish moneylenders who he had full control over, King Edward decided to switch to sinful Christian usurers who he had no control over at all. With this move, it is clear that even if Jews were later to be re-granted their right to usury, they would have been unwanted. After the Statute of the Jewry of 1275 CE, Jews were essentially of no use to the Crown. The provisions included in the statute to help Jewish people subsist failed. Most were poor, and many faced difficulties assimilating into laboring and merchandising spheres, becoming even less useful to England's economy. Amidst this difficult state, in 1290 CE, Edward I expelled all Jewish people from England. The text of the edict is now lost, but letters from the King to his sheriffs reveal that Jews were given a period of time to make their way to London and subsequently leave the island.⁴⁹ Sheriffs were under orders to ensure no harm be done to the emigrants.⁵⁰ Thus marks the end of the original Jewry of England.

Then and Now

The previous sections of this paper contain multiple references to manifestations and tropes of antisemitism that originally arose in medieval England. The events and conditions that led to the emergence of these tropes took place nearly eight centuries ago, yet these tropes continue today. This is partially because other Western European Christian kings followed England's example, such as King Philip IV, who expelled all Jewish people from France and auctioned their property for profit in 1306 CE.⁵¹ But this is also because, hundreds of years after they arose in England, Hitler and his Third Reich laid antisemitic tactics born in medieval England bare for the modern world to see and for contemporary antisemites to draw upon.

For example, the stereotype of "Jewish greed", which started in medieval England, and the consequent portrayal of Jews

⁴⁸ Roth, *A History of the Jews in England*, 84.

⁴⁹ "Letter from King Edward I to the Sheriff of Gloucester", The National Archives, 1290.

⁵⁰ Ibid..

⁵¹ "Expulsion of Jews from France in 1306," BBC, accessed Mar 31, 2026.

as greedy “money grubbers” prevails as one of the most common surrounding Jews.⁵² This portrayal was common in Nazi propaganda and continues to infiltrate the media today. A well known contemporary example is that author J.K. Rowling has long been accused of using Jewish stereotypes in her depiction of goblin bankers in the Harry Potter series.⁵³ Or, in a horrific example reflecting the jealous sentiments of medieval English Christians who *started* the stereotype of Jewish greed: in 2017, a Jewish family was told by their kidnappers, “You Jews have money, we have nothing. You Jews are spoiled by the earth, and we are left behind...”⁵⁴

Another stereotype that arose in medieval England, the stereotype that Jewish people are behind other peoples’ economic hardships, proliferated in Nazi propaganda and was a key factor driving support for the Nazi Party in Germany prior to the Second World War.⁵⁵ Connected to this view is the ever popular belief that Jews secretly control the world, as enumerated in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903 CE).⁵⁶ In recent years, *The Protocols* were even used to blame the COVID-19 pandemic on a secret society of Jews.⁵⁷

Finally, blood libels were included frequently in Nazi publications too, such as the newspaper *Der Stürmer*,⁵⁸ and are still employed today to demonize Jews. Over the nearly 900 years blood libels have been a popular trope of antisemitism, they have gotten no less horrific or gruesome. Most notably, the blood libels included in the infamous QAnon conspiracy theory from 2017 CE and its related conspiracies was nothing short of terrifying.⁵⁹

Conclusion

In only a little over 200 years, the Jews of medieval England went from being a relatively privileged and successful

⁵² “The Myth of Jewish Greed,” World Jewish Congress, accessed Feb 9, 2026.

⁵³ “Jon Stewart Denies Accusing JK Rowling of Anti-Semitism,” BBC, accessed Feb 9, 2026.

⁵⁴ “The Myth of Jewish Greed.”

⁵⁵ Jose-Luis Peydro, Hans-Joachim Voth, Sebastian Doerr, “How Failing Banks Paved Hitler’s Path to Power,” Centre for Economic Policy Research, accessed Feb 9, 2026.

⁵⁶ “An Antisemitic Conspiracy,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed Feb 9, 2026.

⁵⁷ Ibid..

⁵⁸ “Blood Libel,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed Feb 9, 2026.

⁵⁹ Talia Lavin, “QAnon, Blood Libel, and the Satanic Panic,” The New Republic, accessed Feb 9, 2026.

group to being wholly expelled. Within that span, the foundations for today's antisemitic rhetoric were laid. As shown above, modern perceptions and manifestations of antisemitism reflect Nazi discrimination against Jews during pre-war Germany, and Nazi discrimination against Jews during pre-war Germany was at least partially inspired by stereotypes and practices that had originated in England hundreds of years before. Therefore, a line of continuity in how antisemitism is practiced and perceived can be drawn from medieval England, to Nazi Germany, to now. Of course, medieval English Christians did not *invent* antisemitism—the Romans enslaved Jewish prisoners of war and spoke of them contemptuously over a thousand years before Jews were expelled from England—but they certainly set the precedent for how it would go on to manifest. English kings, reliant on their Jewish populace to bankroll their kingdoms, deliberately pushed Jews into a vulnerable position where they garnered virulent jealousy, hate, and violence from the English public. English Christians invented new ways to express these feelings, other Christian kingdoms followed suit, the Third Reich followed suit, and contemporary antisemites continue to follow suit.

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Hail to the Chief: A Historical Analysis of the Vietnam War in U.S. Textbooks

Joyce Peterlin

Abstract

This paper analyzes the portrayal of the Vietnam War in textbooks published from 1965 to 1985, considering the controversy the war attracted during this time period and how that might impact the portrayals passed down to younger generations. Through qualitative and quantitative analysis, it is found that many of these publications chose to minimize the impact of the conflict and focus primarily on the effect it had on the American domestic political climate through word choice and narrative focus. It is also found that many of these textbooks contain negative depictions of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian governments and military by neglecting their autonomy and failing to mention the impact the Vietnam War had on them.

Introduction

The Vietnam War marked a significant shift, culturally and politically, within the United States and abroad. But, not many students know why exactly that is due to the way it was documented. Textbooks published between the years 1965 to 1985 fail to address the extent and nature of the war, and when applicable, the defeat itself. Instead, authors of the era opted to center their textbooks around the domestic politics that continuously characterize U.S. involvement in Vietnam as an inevitability. This argument detracts from the autonomy and responsibility of the American government and military in the Vietnam War and from the autonomy of South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The picture these textbooks paint is incomplete, as they frequently exclude these other South Asian countries, the fact that the U.S. lost, and the atrocities committed by the American military. The portrayals published throughout these textbooks attempt to construct a narrative that highlights the American right to protest, the supremacy of capitalism over communism, and downplays the atrocities committed by the American military in favor of villainizing North Vietnam to a hypocritical extent.

Representations of the Vietnam War

Textbook Publications

The textbooks consulted for this paper and accounts from students have domestic policy in the center of the Vietnam War, not foreign policy.¹ To a certain extent, teaching the Vietnam War within the context of the domestic politics of America makes sense considering they are used in the American classroom setting. However, these early publications center America to a misleading degree that portrays the Vietnam War as an uncontrollable storm the United States military was inadvertently swept into. *The United States Since 1865*, by Foster Rhea Dulles, describes the commitment of American troops in Vietnam: “Once these steps were taken, the further escalation of the war quickly gained what appeared to be an irreversible momentum of its own.”² This framing attempts to convince the reader that any action beyond this point is

¹ AHA, *Teaching the United States and the Vietnam War* – AHA. 2024.

² Foster Rhea Dulles, *The United States Since 1865*, 1959, 544.

not the responsibility of the U.S. government, but rather the uncontrollable nature of war. This undermines the agency of United States decision-makers and military strategists, suggesting that the conflict was an inevitable entanglement rather than a result of deliberate policies and actions. By portraying the war as a force beyond control, the textbooks downplay the extensive planning, intervention, and military escalation that defined the U.S. role in Vietnam.

Additionally, these textbooks place a significant emphasis on the protests against the Vietnam War, often framing them as a demonstration of American democratic values rather than a direct critique of the war itself. For instance, *The Twentieth Century* by Robert K. Garrity is a simplified history of the twentieth century in American history published in 1989. Despite its publication several years after the Vietnam War, it neglects the war itself and instead spends the brief section allocated for the Vietnam conflict describing the popular opinion of the American people and the widespread protests on college campuses.³ By highlighting the anti-war movement as an exercise of American liberty—where citizens freely expressed dissent and influenced political discourse—the textbooks shift focus away from the war’s anti-Communist motivations and the consequences of trying to contain it. This framing allows the textbook’s narrative to celebrate domestic political engagement while downplaying the broader ethical and strategic failures of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Dulles’ textbook scrutinizes the Vietnam War yet shifts the primary focus to Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency and how demonstrations affected his political career.⁴ In this instance, Dulles illustrates these protests as he claims: “Demonstrations throughout the country underscored a spreading sense of helpless frustration with the course the United States was following.”⁵ Despite Dulles’ critique, most of the section titled “Vietnam” is about anti-war protests and the nosedive of Johnson’s political career in the late stages of the war. The phrasing sends a message of unity throughout the nation, eliminating the complexities of a nation divided on the subject. This then communicates that, through the collective efforts of American opinion, Johnson’s decline was a response to the power of democracy. But the American people cannot claim sole

³ Robert K. Garrity, *The Twentieth Century*, Prentice Hall, 1989.

⁴ Dulles, *The United States Since 1865*.

⁵ Dulles, *The United States Since 1865*, 545.

responsibility, because disagreements over handling the Vietnam War within Democratic leadership and his own administration discouraged him from running for the presidency again and overshadowed his domestic accomplishments, such as the Great Society. Even without the internal strife of the Johnson administration, the Vietnam War still spanned three presidential administrations, and no demonstrations against the actions of previous presidents dissuaded them from the war efforts.

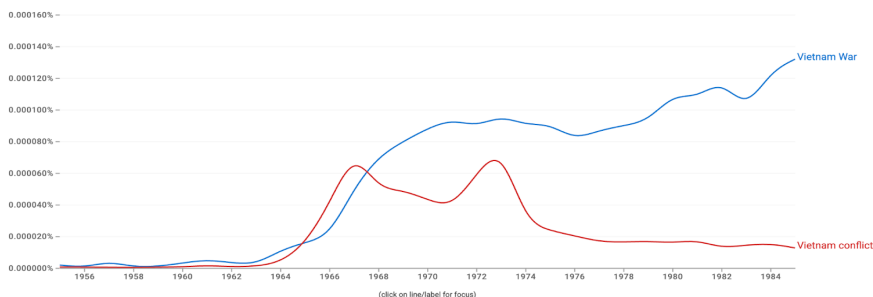
While the inclusion of protest movements is essential to understanding the war's impact on American society, the way these textbooks frame the protests reinforces the idea that the war was primarily a domestic issue rather than an international conflict with far-reaching consequences. Instead of analyzing the reasons behind the protests—such as opposition to the draft, revelations of war crimes, and the questioning of U.S. foreign policy—the textbooks often depict these demonstrations as proof of American freedom of speech and political activism. This portrayal further supports the overarching narrative that the Vietnam War was a turbulent but ultimately internal struggle, rather than a war that profoundly shaped global geopolitics and devastated Vietnam itself. By focusing on the exercise of American liberty in the form of protests while simultaneously downplaying the war's outcomes and international dimensions, these textbooks contribute to an incomplete historical understanding. This selective framing not only limits students' comprehension of the Vietnam War's full impact but also reinforces a broader pattern in American historical narratives that prioritize domestic interpretations of global events.

Word Choices

A common feature found throughout the publications analyzed for this paper was the unique word choices often made. The most common was the absence of the term “Vietnam War”, instead often substituted for terms such as the “Vietnam conflict”. To source a larger group of data, I used the Google Books NGram Viewer to display the frequency of these terms throughout 1955 to 1985 in all books that are currently available online that were published during this time span.⁶

⁶ Google Books NGram Viewer, *Vietnam Conflict vs. Vietnam War*, Google, Accessed March 28 2025.

Since the data for textbooks alone cannot be isolated, the conclusion drawn from these references must account for all types of publications. This quantitative data shows that this phenomenon was not limited to textbooks, thereby it can be assumed that the large number of publications using these inaccurate terms influenced the standard of what was published in textbooks and then taught in the classroom setting. As shown on the graph, referring to the conflict as the Vietnam War gradually gained popularity, but there is still a comparable or even higher number of publications calling it the Vietnam conflict from 1965 to 1967. This is around the time when President Johnson increased the number of troops from 75,000 to 125,000.⁷ There was also a notable uptick in 1972 and 1973, around the time when the U.S. began officially withdrawing



troops from Vietnam.⁸ These events were commonly reported on by the media and drew a lot of controversy, and it is no mistake that the word conflict was used more commonly at these points. The data shows an attempt to differentiate a conflict from a war, insisting that in order for it to be called a war, it must be formally declared.⁹ It is a particularly popular distinction among academics, as encapsulated by the NGram viewer encapsulating all documented works of the era. This suggests that the distinction might have influenced how these textbooks were written. Although the Vietnam War was never formally declared as a war, it is commonly understood and referred to as a war. Trying to differentiate it by referring to it as a conflict minimizes the full scale and resources used in the war.

⁷ History.com Editors. *President Johnson Announces More Troops to Vietnam* | July 28, 1965 | HISTORY. 2009

⁸ Spector, Ronald H. *Vietnam War - the Fall of South Vietnam*. 2019.

⁹ U.S. Const. Art. I Sec. 8

Another common term used to replace the word war was to refer to the Vietnam War as the Vietnam quagmire. Two examples of this word use being employed in textbooks can be found in Samuel Eliot Morison's textbooks entitled *A Concise History of the American Republic*, focusing on the 1977¹⁰ version and the 1983¹¹ version. Within the scope of this paper, a six-year gap between publications is considered significant due to the changes in public perception of the Vietnam War and the shaping of public memory, especially with the return of troops. Despite the gap between these publications and drastic changes to how the war was perceived after its conclusion, the sections regarding the Vietnam War are continuously labelled as the Vietnam quagmire. As a matter of fact, turning to page 734 in both of these textbooks reveals there were no changes made between these editions.¹² Furthermore, neither addresses the conclusion of the Vietnam War in terms of winning or losing, and instead focuses on how the war affected Johnson's ambitions as President of the United States. Morison states, "The war in Vietnam, which had claimed so many victims, had now consumed Lyndon Johnson's ambitions."¹³

The purpose of using these alternative words and narratives to explain and describe the Vietnam War minimizes how students perceive the issue. Whilst wars where the United States won are referenced in the Morison textbooks, such as World War I and World War II, the Vietnam War is presented in a manner that avoids definitive language regarding its outcome.¹⁴ This deliberate framing contrasts sharply with the descriptions of earlier wars, where victories are clearly stated and emphasized. By referring to the Vietnam War as a "quagmire," the textbook suggests an ongoing struggle or an unwinnable situation rather than acknowledging the war's resolution and consequences.

Moreover, electing to avoid the term "war" in section titles, and then further avoiding references to the American loss reflects a broader trend in historical narratives that shape public memory. By omitting clear language about victory or defeat, the textbooks

¹⁰ Samuel Eliot Morison, *A Concise History of the American Republic*, Oxford University Press, 1977.

¹¹ Samuel Eliot Morison, *A Concise History of the American Republic*, 2nd e.d., Oxford University Press, 1983.

¹² Morison, *A Concise History of the American Republic*.

¹³ Morison, *A Concise History of the American Republic*, 740.

¹⁴ Morison, *A Concise History of the American Republic*.

reinforce the ambiguity surrounding the war's legacy. This approach aligns with how contemporary political discourse in the late 20th century sought to frame the conflict—shifting focus away from military failure and toward the domestic political ramifications, particularly the impact on Johnson's administration. Additionally, this pattern of selective emphasis extends beyond Morison's textbooks. Other widely used history textbooks from the era similarly downplay or reframe controversial conflicts where the United States' role was more ambiguous, such as the Korean War.¹⁵ This reinforces the argument that the terminology used in historical narratives is not neutral but rather an intentional choice that influences students' understanding of past events.

Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Representation

The ways in which the Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian military, perspective, and people are represented in the early edition of textbooks suggests a nationalistic identity that favors villainizing the enemy. In this case, the enemy is an amalgamation of Southeast Asian communist forces. Although mentions of these peoples are brief, they contain pervasive negative connotations surrounding their strategies for either winning the war or actions taken during the war. For instance, Morison refers to North Vietnamese combatants as “miserable guerillas, clad in black pajamas and supplied with ammunition carried over jungle trails on the back of old women.”¹⁶ This is a clear example of how these textbooks employ dismissive and demeaning imagery to reinforce a perspective that favors American forces. This description not only undermines the military capabilities and strategic agency of the North Vietnamese forces but also infantilizes and ridicules them, portraying them as weak, desperate, and almost laughable adversaries rather than legitimate actors in a complex geopolitical conflict. This portrayal of guerilla warfare and how they utilized their strategic knowledge of the jungle landscape as a moral failure causes students to think of North Vietnamese forces as unfair, while neglecting some of the American military's more questionable tactics.¹⁷ Particularly, the mention of “old women” demeans the North Vietnamese forces and how they treated their citizens who were not directly involved in combat. The average American would

¹⁵ Zarek Nolan, *Korean War Coverage in High School History Textbooks*, 2021.

¹⁶ Morison, *A Concise History of the American Republic*, 735.

¹⁷ Air Force Historical Support Division. *1972 - Operation Linebacker II*. n.d.

frown upon taking away a citizen's agency in order to aid war efforts. However, such disapproval would be hypocritical considering the U.S. government did the very same thing with their young men. The act of drafting citizens into this war was a similar infringement on the freedom of Americans than it was of the North Vietnamese civilian population described.¹⁸

The agency of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are also consistently demeaned and ignored. David A. Midgley's textbook *Barron's How to Prepare for College Board Achievement Test Social Studies American History* addresses South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. However, in doing so, Midgley makes the claim that, "South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were feeble states with unstable governments unable to stand by themselves."¹⁹ This suggests that American intervention responded to this instability and favored the people of these nations by preventing them from succumbing to communism. It also neglects the will of the people within these nations, and whether or not they were in favor of American intervention. Although the textbooks I consulted do not seem to be prone to speculation, the authors could have also chosen to address the attitude of these nations towards American intervention. Since such perspectives are excluded from the text, the textbooks' narratives furthers the America-centric model of how the Vietnam War was taught. Midgley's text also treats South Vietnam as a figurehead for the fight against communism, stating that "South Vietnam, like South Korea, is half a nation hoping someday to be reunited without becoming the victim of its Communist half."²⁰ Midgley's book was published in 1965, and by referencing South Korea in this fashion, it almost speculates the Vietnam War ending in armistice and groups it with an undeclared, non-loss war. Implying that South Vietnam could become "victim of its Communist half" also detracts from the agency of South Vietnam's ability to fight against the threat of communism, and furthermore, fails to account for South Vietnamese decision-making regarding the ideological differences of its other half. Instead, the text only considers the American policy of containment and demonizing

¹⁸ Deborah E. Cowen, *Fighting for "Freedom": The End of Conscription in the United States and the Neoliberal Project of Citizenship*, 2006.

¹⁹ David A. Midgley, *Barron's How to Prepare for College Board Achievement Test Social Studies American History*, Barron's Educational Series, 1965, 243.

²⁰ Midgley, *Barron's How to Prepare for College Board Achievement Test Social Studies American History*, 243.

communism at the cost of Vietnamese autonomy. The text portrays America's presence in Southeast Asia as vital, while Southeast Asian governments and militaries fall to the wayside. The anti-communist rhetoric is further punctuated by Midgley writing, "To resist further Communist successes, President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles organized the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)."²¹ The founding members of SEATO included the United States, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan.²² The formation of this organization took a western perspective, following a similar framework to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, to the Southeast Asian issue of defense to national security threats. This thereby failed to align with the region's needs, and "SEATO faced charges of being a new form of Western colonialism."²³

The descriptively negative language choices align with the broader trend of villainizing the enemy while centering the American experience in the war. By emphasizing these combatants' supposed misery and crude supply lines²⁴ rather than their military strategies or motivations, the textbooks craft an image of an unworthy or illegitimate opponent—dismissible instead of a force that challenged one of the world's most powerful militaries. This portrayal seeks to justify American intervention by framing the war as a battle against an inferior and faceless enemy rather than a deeply rooted national struggle for sovereignty, with Henry Kissinger going as far as to compare the Viet Cong soldiers to gangsters.²⁵

Furthermore, the emphasis on domestic turmoil in these textbooks obscures the agency of the Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian people in shaping the war's course. By focusing on how the war affected the United States, the textbooks reinforce an America-centric narrative that ignores the broader implications of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. This approach minimizes the war's devastating consequences for the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, including civilian casualties, long-term

²¹ Midgley, *Barron's How to Prepare for College Board Achievement Test Social Studies American History*, 243.

²² Office of the Historian, *Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)*, 1954, 2019.

²³ Office of the Historian, *Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)*, 1954, 2019.

²⁴ Morison, *A Concise History of the American Republic*, 735.

²⁵ Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger diaries: what he truly thought about Vietnam*, 2015.

environmental destruction, and political upheaval that extended far beyond the American withdrawal.

Conclusion

Textbooks written between 1965 and 1985 did a critical injustice to shaping the foreign policy narrative surrounding the Vietnam War. As this major global conflict raged on, and its complexities drew the American military into a defeat in 1975, the representations in U.S. textbooks stagnated in an attempt to deflect U.S. responsibility for the escalation of the war. Thus, a narrative was born that omitted the American defeat and led many Americans to the conclusion that they either had won, or that the conclusion had somehow been a tie. These textbooks managed to largely disregard the decision-making of the U.S. and the autonomy of Southeast Asia, as justifications for intervention continuously evaded the U.S. government's responsibility for escalating the war and detracted from the decision-making ability of South Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian leaders. It is the responsibility of the publishers of these textbooks, of the American education system, and of educators to teach the correct version of events as opposed to using words with less negative connotations in order to detract from the fact that this was a war. The lasting memory of how this war was taught continues to echo in the America-centric model of international thought that continues to dominate average political discussion. As educators and academics in international relations develop and disperse their ideas into the world, it becomes increasingly important to use correct terminology. Maintaining a more objective dispersion of information detracts from attempts to co-opt education with stories that illustrate harmful ideas and propagate nationalism.

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**The Soviet Cosmonaut:
The Emergence of an International Celebrity**

Calvin McKenna

Abstract

The Space Race marked a significant escalation in Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviet cosmonaut was quickly transformed into a device for international propaganda, promoting socialism as the form of governing that was most advantageous for scientific and technological development. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev wanted cosmonauts such as Yuri Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova to embrace fame as an opportunity to help his efforts in regaining domestic trust in the socialist project after Josef Stalin's years of terror, as well as shift international attitudes and presumptions of Soviet socialism.

Introduction

Without any global warning or publicization of an attempted mission, the Soviet Union successfully launched cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into space in April of 1961, marking the first time a human entered space.¹ Gagarin left Earth unknown to many outside of the Soviet government and Soviet space program but returned as a global celebrity and national hero. Despite the magnitude of this space mission, Gagarin's trip was just one of many rapid technological advancements and milestones in the Cold War's Space Race between the Soviet Union and the United States. This era of ideological warfare between two massive global powers saw both nations attempting to prove that their respective forms of government were conducive to technological advancement and the overall advancement of humankind. During these years of international tension, the Soviets, led by First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, saw the opportunity to make Yuri Gagarin and other Soviet cosmonauts national celebrities and global proponents of socialism. The prospect of international fame gave hope to the Soviet government that they could regain and maintain domestic trust in the Soviet experiment as well as spread their ideology to the rest of the world.

The figure of the Soviet cosmonaut was a propaganda device for the Soviet Union during the Space Race in an effort to regain traction in socialist ideology domestically and abroad amid their ideological war against the United States and capitalism. Josef Stalin's years as the leader of the Soviet Union were defined by fear and terror, launching attacks upon anyone who threatened the integrity of a unified Socialist state.² The Soviets made it clear from the beginning of the Space Race that they would produce worldwide victories for the socialist cause and that such successes must be attributed to the working-class people, marking a difference in domestic treatment of Soviet citizens.³ Once Gagarin's mission succeeded, the weight of spreading the word of socialism was placed upon the cosmonaut, marking the origin of a lasting

¹ Cathleen Lewis, *Cosmonaut: A Cultural History* (University of Florida Press, 2023), 8, <https://research-ebsco-com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/c/f3p2dw/search/details/i6kg5bib5r>

² Andrej Kotliartchouk, "Understanding Stalin's Terror against Western Minorities: The National Operations of the NKVD in Contemporary Academic Research," *The Historic Journal* 68, 242, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X24000487>

³ Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, *Speeches and Interviews on World Problems, 1957* (Moscow Foreign Language Pub. House, 1958), 384.

propaganda figure in the East. The Soviet cosmonaut was portrayed in folk art forms as a figure that would lead humankind forward through socialism. The public introduction of female cosmonauts such as Valentina Tereshkova also positioned socialism as an ideology that supported women in male dominated fields.

Historiography Review

Many scholars of Soviet studies have discussed the concept of cosmonauts being used as socialist propaganda. In the book *The Cosmonaut Who Couldn't Stop Smiling: The Life and Legend of Yuri Gagarin*, Andrew Jenks examines the person Yuri Gagarin was presented to the world as well as breaking through the layer of propaganda to see the person he was beyond the public eye. Gagarin, as Jenks states, was a man who was hard to be caught without a smile on his face in public. However, his private life was far less ideal than his joyful public appearances suggested. Jenks argues Gagarin's life can be viewed as a microcosm of twentieth century Russia itself: a presentation of a prosperous nation that could move the entire world forward in an effort to push beyond the horrors of the World Wars.⁴ For the Soviet government, the figure of the cosmonaut could not have been a more perfect vessel to carry out this vision of socialism. The cosmonauts were highly intelligent people, capable of achieving humankind's greatest scientific feats, and human representations of successful socialism for the Soviet people, especially the youth, to look up to. To the public, Gagarin and other cosmonauts were triumphant, living proof of what socialism could achieve for Soviets and the rest of the world. The argument in this paper will tend to agree with Jenks's claims, but with a particular focus on how the Soviet Union was eager to pose itself as wholly different than it was under Stalin, moving beyond an era defined by his cult of personality. This was a time at which the Soviet Union wanted the world to see not only how it had shifted from widespread oppression of its own citizens towards a nation that championed scientific achievement for the betterment of not only Soviet citizens, but people all around the world.

In *Cosmonaut: A Cultural History*, Cathleen Lewis argues that the success of *Vostok 1*, the mission that brought Yuri Gagarin

⁴ Andrew Jenks, *The Cosmonaut Who Couldn't Stop Smiling: The Life and Legend of Yuri Gagarin* (NIU Press, 2012), 11-12, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/lib/michstate-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6371703>

to space, was attributed to Soviet socialism, society, and people. Additionally, after the mission, cosmonauts provided an opportunity for the Soviet Union to use them as political mouthpieces, both domestically and internationally. This marked a shift from the role of past Soviet heroes who would only speak to the citizens of the Soviet Union.⁵ The cosmonaut was to become a global celebrity and proponent of socialism. Lewis also argues that with the *Vostok 6* flight of Valentina Tereshkova, the Soviets were able to promote their state as a place where modern working-class women could achieve great technological feats. This opposed the long-standing forces of Western capitalism that often worked against the social advancement of independent women.⁶ An appeal to American women during the Cold War was an effort from the Soviet government to pull legitimacy away from Western capitalism. It certainly did not convince all American women to move to the Soviet Union by any means, it was the intention of the Soviets to give them more reason to become more vocal in the U.S. regarding the inclusion of women in scientific fields, consequently aiding the spread of socialist ideology.

Soviet women seeing a female cosmonaut was an important part of the state's effort to garner excitement for a new vision of the Soviet Union and the opportunities that socialism could offer to women. While Tereshkova was used as a cultural figure by the state, her accomplishments brought about a great deal of genuine enthusiasm and advancement for women in the Soviet Union, as argued by Roshanna P. Sylvester in her article titled "'You Are Our Pride and Glory!' Emotions, Generation, and Legacy of Revolution in Letters to Valentina Tereshkova."⁷ The publication of Tereshkova's mission in *Pravda* and various other newspapers portrayed her as a "heroine in a communist fairytale," and while her success was indeed a big step for Soviet women in scientific fields, she was constrained by a certain paternal pride when Khrushchev congratulated her, as he proclaimed he was a proud father of his Soviet girl (Tereshkova), something that was not present with male cosmonauts.⁸ This mission marked a historic feat for Soviet women

⁵ Lewis, *Cosmonaut: A Cultural History*, 23.

⁶ Lewis, *Cosmonaut: A Cultural History*, 44-46.

⁷ Roshanna P. Sylvester, "'You Are Our Pride and Glory!' Emotions, Generation, and Legacy of Revolution in Letters to Valentina Tereshkova," *The Russian Review* (2019): 392-93, 398, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/russ.12237>

⁸ Sylvester, "'You Are Our Pride and Glory!' Emotions, Generation, and Legacy of Revolution in Letters to Valentina Tereshkova," 397-99.

at large, as many women had a great sense of pride in Tereshkova. The Soviet government putting a woman in the position to make such history coupled with their portrayal of her story stirred up hope in women that their dreams could be actualized under this new iteration of Soviet socialism.

The arguments in this paper will largely align with the scholarly consensus of cosmonauts as Soviet propaganda. However, while some scholars focus on what domestic issues the Soviet Union was covering up during the time that cosmonauts were promoted, this paper will explore how cosmonauts were made into figures that represented growth and prosperity of Soviet socialism to an international audience. Khrushchev was interested in moving on from the years of terror under Stalin and wanted to show what socialism was capable of with a more inclusive approach. This is evident in his competitive style in the Space Race against Western capitalism, Gagarin's world travels and promotion of socialist rhetoric, Soviet artwork's favorability to cosmonauts, and the nation being presented as a place of upwards social mobility for women. The Soviet Union found use in the cosmonaut as a means for people to begin to forget about past tragedies while simultaneously emphasizing socialist promises of scientific advancement being seen through.

Initial Victories for the Soviet Union and the Domestic Response

The successful launch of *Sputnik 1* is widely considered to be the first major event in the Space Race between the Soviet Union and the United States. The former Soviet state newspaper, *Pravda*, was quick to congratulate their nation on such a feat, stating that the mission "...is the natural result of Soviet scientific and technical development under socialist conditions, the natural victory of socialism over capitalism."⁹ This direct attribution of technological development to the victory of socialism over capitalism, less than two weeks after the mission's success, set a precedent for the rest of the Space Race. This era of scientific advancement between the two global powers did not solely science, since the Space Race was inextricably connected to Cold War political tensions from the very beginning. While this concept may not come as a surprise, it is

⁹ Alexander Topchiev, "A Great Victory of Soviet Science (Sputnik)," *Pravda*, October 16, 1957, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1956-2/launch-of-sputnik/launch-of-sputnik-texts/great-victory-of-soviet-science/>

necessary to bear in mind when examining Soviet propaganda through the lens of cosmonauts.

In *Pravda*'s first announcement of the launch, they asserted that their, "...contemporaries will witness how the freed and conscientious labor of the people of the new socialist society makes the most daring dreams of mankind a reality."¹⁰ There are a couple of points to consider in this statement. The first of which is how socialism and the Soviet Union as a whole presented that they were the entities to lead mankind forward. It is important to consider the context, as the Soviet Union had just achieved a scientific feat that was hard for many to imagine being a reality just years prior. Their position that socialism can make humans' wildest dreams come true is harder to understand, though, even considering the *Sputnik I* launch. However, it is not outside the realm of possibility that, after such a shocking feat, people around the world may have gotten caught up in the immediacy of the propaganda, as it is much easier to identify sensationalized narratives long after the events and their coverage have passed.

Another point to consider is how *Pravda* described the Soviet Union as the "new socialist society," differentiating the state of the nation from that of former eras. It was well understood within the Soviet government that the Stalin years had caused a widespread loss of trust in the socialist project both domestically and abroad, as even Khrushchev himself denounced Stalin's leadership in his famous "secret speech," critiquing the former leader's cult of personality at the Communist Party's Twentieth Congress in 1956.¹¹ Not long before *Sputnik I* was launched, the government under Khrushchev reintroduced and encouraged the collection of various trinkets by Soviet citizens, such as lapel pins. This was something that had been banned in the Soviet Union under Stalin, marking a disengagement from the anti-consumer policies of Stalin's Soviet Union.¹² By taking the position that there was something inherently new or simply different about the Space Race years of the Soviet Union, they were making a conscious effort to regain trust from the world.

¹⁰ "Announcement of the First Satellite," *Pravda*, October 5, 1957, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/pravda-newspaper-article-announcement-first-satellite>

¹¹ Khrushchev, Nikita, "Speech to 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U.," February 24-25, 1956, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm>

¹² Lewis, *Cosmonaut: A Cultural History*, 67.

Khrushchev made it clear from the beginning of the Space Race that Soviet successes were to be accredited to the people rather than the government. In 1957, the year of the first two *Sputnik* launches, Khrushchev delivered a year's end speech and declared that "The sputniks glorify the successes of our people, the triumph of the ideas of socialism, herald the progress of Soviet science and engineering."¹³ This sentiment closely aligns with socialist ideals of uplifting working-class people. His celebration of the Soviet people regarding these achievements goes a little deeper than surface level socialism, though. The grand scale of these scientific feats marked a turning point in the technological field and what ordinary people imagined it could produce. By giving those ordinary people at least part of the credit for such scientific success, Khrushchev attempted to garner enthusiasm for the socialist experiment. For Khrushchev, the turning point could also mark an opportunity for the government to redefine itself to its people and to the rest of the world.

The Soviet cosmonaut was introduced to the world after the successful Gagarin launch. Given that this was the first time people had the chance to see a cosmonaut in such an extraordinary context, the Soviet Union had a unique opportunity to frame the cosmonaut as a beacon of socialist hope and glory. This is exactly what they did. Of the unveiling of Yuri Gagarin to the public, Moscow newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* wrote "A solemn ceremony begins, dedicated to the great world-historic victory of the Soviet people, the success of the world's first space flight by our dear compatriot comrade Iurii Gagarin."¹⁴ While the physical presentation of Gagarin in Moscow was entirely important, it was also essential that the government reported upon the event in a sensationalized manner to those not in attendance through the official newspaper of the Moscow City Council, *Vecherniaia Moskva*. The author of this article made a point to link the victory back to the Soviet people, as was done with the *Sputnik* launches.¹⁵ However, given that there was a historical actor, the cosmonaut, involved in this Space Race

¹³ Khrushchev, *Speeches and Interviews on World Problems*, 384.

¹⁴ "Moscow Meets the First Cosmonaut," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, April 14, 1961, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1961-2/first-cosmonaut/first-cosmonauts-texts/the-capital-meets-its-hero/>

¹⁵ "Moscow Meets the First Cosmonaut," *Vecherniaia Moskva*, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1961-2/first-cosmonaut/first-cosmonauts-texts/the-capital-meets-its-hero/>

breakthrough, the Soviets saw it fit to introduce them as a new source to which they could attribute scientific advancement.

The Soviet state had found a human form of propaganda, allowing them to spread messages of socialist opportunity and victory to the world. Additionally, they brought Soviet people and the figure of the cosmonaut together in an inextricable link that would position cosmonauts' voices that the population would listen to. It would be difficult for the government to push out messages of socialist success and opportunity without requisite enthusiasm among their people. However, with the introduction of Gagarin, they no longer needed to worry about lack of excitement and could rely upon the cosmonaut as a mouthpiece and physical propaganda vessel for the spread of socialist messaging.

Cosmonauts on a Global Stage

The Soviet Union was eager to spread the news of their famous cosmonaut throughout the world, especially to their Cold War rival, America, through their own rhetoric, rather than allowing other nations to draw their own conclusions. The magazine *Soviet Life* was published by the Soviets and distributed in the United States from the 1950s until the state's dissolution in 1991.

Naturally, this magazine was the perfect place to present Gagarin as a voice of socialist propaganda. An article in the May 1961 issue of *Soviet Life* quotes Khrushchev: "If the name of Columbus, who crossed the Atlantic and discovered America, lives through the ages, what can be said of our outstanding hero, Comrade Gagarin, who penetrated outer space, circle the entire globe, and returned safely to earth? His name will be immortal in the history of mankind."¹⁶

Khrushchev's comment was a direct message to the United States with his mention of Christopher Columbus, at the time still known as the discoverer of America. This mischaracterization of Columbus is beside the point of Khrushchev's message, though, as he is drawing a comparison between these two historical figures to make an argument for the victory of socialism and the prolonged success it ought to see. The Soviet leader uses geographical references to make his argument, stating that Gagarin had surpassed Columbus' legacy because of the scale of his travel. Through his mention of

¹⁶ "A Day to Remember," *Soviet Life*, May 1961, https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/culture/soviet-life/full-issues/1961/sim_soviet-life_1961-05_5.pdf

Gagarin traveling around the entire world and his place in the history of mankind, Khrushchev argues that socialism has spread its influence across the entire world. Additionally, he poses Gagarin as the hero that has brought socialism to the world and who will be credited with such an honor in world history. Given both the recency and groundbreaking scale of Gagarin's space flight, even capitalist American minds could become susceptible to the possibility of a Soviet name being irrevocably engrained in historical conversation.

Gagarin's international travel was an inevitable consequence of his space flight. Spreading socialist propaganda of the cosmonaut through newspapers could only achieve so much—Gagarin needed to be seen and heard around the globe. Embarking on these travels, he maintained a smile accompanied by a pleasant and playful demeanor to present the Soviet Union as a model society for the quickly advancing modern world. Gagarin had a keen instinct for portraying himself in a manner that matched the ideal expectations of others, something that was noted by the head of the Soviet space program, Sergei Korolev, and was eventually factored into the decision to select him to man the *Vostok 1* mission.¹⁷ During these travels, Gagarin subtly incorporated socialist thinking into his remarks. In a press conference following a meeting with Queen Elizabeth II, he took questions from British reporters. When questioned whether the next major space event would be a flight to the moon and whether he would be the one to carry it out, Gagarin responded “I don't think that the next major milestone will be my flight to the Moon, if only because I mustn't be a monopolist. Other people must also get the chance to make flights into space.”¹⁸ Even in the case that Gagarin would prefer another cosmonaut, such as his colleague and backup for *Vostok 1*, Gherman Titov, to be responsible for the next space milestone, his choice to mention monopoly is particularly interesting, as it directly relates to capitalism.

In fact, when asked a similar question in Finland, he once again made sure to say he would not be “monopolistic.”¹⁹ This anti-

¹⁷ Jenks, *The Cosmonaut Who Couldn't Stop Smiling: The Life and Legend of Yuri Gagarin*, 108.

¹⁸ “Yuri Gagarin Comes to London (1961),” Video, 5 min., 28 sec, Posted April 23, 2023, by ITN Archive, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxQx1xmBKWI>

¹⁹ “Interview with Gagarin on a train in Finland – 1961,” Video, 6 min., 35 sec, Posted April 12, 2021, by Soviet TV Subtitled, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVKAt_7Deqo

monopoly sentiment goes much deeper than his desire for another cosmonaut to take the spotlight—it was a critique of capitalism. Gagarin, a propaganda figure, could not effectively spread the word of socialism by always directly praising the Soviet Union and its ideologies because such a strategy would turn away many skeptics. To be an effective voice for Soviet propaganda, Gagarin and other cosmonauts had to portray themselves as normal, everyday people, dropping hints of socialist rhetoric with a smile and charm. Socialist thinking had to be applied to seemingly apolitical statements in order for people to understand what a socialist state would be like, because any form of government or ideology eventually permeates all aspects of life in one way or another. It was the hope of the Soviet Union that if they could deliver these anti-capitalistic messages through such a likable person, people would begin to feel less antagonistic towards the Soviet Union, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Cosmonauts as They Appear in Soviet Art

The artwork that depicted Soviet cosmonauts was its own form of propaganda. Through various visual mediums, such as posters or paintings, Soviet artists depicted cosmonauts as figures to lead both the Soviet Union and the rest of the world into new territory (quite literally in terms of spaceflights).²⁰ One poster in which this messaging can be seen clearly includes a depiction of a cosmonaut dressed in all red with a red hammer (a color representative of Soviet socialism) and sickle over his head, the words “Glory! To the Soviet people, pioneers of the cosmos,” a globe in the background, and four red stars shooting into the cosmos, each one representing a *Vostok* mission.²¹ This depiction of a cosmonaut follows two similar themes that came out of Gagarin’s promotional travels: an attribution of scientific achievement to Soviet people and the notion that socialism was to be a beacon of global advancement. The cosmonaut is holding the sickle and hammer high above his head in a triumphant manner while the stars fly overhead. Given these choices, it appears as though the artist was going further than an assertion that socialism could lead the

²⁰ Lewis, *Cosmonaut: A Cultural History*, 24.

²¹ Unknown, “Space Race Propaganda,” *Santa Clara University Digital Exhibits*, accessed December 5, 2025, <https://dh.scu.edu/exhibits/exhibits/show/the-cold-war--2022-/item/2799#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-610%2C-3%2C1825%2C937>

world forward—they seem to claim a Soviet victory in the Space Race.

Some folk artists in the Soviet Union celebrated Gagarin's flight with art laden with religious and biblical references. In a piece titled "Son of Russia," Gagarin is led up a staircase in the clouds by a scientist to his rocket ship with the cosmos in the background.²² The painting appears to make the argument that Gagarin was chosen for this mission, much as someone would be chosen to be led up to heaven as the painting references. Additionally, the title being "Son of Russia" brings about an argument that the artists were situating the nation as a God-like, in turn making Gagarin a Christ-like figure. Even though religion was largely separated from government operations in the Soviet Union, individual artists involving religion into the sphere of the cosmos was tactical as it gave reason for people of faith to support cosmonauts as if they were divinely chosen. Regardless of this separation of church and state, religious artists' tendency to honor cosmonauts was a testament to the reach of the government's promotion and propaganda during the Space Race.

The village where this painting was made, Palekh, was famous for its folk-art production. In a 1951 issue of *USSR Information Bulletin*, another Soviet to America distribution of information and news about the Soviet Union, an article claims "The collective, creative work of the Palekh artists and the concern and attention shown for them by the Soviet State have created the conditions for the further development and flowering of their art ... They work on modern themes and their art is permeated with socialist realism."²³ The open Soviet support of these artists is understandable, especially considering how favorable it was in Gagarin's promotion and the overall message of a Soviet Union being at the forefront of technological advancement.

The Effects of Cosmonaut Fame on Women

In June of 1963, Khrushchev sent his initial congratulations to Valentin Tereshkova via radio while she was still in orbit, and the

²² Unknown, "Iurii Gagarin – Son of Russia," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, accessed December 5, 2025, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/page/2/?s=gagarin#bwg266/1281>

²³ N. Koshelev, "Master Artists of Palekh," *USSR Information Bulletin*, January 12, 1951, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Information_Bulletin/Rto7AQAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=palekh+art&pg=PA707&printsec=frontcover

transcript was published in various state newspapers such as Pravda.²⁴ Khrushchev told her, “I am very happy and as proud as a father that our girl (*devushka*), a girl from the Soviet Union, is the first, the first in the world, to travel in space, to be in command of the most highly perfected machinery. This is a triumph for the ideas of Lenin, it is a triumph in the struggle of our people (*narod*) and we are proud of the successes achieved, proud of you.”²⁵

Khrushchev related this event back to the inception of Soviet socialist rule with his mention of Lenin. In doing so, he once again was attempting to establish that this version of the Soviet Union differentiated itself from that of Stalin’s in the sense that they were following through on promises that were made at quite possibly the height of excitement for the socialist experiment. His parental pride comes through in this message, adding a clear gendered element that did not appear in his remarks towards other cosmonauts, but there is a general sense that he wanted to make sure people, domestically and abroad (the transcript was published in America as well), understood that women under socialism in the Soviet Union were given chances that capitalism had not offered.²⁶

The effects that Tereshkova’s flight had on Soviet women could be seen in their letters to her, as they spoke of her as a role model and were honored that they were alive to witness such a great leap for women in their efforts to close the gap in equality with men.²⁷ A. D. Pisavera, a Soviet woman who was around to witness the October Revolution wrote to Tereshkova, saying “Your unparalleled achievement uplifts women not only in our Great socialist land, but also women across the globe ... Sweet Valya, you have justified the faith of the party and the government, justified the expectations and dreams of an older generation of women, who have dreamt of a great future for Soviet women.”²⁸ Pisavera’s

²⁴ Sylvester, “‘You Are Our Pride and Glory!’ Emotions, Generation, and Legacy of Revolution in Letters to Valentina Tereshkova,” 398.

²⁵ “Kremlin to the Cosmos,” *Pravda*, June 17, 1963, as translated in Roshanna P. Sylvester, “‘You Are Our Pride and Our Glory!’ Emotions, Generation, and the Legacy of Revolution in Women’s Letters to Valentina Tereshkova,” *The Russian Review* (2019), 78: 398-99, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/russ.12237>

²⁶ Sylvester, “‘You Are Our Pride and Glory!’ Emotions, Generation, and Legacy of Revolution in Letters to Valentina Tereshkova,” 398.

²⁷ Sylvester, “‘You Are Our Pride and Glory!’ Emotions, Generation, and Legacy of Revolution in Letters to Valentina Tereshkova,” 403.

²⁸ A.D. Pisavera to Valentina Tereshkova, June 17, 1963, as translated in Roshanna P. Sylvester, “‘You Are Our Pride and Our Glory!’ Emotions, Generation, and the Legacy of

emotional response to this historical event reflects a weight being lifted off an entire generation's shoulders. Pisavera wrote that in addition to carrying out the dreams of her generation, Tereshkova had also validated the generation's faith in one of the original purposes of the October Revolution in 1917: the advancement of Soviet women. Khrushchev's government was able to deliver upon what Soviet women had long been fighting and asking for, regaining trust in the socialist experiment.

Historian Juliana Fürst claimed the women of Tereshkova's generation to be "...the first generation to master doubt and belief simultaneously..."²⁹ These women had grown up in a Soviet Union under Stalin that created fear and distrust in its people, but they had also been alive and young to see Tereshkova's unprecedented feat. These women were able to see someone with similar experiences break through a gender barrier that stood for decades. Valentina Vladimirovna Zorkina, a twenty-seven-year-old senior machinist, wrote Tereshkova, saying "Dear Valyusha, I have read your biography and it reminded me in part of my own biography ... What torment we suffered during the war and in the postwar years ... I am so proud that you are such a good, sympathetic girl who will help people in their hour of need."³⁰ The decision to share Tereshkova's story of resilience certainly resonated with working-class women under Stalin's rule, under the pressures of a far more oppressive and fear-inducing government for minorities. While this form of propaganda may feel less forced or constructed due to the true historic nature of Tereshkova's flight and her humble upbringing, the Soviet Union was able to situate itself as a place for women to succeed in science. This feeling was picked up by Soviet women such as Pisavera and Zorkina who were long hopeful of a Soviet Union that allowed women the same opportunities as men.

Revolution in Women's Letters to Valentina Tereshkova," *The Russian Review* (2019), 78: 405-6, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/russ.12237>

²⁹ Sylvester, "'You Are Our Pride and Glory!' Emotions, Generation, and Legacy of Revolution in Letters to Valentina Tereshkova," 408.

³⁰ Valentina Vladimirovna Zorkina to Valentina Tereshkova, Novokuibyshevsk, Russia, June 20, 1963, as translated in Roshanna P. Sylvester, "'You Are Our Pride and Our Glory!' Emotions, Generation, and the Legacy of Revolution in Women's Letters to Valentina Tereshkova," *The Russian Review* (2019), 78: 409, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/russ.12237>

Easing of Space Race Tensions

The Space Race's years of competitive propaganda ended with the Apollo-Soyuz joint mission between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the linking of respective spacecraft in orbit. This was a new kind of propaganda, with the two global powers attempting to present a thawing of Cold War tensions through a symbolic public act.³¹ The joint venture proved to the public that the two governments were at the very least willing to work with one another, as a mission such as this was not simple to plan and execute. This willingness to work with one another can be seen in a letter from Leonid Brezhnev, Khrushchev's successor, to the U.S. President Gerald Ford. Brezhnev was far more willing to take a cooperative approach in order to avoid hostility, writing "...our cosmonauts and your astronauts act as messengers of good will representing the aspiration of the peoples of the two countries toward peaceful cooperation. In this, I see yet another confirmation of the fruitfulness of the course of the comprehensive improvement of the Soviet-American relations we have jointly undertaken."³² The cosmonauts and astronauts are still portrayed as symbolic figures in this letter, only in a different sense: a new concept of brotherhood as the link between nations. The two nations were making efforts to redefine these existing public figures to shift the perceptions of international relations.

The Soviet cosmonaut was a state-controlled propaganda figure during the Space Race years. Nikita Khrushchev made a clear point of the fact that socialism and capitalism were inextricably connected to the Space Race. All the Soviet victories in this global competition were to be accredited to the socialist experiment and the Soviet people, making a clear distinction from Stalin's form of leadership in which he was positioned at the forefront of advancement. Khrushchev wanted the world to see that socialism could allow for the flourishing of scientific advancement and could lead the world into new directions and realms, such as outer space. From the first public introduction of Yuri Gagarin, cosmonauts had a duty to be global proponents of socialism. They were the ideal

³¹ Thomas Ellis, "'Howdy Partner!' Space Brotherhood, Detente and the Symbolism of the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz Test Project," *Journal of American Studies* 53, no. 3 (2019): 744-47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26803825>

³² Leonid Brezhnev to Gerald Ford, October 10, 1975, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/20831-17>

image of advancement as young and intelligent people who had achieved something nearly unthinkable. Through their support of socialist ideas during global travels, the world could hear from likable and successful young people about how socialism had led to such great scientific breakthroughs. Soviet artwork reflected notions that cosmonauts were leaders of global advancement and even that they were divinely chosen to do so, catering to a certain pathos of religious crowds. Valentina Tereshkova's feat of becoming the first woman in space marked a turning point at which socialism offered women opportunities of grand scale in scientific fields that the U.S. had not. In these ways, cosmonauts were used as propaganda figures in order to gain, and regain after the Stalin years, interest and traction in the Soviet socialist experiment, showing the world what it could offer through the lens of charismatic proponents of the ideology. The Soviet Union was successful in these goals: Soviet people showed great pride that their nation was the producer of such successful people that represented the finest manifestation of socialist opportunities.

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**America's Dance with Fascism:
William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Legion**

Delaney Grant

Abstract

This paper will examine fascism in the United States during the 1930s, focusing on William Dudley Pelley and the Silver Legion. Pelley and the Legion faced congressional committees that claimed the organization was aiming to recreate Nazi Germany by overthrowing the U.S. government. Pelley and his legion wanted to institute what Pelley coined "The Christian Commonwealth," a fascist government that planned to remove elected representatives from Congress, strip Jewish, Black, and Asian Americans of their civil rights, and create a white Christian nation, calling back to the founding of the U.S. This paper argues that Pelley planned to use U.S. elections of 1936 to gain power, and when he lost, he turned to planning a paramilitary takeover.

Introduction

The 1930s was a time of economic turmoil and uncertainty in the United States, leading many to search for answers for their instability. William Dudley Pelley, an esoteric writer with far-right political ambitions, hoped to be the guiding voice for Americans, to lead them to the answers he had found to explain the state of the U.S. and the world. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, news outlets and Congressional committees alike claimed that Pelley's answer was the overthrow of the U.S. government. Newspapers and politicians asserted that he and his followers, which were known as the Silver Shirts, a parallel to the Brownshirts of the Nazi regime and the Blackshirts of Mussolini's fascism, wanted to recreate Nazi Germany in the U.S. with Pelley at its head. But was this true? Were the thousands of people following Pelley truly committed to overthrowing the United States government? Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Pelley wrote multiple books and journals expressing his beliefs on topics such as religion, the economy, and minority groups, particularly Jews and Black Americans. These ideas crystallized into his plan for the U.S., what Pelley called the "Christian Commonwealth." The hope of realizing this new America formed the foundation of the Silver Legion and Pelley's 1936 presidential campaign. I argue that, with the support of the Silver Legion, William Dudley Pelley planned to use the U.S. presidential election—and thus democratic process—to gain power and implement a fascist¹ government in the United States. When Pelley lost the election, he then turned to planning a government takeover with his Silver Legion acting as his military.

Early Life

William Dudley Pelley's early adult life consisted of progressive beliefs, but after being sent to Siberia with the YMCA Red Cross during World War I, he exchanged the far-left for far-right beliefs. Born on March 12, 1890, Pelley grew up in a

¹ The definition of fascism in this paper will follow the definition laid out by Roger Griffin in his book *Fascism*, "Fascism is the genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism." The ideas of "palingenesis," the rebirth of a nation to a former time period of glory, "ultranationalism," or a form of nationalism beyond the scope of what is compatible with liberal democracy, and the "core utopian myth," or the ideal state of a society, will be used throughout this paper (p. 92, 100–101).

Methodist household in Massachusetts.² When his father found success in a new business venture in the tissue paper industry, he forced his son to leave school at the age of seventeen.³ This abandonment of his educational aspirations led Pelley to develop a rebellious spirit, feeling as though his life was dictated by his father's success.⁴ He began to criticize the religion he grew up in, idolizing Elbert Hubbard, a man who mocked Christianity.⁵ Pelley also began to form his own political views, reading Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* and was known as a "low-level participant" in the progressive movement.⁶ These beliefs began to change, though, following his work in Siberia from August until November 1918. He worked as a volunteer for "Red Triangle" and as a correspondent for the American Red Cross.⁷ He would be exposed to the idea that "a Jewish conspiracy lay behind Communism" by fellow Red Cross agents.⁸ While not having immediate impacts, Pelley, only a few years after returning to the U.S., separated from his wife and moved to Hollywood to pursue scriptwriting. His writing turned towards nativism, perceiving outsiders, mainly immigrants and Jews, as dangerous and ruinous to the United States, fitting in with the writing being produced in Hollywood during this time.⁹ Pelley left Hollywood in 1927, and the following year, Pelley experienced a "spiritual awakening," causing him to turn to esoteric writings and start building his own spiritualism. He wrote about his communication with Jesus, the secrets Christian clergy hid from their congregations, including rebirth, and offered his own spiritual guidance.¹⁰ He created multiple journals and wrote what the "oracles," his "clairaudient communications," spoke to him.¹¹ He claimed the "oracles" foresaw an economic collapse in 1929. They told Pelley that, after this collapse, he should start a Christian paramilitary organization to "recast the social order." His

² Leo P. Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley: Spiritualist in Politics," in *The Old Christian Right*, (Temple University Press, 1983), 26.

³ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 26.

⁴ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 26.

⁵ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 26.

⁶ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 26, 31, 36.

⁷ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 33–34.

⁸ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 36.

⁹ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 38–46.

¹⁰ Bradley W. Hart, "The Silver Legion and the Chief," in *Hitler's American Friends*, (St. Martin's Press, 2018) 67–68.

¹¹ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 49.

sign to start this journey occurred when a “housepainter” was elected to German chancellorship.¹² He established his Christian paramilitary organization in 1933, after his “housepainter,” Adolf Hitler, came to power.

The Formation of the Silver Legion

When Pelley formed the Silver Legion in 1933, he began to advertise in flyers and newspapers in order to lay out the organization’s beliefs, goals, and structure, hoping to grow a base of legionnaires. Pelley formed what was known as “The Councils of Safety,” or the introductory level of the Silver Legion. Both men and women were permitted to be part of a council, and their purpose was to educate members as well as potential members of the goals of the organization, how they planned to achieve those goals, and how to recognize the “subversions of the adversary,” namely Communists and Jews.¹³ For these Councils of Safety, initial largest numbers residing in the Midwest and the West, Pelley wrote “Master Councilor’s” addresses to be read at meetings.¹⁴ Each address discussed a particular aspect of the Silver Legion, ranging from the Communist threats brewing in the White House to blaming Jews for purposefully starting the Great Depression.¹⁵ A booklet from 1933 reveals what the first principles of the Silver Legion were. Titled “Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America,” Pelley outlined the early goals of the Legion. He referred to the Legion as a “great Christian Militia” tasked with the goals of purging “rascals in high places” as well as exposing “dishonest and corrupt public officers.”¹⁶ He categorized the Legion into five major divisions. Pelley highlighted the goals of combating enemies both outside and within the federal government, using the Silver Legion as a paramilitary force in times of “mob rule,”—when the “Communists” took over—and “to create an overwhelming public censure...to halt this campaign against morale and morals.”¹⁷ From

¹² Ribuffo, “William Dudley Pelley,” 56.

¹³ William Dudley Pelley, *One Million Silvershirts by 1939*, (The Pelley Publishers, 1938), 21–22

¹⁴ Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends*, 71.

¹⁵ William Dudley Pelley, “The Challenge to Disaster,” *The Councils of Safety of the Christian Party*, no. 1, [1934?], 4.

¹⁶ William Dudley Pelley, *Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America*, Pamphlet, 1933.

¹⁷ Pelley, *Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America*.

the beginning, Pelley made it clear the Silver Legion was in the business of transforming the structure of the American government, even undermining federal elections by removing representatives from their seats, using his paramilitary as a threat.¹⁸

The formation of the Silver Legion brought like-minded Americans together with Pelley as their “chief.” The Silver Shirts were to be primarily composed of white, Catholic or Protestant men and women based on the criteria Pelley laid out. To become an official member of the Legion, prospective applicants had to fill out a form to determine whether they would be a good fit. The form included questions such as the applicant’s “racial extraction,” place of birth, birthplace of parents, their doctor’s information, income, profession, previous politics, and baptized name.¹⁹ In Pelley’s eyes, his Silver Shirts had to be individuals with established lives as American citizens and in good health to become part of his Silver Rangers. Silver Shirts were any member of the organization while Silver Rangers were those who joined the paramilitary section of the organization. The only group outwardly not allowed to be a part of the legion were Jews. Black Americans, while not specifically barred from the group, were not members of the Legion, explained by the overlap between the Legion and Ku Klux Klan chapters. An organization that lacked diversity not only in race and religion but in opinion. Every member wore the regulation uniform consisting of a silver shirt with an *L*, supposedly standing for “Love Loyalty, and Liberation, on the chest, tie, blue trousers, and a standard cap.²⁰ The Legion stripped the individuality of followers to the point of only identifying with one thing, the Christian Commonwealth. These individuals were surrounded by others like them. People who may have struggled through the Great Depression were now looking for answers and explanations for the hardships they faced. They were looking for a community that replaced the America they felt betrayed by, and they found the Silver Legion. Roger Griffin in his book *Fascism* asserts that a “core utopian myth” is a fascist creation, which centers on the idea of a “people” with a shared glorious past that they hope to reimagine for their future.²¹ That is

¹⁸ Pelley, *Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America*.

¹⁹ U.S. House of Representatives, “Hearings Before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities” in *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*, Volume 12, (United States Government Printing Office, 1940), 7224–7225.

²⁰ Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends*, 54.

²¹ Roger Griffin, *Fascism*, (Polity, 2018), 100.

what Pelley was creating through the members of the Silver Legion. These white, Christian men were the backbone of his organization, and they were intended to be the foundation of his government.

The Christian Commonwealth

In 1936, William Dudley Pelley, with the backing of his Silver Legion, campaigned to become President of the United States. Upon his election to office, he planned to change the United States beyond recognition, transforming it into Pelley's core utopian myth, the Christian Commonwealth. One aspect of this reform pertained to the government, its structure, and its representatives. Pelley's government, he claimed, would be centered around Christ. Therefore, one of his first actions if he was elected was to "clean the halls of statecraft," which entailed having a new group of representatives elected to Congress. These representatives were required to "be pledged to the ideals of The Christ."²² Pelley wanted to overrule the elections of voters, forcing new representatives into office, representatives in his image. While advocating for the removal of elected representatives, he conflictingly claimed to support the United States Constitution, insisting the American form of government had no need to be changed. However, after asserting the above claim in one of the addresses for the Councils of Safety, on the very same page he said he was okay with "smashing" the institutions of America if they were "seized," meaning if "Communists" were in power, and if there was an "ADEQUATE structure to erect in its place."²³ In Pelley's mind, that structure was his Commonwealth. He wanted to turn the United States government completely on its head, from democracy to fascism, even if he insisted otherwise. Pelley admitted that if the U.S. government structure as they knew it had fallen, he planned to become the sole leader of the country, implementing his Christian Commonwealth.²⁴ Pelley designed his takeover of the United States government methodically, planning different ways of reaching his ultimate goal, to lead a fascist government where the United States used to be.

²² Pelley, *Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America*.

²³ Pelley, "The Challenge to Disaster," 8.

²⁴ House of Representatives, "Hearing Before a Special Committee," 7252.

The Silver Legion's Antisemitic Policies

Under the Christian Commonwealth, not only was the U.S. government to be completely reformed, but the lives of American Jews would be permanently altered. Antisemitism was a core belief of the ideology of Pelley and Silver Shirts. A quote from one of Pelley's addresses to the Councils of Safety summarizes his and the Legion's feelings towards Jewish people: "Jews have come to America, violated every law of hospitality, outraged our culture, undermined our government, seduced our growing daughters, turned our sons to crime, perverted our ethics, looted our business life, introduced us to ruin."²⁵ What would Pelley's plan be for a group he claimed was harmful to American culture, government, and lives? He makes clear in this address that he does not want to exterminate Jews, believing such an action to be against Christian ideals, and he believed that forcing mass deportation of Jews would be too expensive for his government. Instead, he said that when the Christian Commonwealth was established, Jews would be removed of their citizenship, instead declared wards of the state.²⁶ Second, in the establishment of the Commonwealth, a position for Secretary of Jewry would be created to "treat all Jews as a caste of Public Invalids."²⁷ In Pelley's mind, mass emigration of Jewish people out of the United States without government coercion was a guarantee.²⁸ The final part of the initial plan was to compile the wealth and assets of American Jews for the Commonwealth to be redistributed amongst them until the Commonwealth was officially established, and Jews were no longer deemed a threat to its forming.²⁹ This period was to last seventeen years, and if Jews were "sufficiently liberated from their own strange fixations," they could be returned certain civic privileges, not specified in Pelley's writing.³⁰ Pelley wanted to see an America rid of Jewish people, willing to incite violence to get it.

Pelley's vision for America was one where Jews were absent, and his policies and the conspiracy theories he shared

²⁵ William Dudley Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," *The Councils of Safety of the Christian Party*, no. 12, [1934?], 19.

²⁶ Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 19.

²⁷ Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 19.

²⁸ Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 20.

²⁹ Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 19.

³⁰ Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 21.

encouraged followers to view Jews as enemies of the state who must be eradicated for their government to flourish. Following the official establishment of Pelley's government, Jews would be considered wards for the state for seventeen years, from 1936 to 1953, and they would be separated from the American public. The plan was Jewish confinement to one city in every state. They could live and work only in these cities and would not be able to go outside of them.³¹ Pelley claimed that violence against Jews was not tolerated, unless the perpetrator was an officer of the law.³² Who would be officers of the law? The Silver Legion. While Pelley does not directly state that he approved of violence against Jews, in this statement he authorizes his police force, the Silver Legion, to do what they see fit to establish and protect the Christian Commonwealth as the government of the United States. Such perpetuation of violence is an aspect of fascism identified by Griffin in his book *Fascism*. He defines that under fascism, there is typically a force that threatens the "ultranation," or in this case, Pelley's dream of a white America, one he imagined America looked like in 1776.³³ Any group Pelley believed did not fit into his version of America, Jews, Black Americans, or Asian Americans, were threats to his vision. Followers were thus prepared to fight these forces. Therefore, Pelley prepared the Silver Legion for violence against Jews in order to establish his form of government. Notably, though, Pelley felt this treatment of Jews was "considerate" and "kindly," likely in comparison to the treatment of Jewish people in Germany at this time. He asserted in his writings that if Jewish people abroad attempted to put themselves "back in power," that he would turn the Jewish cities in the Christian Commonwealth into concentration camps.³⁴ While claiming violence against Jewish people was against his Christian ideals, William Dudley Pelley actively incited violence against this group based in his Jewish conspiracy.

Black and Asian Americans in the Christian Commonwealth

Jews were not the only minority group Pelley and the Silver Legion targeted. Similar policies to those against Jewish Americans

³¹ Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 21.

³² Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 19.

³³ Griffin, *Fascism*, 41–42.

³⁴ Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 21.

were meant to be placed against all racial and ethnic minorities, constructing Pelley's fantasy of a white America and creating Pelley's ultranation. According to Griffin, the "ultranation" is a form of national community where fascists believe that the current state of their nation is under a state of emergency—it is "sick" and needs to be made "healthy" again through renewal in the form of the core utopian myth.³⁵ In Pelley and the Silver Shirts' case, that would be the Christian Commonwealth. Many Silver Shirts were also Ku Klux Klan members since Pelley spent a good amount of time in the early days of the Legion recruiting at KKK meetings.³⁶ Therefore, Pelley's racism against Black Americans matched the ideals of his Silver Shirts. Like Jewish people, Black Americans would become wards of the state. However, instead of being entirely excluded from society, Black Americans would be forced into slavery to supply cheap physical labor.³⁷ Pelley was obsessed with returning America to 1776.³⁸ He mentioned on numerous occasions that his goals for the country were to return to the ideals of the nation's founding, often admiring the founding fathers. Pelley, seeing a nation he deemed as "sick," overrun by Communist Jews who wanted to destroy the country, suggested that the answer to their problems is to go back in time to an "ideal state of society."³⁹ For Hitler, it was the Ancient Greeks, and for Pelley it was America at the nation's founding. Based on his admiration, what was Pelley to do with Asian Americans, a group whose presence in the U.S. wasn't established until the nineteenth century? To Pelley, the answer was quite clear: Asian American citizenship would be revoked and no protections afforded under the United States Constitution. According to Pelley, Asian Americans were not to be afforded the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness under his government.⁴⁰ Pelley claimed to be in favor of democracy, an advocate for the Constitution, and a freedom-loving American only wanting what was best for his country. However, examining his policies toward Jewish Americans, Black Americans, and Asian Americans, it is clear that Pelley wanted a white America, an Aryan

³⁵ Griffin, *Fascism*, 37–42.

³⁶ Hart, *Hitler's American Friends*, 50.

³⁷ Hart, *Hitler's American Friends*, 55.

³⁸ William Dudley Pelley, "Machine-Gun Government," *The Councils of Safety of the Christian Party*, no. 5, [1934?], 5.

³⁹ Griffin, *Fascism*, 41.

⁴⁰ House of Representatives, "Hearing Before a Special Committee," 7284.

nation that lacked diversity. Pelley's belief in a white America made "impure" by any person not a white Christian became a core component of his utopian myth and a pillar in his ultranation.

Women and Children in the Silver Legion

The role of women in the Silver Legion was to educate the youth towards Pelley's policies, ultimately raising them to become the next generation of Silver Shirts and carry on the Christian Commonwealth. Pelley refers to his belief on education of the youth in his address "Abraham's Seed" to the Councils of Safety. In this speech, he states how children will be educated on the Talmud and the separation of Jews from the general public. He claims the education and research the Commonwealth would share in schools and to the American people would demonstrate "why the Jew as an invalid is called a Psychopathic."⁴¹ Throughout the address, Pelley claims that Jews are mentally ill and should be locked up in asylums. Furthermore, while Pelley did not allow membership to children under the age of eighteen, he set up a Youth Committee led by women in the Silver Legion to organize Children's meetings and Youth outings. These events and meetings were meant to combat "filthy and perverted press" as well as "Jewish-Communist teachers" which Pelley saw as threats to the youth. The women were meant to teach children "American tradition" and "better ethical culture."⁴² Pelley's plan for children was not only for the children of Silver Shirts, though. In 1933, Pelley addressed child homelessness in the United States. Under the Christian Commonwealth, he claimed that the Silver Rangers would end the "vagabondage of homeless boys and girls by putting this youthful army in concentration centers, and drilling it in the essence of good citizenry..."⁴³ Pelley saw these children as potential soldiers for his military. He describes them as an "army," claiming they would "drill" the morals of the Silver Legion into them.⁴⁴ It is clear from this that Pelley saw children as the next generation of Silver Shirts that would take over the battle when he and his followers could no longer. Children raised in his ideology were more likely to continue to follow him as adults and commit to the cause as Pelley's ideas

⁴¹ Pelley, "Abraham's Seed," 20.

⁴² Pelley, *One Million Silvershirts*, 36.

⁴³ Pelley, *Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America*.

⁴⁴ Pelley, *Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America*.

were not widely accepted. He needed to raise children in his ideology. Children that would never know any different, and children that could carry on the Silver Legion and Christian Commonwealth when Pelley passed it on.

The Silver Legion after the 1936 Election

William Dudley Pelley did not win the presidential election in 1936, losing his opportunity to use the democratic process to implement the Christian Commonwealth. After 1936, his plan evolved to a complete overthrow of the United States government by using his Silver Legion as a military force. Pelley began the Silver Legion under the principle that they were a “Christian militia.”⁴⁵ Though he later denied it, Pelley and the Silver Legion always saw themselves as a paramilitary organization, one that was to become the official military of the country when the Christian Commonwealth was implemented. Therefore, when Pelley lost the election, his reaction was to consider forcing his way into the White House without the permission of the American people. Pelley proposed to “effect conditions which shall eject and dismiss the Sephardi Jew, Franklin D. Roosevelt... and discharge every agent and attaché of the alien oligarchy he has inducted into the Federal Government.” He proposed that the Silver Shirts should arrest “common enemies of Constitutionalism” and present evidence of their “traitorous activities” to a Silver Shirt jury.⁴⁶ Pelley outlines that he will use the Silver Shirts to overthrow the U.S. government, ousting Roosevelt and any other representative or government employee that he deems as to be a Jew or a Communist, destroying the fundamentals of American democracy. He ends this document by saying, “Let us be Christians not afraid to clean the Temple of the Republic...”⁴⁷ Pelley saw America as sick, dirty, and needing to be made healthy and clean once again. The Christian Commonwealth was to be the renewal of the nation, the “paligenesis” Griffin talks about.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Pelley, *Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America*.

⁴⁶ William Dudley Pelley, *Chief Pelley's Silver Program: How Far Do You Endorse It?*, Pamphlet, 1938.

⁴⁷ Pelley, *Chief Pelley's Silver Program*.

⁴⁸ Griffin, *Fascism*, 101.

The Downfall of the Silver Legion

The Silver Legion came to an end before the Christian Commonwealth was realized. Its downfall started with the Dies Committee, now known as the House Un-American Activities Committee. Pelley was called to testify in the hearing due to his perceived ties to fascism, his conspiracy theories about the current U.S. government, and the belief that he was going to attempt to overthrow the U.S. government. During his testimony, he often complimented the committee on their investigations of Communism in the United States and proclaimed his support for their work.⁴⁹ However, much of his testimony involved denial of Silver Shirt actions or beliefs of the Silver Legion. One denial was the denunciation of the Silver Legion as a militia force. Pelley claimed he never approved of the Silver Legion being labeled as a militia or “military menace”, nor did he approve of using violence to achieve his goals.⁵⁰ However, as has been previously established, Pelley defined the Silver Legion as a Christian militia right after its founding in 1933.⁵¹ Contradicting this disavowal of violence, in his testimony, Pelley admits that if Communists use “force,” that the Silver Legion will meet that force with its own.⁵² His testimony was supposed to clear his name; however, Pelley made the situation worse for himself by contradicting his own books and feigning ignorance to his own writings. Pelley was also given what-if scenarios, questioning what would have been done if his Christian Commonwealth had come to fruition. The committee introduced evidence of Pelley’s international allegiances which read, “I propose to effect the fullest and friendliest understanding in international relationships with all rightist and anticommunistic nations abroad—particularly Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, and Japan,...”⁵³ He then goes on to say that Mexico and Canada could have been added if their governments had “become dominated by similarly anti-Jewish and anti-communistic groups.”⁵⁴ This, coupled with multiple statements by Pelley praising Hitler, supported the image of Pelley as a supporter of fascism. In the conclusion of the

⁴⁹ Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends*, 79.

⁵⁰ House of Representatives, “Hearing Before a Special Committee,” 7228.

⁵¹ Pelley, *Declaration of Principles of the Silver Shirts of America*.

⁵² House of Representatives, “Hearing Before a Special Committee,” 7246.

⁵³ House of Representatives, “Hearing Before a Special Committee,” 7283.

⁵⁴ House of Representatives, “Hearing Before a Special Committee,” 7283.

testimony, the Acting Chairman shared the findings of the committee based on Pelley's testimony. He said it was clear that Pelley "unblushingly" supported Hitler and his policies against Jews, was willing to take up arms with a menace of his own imagination, and personally identified the aims of the Silver Legion to line up with the aims of the National Socialist Party of Germany.⁵⁵ Pelley's testimony set in motion the destruction of the Silver Legion in the months following his appearance.

Conclusion

Unfortunately for Pelley, he faced numerous legal battles after his testimony to the Dies Committee. He, officially, disbanded the Silver Legion shortly after his testimony. The federal government charged Pelley under the Espionage Act of 1917, and he was arrested in April of 1942.⁵⁶ He lost any and all influence he once had. While he boasted around fifteen thousand members to his organization in the mid 1930s, their influence in local politics in the Midwest and West made them a force to be reckoned with.⁵⁷ However, due to Pelley's arrest, he was outshone by later leaders on the far-right, such as Father Coughlin, who had more influence post-war.⁵⁸ Pelley would be sentenced to fifteen years in prison in August of 1942, nailing his dream of the Christian Commonwealth dead in the coffin.⁵⁹

Whether or not Pelley was to be the United States' Hitler, Pelley and the Silver Legion were unequivocally fascists, and the Christian Commonwealth was to establish a fascist regime in America. Pelley and the Silver Legion demonstrate Griffin's ideas of the core utopian myth and paligenesis ultranationalism in the Christian Commonwealth. Pelley's ideology included a core utopian myth that the Silver Shirts had been ordained by God to create a new form of government in the United States, one Pelley believed echoed that of the 1776 United States: a white America with racial, religious, and ethnic minorities as noncitizens. Pelley insisted that the United States was "sick" and the only way to heal it was to go back to the ideals of the founding fathers in 1776. He created the

⁵⁵ House of Representatives, "Hearing Before a Special Committee," 7332-7333.

⁵⁶ Hart, *Hitler's American Friends*, 81.

⁵⁷ Hart, *Hitler's American Friends*, 81.

⁵⁸ Hart, *Hitler's American Friends*, 82.

⁵⁹ Ribuffo, "William Dudley Pelley," 79.

Silver Legion not only as his following but also as his military force to take action when he deemed the “Communist takeover” was underway. Pelley claimed to be a supporter of democracy and an advocate for the Constitution while simultaneously suggesting that the press, the public, and media should be suppressed and censored as well as declaring that Pelley planned to remove anyone from the U.S. government that he deemed to be against his policies and beliefs. The United States had fascists on their soil in the 1930s, hoping to overthrow and implement their own form of government in the country, and those fascists were William Dudley Pelley and his Silver Legion.

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Criminalizing Jewishness: The Soviet Repression of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee

Lillian Towery-Collins

Abstract

During World War II, the Soviet regime established the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC) to rally international support against Nazi Germany. After 1945, the cultural and political expression the state had once encouraged was reframed as bourgeois nationalism and treason. The secret JAFC trial criminalized Jewish identity through abusive interrogations, coerced testimonies, and verdicts predetermined by the Politburo before proceedings began. Cold War paranoia and the broader campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans" created an environment where Yiddish language, communal traditions, and foreign fundraising conducted at the state's own request became evidence of disloyalty. The destruction of the JAFC was the culmination of late-Stalinist antisemitism.

Introduction

During World War II, the Soviet regime created the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC) as part of a broader effort to mobilize international support against Nazi Germany.¹ The committee operated under state supervision and carried out tasks that aligned with official priorities, including propaganda work, public rallies, and foreign fundraising—actions actively encouraged during the war, especially when they called attention to Jewish suffering as evidence of fascist crimes. After 1945, however, the same forms of public Jewish expression that had once been useful to the state were reframed as evidence of political disloyalty. The shift culminated in the secret trial of the JAFC, where the Soviet regime criminalized Jewish identity by redefining ordinary cultural, linguistic, and political expression as bourgeois nationalism and treason.² Through antisemitic interrogations, coerced testimonies, and predetermined verdicts, the state transformed Jewishness itself into evidence of disloyalty.

By the 1930s, Soviet nationality policy emphasized the need to “modernize” what the regime labeled “backward cultures.”³ These groups were identified by their attachment to traditional dress, religious life, and older communal practices—traits the state viewed as obstacles to becoming fully Soviet. The goal of policy was to push minorities toward a secular, standardized Soviet culture through a process known as Sovietization.⁴ Any group that held too tightly to its own cultural traditions risked being seen as resisting modernization and therefore politically unreliable.

After World War II, the alliance between the Soviet Union and the West—the United States and Western Europe—collapsed into a global Cold War. By 1947, the division had hardened. This new bipolar world reshaped domestic politics inside the Soviet Union.⁵ With the onset of the Cold War, the regime grew suspicious

¹ Later in the paper when I quote Joshua Rubenstein, he uses the abbreviation JAC for the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. I will use JAFC throughout my paper.

² Anna Schur, “Jewish in Form, Socialist in Content? Jewish Identity and Soviet Subjectivity at the Trial of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 48, no. 2 (2018): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2018.1492824>.

³ Francine Hirsch, “Getting to know ‘The Peoples of the USSR’”: Ethnographic Exhibits as Soviet Virtual Tourism, 1923-1934,” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 4 (2003): 684, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3185651>.

⁴ Hirsch, “Getting to know ‘The Peoples of the USSR,’” 692.

⁵ Lewis Siegelbaum, “Cold War,” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History: An Online Archive of Primary Sources*, accessed December 4, 2025, <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/?s=cold+war>.

of any foreign influence, and Jewish people—because of their international ties and diasporic identity—were increasingly treated as potential conduits of Western pressure. Cold War paranoia did not invent Soviet antisemitism but intensified it, making Jewish cultural life and ordinary foreign contacts appear politically dangerous.

Historiography

Joshua Rubenstein argues that the JAFC was created primarily for wartime propaganda and fundraising for the Soviet Union. It was established to promote support from the Jewish community in the west.⁶ He highlights the rallies, fundraising efforts, and foreign connections among members of the committee and foreign organizations, which he interprets as evidence of its fundamentally political and externally oriented mission.⁷ He claims the shift stemmed largely from the committee's extensive foreign connections, particularly its relationships with American Jewish figures such as B.Z. Goldberg and Paul Novik. Goldberg was a prominent Yiddish journalist who visited the Soviet Union several times, while Novik was a member of the communist party in the U.S. and the editor of New York's *Morgen Freiheit*.⁸ These ties were essential to wartime fundraising, but in the postwar political climate they became liabilities that reinforced Stalin's increasing suspicion of outside influence.⁹ This suspicion grew alongside broader cultural repression: "By the late 1930s, fewer parents were sending their children to Yiddish-language schools. Yiddish books were removed from libraries, and Yiddish scholarly institutes shut down, along with many schools and newspapers. All the Yiddish writers understood that future generations would have little, if any, access to genuine Yiddish culture."¹⁰ To Rubenstein, the fading of Yiddish life in the Soviet Union reveals that the repression of the JAFC fit into a larger trend of the state's persecution of Jewish cultural expression.

⁶ Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 1.

⁷ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*, 7.

⁸ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*, 57.

⁹ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*, 26.

¹⁰ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*, 6.

Gennady Estraiikh offers a more culturally oriented interpretation. He acknowledges that the JAFK was founded as a governmental institution, but he argues that it slowly began taking on the tasks of a cultural institution. As he notes, "From 1944 onwards, the JAFK increasingly fulfilled functions of a public organization by, for example, responding to requests to help solve various problems and grievances, which dogged Jews during and after the war."¹¹ These problems included lobbying against antisemitic policies and helping Jews reintegrate into their communities after the war. Estraiikh argues the JAFK became vulnerable postwar because it served as one of the few remaining public channels through which Soviet Jews sought assistance. He stresses that after the war, "it was not allowed to remind the regime about its specifically anti-Jewish repressions,"¹² making any institution that acknowledged Jewish suffering politically dangerous. In this view, the move against the JAFK was not just political—it was part of the state's effort to eliminate one of the only public spaces where Jewish cultural life was still visible.

Anna Schur examines how the trial exposed the tension between Jewish identity and Soviet expectations of loyalty. She argues that the proceedings functioned as "an investigation, carried out mostly by the defendants, both into the permissible parameters of Soviet Jewishness and into the essence of the official nationality policy."¹³ The purpose was not to determine factual guilt but to test and redefine the limits of what Soviet Jewishness could look like. Notably, while the court never officially declared Jewishness as a crime, their questioning proved that, in the eyes of the regime, one could not be "too Jewish" and still be considered "Soviet."¹⁴ According to Schur, the charges were ideological from the start—the defendants were prosecuted not for their actions, but for who they were and what their identity represented to the state.

Karl Robert Krotke-Crandall frames the JAFK trial within a wider postwar campaign to push Jewish people out of Soviet cultural and political institutions, rather than an isolated episode of repression and antisemitism. He argues the crackdown on the JAFK

¹¹ Gennady Estraiikh. "The Life, Death, and Afterlife of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee." *East European Jewish Affairs* 48, no. 2 (2018): 142, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13501674.2018.1524737?needAccess=true>.

¹² Estraiikh, "The Life, Death, and Afterlife," 145.

¹³ Schur, "Jewish in Form, Socialist in Content?" 151.

¹⁴ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*, 41.

mirrored earlier state-backed efforts to remove Jews from leadership roles within Soviet cultural institutions by framing Jewish cultural influence as ideological deviance. “Various elements of the Party apparatus launched campaigns directed at highlighting the presence of and expelling Jews from the leadership of various artistic organizations.”¹⁵ For Krotke-Crandall, the JAFK case fits cleanly into this wider campaign. Jewish cultural leaders were also accused of “an agenda that diverged from the official Party line,” which, according to Krotke-Crandall, shows how even ordinary cultural work—such as writing poetry, performing in plays, teaching language, and conducting historical research—was treated as political deviation.¹⁶ Krotke-Crandall makes the point that the charges had almost nothing to do with actual behavior. Instead, the state used them to cast Jewishness itself as politically suspect. For him, the attack on the JAFK fits into a wider pattern of efforts to remove Jewish influence from Soviet cultural institutions.

Although Rubenstein is correct in emphasizing that the JAFK was created as a political body focused on foreign contacts and wartime fundraising, his explanation does not fully account for why the committee came to be seen as a threat to the Soviet state in the postwar period. I agree with Estraiikh that elements of Jewish cultural expression—such as the wartime rallies that centered Jewish suffering, the members’ involvement in projects like the Black Book, and the publication of *Eynikayt*, an important Yiddish newspaper—made the committee increasingly visible as a site of Jewish identity. However, I do not view the JAFK as a cultural institution in the way Estraiikh sometimes suggests because it continued to operate within strict political boundaries and was never intended to serve as an autonomous cultural organization. Schur contends that the trial targeted the defendants for their Jewish identities rather than any actual crimes, illustrating how the court used the proceedings to situate Jewishness itself as evidence of political disloyalty. Krotke-Crandall situates the repression of the JAFK within broader campaigns to purge Jewish influence from Soviet cultural life, demonstrating that accusations of ideological unreliability were part of a long-standing pattern in which Jewish

¹⁵ Karl Robert Krotke-Crandall, “The Holocaust in Russian Life: New Perspectives on Soviet Jewish Memory.” (PhD diss., Washington State University, 2021), 125, https://rex.libraries.wsu.edu/view/pdfCoverPage?instCode=01ALLIANCE_WSU&filePid=13354075810001842&download=true.

¹⁶ Krotke-Crandall, “The Holocaust in Russian Life,” 125 and 140.

leaders were treated as politically suspect. Taken together, these historians show how the late Stalinist regime collapsed the boundary between political activity and Jewish cultural life. By the time of the trial, foreign fundraising, Yiddish publishing, and even basic communal work were treated as essentially the same thing—evidence of “bourgeois nationalism” or treason. The destruction of the JAFc reflects not just political suspicion, but a broader shift in which Jewish identity itself became criminalized.

History of the JAFc

In 1942, four anti-fascist committees along with the JAFc were established—for women, youth, scientists, and Slavs—with the intention of appealing to Western ideals in an alliance against Nazi Germany. Each anti-fascist committee was under the watch of Solomon Lozovsky, the deputy chairman of the Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformburo) and deputy people's commissar for foreign affairs.¹⁷ As Rubenstein notes, “The JAC’s goal was clear: to help the war effort by soliciting money and political support for the Soviet Union, principally from wealthy Jews in the West. It would not operate independently, but rather, like all Soviet institutions, be closely supervised by party officials.”¹⁸ In the early months of the JAFc, the committee held multiple rallies in support of the Soviet, and Jewish, struggle against Nazi fascism. During the first rally, held on August 24, 1941, prominent Jewish academics, writers, and Red Army fighters emphasized the importance of Jewish unity against Germany. This rally was both approved and given an international broadcast by the regime. Peretz Markish, a prominent Yiddish writer, used the image of biblical Job as an analogy of the Jewish condition during the war. David Bergelson, another leading Yiddish writer, asked if it was possible that “this people will give up and perish? A people which, over the course of thousands of years, suffered unheard of humiliations, bloodshed, and slaughter at the hands of its enemies?”¹⁹ These speeches directly contradicted Soviet policy by emphasizing Jewish unity or Jewish suffering. These statements were incredibly nationalistic in the eyes of Soviet policy yet were sponsored by the Sovinformburo and the Party due to their wartime propaganda value. With this official backing, these

¹⁷ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, 3.

¹⁸ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, 10.

¹⁹ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, 8.

men, among others, continued to give speeches, author poems, stories, plays, and articles all with similar themes of Jewish unity against the Nazis.

Along with the JAFK's rallies to gather support from foreign entities, the members of the JAFK were specifically chosen for their accomplishments and ability to appeal to foreign interests. "By 1944, the JAFK had sixty-two members, which included authors, officers and generals, artists, physicians, scholars, and representatives of the Jewish Autonomous Region (Birobidzhan)."²⁰ Several of the defendants were famous personalities. Lozovsky brought political authority and diplomatic experience; Lina Shtern was a renowned biochemist; Boris Shimeliovich directed one of Moscow's leading hospitals; and Benjamin Zuskin was a prominent actor in the State Jewish Theater. The committee's most widely known members were the five major Yiddish writers—Isaac Fefer, Peretz Markish, David Hofshsteyn, Leyb Kvitko, and David Bergelson—whose literary prominence gave the JAFK credibility with organizations abroad. Alongside these figures were translators, editors, and trade-union activists who supported the committee's outreach work from within the Soviet Union.²¹ During the war, these qualifications made the JAFK invaluable. In the postwar years, however, the same features—foreign contacts, cultural influence, and linguistic expertise—would be reinterpreted as signs of nationalism or cosmopolitan disloyalty.²²

Cosmopolitanism is the philosophical view that all people are citizens of the world with a shared sense of global community and responsibility that transcends national or local affiliations.²³ In the late Stalinism context, the phrase "rootless cosmopolitan" became a political weapon to stigmatize Jews as inherently disloyal and insufficiently Soviet. Unlike many Soviet minorities who had clearly defined internal territories, the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and its alignment with the West transformed Soviet Jews into a diaspora nationality in the State's eyes.²⁴ This meant that the Jewish community had dual loyalties, making them potential traitors

²⁰ Estraiikh, "The Life, Death, and Afterlife," 140.

²¹ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*, 65; Estraiikh, "The Life, Death, and Afterlife," 140.

²² Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*, 41.

²³ Gillian Brock, "Cosmopolitanism," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cosmopolitanism-philosophy>.

²⁴ Schur, "Jewish in Form, Socialist in Content?" 158.

in any conflict with the United States.²⁵ This perceived link to a foreign, pro-western state made them ideal targets for charges of cosmopolitanism. “This [the trial] all happened at a time when the Soviet press wrote about a “cosmopolitanism” that had ostensibly spread as a malaise among intellectuals, too often with auspicious Jewish surnames.”²⁶ The term accused Jewish intellectuals of privileging foreign, Western, or “bourgeois-nationalist” values over Soviet patriotism, thereby transforming Jewish cultural activity—or even knowledge of foreign languages—into evidence of political treachery.

On January 12, 1948, the chairman of the JAFK, Solomon Mikhoels, was murdered in Minsk under orders from Joseph Stalin. Dispatched to Minsk to review a play for the Stalin Prize, he was lured into a hotel and killed. His body was left in the snow to be found the next morning. His death was officially declared to be a result of a car accident.²⁷ Mikhoels’ death marked the beginning of Stalin’s attack against the JAFK. Hofshteyn was arrested the night of September 16, 1948. Fefer followed on December 24, 1948. Zuskin was arrested the same night as Fefer. He was heavily sedated in his hospital room due to severe chronic insomnia, yet he was still taken even when the duty physician insisted he should not be moved.²⁸ The following arrests did not occur until a month later. Boris was taken away on January 13, 1949. Nine more defendants were arrested between January 24—28, 1949.²⁹ These arrests set the stage for the secret trial, in which coerced testimony and predetermined verdicts would transform the committee members’ wartime service into evidence of disloyalty.

Jewish Cultural Expression Reframed as Treason

The JAFK trial reframed the use of Yiddish, cultural preservation, and Jewish community-focused work as evidence of “bourgeois nationalism.”³⁰ During the trial, linguistic expression itself was treated as a marker of separatism. As Lozovsky noted, “if someone writes in Yiddish, that is nationalism, that means that what

²⁵ Krotke-Crandall, “The Holocaust in Russian Life,” 124.

²⁶ Estraiikh, “The Life, Death, and Afterlife,” 144.

²⁷ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, 1.

²⁸ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, 43–44.

²⁹ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, 42–44.

³⁰ Schur, “Jewish in Form, Socialist in Content?” 153.

is on trial here is the Yiddish language.”³¹ The prosecutors viewed Yiddish as a barrier to assimilation and therefore a political threat rather than a cultural medium. The underlying implication was that a loyal Soviet citizen would abandon Jewish linguistic distinctiveness in favor of Russian.

The court extended this logic beyond language to all Jewish cultural practices. For example, when the presiding officer asked Hofshsteyn why a true communist would become involved with Rabbis, matzoh, and even kosher meat, they framed such activities as incompatible with Soviet identity.³² Efforts to prevent cultural assimilation were treated as nationalist subversion. As Fefer stated earlier during the trial, “I did not think that working to counter assimilation was nationalistic activity.”³³

Public expressions of Jewish identity in print were also used to support charges of treason. During the trial, Kvitko himself stated that Eynikayt “showed the achievements of Jews...[while] downplaying the role of other nationalities, including Russians.”³⁴ Although this claim appeared in the testimony of a defendant rather than the prosecutor, its language echoed the state’s accusations—certainly reflecting the intense pressure applied during the investigation—and suggests how artistic and communal activities could be reframed as political separatism. Eynikayt operated under party supervision during the war, and the regime encouraged it as part of the JAFCC’s propaganda mission. Yet, in the postwar climate, the state cast the same activities as nationalistic and disloyal. What had been valuable to the regime as anti-fascist messaging became criminal once Jewish cultural visibility no longer served state interests.

Finally, the trial targeted Jewish identity itself as evidence of nationalism. As Lozovsky stated, “Ehrenburg says that his mother’s name is Hannah...My mother’s name was Hannah, too. Am I supposed to be ashamed of that?...Why is that considered

³¹ Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, “Solomon Lozovsky,” in *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 190-191.

³² Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, “David Hofshsteyn,” in *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 161.

³³ Rubenstein and Naumov, “Solomon Lozovsky,” 197.

³⁴ Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, “Leyb Kvitko,” in *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 146.

nationalism?”³⁵ Hannah is a Hebrew name with deep roots in Jewish tradition, and Lozovsky’s recognition of it as a shared cultural marker—connected his own mother to Ehrenburg’s—illustrates how even the most personal expressions of Jewish identity could be construed as anti-Soviet. By equating Jewishness with treason, the regime collapsed the distinction between cultural life and political opposition.

Coerced Testimonies and Fabricated Evidence

If Jewish cultural life could be reframed as treason in the courtroom, that logic was enabled by an investigation process built entirely on coerced testimony and fabricated evidence. In 1953, the material for the JAFK trial was reviewed by security agencies, the prosecutor’s office, and the political leaders of the country. All the evidence pointed towards the innocence of the defendants. The interrogation process that produced the “evidence” for the JAFK trial relied on torture, falsified interrogation records, and deliberate manipulation, revealing the Ministry of State Security (MGB) manufactured treason where none existed.³⁶ Once the trial began, the majority of the defendants retracted their confessions and testified that their pre-trial confessions were forced from them under duress or were outright “poetic inventions”³⁷ of the state. Ultimately, the 1953 review confirmed that the entire case lacked evidence of counterrevolutionary crime.³⁸

One example of a false guilty plea in the JAFK proceedings was from Lina Shtern, one of only two women on trial, and a renowned scientist in the Soviet Union. She admits to the court that she “did not plead guilty to anything but signed the interrogation record in order to leave here [the prison she was interrogated in].”³⁹ She gives one of many accounts in this trial of false guilty pleas in order to escape situations, whether it was intense interrogation,

³⁵ Rubenstein and Naumov, “Solomon Lozovsky,” 186.

³⁶ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, xi.

³⁷ Schur, “Jewish in Form, Socialist in Content?” 153.

³⁸ Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, “Determination to Annul the Sentence and Terminate the Case of Lozovsky et al., November 22, 1955,” in *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 504.

³⁹ Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, “Lina Shtern,” in *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 333.

sleep deprivation, starvation, torture, or any combination of the above.⁴⁰

Similarly, Bergelson recalled that “one interrogation record that I signed was written by the investigator in advance” and that he initially refused for an entire week. He told the court he eventually signed the record in hopes of explaining his situation face to face. He also describes an investigator that dictated his replies during previous interrogations.⁴¹ However, though he hoped the court would listen to him, the manufactured documents were treated as authentic evidence.

Coercion was a deliberate and integral part of the investigation process. Lozovsky’s testimony features an account of blatant antisemitism and harassment done by the investigators in an attempt to make the defendants break. He recalls Colonel Komarov saying that “Jews are low, dirty people, that all Jews are lousy bastards” and that all conspiracies against the party were created and carried out by Jews.⁴² Not only does this reveal how mentally taxing the investigations must have been for each defendant, but it also demonstrates that antisemitism was deep within the structure of the regime. As Rubenstein notes, “except for the members of the JAC, no one from the other anti-fascist committees suffered reprisals for their wartime efforts.”⁴³ Rubenstein’s observation underscores how the regime specifically targeted the JAFC not for actual crimes, but because Jewish identity itself had been recast as a form of treason.

Predetermined Verdicts, Cold War Paranoia, and the “Cosmopolitan” Campaign

The outcome of the JAFC case was settled long before the defendants entered the courtroom. The trial reflected paranoia within late-Stalinism, Cold War fears of “cosmopolitanism,” and the belief that the establishment of Israel had given Jews an inherent loyalty to a foreign state.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, xiii.

⁴¹ Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, “David Bergelson,” in *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 133.

⁴² Rubenstein and Naumov, “Solomon Lozovsky,” 229.

⁴³ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, 25.

⁴⁴ Schur, “Jewish in Form, Socialist in Content?” 158.

The verdicts for the JAFK defendants were not merely suggested by security officials but were formally predetermined by the highest echelons of the Soviet State.⁴⁵ Minister of State Security Semyon Ignatiev proposed the executions in a cover letter to the indictment, which the Politburo then officially approved—over a month before the trial started.⁴⁶ With a predetermined verdict, the outcome of the trial could not be changed, no matter what evidence came to the surface. Although the trial was secret, it functioned as political theater. The defendants were permitted to speak and present appeals, creating the illusion of a fair legal process.⁴⁷ In reality, the verdicts had already been decided, and the proceedings were a farce designed to give the defendants the false impression that their pleas could alter their fate. Regardless of their testimony, each defendant was condemned to execution—not for any crime, but for the state’s criminalization of their Jewish identity.

Cold War paranoia provided the ideological framework that allowed the Soviet state to transform the JAFK into the center of a fictional anti-Soviet conspiracy. Security officials increasingly interpreted global Jewish networks as potential channels of foreign influence, especially after the establishment of Israel and the heightened tensions with the United States, recasting the JAFK’s wartime foreign ties as evidence of espionage.⁴⁸ As Estraiikh notes, the MGB’s “scriptwriters” had already begun preparing narratives of Jewish conspiracies, long before the defendants entered the courtroom.⁴⁹ These narratives drew on the broader anti-cosmopolitan campaign, in which the state sponsored a press crusade that painted the regime’s Jewish intellectual and artistic elite—including world-renowned scientists, veteran Bolsheviks, and celebrated writers—as rootless subversives tainted by Western culture.⁵⁰ Within this climate, ordinary foreign ties that the JAFK created and fostered throughout the war were recast as evidence of espionage. Even personal histories became suspicious. During the trial, Bergelson criticized Hofshteyn, a fellow defendant, saying that

⁴⁵ Schur, “Jewish in Form, Socialist in Content?” 150–151.

⁴⁶ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, xviii.

⁴⁷ Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, “Judicial Proceedings Against Members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee,” in *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 70.

⁴⁸ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, 41.

⁴⁹ Estraiikh, “The Life, Death, and Afterlife,” 143.

⁵⁰ Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom*, xi.

“going to Palestine was in itself a hostile act...”⁵¹ The Cold War made it possible for the regime to interpret any Jewish connection—linguistic, cultural, or geographic—as a sign of divided loyalty. In this way, the conspiracy attributed to the JAFC was not uncovered through the investigation but rather constructed during it to support the regime’s paranoia.

The predetermined nature of the case becomes even clearer when looking at how the fabricated investigation shaped the sentences. The Military Collegium’s ruling accepted every coerced confession as fact, sentencing thirteen defendants to death and giving Shtern a labor camp term.⁵² Nothing in the trial suggested that guilt or innocence mattered. The outcome matched the political demands of the moment, not the evidence. The annulment of the sentences in 1955 later confirmed this. The review found that Goldshtein’s testimony—the starting point for the entire case—had been obtained through beatings, and that investigators had “systematically deprived” prisoners of sleep to force signatures on fabricated records.⁵³ It concluded that there was an “absence of counterrevolutionary crime” altogether.⁵⁴ In other words, the core accusations that justified the executions were invented. The state admitted this years later, but only after the defendants were already dead. For those on trial, the proceedings were never a search for truth but instead the last step in a process where Jewish identity had already been condemned as treason.

Cold War politics also shaped how the state interpreted the JAFC’s activities. After the establishment of Israel, the Soviet leadership grew increasingly suspicious that Soviet Jews had a built-in loyalty to a foreign state, even when there was no evidence of political connection. The Soviet regime conflated Jewish cultural concerns with Zionism—a political movement that advocated for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the historic land of Israel (at the time, this was the British Mandate of Palestine). They used this term to describe any assertion of Jewish national or cultural interests, whether or not it involved actual support for a Jewish state. Hofshteyn’s involvement with rabbis or Jewish cultural matters was treated as political activity rather than ordinary

⁵¹ Rubenstein and Naumov, “David Hofshteyn,” 163.

⁵² Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, “The Sentence,” in *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2005), 402.

⁵³ Rubenstein and Naumov, “Determination to Annul the Sentence,” 411.

⁵⁴ Rubenstein and Naumov, “Determination to Annul the Sentence,” 410.

community work.⁵⁵ The same pattern appears in the way the prosecutor used Kvitko's preliminary testimony. By reading aloud Kvitko's coerced statement that "the Jews were not recognized as a nation... which led... [to] the infringement of their legal rights compared to other nationalities," the prosecutor presented this line as proof that Kvitko supported Jewish national autonomy.⁵⁶ In reality, this "evidence" came from an interrogation record shaped by pressure and leading questions. But in the courtroom, it was treated as confirmation that Jewish cultural concerns were equivalent to Zionist separatism. In these examples, the state no longer distinguished between Jewish cultural practices, foreign contacts, and Zionism—everything was folded into the same category of "nationalist" or "anti-Soviet" behavior. Combined with the broader campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans," these assumptions created an environment where Jewish identity automatically looked suspicious. The JAFC defendants were judged through this lens, meaning that no amount of evidence or testimony could change how the state interpreted their political identities.

By the end of the trial, the Soviet state had completed a much larger transformation: Jewish identity itself had come to function as evidence of political betrayal. This is clear in Bergelson's statement, when he told the court, "There cannot be anything criminal in the phrase 'I am a Jew.'"⁵⁷ His plea underscores how far the regime had moved from evaluating actions to criminalizing identity. The predetermined verdicts, Cold War paranoia, and the broader "cosmopolitan" campaign all worked together to create an environment where Jewish cultural expression, foreign fundraising done at the state's request, and even personal heritage were treated as signs of treason. The trial did not expose a conspiracy—it invented one, using fabricated interrogations and coerced testimony to retroactively justify a conclusion that had already been reached. In this sense, the JAFC case reflects a broader late-Stalinist shift: the state no longer differentiated between Jewish communal life and political nationalism. Instead, Jewishness itself had become incompatible with Soviet loyalty, making the repression of the JAFC not just a security measure, but a targeted act of antisemitic state violence.

⁵⁵ Rubenstein and Naumov, "David Hofshteyn," 194.

⁵⁶ Rubenstein and Naumov, "Leyb Kvitko," 142.

⁵⁷ Rubenstein and Naumov, "David Bergelson," 128.

Conclusion

Taken together, the trial records demonstrate how the regime twisted testimony into criminal evidence. Jewish cultural expression, from language to communal life, no longer fit into the Soviet narrative of what a true citizen should be and was reframed as anti-Soviet nationalism. Coerced testimony was used to manufacture the evidence the state needed to claim nationalism. Lastly, predetermined verdicts and Cold War paranoia finalized the outcome of the trial. The trial was not a standalone event—it was one episode of a larger antisemitic campaign. What had been useful to the state during the war became suspect afterward, and a clear threat in the new Cold War climate. The destruction of the JAFC was not a deviation, but a culmination of late-Stalinist antisemitism.

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<https://soviethistory.msu.edu/?s=cold+war>.

Crime and Punishment in Medieval Rural England

Riya Jacob

Abstract

This paper explores patterns of crime and punishment in rural medieval England between 1275 and 1306 through an analysis of the *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*. By analyzing recorded data on verdicts, accusations, and crimes committed, this study identifies key trends in criminal activity and judicial outcomes. The findings reveal a predominance in theft-related offenses and a remarkable number of high acquittals, even in cases involving serious crimes like homicide. This suggests a weakened justice system that depended heavily on the community and its dynamics, which included reputation, social ties, and reluctance to impose social punishments. Additionally, this study explores the economic dimensions of crime, demonstrating how theft posed a significant threat to subsistence economy, as well as the gendered nature of justice, where women's limited participation in crime reflects social expectations. This study ultimately conveys how medieval justice functioned as a flexible community-based system, providing insight into the relationship between society, law, and the evolution of legal institutions.

Introduction

Between the late thirteenth century and the early fourteenth century, England underwent significant judicial changes through the extensive legislative program of King Edward I. These judicial changes aimed to rationalize the common law and improve the administration of justice.¹ *The Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials*² provide a valuable window into local justice, social tensions, and the evolving relationship between royal authorities and rural authorities. The records within this source not only provide insight into which crimes were most common, but also how justice was administered and how local communities enforced law and order. Crime and punishment in rural medieval England were shaped by social hierarchies, economic strain, and gendered power dynamics.

Dataset Overview & Methodology

This study draws upon legal records from *The Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials*, which were designed to administer crimes such as theft, murder, and receiving stolen goods. With the data compiled from the *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials 1275–1306* written by Ralph B. Pugh, I created a dataset of individual case entries, each listing the gender of the accused, the accused crime, the location, the verdict rendered, punishment if found guilty, and in some cases, the details of stolen items and presence of chattels, which is an umbrella term for one's belongings. Chattels could be clothing, cookware, or livestock. Chattels were often seized after prisoners were convicted of felonies. These records helped create a valuable window into medieval crime and punishment practices, allowing for quantitative analysis of crime patterns, conviction rates, and the nature of stolen goods. By investigating this topic and these patterns, I was able to look into how law and order were managed within a community and how it has evolved past this. Additionally, this study highlights the gap between the severity of the law and its flexible application in practice. Taken together, these ideas demonstrate the importance of

¹ Phelan, Amy Elizabeth. "A Study of the First Trailbaston Proceedings in England, 1304–1307." Order No. 9733677, Cornell University, 1997.

² Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Tthe railbaston Trials, 1275–1306*.

how legal systems are shaped by the societies in which they operate, offering insight into both medieval justice and the development of the legal system over time.

To analyze the records quantitatively, the dataset was manually transcribed and standardized. I consolidated the crime categories when necessary, treating theft and what the authors called theft/larceny as a single category. Additionally, I coded the verdicts similarly to how they were recorded in the royal court rolls: guilty (g.), not guilty (n.g.), hanged, remanded (rem), acquitted (quit), and unfinished, meaning the proceedings were either incomplete or missing. The organization of these categories allows for the calculation of crime frequencies, acquittal and conviction rates, and theft sub-categories.

The Nature of Crime in Rural Wiltshire

While reading through the Wiltshire court rolls, I found that most of the crimes committed in the rural area were theft, larceny, and burglary.³ A majority of these crimes were committed by men, with a small fraction of theft cases involving women. The royal court gaol delivery rolls records show that women rarely committed theft, but if they were accused, it was because they were accompanying a man who committed the crime. This does not always mean that the woman involved in the crime was married to the man. Often, these women were family members or had no familial or marital relation. This was not the case for Edith de Helmerton, who was taken at Henton, a civil parish in Wiltshire, with her husband for stealing sheep at Aulton, a hamlet adjacent to the village of Collingbourne Kingston in Wiltshire.⁴ The record frames them as a pair, even though her husband was explicitly linked to the theft and punished for the crime. While Edith's husband was executed, Edith was pregnant during the arrest. So, instead of immediate trial or execution, she was sent to Salisbury Gaol to be held until she gave birth.⁵ Additionally, her defense for this case was that she was Robert's wife. This is important because

³ Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, p. 8

⁴ Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 34, p. 38

⁵ Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 34, p. 38

under medieval law, a wife could claim that she acted under her husband's coverture, meaning that women had no legal identity. By marrying, her identity was assumed by her husband, which is also why women take their husband's last name, as a symbol of subsuming his identity.⁶ Edith's husband's coverture eliminated her culpability as the jury verified that she was Robert's wife, and this status absolved her from the responsibility of the crime, which is why she was acquitted. This case demonstrates how poverty affected and drove peasants to commit crimes out of desperation because of the conditions of the accused couple. With Edith being pregnant in an era where overpopulation and food scarcity were immense issues, the theft of the livestock could have fed them for a long time, or they could have sold the livestock to accumulate the funds to raise their baby. The theft presents itself as a family affair, since Robert is not committing the crime by himself, but Edith is accompanying him. Their effort to steal sheep and run from one town to another illustrates their desperation.

Poverty was a major issue from 1275 to 1306 due to economic vulnerability, high population density, and meager food production.⁷ These conditions left many vulnerable, which is why women sometimes acted alone in theft to obtain food, clothing, and livestock to ensure their and their family's survival. In the royal court rolls, there are ten recorded cases where women acted alone in theft, stealing goods such as livestock. The men of rural Wiltshire, who were expected to provide for their families, often committed burglary and larceny.⁸ Stealing livestock or clothing was a common occurrence recorded in the court rolls and indicates how poverty-stricken the community was. Livestock and clothing theft were treated in the same way. For both, large quantities of stolen goods led to the suspect being hanged. Although punishment was harsh for the theft of clothing and livestock, there were outliers for both types of theft in my dataset. For instance, in 1275, a man was hanged in Werem for stealing a green mantle, a woman's coat, and a tapet (a decorative piece of cloth)⁹ while a man in Chippenham allegedly

⁶ Allgor, Catherine. 2012. *Coverture: The Word You Probably Don't Know but Should*. National Women's History Museum. September 4, 2012.

⁷ Guido Alfani. 2020. *The Economic History of Poverty, 1450–1800*. ResearchGate. November 25, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315149271-2>.

⁸ *Problems of the medieval era - Causes of crime - Eduqas - GCSE History Revision - Eduqas*. (n.d.). BBC Bitesize. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zmsqjsg/revision/2>

⁹ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 11, p. 35

stole nine hens but was acquitted.¹⁰ There were a recorded 117 acquittals in theft cases in my data set, indicating that the issues of overpopulation, paired with poverty in rural areas affected the masses of Wiltshire. Authorities reached this verdict because livestock thefts occurred more often than clothing thefts. Additionally, the crime's commonality, paired with the number of acquittals, suggests that law enforcement at the time was not strong enough to reduce or stop livestock theft, so they stopped charging the thieves for their crime. The large number of acquittals in theft cases also suggests that local juries were often reluctant to condemn members of the community unless the guilt was overwhelming.

The community showed a strong sense of cohesion, as persons identified as strangers were more likely to be hanged for the same crime as someone well-known in the community. Out of the five cases, including strangers, four out of the five were for theft or burglary, while one was due to homicide. To determine the bias within the community against strangers, I compared these five cases to two large burglary cases and one homicide case. The first case I used was Case 73 located in Bradeford, where six men were arrested for suspicion of burglary, suspicion of homicide, burglary, sheep-stealing, and “other larcenies”.¹¹ All six men were acquitted as they were deemed to be faithful. A ruling regarding faithfulness was an effect of a political settlement known as the Dictum of Kenilworth. This political settlement helped people escape conviction and regain their estates if they pledged loyalty to royal authority.¹² If they were faithful to the crown, they would be exempt from their crimes and repossess their belongings. Similarly, in Case 84 located in Ambresber' five men were accused and taken for suspicion of receiving stolen goods, larceny, receiving an outlaw, theft of fish, and burglary.¹³ These men were also acquitted because the jury deemed them to be “good and faithful”. In comparison to the 11 men acquitted for their crimes centered on theft or burglary, the verdict for the four strangers charged with burglary was that 2 were hanged, and the other 2 had their cases marked as unfinished. For the stranger case regarding homicide, the

¹⁰ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 67, p. 43

¹¹ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, faithfulness was a consequence, case no. 73, p. 44

¹² The National Archives. 2019. “The Cultural Revolution.” *The Cultural Revolution* 1 (1). <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>.

¹³ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 84, p. 47

accused John de Guldeford was indicted because he was unknown: "John was a stranger [sic], he was indicted before the coroner and not because he was guilty of the death."¹⁴ This demonstrates the value of public opinion and how strangers did not have the trust of the community to support them like the 11 acquitted in the cases I have presented. I decided to compare the case of John de Guldeford to Case 161 in Knoel because the accused, Richard de Wytt, was arrested for two serious crimes, larceny and homicide.¹⁵ Despite the seriousness of his crimes, Richard was acquitted, proving that even in homicide cases, local defendants received leniency, whereas strangers charged with far lesser offenses were consistently hanged. Therefore, 66.7 percent of stranger defendants with recorded outcomes were hanged, while locals had a zero percent execution rate when comparing cases. Across the entire sample, every local defendant was acquitted, while all known executions fell on strangers. Additionally, the Salisbury Gaol delivery records show that 100 percent of the strangers accused of burglary or theft with known verdicts were hanged, while zero percent of locals accused of the same offenses were executed. The trust of the local community, which served as the justice system, helped locals escape harsh punishment but also showed that trust mattered in these criminal cases. Without trust, strangers were subjected to the community's fear of outsiders, and as a result, they were executed for their crimes.

Some of the less frequent crimes in rural Wiltshire include receiving stolen goods and murder, of which those accused were often unpunished. In one Wiltshire case in 1275, a homicide was excused when the accused killed a trespasser and burglar, with the jury declaring them not guilty.¹⁶ In the case of murder, neither of the accused was punished due to the nature of the situation. The accused slew a trespassing burglar and was found not guilty for the crime. The most likely reason for acquittal in this case is that the death of the burglar was the result of self-defense. This case helps prove that medieval England had a system where punishment was conditional upon circumstance, intention, and perception from the community rather than indicate a type of law that is standardized and objective. In cases of murder, most suspects were not punished

¹⁴ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 27, p. 37

¹⁵ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 161, p. 57

¹⁶ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 28, p. 37

due to a combination of societal factors, including strong community loyalty, distrust of outsiders, and the importance of reputation, and a flawed justice system, which made convictions rare and investigations difficult. This stands to be true as only two out of the 31 recorded murder cases ended in the accused being hanged. From 1275 to 1306, there were not a lot of investigative resources like police, and the community relied on the “hue and cry”¹⁷ to catch criminals. Centered on the Statute of Winchester (1285), which established a system where all freemen possessed arms to preserve peace, the “hue and cry” was an initiative to stop crime as it was happening by having the community shout at and chase the criminal. If they failed to stop the crime, the villagers of the local area would be fined.

The Rural Context of Justice

High acquittal rates in rural medieval England stemmed from small, tightly knit communities whose local juries were reluctant to condemn neighbors for crimes they viewed as minor or socially harmless. As most of the villagers in town were facing poverty, theft of clothes and livestock was often overlooked, but when the amount stolen was more than 10 animals, the suspects were often hanged. For example, two men in Chiggelewe were accused of theft. One man stole a horse while the other stole seven sheep, a cow, a horse, three oxen, and pigs-amount not specified¹⁸. The man who stole a plethora of livestock was hanged, while the other was acquitted. This suggests that one suspect committed a crime that did not harm the social order of the town, while the other suspect was considered a threat to the social order, leading to his death. Although the community of rural medieval England took cases of theft seriously, they did not give cases of murder the same treatment. There are several cases of homicide recorded in the rolls that end in acquittals, as the community deemed those accused good people¹⁹. This indicates the importance of reputation and social trust in the rural community.

¹⁷ WARRIN, FRANK L. 1933. “HUE and CRY.” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 9 (1): 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26433779>.

¹⁸ Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 95, p. 48.

¹⁹ Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, cases no. 45, 60, 63, 66, 68, 77, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, 289, pp. 39–77.

In relation to maintaining social order, several entries where the suspect is described as “stranger” end with said stranger being hanged for their crime, even if the crime was similar to that of a known resident of the village. In a community where everyone knew each other, a stranger entering the community might pose a threat to the social hierarchy, especially if they committed minor offenses that would usually lead to an acquittal if the stranger were known. A stranger who committed crimes had no kinship ties or local patronage to shield them and therefore became an ideal target for harsh punishment. In the royal court rolls, there were four cases of strangers,²⁰ with two cases ending in them being hanged and the other two unfinished. All four cases of strangers are theft cases, and the only case with specifics shows the stranger stealing two pairs of shoes and a hood, for which he was hanged. The other cases had no details but still illustrated how executing outsiders served not only as a legal punishment for crime but also as a symbolic reinforcement of communal boundaries, preserving internal cohesion by treating those without social roots as expendable.

Verdicts & Their Significance

Based on the data, there is an overwhelming number of acquittals, even in cases involving significant theft or homicide, demonstrating that rural juries functioned less as instruments of royal authority than as defenders of social cohesion. The number of acquittals recorded suggests that medieval criminal justice was not primarily punitive and was highly lenient and dependent on local juries. Jurors often acted to protect neighbors and maintain the social hierarchy of the rural area.

Although a majority of the verdicts were acquittals, several accused were deemed guilty, which often led to hangings. With felony convictions carrying automatic execution and forfeiture, the legal system provided no graduated sentencing. As a result, local juries often chose acquittal to avoid imposing the only available punishment: death.

Local reputation and status also had a great influence on the verdict. In several cases, people were acquitted of theft of serious goods and murder due to good public opinion. For instance, six people were accused of theft and murder in Swanborg, but five

²⁰ Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*.

were acquitted because they were “said to be good and lawful”.²¹ The one person in this case who was not thought of as good and lawful by the community was hanged.²² This shows how medieval justice enforced local trust and community membership as much as the law.

Besides the verdicts of guilty or not guilty, there were several outcomes like non-suit, unfinished, remanded, and false claim, which led these cases to collapse before reaching a definitive verdict. For example, “Thomas le Pipe, of Sembleton, taken at Salisbury by the same for burglary at Kylgarslegh, Oxfordshire, at the house of Henry Uppehull there and taking away his goods, denies. Jury of 12 say [unfinished].”²³ Cases like Thomas’s were left unfinished due to many possibilities like lack of evidence, the accuser did not pursue the case, or the jury failed to reach a verdict. This case, specifically, is interesting because despite the seriousness of the charge, the outcome remains unfinished. Thomas’s case, like many, demonstrates that even serious accusations did not guarantee resolution, reinforcing the idea that medieval justice relied heavily on local cooperation and would falter if the justice system was strained. The accusations that led to the aforementioned verdicts most likely began as personal or local conflicts while using the criminal court as leverage, since prosecution could be dropped later once compensation was paid, social pressure resolved the issue, the accuser lost interest, or families negotiated a settlement.²⁴ I arrived at this conclusion because records preserved the initial accusation but not the resolution of the case.

Punishments & the Social Implications

Under Edward I’s rule, county-based commissions were designed to address crime and assert royal authority across the kingdom, including a majority of England’s rural areas. Starting in 1305, the Trailbaston Trials were established to investigate and punish felonies like theft, rape, and homicide.²⁵ The harshness of

²¹ Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 66, p. 43.

²² Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 66, p. 43.

²³ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 14, p. 35.

²⁴ Pugh, Ralph Bernard. 1978. *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, p. 11.

²⁵ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*.

medieval felony law can be attributed to the belief that harsh, public punishments would deter crime and maintain social order. The punishment often imposed in *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials 1275–1306* was public hanging.

Those found guilty were more commonly hanged for their crime rather than being imprisoned, which was not common after a verdict was found. People risking getting arrested to acquire items to live more comfortably is prevalent in one of the cases mentioned in the *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials 1275–1306*, where Thomas le Fys of Enedford was hanged for theft of a coat for himself and his daughter, and his daughter hanged for receiving the aforementioned goods.²⁶ Their crime reflects the effects of rural poverty, and the punishment they received shows the severity of medieval felony law.

Gender & Punishment

While examining cases of theft and murder, I found that men were punished more harshly in theft cases. For instance, there are nine cases where women are involved in cases of theft, and four were hanged for their crime, five were acquitted, and one was remanded for pregnancy. While looking at these nine crimes compared to the men's theft cases, I found that the women had a higher hanging rate than the men's, because the sample of women in the gaol rolls was smaller than the sample of men. The hanging rate for women was 50 percent, while the rate for men was 40 percent. Although men were historically punished more, the disparity of punishment between men and women suggests that the community found theft by women to be a different kind social threat because it violated the economic norms of the time. In rural medieval society, women's economic roles were confined to household duties or dependent on male relatives or marriage. By acquiring goods through different means, like theft, the women in the rolls deviated from these norms. Their theft of valued goods showed that they were able to obtain wealth, even if not through legal means, as opposed to gaining wealth through marriage.

On the other hand, men and women were treated the same in murder cases. The accused, regardless of gender, were typically

²⁶ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 16, p. 35.

acquitted or pardoned if the killing could be framed as accidental, provoked, or defensive. This unusually high acquittal rate—only two executions out of thirty-one murder indictments—implies that the overlordship, which helped hold economic, judicial, and supreme authority in Wiltshire, was relatively weak, and local influence shaped judicial outcomes. By not having strong leadership or economic authority over an overpopulated area, the overlord of Wiltshire allowed the villagers to get away with their crimes, which was the result of suffering the brunt of the economy from 1265 to 1306. Overlordship authority could not have been strong, as the law appears to have been negotiable,²⁷ allowing public opinion and a tight-knit community to protect their members and making homicide, especially within rural communities, more common and easier to resolve informally.

Economic Dimensions of Justice

In rural communities, criminal justice was not only about enforcing order but also an opportunity for financial gain, resource distribution, and punitive loss. In the cases where the accused was found guilty and hanged, their chattels, or belongings, were forfeited to the crown.²⁸ The presence of chattels in death sentences suggests that economic gain may have incentivized the pursuit of criminal cases and verdicts, especially in theft cases. Additionally, as theft was the most common crime, it was also economically harmful due to villagers living at a subsistence level – meaning they produced just enough to survive and had little to no surplus of goods. Theft surrounding these goods was also a threat to community stability and was seen as a direct challenge to the subsistence system.²⁹ The thefts recorded in the royal court rolls were not only crimes but economic disruptions, which is why the community took strong action against them.

In the few cases where a defendant's chattels were recorded, tithingmen were sometimes held financially responsible for them. The tithingmen, or tithing, was a system of collective responsibility made up of men to keep other men accountable.

²⁷ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, p.18

²⁸ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, p.16

²⁹ Hamerow, Helena, and Mark McKerracher. 2015. *Feeding Medieval England a Long "Agricultural Revolution", 700–1300*. Oxford University Press.

When an accused person died or fled, the tithing was required to answer for the loss of property, which showed that justice in the royal courts operated as a communal, economic system: responsibility for wrongdoing was shared among neighbors, and juries used financial pressure on the tithing to encourage community discipline. To compensate for the crime, courts called for the confiscation of property, where the local tithing acted as the steward of the criminal's property, or chattels, to ensure it was used to satisfy the debt incurred by the crime. The debt was handled and paid for by the tithing to make sure the tithing kept the community accountable and to lessen crime. Although the tithing was active in rural communities, it did not successfully ensure a decrease in crime as many had hoped.

Economic penalties for crimes extended beyond property confiscation from criminals or the tithing. Failure to prosecute resulted in a fine against the accuser. For instance, in 1277, a man accused another of theft but failed to appear in court, leading to the accuser getting fined 40 pence, which is equivalent to 50 cents.³⁰ Although it is not worth much now, in 1265, 40 pence was worth around 40 days of labor.³¹ Fines this expensive discouraged frivolous accusations, which explains why a failure to appear in court only occurs once in these rolls.

While looking at the economic dimensions of justice through a gendered lens, I found that the rarity of female offenders reflects a lack of independent economic activity in rural medieval England. Women appear less frequently in the gaol rolls because they were largely excluded from property ownership, wage labor, and formal market participation. Their exclusion in these realms explains why they show up in the records in secondary rolls, such as receiving goods or participating in theft by proxy. Their crimes were tied to household survival within a subsistence economy, where the theft of livestock, grain, or clothing could be economically significant. As a result, women's experiences were shaped by not only economic disadvantage but also gender specific legal considerations. In two entries, women benefited from pleading pregnancy to avoid execution.³² Even though pregnancy helped

³⁰ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, case no. 56, p. 41.

³¹ The National Archives. 2017. "Currency Converter: 1270–2017." The National Archives. 2017.

³² Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, cases 34, 81, pp. 38–46.

women avoid punishment for crimes, the protection from the pregnancy was temporary, underscoring a justice system that tied morals of the church to reproductive status, finding it immoral to kill an unborn child, even though overpopulation was occurring. Furthermore, women were largely excluded from serving as primary witnesses, jurors, or complainants under the guise of being underqualified, highlighting a deeper pattern of systemic exclusion³³. Their invisibility in legal records when they do not trend towards crime is reflective of diminished economic power.

Conclusion

The gaol rolls of Wiltshire in 1275–1306 provide a valuable window into the realities of rural medieval crime and punishment. The administration of justice was deeply shaped by social and local dynamics, gender hierarchies, and economic pressures. The majority of recorded cases involved theft of livestock, clothing, or household items, which underscores the fragility of peasant livelihoods and the centrality of material property in rural society. Additionally, medieval juries were composed of local men who judged based on community knowledge and reputation; outsiders were at a disadvantage and were convicted—and sometimes executed—more often than local defendants. Conversely, long-standing residents, particularly those with social ties, were more likely to escape with acquittals or delayed justice. Within the community, gender further conditioned access to both crime and justice. Women appear rarely in the records, but when they do, it is often in the context of economic precarity. The lack of female involvement exposes the legal system's limited recognition of women's rights. Ultimately, the Wiltshire Gaol rolls convey a justice system that prioritizes maintaining social order instead of a strict adherence to legal principle. Crime was not merely a judicial issue, but a social and economic one, and its punishment sheds light on the values, fears, and vulnerabilities of a world suspended between communal solidarity and punitive order.

³³ Pugh, *Wiltshire Gaol Delivery and Trailbaston Trials, 1275–1306*, pp. 12.

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Politics of the 1936 Olympics

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between politics and sports with a concentration on Olympic Games and a specific exploration of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Evidence of political machinations from the original modern Olympics, in France 1894, through the 2008 Beijing Games are used to provide details on the entanglements between the sporting world and government/political ambitions. Through analysis of period newspapers, history books, and journal articles documenting aspects of the 1936 Games, this article demonstrates that the Berlin Games were infused with politics and discusses the ways in which the Games were influenced by these political influences.

Introduction

In 1894, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, created an international athletic competition intended to elevate the physical abilities of the French, promote worldwide peace, and enhance nationalism. This competition was the first modern Olympics. As such, he attempted to exclude Germany from the first games because of his upset over France's defeat in the Franco Prussian War. Although he was unsuccessful in this goal, he demonstrated how international politics have been integrated in the Olympics since the competition's very beginning.¹ This use of the Olympic Games for nationalist gain has only increased since de Coubertin's inauspicious bent in 1894. Perhaps the most obvious example of this in modern history are the 1936 Berlin Olympics. These Games demonstrated an indisputable interplay between politics and the Olympics from the beginning of the selection process to the media's review of the Games.

In the past, many historians have delved into the topic of the Olympics and the political pressures that countries have exerted upon the competition. Some notable examples include *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (1992) by Allen Guttman which investigates the Games impact on politics.² Byron Peacock's essay, "A Virtual World Government unto Itself: Uncovering the Rational-Legal Authority of the IOC in World Politics" (2010) argues the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is a political entity. *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games* (1999) by Alfred E. Senn claims the 1936 Berlin Games were the first serious politically inspired display requiring the most deliberation from Olympic authorities.³ However, many sources do not provide background to the Games.

The Selection

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) gave the honor of hosting the Olympics to Germany during the Weimar Republic. This was intended to generate economic development

¹ Shapiro, Edward S. "The World Labor Athletic Carnival of 1936: An American Anti-Nazi Protest." *American Jewish History* 74 (1985): 255–73.

² Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.

³ Alfred E. Senn, *Power, politics and the Olympic Games: A history of the power brokers, events, and controversies that shaped the Games*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

within postwar Germany, a country still dealing with the reparations of the Treaty of Versailles. It was also regarded as a large step towards reintegrating Germany into the European community.⁴ Dr. Theodor Lewald played a substantial role in the decision of where to host the Olympics. He was the president of the German Olympic Committee and, starting in 1930, he campaigned for the Games to be held in Berlin. Dr. Lewald used political offers to gain support of other countries for his campaign, such as agreeing to vote for Japan to host the 1940 Olympics in exchange for them voting for the Berlin Olympics.⁵ Dr. Lewald was the first to use such tactics, which created a politicized selection process for future Games.

When Hitler became chancellor in 1933 evidence of discrimination against Jews became prominent, and the IOC required assurance that this discrimination would not extend to the German Jews being excluded from the Games. But there was no *official* German rule barring Jews from participating in the Games. There was a possibility that the Games may have been moved by the IOC to Rome or Tokyo, who both wished to host, or the Games may be canceled entirely (similar to the 1916 games which were canceled due to the First World War, also intended to be hosted in Berlin). If the Games remained in Berlin, some nations threatened to bar their athletes from participating.⁶ The IOC, therefore, was compelled to investigate the case of potential discrimination to decide if there was a cause for moving the Olympics away from Berlin. However, Dr Lewald assured the IOC that there Jewish athletes would not be barred from trying out for the Games, so the attempt to take the Olympics away from Berlin failed, June 7, 1933.⁷ Hitler later removed Dr. Lewald as the head of the German Olympic Committee since one of his grandparents was Jewish. However, Lewald remained in a lower position on the same committee, for IOC purposes.⁸

⁴ Britannica Editors. "Berlin 1936 Olympic Games." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 9, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Berlin-1936-Olympic-Games>.

⁵ Glosniak, Q. (2017). The 1936 Nazi Olympic Games; The First Truly Modern Olympiad. Claremont McKenna College.

⁶ Arthur J. Daley, "Berlin Faces Loss of Olympic Games," *New York Times*, Apr. 18, 1933.

⁷ Britannica Editors. "Berlin 1936 Olympic Games." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 9, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Berlin-1936-Olympic-Games>.

⁸ Glosniak, Q. (2017). The 1936 Nazi Olympic Games; The First Truly Modern Olympiad. Claremont McKenna College.

The Boycott Movement

The White House and the U.S. State Department remained neutral throughout the IOC's Berlin decision. Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States, did not want to appear supportive of the National Socialist regime, but he also did not want to insult Germany. Roosevelt also believed that the government should not intervene in an amateur sport community issue.⁹ Meanwhile, the doctrine of appeasement was growing in war-weary Britain, and the promise of keeping sports and politics separate resulted in Britain attending the Olympics. At the same time, in France, the bourgeoisie and working class were waging a completely different battle over whether to support the Olympics in Berlin or the Workers' Olympics, a separate event to replace the Olympics. Ultimately, Leon Blum, leader of the French socialist government, compromised by sending funds to both Games. The U.S., Britain, and France were influential to the Olympics in 1933. The U.S. was considered the athletic power of the time, Britain the land of modern sport, and France the origin of modern Olympics.¹⁰ Their decision on whether to participate was important, since their governments did not take a stand on the decision, the Games continued.

In 1934, the American Olympic Committee (AOC) sent its president, Avery Brundage, to Germany for an investigation to decide if the U.S. would participate in the Games. In response, five more Jewish candidates were named for the German Olympic team. Accordingly, Brundage stated "Jewish athletes in Germany are not being discriminated against,"¹¹ so the AOC accepted the invitation to the Games. After Brundage ended his investigation, he joined the antiboycott movement, claiming that sports should not be mixed with politics.¹² On November 30, 1935, the *New York Times* reported that the Maccabee League of Jewish Athletes were withdrawing. Since the government would not recognize Jews as citizens, they could not represent Germany during the games. This

⁹ Wenn, Stephen R. "A Suitable Policy of Neutrality? FDR and the Question of American Participation in the 1936 Olympics." *International Journal of the History of Sport* 8, 1991: 319–35.

¹⁰ Young, Christopher. "Olympic Boycotts: Always Tricky." *Dissent* 55, (2008): 67–72.

¹¹ Ecker, Tom. "Olympic Pride: Nationalism at the Berlin and Beijing Games." *Harvard International Review* 36, 2014: 46–49.

¹² Britannica Editors. "Berlin 1936 Olympic Games." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 9, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Berlin-1936-Olympic-Games>.

withdrawal was disappointing to the international forces trying to boycott the games, they saw it as the Jews in Germany giving up.¹³

The anti-boycotters in the U.S. would eagerly point to the notable fencer, Helene Mayer, to boost their argument. Mayer was initially excluded from the German fencing clubs because she was Jewish.¹⁴ Eventually she was allowed to compete, but she was the only “non-Aryan” on the team¹⁵ as she was considered a “half-Jew”. This is what allowed her to participate, as the 1935 Nuremberg Laws stated that German Jews were not citizens of the Reich.¹⁶ During the Weimar Era, she won European Champion-ships in 1931 and came in fifth place in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games. During the 1936 Games, she won the silver medal, but the German press was instructed to not report on her winnings or her “non-Aryan” heritage. Brundage supported her participation in the Games since it undermined the boycotters. The boycott movement disapproved of her participation, because this challenged their argument of discrimination of Jews in the Games.¹⁷ Mayer’s participation in the Games was incredibly controversial because of her identity. Like many Germans with Jewish heritage of the time, she was struggling with the idea that she could no longer be considered German under the law.

In the U.S., discrimination was used to argue against the boycott of the Games. *The Crisis*, a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) magazine, pointed out that the treatment of Jews in Germany was familiar to the Black people in America.¹⁸ General Charles H. Sherrill, a representative to the IOC, warned a boycott against the Olympic Games would provoke “antisemitic feeling” in the U.S., as scare tactic against American Jews attempting to convince them to give up the boycott. Brundage supported Sherrill, claiming it was “un-American” to

¹³ Kass, D. A. “The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics.” *Journal of Sport History* 3, (1976): 223–35.

¹⁴ Kass, D. A. “The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics.” *Journal of Sport History* 3, (1976): 223–35.

¹⁵ “Helene Mayer Chosen for German Team.” *New York Herald Tribune*, Jul 16, 1936.

¹⁶ Stoltzfus, Nathan. “Societal Influences on the Promulgation and Enforcement of the Nuremberg Laws.” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 94, no. 3/4 (2011): 375–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41328531>.

¹⁷ Pfister, Gertrud, and Toni Niewerth. “Jewish Women in Gymnastics and Sport in Germany 1898-1938.” *Journal of Sport History* 26, 1999: 287–325.

¹⁸ “Nazis, Negroes, Jews and Catholics,” *The Crisis* (Baltimore, MD), Sep. 1935.

support the boycott. Colonel William May Garland supported the argument that the Olympics should be separate from politics. Garland was part of the US Olympic Committee, which was integral in bringing the Olympics to Los Angeles in 1932. The strongest argument against the boycott was the hope that sending American Jewish athletes to compete in Germany would allow them to gain glory for America and destroy the myth of Aryan superiority.¹⁹

Once the IOC decided to keep the Games in Berlin, boycotters began attempting to prove that there was discrimination against Jews in Germany. If such discrimination was proved, then this would have violated the pledges of Dr. Lewald. Samuel Untermyer, the President of the Non-Sectarian Anti-Nazi League to Champion Human Rights, claimed that any Jew that participated in the games deserved contempt and attempted to scare Jewish athletes into boycotting. Jeremiah T. Mahoney, a former Supreme Court Justice and President of the Amateur Athletic Union, supported the boycott and pointed out that the Olympic code recognizes all races and faiths.²⁰ The American Jewish Congress and the National Federation of Settlements supported the boycott, believing that antisemitic discrimination was against fair play in sports because it prevented Jews from participating in sports.²¹

America was not the only country struggling with the decision of whether or not to send athletes to the Berlin Games. The Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) ignored the discrimination and violence occurring in Germany. The COC did this because they theorized that Britain and Canada's connection was strong enough, Canada would follow Britain regarding Britain's decision to participate. The Canadian press believed the Canadian Athletes traveling to Berlin had earned their right to attend and were not responsible for discrimination in Germany. The Jewish community in Canada and the political left advocated for boycotting the Games but lost their battles.²² The Canadian Communists persuaded some

¹⁹ Kass, D. A. "The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics." *Journal of Sport History* 3, (1976): 223–35.

²⁰ Kass, D. A. "The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics." *Journal of Sport History* 3, (1976): 223–35.

²¹ Kass, D. A. "The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics." *Journal of Sport History* 3, (1976): 223–35.

²² Congelio, Brad J. Review of *More Than Just Games: Canada and the 1936 Olympics*, by Richard Menkis and Harold Troper. *Journal of Sport History* 43, no. 3 (2016): 360–361.

athletes to sail for the People's Olympics held in Spain.²³ Eva Dawes, Canadian high jumper, participated in the boycott campaign, although she later denied any political involvement.²⁴ It is also worth noting that the fascist movements in Europe had reached Canada by the 1920s. A baseball game in the summer of 1933 in Toronto ended in race riots when an altercation between the Swastika Club and Jewish fans escalated.²⁵ The 1936 Olympics was full of fascist ideology so it is important to acknowledge that this ideology was not just in Germany, but other nations as well. Since portions of the population belong to this school of thought, nations, such as Canada, had less reasons to boycott the Games.

Charles Clayton Morrison, an American Disciples of Christ minister, supported the boycott of the games, and became increasingly involved in the protests against them.²⁶ *The Crisis*, a NAACP magazine, requested that the USA refrain from participating in the 1936 Olympics in September 1935 on grounds of the suppression of religious, social, and political liberty taking place in Germany.²⁷ This was over two years after the IOC decided to keep the games in Berlin. Regardless, organizations and individuals continued to urge the boycotting of the Olympics. The American Student Union called for teachers, workers, and students to join a boycott against the Olympics due to the propaganda for Nazism.²⁸ Ultimately, 43% of Americans supported the boycott of the Games, but every country attended.²⁹ As a result, boycotters arranged counter-Olympic festivals the spring before the Games.³⁰

²³ Kidd, B. "Canadian Opposition to the 1936 Olympics in Germany." *Canadian Journal of History of Sport & Physical Education*, 9, 1978: 20–40.

²⁴ Hall, M. Ann, and Bruce Kidd. "History and Individual Memory: The Story of Eva Dawes." *Sport History Review* 48, 2017: 126–43

²⁵ Rosenberg, D, *The Canadian Jewish Congress and the 1936 Berlin Olympics Boycott Movement*, 2001.

²⁶ Swanson, R.A. "'Move the Olympics!' 'Germany Must Be Told!' Charles Clayton Morrison and Liberal Protestant Christianity's Support of the 1936 Olympic Boycott Effort." *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 12, January 2003: 39–50.

²⁷ "Stay out of Nazi Olympics," *The Crisis*, (Baltimore, MD), Sep. 1935.

²⁸ American Student Union, "Protests Germany as Seat of Olympics." *Philadelphia Tribune*, Mar. 26, 1936.

²⁹ Allen Guttman, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

³⁰ "American Athletes Leave for Counter-Olympics in Spain: Committee on Fair Play in Sports Backing team to International People's Olympics." *Jewish Advocate*, Jul. 3, 1936.

Olympic Protests

When Dr. Lewald's campaigning succeeded in Germany hosting the Games, he had beaten out Barcelona. The newly-elected Spanish government decided Spain would boycott the Berlin games and hold their own Olympics (despite still planning to send their own team to Berlin). Spain planned an international multi-sport called the People's Olympics, or Olimpiada Popular in Spanish.³¹ This was also the site of the 1936 Worker's Olympics. These games were designed to be inclusive, and invitations were sent to the US specifically requesting Black athletes to attend because the games were intended to represent the Olympic spirit of brotherhood between races.³² Six thousand participants signed up from 22 different nations. It is estimated that around 25,000 audience members were set to attend these games.³³ Some participants were political exiles from Germany and Italy, and teams registered to represent Jewish athletes. There were no qualifications to participate, except a sponsor. Sponsors funded the participants and consisted of trade unions and left-wing groups.³⁴ The American team was picked by the Committee on Fair Play in Sports, and the team consisted of: Frank Payton, Dorothy Tucker, Eddie Kraus, Harry Engle, Myron Dickes, Julian Raul, Charles Burley, and Irving Jenkins.³⁵ Charles Burley, from Pittsburgh, was opposed to the Olympics because he believed that Germany's policies excluded Jews. Burley turned down his chance to compete in Berlin and instead joined the American Labor team as a boxer to compete in Spain. The American team later planned on attending the World Labor Athletic Carnival.³⁶ The games were to foster equality, not physical prowess. However, political strife interfered as the Spanish Civil War broke out, and the games were canceled. Some athletes escaped the war, including the US team who had arrived early on

³¹ Special to People's World, "This Week in History: Peoples' Olympiad Protests Berlin Olympics of 1936," *People's World*, Jul. 18, 2016.

³² Sam Harrison, "The 'Protest' Olympics that Never Came to Be," *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 2021, 19.

³³ Physick, Ray. "The Olimpiada Popular: Barcelona 1936, Sport and Politics in an Age of War, Dictatorship and Revolution." *Sport in History* 37, (2017): 51–75.

³⁴ Special to People's World, "This Week in History: Peoples' Olympiad Protests Berlin Olympics of 1936," *People's World*, Jul. 18, 2016.

³⁵ "U.S. Team off for Spain: Nine Athletes will Compete in People's Olympics July 19-26," *New York Times*, Jul. 4, 1936.

³⁶ "American Athletes Leave for Counter-Olympics in Spain: Committee on Fair Play in Sports Backing team to International People's Olympics," *Jewish Advocate*, Jul. 3, 1936.

July 16.³⁷ The Spanish government withdrew their team from the Berlin Olympics because of the Civil War.³⁸

Despite the decision for America to join the Berlin Olympic games, some of the U.S. population still disagreed on attending. The Jewish Labor Committee and the Amateur Athletic Union worked together to organize a protest against the Games. On August 15-16, 1936, the World Labor Athletic Carnival was held on Randall's Island in New York City to protest US participation in the competition.³⁹ The Carnival served not only as a protest but also as an alternative to the Olympics. Herbert Lehman, New York's governor, attended and presented a "loving cup" given to the winners. Leading politicians attended the event, and past Olympic champions, such as Ed Gordon, who in 1932 won the Gold Medal for the long jump in Los Angeles, also attended. Organizations, such as Forward, a Jewish independent nonprofit, gave the Olympics little coverage and instead focused on the World Labor Athletic Carnival to make an ideological stand.⁴⁰

Samuel S. Fleisher, a Jewish-American art patron and philanthropist who founded the Graphic Sketch Club, had the idea of an Olympics that involved intelligence and art. Fleisher based his notion on the original Olympic Games in Greece, which included not only athletics but artistic expressions such as poetry. George Johnson, the President of Lit Brothers (a department store based in Philadelphia, 1859–1918), financially backed Fleisher's idea, and the University of Pennsylvania became the host of the competitions. Activities included graphic and plastic arts, music, dancing, and more.⁴¹ Although Fleisher's idea had been around for longer than the decision for Berlin to host the Olympics, *Jewish Advocate* said that the Cultural Olympics were to be held in protest of the Berlin Games. An Arrangements Committee claimed the cultural games

³⁷ Sam Harrison, "The 'Protest' Olympics that Never Came to Be," *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 2021, 19.

³⁸ Alan Gould, "Hitler Smilingly Opens Olympic Games Before 105,000", *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 1936.

³⁹ Shapiro, Edward S. "The World Labor Athletic Carnival of 1936: An American Anti-Nazi Protest," *American Jewish History* 74, 1985: 255-73.

⁴⁰ David Ian Klein, "Hitler wanted his 1936 Olympics to wow the World. The Forward Highlighted Protest Games Instead," *Forward*, Jul 21, 2021.

⁴¹ S.J. Woolf, "Sponsor of the Cultural Olympics: Fleisher Has Created A Playground for Art The Cultural Olympics," *New York Times*, Apr. 4, 1937.

were to be “a true manifestation of the Olympic ideal and its spirit.”⁴²

American individual athletes made their own personal decisions as well, some opting to participate in the 1936 boycott movement. Lillian Copeland, American track and field athlete, won gold in the discus throw during the Los Angeles Olympics in 1932 but did not participate in the 1936 Games. She was a Jewish athlete who supported the campaign to boycott.⁴³

While some like Copeland willingly stepped down from the 1936 Olympics, others were forced. Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, two American Jewish track and field athletes, attended the Games, but on the day of the competition were replaced by Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe due to American officials not wishing to offend their German hosts. Although Glickman believed that part of the reason they were not allowed to participate was antisemitism.⁴⁴ Jesse Owens had already run in the Games and requested not to compete again because he was tired. Nevertheless, Owens and Metcalfe ran instead of Glickman and Stoller.

The Competition

Just as the buildup to the games were infused with politics, so was the opening ceremony. 105,000 audience members, and about 4,500 athletes from 50 different nations attended the opening ceremony. Many nations gave a Nazi salute to Hitler as they passed him in the stands, but at the last minute, the American team instead simply removed their hats. The original plan had been to do a modified salute, hats in hand, but these athletes decided to not do even a modified salute in direct protest to the Nazi regime. Additionally, the American delegation did not dip their flag like tradition dictated, causing a less welcome reception to the American delegation than the other nations received. The only other nations that did not dip their flag were Iceland, Bulgaria, and India.⁴⁵ Not dipping the flag was considered a sign of disrespect to the host nation, Germany.

⁴² “Cultural Olympics to be Held in Protests on Nazi Games,” *Jewish Advocate*, June 2, 1936.

⁴³ Soifer, Paul. “Lillian Copeland Speaks out on the Olympics: Los Angeles 1932, Berlin 1936.” *Western States Jewish History* 38, 2005: 3–16

⁴⁴ Harrison, Donald H. “Glickman and Stoller, Jewish Athletes Cut from Competition at the Olympics, 1936.” *Western States Jewish History* 33, 2000: 55–61

⁴⁵ Alan Gould, “Hitler Smilingly Opens Olympic Games Before 105,000”, *New York Times*, Aug. 2, 1936.

Hitler also first introduced the torch relay, which remains a feature of the Olympic Games today.⁴⁶ The relay linked classical Greece and modern Germany through symbolism as the torch began in Olympia, Greece, and ended in Germany. The relay was originally orchestrated by Carl Diem, a German sports administrator, but it was restaged by Leni Riefenstahl, a German Filmmaker, to convey a sense of an ancient Olympia. The torch relay was featured in Riefenstahl's film, *Olympia*, a propaganda documentary on the 1936 Olympics.⁴⁷ This is important to note because of the way the government used sport to heighten their country's nationalism through films such as *Olympia*.

During the summer Berlin Games, the Germans used moving pictures, films, and radio broadcasts to highlight German achievements. When other countries did well in their competitions, the Nazi media framed it as a surprise, not a result of training, while German success was portrayed as expectations that had easily been fulfilled.⁴⁸ A *New York Times* newspaper from August 16, 1936, discusses the way sports, particularly the Olympics, leave a lasting impression on both the foreign visitors and the host countries. The competition hosted in Berlin gave spectators a sense of improvement in international relations. The article describes the impression carried away by foreigners, "this is a nation happy and prosperous almost beyond belief; that Hitler is one of the greatest, if not the greatest political leaders in the world today..."⁴⁹ The impression left behind was purposeful. Hitler reasoned that the country needed to be presented at its best, as the world was going to be their guest. He placed the resources of the state behind the preparations⁵⁰. The games provided Hitler an opportunity to present his nation as flourishing to the outsiders that had been hearing less than positive stories from Germany.

However, not everyone had a favorable impression of Hitler after the Games. Ed Sullivan, an American radio show host

⁴⁶ Young, Christopher. "Olympic Boycotts: Always Tricky." *Dissent* 55, (2008): 67-72.

⁴⁷ Mackenzie, Michael. "From Athens to Berlin: The 1936 Olympics and Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*." *Critical Inquiry* 29, 2003: 302-36.

⁴⁸ Heck, Sandra. "A Blond, Broad-shouldered Athlete with Bright Grey-blue Eyes": German Propaganda and Gotthardt Handrick's Victory in Modern Pentathlon at the Nazis' Olympics in 1936." *Journal of Sport History* 38, (2011): 255-274

⁴⁹ Frederick T. Birchall, "Olympics Leave Glow of Pride in the Reich," *New York Times*, Aug. 16, 1936.

⁵⁰ Krüger, Arnd, and W. J. Murray. *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics and Appeasement in the 1930s*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

and sports reporter, simultaneously reported on the success of Jesse Owens and the controversy over the treatment of Jews in Germany. Sullivan wrote on the reported killings of Jews under the Nazi regime and how Hitler supported these killings more than he would support a black man's athletic prowess—Owen's winning gold medals during the Olympics.⁵¹ In this way the media and entertainment industry wrote on the politics infused in the Olympic Games. By discussing the reported killings under Hitler together with Owens's success, Sullivan is highlighting how politics and sport are not separate.

Germany won thirty-three gold medals during the 1936 Olympics. German athlete Gotthardt Handrick won a gold medal in the modern pentathlon and became an example of propaganda and militarization surrounding sport. The modern pentathlon has been an Olympic sport since 1912 but was largely ignored by the media, since it was less popular than other sports. During the 1936 Games, press coverage was higher than usual because in Germany, the Press instead acted as an advertisement for nationalism and military service. The series *Olympia-Hefte* wrote ten pages describing what the Nazis wanted Germans to know about the Olympic sports. In the series, they wrote that the modern pentathlon was "... a sport of great importance and manliness." Handrick was a fighter pilot and his physical appearance fit into the Nazi scheme of Aryan type. Handrick was a white male, with a military cut appearance, so when he won his gold medal, the media recounted it as a demonstration of national and Aryan superiority. Right after Handrick's victory he was promoted to captain. Handrick's victory reflects the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda, and the image of a strong officer.⁵²

On the other hand, Jesse Owens' success in the track and field events highlighted American success. Owens won four gold medals in his competitions, providing a blow to the Nazi propaganda in Germany at the time. His success in the Games have since been used both as an example of American exceptionalism and as a counter point to the Nazi ideology.⁵³ Owens has become a

⁵¹ Ed Sullivan, "Blackbird," *Daily Times*, (Chicago, IL), Aug. 10, 1936.

⁵² Heck, Sandra. "'A Blond, Broad-shouldered Athlete with Bright Grey-blue Eyes': German Propaganda and Gotthardt Handrick's Victory in Modern Pentathlon at the Nazis' Olympics in 1936." *Journal of Sport History* 38, (2011): 255-274

⁵³ Milford, Mike. "The 'Reel' Jesse Owens: Visual Rhetoric and the Berlin Olympics." *Sport in History* 38, 2018: 96-117

source of political rhetoric, due to his resounding success, instead of his athleticism. Owens is also an example of how American athletes were received in Germany. While there were rumors that Hitler “snubbed” Owens, Owens denied these rumors and said, “I think the writers had bad taste in criticizing the man of the hour in Germany.”⁵⁴ The take Owens had on Hitler further demonstrates the way Germany and Hitler presented themselves to the foreigners coming to compete.

Protests did not end after the Olympics. On August 26, 1936, ten days after the conclusion of the Olympic Games, the Austrian government cut Hitler and other notable personnel from the Nazi party from the Berlin Olympics film, *Olympia*. As a result of the government’s decision, the Austrian Nazis demanded the money to pay to see the film back and protested until the police intervened.⁵⁵

Post 1936

After 1936, the IOC became politicized as more government and party agencies began providing their support in financials. Brundage became a speaker against the intersection of sport and politics. In 1956, Brundage said, “Olympic Games are contests between individuals and not between nations,” in response to six countries withdrawing from the competition due to the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the Suez crisis. In 1968, Brundage and Owens shared a belief that the world of politics and sport should remain separate. This was at the same time as the Olympic Project for Human Rights demanded the boycott of the New York Athletic Club because it banned South Africa and Rhodesia from the Games. Owens argued he would never have been able to prove Hitler’s racial arguments wrong during the 1936 Olympics if the U.S. had boycotted.⁵⁶ Even after the 1936 Games ended, the debate over the protests continued, and politics in the Games remained.

The issue of attendance of the 1936 Berlin Games has been analyzed by many pundits and scholars. Some, such as author and University of Pennsylvania faculty member Carolyn Marvin, argue that Brundage used the Olympic rule to further his laissez-faire

⁵⁴ Ecker, Tom. “Olympic Pride: Nationalism at the Berlin and Beijing Games.” *Harvard International Review* 36, 2014: 46–49.

⁵⁵ “Austrian Nazis Protest Cutting of Hitler Film,” *New York Times*, Aug. 28, 1936.

⁵⁶ Young, Christopher. “Olympic Boycotts: Always Tricky.” *Dissent* 55, (2008): 67–72

agenda, and to combat communism, making him unable to recognize fascism's involvement in the Games.⁵⁷ Others though have argued that Brundage simply was defending his belief that politics should remain separate from the Olympic movement.⁵⁸ Regardless of whether or not Brundage's insistence on attending was politically motivated, the 1936 Berlin Games were political from the start.

The intense nationalism surrounding the 1936 Games continued on into future competitions, notably in the 2008 Beijing Games. The torch relay was disrupted because of the protesters attempting to extinguish the flame (the flame was extinguished once, in Paris). There was controversy over China's treatment of Tibet, and the route of the relay had to be changed multiple times.⁵⁹ The Beijing games hold similarities to the Berlin games, with the controversy over human rights treatments in both countries, and the resulting protests.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the modern Olympics, politics have been involved, but none more notably so than in the 1936 Olympics. The decision to host the games in Berlin was politically and economically motivated. The propaganda surrounding these particular Olympics and high levels of nationalism as a result exemplified the political programming of conflicting parties and governments. The debate on boycotting was a result of the politics surrounding Nazi rule and treatment of Jews in Germany. Although scholars, athletes, and politicians all expressed their opinions on the events of 1936 and the participation of nations in this Olympic competition, there is no definitive conclusion. It seems as if the very nature of international competitions are based in politics. Despite arguments for separation between Olympics and politics, the Olympic Games will likely remain political, as they have only become more politicized since the introduction of political offers in the selection process.

⁵⁷ Marvin, C. "Avery Brundage and American Participation in the 1936 Olympic Games." *Journal of American Studies*, April 1982: 81–105.

⁵⁸ Wenn, Stephen R. "A House Divided: The U.S. Amateur Sport Establishment and the Issue of Participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympics." *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 67, 1996: 161–71

⁵⁹ Ecker, Tom. "Olympic Pride: Nationalism at the Berlin and Beijing Games." *Harvard International Review* 36, 2014: 46–49.

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Changing Trends of Religious Syncretism from Early Empire to People's Republic: A Summary Analysis of Film and Literary Works from Chinese Imperial, Republican, and Socialist-Era Authors

Zachary A. Gioppo

Abstract

The development of religio-cultural practices—in the East as in the West—has been deeply interwoven with the society's popular literature, artistry, and prose of the cultures. From the 19th century onward, the west has continuously explored the manifestation of religion in Chinese culture. However, a dependence on interpretation and analogization to the western lens has overlooked the unique amalgamation of formalized ideology, popular folk belief, and philosophy which leave it without reasonable parallel. This work will instead highlight the proliferation of the Three Teachings—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—through the Chinese world. Specific case-studies from the Qin and Ming dynasties complement later Qing and Republic-era literature to build a “timeline” of increasing syncretism within Chinese spirituality.

Introduction

Throughout China's dynastic eras, one common thread has been an apparent disconnect between the formalized state theology as extolled by the Imperial Court and the daily realities of a non-homogenized folk-religion practiced beyond the palace walls. Often, works attempting to address questions around religious integration and coexistence will instead reflect a homogenized cultural practice, seeking to identify elements of compatibility and discordance between the author's cultural context and their counterpart's own culture.¹ When exploring the religious questions, this can lead to the creation of strictly delineated boundaries between different socio-religious subgroups. The compatibility and incongruities between two groups are called out as points for communion and conflict respectively (be it for reasons of heritage, ritual, or otherwise).²

Taking into consideration these biases, it is evident that in order to meaningfully explore the questions of religion, western scholars must also rectify the realities of an exclusive monotheist worldview, in addition to the self-evident differences in cultural practice with Eastern societies). Where a steady expansion of the Abrahamic faiths encouraged a major shift away from any pluralistic (or co-existence) feelings for "pagan" (polytheist) groups in Europe and (later) the New World, the gradual introduction and expansion of the Three Teachings across the Sinosphere established a significantly different paradigm.³ The Three Teachings, of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, offered each a distinct path toward social harmony, while permitting the continued existence of localized folk practices, regardless of any potential cohesion between one region and its neighbors.⁴ Individual cultural communities within the broader Chinese sphere of influence could build regionally distinct manifestations of their belief, without

¹ Ho-III Lee, "CULTURAL CONFRONTATION AND COMPROMISE: THE RESPONSE OF NON-WESTERN SOCIETIES TO WESTERN POLITICAL IDEAS," sec. 5, *The International Journal of Peace Studies* 6, no. 2 (2006), https://www3.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol6_2/Lee.htm.

² Helmut K. Anheier, "Cultures, Values, and Identities: What Are the Issues?," *Global Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2020): 11755, <https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.11755>.

³ Gedaliahu A. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions (Oxford university press, 2015).

⁴ Vincent Goossaert, "The Concept of Religion in China and the West," *Diogenes* 52, no. 1 (2005): 13–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192105050596>.

completely isolating themselves from others, whose daily practices may differ.⁵

The strictly dichotomous perspective dominating the west (take for example the paradigms of sin-virtue, or orthodoxy-heterodoxy) did not leave significant room for cautionary indifference, and establishing a predisposition toward an apparently straightforward mode of binary decision-making.⁶ Particularly when applied to the nuanced web of ritual behavior, spiritual practice, formal theology and mysticism that typified Chinese cultural reality through the imperial periods, the western separation of secular and theological thought has had a resounding impact on the interpretation and interaction with Eastern groups.⁷ In order to isolate the socio-religious reality—and corresponding changes between dynasties—of daily life, this paper analyzes specific cultural works of prose and literature alongside written accounts of daily life, taking pieces from across China's multi-dynastic history.

As discussed by Wang Yi, et al., by the Han dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.), each of the Three Teachings had begun molding the Chinese belief system and establishing a firm cultural identity for the Chinese people.⁸ In tandem with the growth of these foundational philosophies, the mystical beliefs underlying the supernatural elements of Chinese folk-religion underwent a parallel growth, developing from early animistic or elemental foundations toward ancestor worship. Despite the growth toward an ancestral cult, a growing concept of Confucian daily ritual (利, a concept comparable to etiquette or ceremony) and filial piety (孝, a duty to one's family, particularly elders) led to a measured respect for spirits. Wang Yi, et al. specifically posits that these Confucian

⁵ Xuedan Li and Yuehua Chen, "A Reflection on Making 'Religion' in China: The Genealogy of Zongjiao through Cultural Exchange," *HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies* 80 (October 2024), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i3.10121>.

⁶ Brandon Gallaher, 'Orthodoxy and the West—The Problem of Orthodox Self-Criticism in Christos Yannaras' in Polis, *Ontology, Ecclesial Event: Engaging with Christos Yannaras' Thought*, Ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2018), 206-225--Gallaher (n.d.), accessed April 2, 2026, <https://hdl.handle.net/10871/37716>.

⁷ Ahmed M. Adil, "A Comparative Study on Western and Eastern Secularism," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 12, no. 7 (2023): 42–25.

⁸ Wang Yi et al., "The Construction and Characteristics of Chinese Beliefs in Ghosts and Deities within the Context of the Integration of the Three Teachings," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 15, no. 3 (2025): Pages 141-153, <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i3/24778>.

values tempered it from a general spirit veneration into a continuation of the same 孝 owed during life.⁹

Considering the innate complexity of contrasting the Eastern and Western idea of theology, a new frame of reference for their comparison can be taken as two parallel continuums: The first of these considers the formality of daily worship—juxtaposing the highly regulated spirituality disseminated from the Imperial court with the simpler rituals of the laity—and the latter showing the debate of philosophy and morality—while many relied on the supernatural for answers, scholars of the Three Teachings favored complex prose and analogy. To understand these two ranges of formality and their interactions, this review will adopt the lexicon of Berezkin in his work *From Imperial Metaphor to Rebellious Deities*, which opens with discussion of this specific terminology.

Berezkin highlights the three “classic” approaches to interpreting this dichotomy, presented chronologically to a developing discipline: The first divides “big” (aristocratic) and “small” (lower-class) religion; the second approach defines a “popular religion” as the underlying beliefs, spanning social strata; the last re-interprets “popular religion” as an activity or custom which the masses may engage, rather than a well-structured entity.¹⁰ Berezkin critiques this chronology for an inability to encompass the changing understanding of Western scholars over time.

Despite the traditional connotations of the term “popular religion” as described, Berezkin selects it as his term of choice for his analyses—applying to it a more nuanced sense of “the common beliefs and practices of lay people of Han nationality... avoiding the traditional division between the main institutionalized spiritual systems... and the so-called ‘sectarian movements.’ In this usage... the elements of the main traditions mentioned above co-exist in constant interplay”.¹¹ As Berezkin defines it, the “popular religion” gains sufficient amorphism to reflect elements of spirituality, ideology, or philosophy as they manifest in the daily lives of Chinese people, and thus provides a valuable framework for connecting the manifestation of these ideas in cultural works with

⁹ Yi et al., “The Construction and Characteristics of Chinese Beliefs in Ghosts and Deities within the Context of the Integration of the Three Teachings.”

¹⁰ Yi et al., “The Construction and Characteristics of Chinese Beliefs in Ghosts and Deities within the Context of the Integration of the Three Teachings.”

¹¹ Rostislav Berezkin, *From Imperial Metaphor to Rebellious Deities: The History and Modern State of Western Studies of Chinese Popular Religion*, SINO-PLATONIC PAPERS, no. 243 (December 2013), https://sino-platonic.org/complete/spp243_chinese_popular_religion.pdf?

the specific circumstances of the era producing it, regardless of the author's social status or any imperial edict. This paper will also draw on the language of C. K. Yang, who introduced the differentiation between “diffused” (systemic theology, scripture, and organized worship) and “institutionalized” (where theology, practices, and personnel are integrated near completely with some number of secular institutions) religion.¹²

Imperial Eras

The Qin Dynasty (221–207 B.C.) is marked by the earliest widespread adoption and gradual development of both Confucianism and Daoism, beginning with their origination during the mid-late Warring States Period, to their status as foundational elements of the Chinese popular religion. Confucius himself is attributed with personally compiling *The Book of Songs* (Classics of Poetry), *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Rites*, *The I-Ching* (Book of Changes), and *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. In addition to the Five Classics of Confucius as listed, there are also the Four Books, which includes commentaries by early Confucian students—most significantly the scholar Zengzi (505–435 B.C.), who provided significant commentary in *The Analects of Confucius*. Within the *Book of Rites*, specifically, its foreword, *The Great Learning*, is attributed to Zengzi, and is a major work which establishes key themes of philosophy and political thinking.

Likewise, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, attributed to the grandson of Confucius, is significant for its discussion of the path to “perfect virtue.” This text has the first mention of the Way (道), a fundamental concept of Chinese philosophy and spirituality which comprises the undifferentiated essence of the universe but is considered indescribable and beyond intellectual understanding. Finally, there is the text of *Mencius*, a collection of conversations and dialogues with the scholar Mencius, another early student of Confucian thought. The *Book of Songs* specifically highlights the coalescence of numerous pre-Qin sources. Martin Kern, in “Early Chinese Literature, Beginnings Through Western Han,” establishes the *Book of Poetry* (a collection of 305 selected songs) as showing

¹² C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 1961), <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.8501504>.

connections to early Zhou civilizations.¹³ Han dynasty historian Sima Qian was the first to forward the claim that the Five Classics were personally compiled by Confucius during his travels between the different states of the Warring States period, offering a glimpse into the diversity of pre-Qin cultures and preserving their cultural works to become interwoven into the growing Chinese identity.

Similar to the foundational Confucian texts, *The Zhuangzi* stands out as a defining document for Daoism for its simultaneous integration of sociopolitical commentary with supernatural and mythological activities, utilizing them simultaneously as direct literary tools. In one chapter, “Ransacking Coiffers,” an ongoing theme toward the condemnation of the sages’ role in governance is expanded upon, highlighting their political status, and using it to further the notion of some “universal alienation” from the innate nature of living things.¹⁴ Kwek elaborates on this with the notion of “resonance cosmology,” described by her as a uniquely Chinese concept where the “interrelations between natural and social changes, natural and social rhythms of existence...are “cosmological” because [they] situate politics strictly within the orbit of other natural, nonhuman flows.” Kwek’s argument effectively poses a sort of universal cause-and-effect relationship between governments, or even individuals, and cosmological-scale events.¹⁵

Early Buddhism, known to have begun developing as early as the sixth century B.C. in the Indian sub-continent. However, despite its early beginnings, it was not until the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) that the earliest Buddhist missionaries seem to have been recognized by the Chinese courts. Jiahe Liu, in *Early Buddhism and Taoism in China*, discusses various theories of how Buddhism was introduced to China, as well as the differences between Daoism and early Chinese Buddhism.¹⁶ Notably Emperor Ming (58–75 A.D.) of the Eastern Han mentioned his brother (Liu Ying) engaging in both Buddhist and Daoist practices (specifically

¹³ Martin Kern, “Early Chinese Literature, Beginnings through Western Han,” in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature: Volume 1: To 1375*, vol. 1, ed. Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen (Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521855587.003>.

¹⁴ Dorothy H. B. Kwek, “Critique of Imperial Reason: Lessons from the Zhuangzi,” *Dao* 18, no. 3 (2019): 411–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-019-09673-4>.

¹⁵ Kwek, “Critique of Imperial Reason.”

¹⁶ Jiahe Liu and Dongfang Shao, “Early Buddhism and Taoism in China (A.D. 65–420),” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 12 (1992): 35–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1389953>.

that he refused to conduct animal sacrifice, instead following “humane Buddhist sacrifice”), thus indicating that by the first century A.D., some Buddhist ideas had made it to the Chu state (today parts of Hubei and Hunan). At the time of its introduction into Han dynasty society, the discussion of Buddhism as one element of the popular syncretic faith was complicated, as Buddhism was frequently conflated with Daoist beliefs. Liu notes that the Mahayana School of Buddhism is recognized as the first to enter the country, and even then, through a relatively meager quantity of literature—specifically, a partial translation of *The Sutra in Forty-Two Sections*, which shared many Mahayana-school deities, but did not itself require specific rituals. Wang posits that it was the introduction of Buddhism which enabled a “concentration” of the ghost and spirit system.¹⁷

The Song Dynasty (960–1279 A.D.) shows the advancement of Three Teachings, particularly with the development of Buddhism from its earlier introductions in the Han era, as well as a literary flourishing that has produced a great abundance of literary works through which to showcase and explore the developing relationships of the Three Teachings. In fact, it is from the Song dynasty scholars that the phrase “Three Teachings Syncretism” (in Chinese, 三教合 or “Sanjiao Heyi”) was introduced into the lexicon. In 2025, Enhai Lei and Xudong Hu published “Presentation and Analysis of ‘Three Teachings Syncretism’ in Song and Jin Poetry and Its Modern Significance,” where they set out to create a unified anthology of Song and Jin works which explicitly highlight the concept of the Three Teachings and explore the background of these works from the angles of literary trends, historical context, and active philosophical schools during the period of authorship.¹⁸ An immediately identified trend among Song and Jin works was the notion that each of the Three Teachings share a common progenitor: a southern Song monk is recorded as saying, “All Schools share the same source, the three teachings speak with one tongue.” Despite the works indicating a shared common ancestor, the three teachings are clearly maintained as distinct in purpose and nature. Lei and Hu further analyze the

¹⁷ Yi et al., “The Construction and Characteristics of Chinese Beliefs in Ghosts and Deities within the Context of the Integration of the Three Teachings.”

¹⁸ Enhai Lei and Xudong Hu, “Presentation and Analysis of ‘Three Teachings Syncretism’ in Song and Jin Poetry and Its Modern Significance,” *Religions* 16, no. 1 (2025): 39, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010039>.

writings of Hou Shanyuan, another Jin Daoist, who implies that Confucianism exemplifies daily practices for virtue, calling it “the Five Constants for daily use”, while Buddhism explores “true nature,” and Daoism the alchemy and mysticism, through its desire to find the “Great Elixir,” in pursuit of immortality.¹⁹ A final poem, to highlight this growing convergence and mutual acceptance comes from Ma Yu (Song Dynasty, born in modern Zhejiang province), titled “Verses on Attesting to Cultivation” reads: “Immortals and Buddhas converge as one; Dao and virtue find balance in both.”²⁰ In this poem, the reference to “Immortals” would be to Daoism, virtue to the Confucianists, and the Buddhas to Chinese Buddhism. The description here illustrates how they may be converging more succinctly than those before it, explaining the philosophy of the Dao and Confucian thought as comprising what in the framework of this paper may be the “common” or “diffused” aspect of the popular religion, while the alchemical and mysticism of Daoism may align better with Buddhist belief under the other, organized face of popular religion.

The Song dynasty intellectual Su Shi’s literary contributions have been highly impactful in tracing the authorship of many early Daoist and Confucian works. In 2024, Pinghua Liu published in *Religions* an explorative biography of Su Shi, highlighting the impact his works have had on the Confucian and neo-Confucian movements during his lifetime, as well as the shockwaves his work had even after his death.²¹ Su Shi was raised as a Confucian scholar to take the imperial exam and enter into the civil service. The imperial examinations themselves are another implication of the deep integration of Confucian principles, beginning with the first exams in the Qin era and continuing for all dynasties thereafter. Despite succeeding in the exams and receiving a provincial appointment, Su Shi later was forced into exile to a remote part of the country, where he is said to have experienced profound spiritual growth, becoming a Buddhist convert.

The Ming Dynasty, (1368–1644 A.D.) exemplifies the essential role of literature in establishing and expanding popular

¹⁹ Lei and Hu, “Presentation and Analysis of ‘Three Teachings Syncretism’ in Song and Jin Poetry and Its Modern Significance.”

²⁰ Lei and Hu, “Presentation and Analysis of ‘Three Teachings Syncretism’ in Song and Jin Poetry and Its Modern Significance.”

²¹ Pinghua Liu, “Su Shi: A Paragon of Interreligious Harmony in Song Dynasty China,” *Religions* 15, no. 8 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080979>.

religion in China, even as its constituent belief systems continue to evolve. By the Ming dynasty, moveable typesetting (an innovation of the mid to late Song dynasty) led to the development of longer-form narratives, and China's first novels would then come into circulation. Amongst the Ming and Qing-era novel writings, few can compare in name-staying power as the *Journey to the West*, which remains to this day a well-known classic of Chinese literature. The narrative itself incorporates true historical events (in the real-world travels of a Chinese Buddhist monk to India, to learn and re-translate Buddhist works) with fantastic elements of the popular religion directly, including Daoist ritual, Confucian Sages, and numerous Buddhist deities from within the framework of an ever-more syncretic religion.

In "Buddhist Allegory in *Journey to the West*," Bantly makes resounding efforts to frame even the *not*-distinctly Buddhist elements of the work within the Buddhist frame of reference and is thus able to showcase exactly what the popular religion had taken from Buddhism.²² Bantly's conclusion—that *Journey to the West* should be incorporated into the canon of Chinese Buddhist texts—is, however, refuted in his own work, due to the unidirectional nature of his argument. He compares *Journey to the West* to other, more widely accepted elements of the Chinese Buddhist canon and finds few direct justifications for excluding it. However, he still does not advise its incorporation due to the lack of period-specific evidence of the novel's theological elements permeating Buddhist discussions outside literary circles.

Although *Journey to the West* was unable to reshape the Buddhist canon, the impact of the popular works is apparent in another Ming era deity: the cult of Mazu arose from local worship of a fishing god, Mazu, and through significant political maneuvering, literary works, and a dedicated local aristocracy, developed into one of China's largest and longest-lived worship cults.²³ Yanchao Zhang of Xiamen University published an article in 2020 exploring the development of the Mazu cult through the lens of the Three Teachings and highlighting how syncretic popular religion adapted to include an ever-changing list of deities and

²² Francisca Cho Bantly, "Buddhist Allegory in the Journey to the West," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 48, no. 3 (1989): 512–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2058637>.

²³ FThe United Nations, "Mazu Belief and Customs - UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage," UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/mazu-belief-and-customs-00227>.

religio-cultural norms.²⁴ The author identifies in her literature review ~16 works which highlight Mazu worship or contribute to the Mazu canon all of them are written by natives of Putian, the “origin” region of the Goddess. Among them, six of the authors of these works are connected to the Lin lineage, a family important to the Putian region and the Mazu cult. The Lin family included Mazu in their familial genealogy, as well as claiming her continued divine patronage.²⁵ The works themselves are classified between records of administrative actions or local government decisions of note, as well as records of miraculous or supernatural intervention believed to have been performed by Mazu. In a way, the continuously evolving lineage, abilities, and history of the Mazu goddess across dynasties, cultures, and geographic regions, exemplifies the inter-religious syncretism that makes the Chinese system of popular religion. The diffuse religious elements of the Chinese imperial governments allowed the Three Teachings to survive more than two millennia of constant change without losing its core ethos.

Modern Eras

The Qing Dynasty (1636–1912 A.D.) once again saw non-Chinese theologies entering and trying to find their place among the existing syncretism. Domestically, the ever-changing realization of popular religion continued, with literary efforts remaining a driving force. For multiple dynasties before then, it had been a standard practice to introduce official anthologies of prose, releasing compilations as learning documents for the imperial exams.²⁶ The Kangxi emperor revised the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and made efforts to censor those passages which spoke on tyranny and the worthiness of rulers.²⁷ The work of Jyrki Kallio looks to the Guwen Guanzhi (GWGZ), in Chinese titled 《古文观止》 (translating to

²⁴ Yanchao Zhang, “The Local Promotion of Mazu: The Intersection of Lineage, Textual Representation, Confucian Values, and Temples in Late Imperial China,” *Religions* 11, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11030123>.

²⁵ “The Mazu Inscription of Chiwan (1464) and the Early Ming Voyages on JSTOR,” accessed April 4, 2026, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/stable/10.13173/zeitdeutmorggese.167.1.0191>.

²⁶ FJinshan Yuan and Aochong Zhang, “The Imperial Examination System: ‘How to Examine’ and the Comprehensive Development of Students during the Ming and Qing Dynasties,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 114 (April 2025): 103267, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2025.103267>.

²⁷ H. G. Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (Routledge, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003627029>.

“For classical poetry, look no further”), as a subtle oppositionary response to the increasing state overreach during the early Qing period.²⁸

Kallio explores the development of the “self-cultivation approach to commerce,” which seeks to apply the same Confucian values that were meant to bring success in civil service and the imperial exams to a mercantile lifestyle, informed by the burgeoning middle classes and increasing opportunity to trade and engage with Western ideas. Kallio posits that the GWGZ arose to meet the convergence of these two needs, meaning that, despite increasing Western contact, and a coinciding “split” between the diffuse and ritual of the popular religion.²⁹ It was largely still relatable and accepted by the population at large. The contents of the GWGZ reflect the age-old pattern in China of writing in allegory, quoting from ancient texts or historical accounts as opposed to a direct critique of current events. Generations of literary continuity in popular religion and culture allowed such a practice to develop, and its continuance through anthologies like the GWGZ prove that even as China began interacting with the Western world, they held strongly to traditional practices. By selecting a subset of the popular religion’s foundational texts (to exclude the most complicated works), it filled the niche of an accessible reader which both the existing scholar and rising merchant classes could readily engage with. Its inclusion of works outside the imperial set, this anthology promoted a diversity of thought and stands out for offering those lower classes the chance to directly engage with the historic language of ritual and statecraft.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) (1949–), as an emerging socialist power, struggled to identify themselves against the Kuomintang and the internationally-supported Republic of China (the ROC, a Western-supported power). The PRC therefore felt a profound ideological pressure to build a thoroughly modern identity and differentiate their new state from the Qing and the “Century of Humiliation,” which heralded the end of the dynastic era.³⁰ Nowhere is the desperation for a new start more evident than

²⁸ Jyrki Kallio, “Reading between the Lines of a Classical Chinese Prose Anthology: Guwen Guanzhi as a Subtle Challenge to State Orthodoxy,” *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* 1 (2020): 59–87, <https://doi.org/10.25365/jeacs.2020.1.59-87>.

²⁹ FKallio, “Reading between the Lines of a Classical Chinese Prose Anthology.”

³⁰ *Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on “China’s Narratives Regarding National Security Policy”*: Hearing before the U.S.-China

in the Cultural Revolution. Initiated by Chairman Mao Zedong (born in 1893, he led the PRC from its founding until his death in 1976), the Cultural Revolution took unequivocal strides toward a rapid reinvention of the Chinese Nation, chiefly through the superseding of the Four Olds with the Four News (replacing old culture, customs, habits, and ideas with new versions), eventually intending to purge all counter-revolutionary thought from the new China.³¹

Tong Zhang and Barry Schwartz published “Confucius and the Cultural Revolution: A Study in Collective Memory” in 1997, in which they explore the reinterpretation of Confucian thought and state-backed perspectives on the Three Teachings during the Cultural Revolution—an era typified by the steadfast suppression of traditional thought and the ancient works—before and after.³² The Communist Party was, as Zhang and Schwartz describe, caught between the need to either integrate symbolism into socialist movement and the popular reverence for Confucian hierarchy, traditionalism, and deference.

Thus, in the early days of state-building, the party frequently echoed Confucian ideals. Chairman Mao himself suggested the Doctrine of the Mean, one of the Four Books of the Confucian Classics, was an achievement warranting study through a socialist lens. Likewise, President Liu Shaoqi recommended that all communists must practice self-cultivation in the Confucian way (a practice of reflection, encouragement, blame, and discipline strengthening moral character. See Yongli, L. et al. in 2021).³³ However, at the same time, they had to ensure they were emphasizing those elements of the popular religion deemed appropriate, in order to not undermine the new socialist order.

The Three Teachings, although valuable for principles such as loyalty (i.e., the filial piety relationship between ruler and subject) or moral values, at the same time the strict atheism and

Economic and Security Review Commission, China’s Narratives Regarding National Security Policy (2011), <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Kaufman.pdf>.

³¹ Stefanie Lamb, “Introduction to the Cultural Revolution,” Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, Stanford University, December 2005, https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/introduction_to_the_cultural_revolution.

³² Tong Zhang and Barry Schwartz, “Confucius and the Cultural Revolution: A Study in Collective Memory,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 11, no. 2 (1997): 189–212.

³³ Liu Yongli and Liu Yiping, “Self-Cultivation as the Basis of Person Making: A Confucian Perspective Illustrated by a Case Study of Zeng Guofan,” *Psychology and Developing Societies* 33, no. 1 (2021): 27–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971333621990448>.

classless order of the Socialist state could be greatly damaged by their superstition, the Daoist inaction (encouraging a contentment with one's circumstances), or monastic orders which opposed socialist land-reform. China's leaders could just as easily undermine their new state as they could integrate those old values into their own. Zhang and Schwartz's interviews in the 1990s with Chinese citizens alive at the time of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath reveal that people often simultaneously acknowledged Confucius as a sage and great thinker, while abhorring the old-order he represented.³⁴ By the start of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the battle against the Four Olds, Confucius became the archetype of imperial suppression and control.³⁵

The modern People's Republic of China, particularly since the appointment of current Chairman Xi Jinping (2012–) has sought to re-strike the balance between the diffused popular religion, building upon the selective, controlled rehabilitation of Confucian practice which began after the Cultural Revolution.³⁶ Confucian modes of thought could be encouraged where it suited public good and those elements which may subvert the “Worker's movement” could be suppressed.³⁷ Continuous re-evaluation of the Three Teachings has created a constant push-and-pull, highlighting the dichotomy between revision and revocation as the New China develops two parallel channels of continuity: There is an official, institutionalized track seeking strictly-overseen, state-sanctioned education and heritage initiatives and a quieter, spontaneous track where the inherited rituals of manner and symbols of the popular religion are repurposed into modern entertainment—sometimes subverting the state-sanctioned “diffuse” form of the popular religion.

Take *The Untamed* (2019), a modern Xianxia (high-fantasy martial drama) television serial, set during an ancient dynastic period, where the magic of Daoist alchemy is as real as the Confucianist ritual order characters must follow.³⁸ This setting

³⁴ Zehao Zhou, *THE ANTI-CONFUCIAN CAMPAIGN DURING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION, AUGUST 1966-JANUARY 1967*, 2011, <http://hdl.handle.net/1903/12285>.

³⁵ Zhang and Schwartz, “Confucius and the Cultural Revolution.”

³⁶ Zhang and Schwartz, “Confucius and the Cultural Revolution.”

³⁷ Lily Marie Theres Rezepa, *Understanding the Revival of Confucianism in China's Contemporary Politics*, 2, no. 1 (n.d.).

³⁸ “‘The Untamed’: A Primer On The Chinese Drama The Internet Is Obsessed With,” Bustle, February 20, 2024, <https://www.bustle.com/p/the-untamed-a-primer-on-the-chinese-drama-the-internet-is-obsessed-with-21791344>.

builds a convenient historical mask, allowing for plausibly deniable commentary on contemporary conditions through indirect analogy.³⁹ Works like *The Untamed* can take advantage of temporal distance at the dynastic scale, while drawing on universally recognizable cultural language in moments where speaking directly may run against state censors. In many ways, the silent protests of Qing-era scholars, in a period of growing political strife, invoked many of the same allusive measures as seen today. Especially considering the experience of the compilers of the GWGZ in selecting specific poems, in order to call out their concerns with the Qing government, the parallel is plain. Then as now, this dependence on allegory is not a stylistic obliqueness but a functional response to the dichotomy the PRC has established. Although the re-introduction of the traditional Three Teachings to the popular religion was treated with the utmost caution, those outside the government have always employed those same tools to spread their own stories.

Returning to 1989, the diffused form of the popular religion was the first to find its footing. Faced with a need to balance the revision-revocation dichotomy, the PRC moved to establish an official institution to manage cultural heritage, marking the parallelization of diffused and popular religion once again. Thus, a series of institutions and cultural sites were established both within China and abroad with the express goal of bringing Confucius thought in line with modernity.⁴⁰ In support of this goal, in 1989, the government laid plans for the restoration of the Temple and Cemetery of Confucius and the Kong Family Mansion Qu Fu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the largest temple to Confucius globally.⁴¹ As a part of this celebration of Confucianism, in a speech for the 2,540th birthday of Confucius (where the plans for the UNESCO site were publicized), the party refuted those who sought to hide the mistakes of both recent ancient history and concluded by emphasizing the Confucian value of social harmony, implying such

³⁹ Arsh Rune, "The Untamed: When Ancient Symbolism Outsmarted Modern Censorship," *Medium*, September 17, 2024, <https://arshrune.medium.com/the-untamed-when-ancient-symbolism-outsmarted-modern-censorship-3f43133ed4db>.

⁴⁰ "Confucius Institute," accessed April 4, 2026, <https://www.ci.cn/en/whsc>.

⁴¹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Temple and Cemetery of Confucius and the Kong Family Mansion in Qufu," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed December 13, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/704/>.

harmony was a paramount principle of the socialist system.⁴² The speech calls for neither eulogization nor blind repudiation, but instead emphasized the principle of “critical inheritance” (a Maoist idea that calls for making “the Past serve the present”), further solidifying its position as the newest addition to the popular religion.⁴³ By 2003, coinciding with the completion of the reconstruction efforts, the Confucius Institute was founded to walk the path between the Four Modernizations, while integrating the ancient values of the Three Teachings through literature. They now operate education resources globally and are a vital component of New China’s global outreach and uplifting programs.

Conclusion

The staying power of the Three Teachings—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—lie in their capacity to coexist, absorb, and be reinterpreted under changing institutional pressures, shifting social stratification, and evolving cultural practices. Across the dynastic eras, the relationship between local folk practice and the Three Teachings remained fluid: cults and deities could be elevated or censored according to political will, regional needs, and the moralistic language of a writer’s community. The “universal resonance” underlying the Chinese system—linking magisterial decisions to individual realities, and, in turn, to the natural balance of the world—supports an unyielding reverence for the past, in which tradition is both a predestined inheritance and a living framework to interpret the present.

From this societal reference point, relationships with the past remain culturally productive, and thus literature, poetry, and drama become the preeminent tools to shape popular religion for the next generation, while the works themselves arise in response to the circumstances of their author, offering a window into the very fabric of each era’s culture. Through one strand of the popular religion, diffused into the institutions of governance and education, even the most consequential matters of state are guided by the by memories of history, and by the other strand, the prosaic details of life are met

⁴² The United Nations, “Temple and Cemetery of Confucius and the Kong Family Mansion in Qufu,” UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/704/>.

⁴³ “‘Make the Past Serve the Present’: Reading Cultural Relics Excavated During the Cultural Revolution of 1972 | Springer Nature Link,” accessed April 4, 2026, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-13638-7_8.

in ritualized procedure. The state's own negotiation with the tradition of the popular religion underscores this relationship. To achieve meaningful reinvention, change must be framed as continuity. Whether by introducing heritage sites or sanctioned schools and educational institutions, the PRC has called for "critical inheritance," demonstrating the capacity to reshape and reintroduce age-old principles. In other words, modernity has not come at the expense of the popular religion—rather, it has found fresh manifestations reflecting changing contexts, audiences, and expressive mediums. So long as cultural works remain a tenant of how the past is imagined and the present narrated, the Three Teachings, bound in their syncretic logic of popular religion, will continue to evolve along with the needs of its people.

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**The Distance Between Ideology and Reality:
Bolshevik Anti-Religious and Secularization Efforts
in Soviet Russia, 1917–1929**

Katherine Dyal

Abstract

This paper explores the Bolshevik regime's anti-religious and secularization efforts in Soviet Russia from 1917 to 1929, in the context of the Russian Civil War and the construction of a new socialist state. By discussing Bolshevik methods of anti-religious action, challenges to secularization, and results of these efforts, this paper examines the extent to which a state-sponsored transformation of society was successful. It also situates secular ideals and anti-religious sentiment in the context of the Bolsheviks' goal of creating a new society and culture and considers the relevance of Orthodoxy's dominance in Russian culture and empire prior to the time period discussed.

Introduction

Prior to the Bolshevik government takeover in autumn of 1917, Orthodoxy was well-established as the dominant religion of the Russian Empire, with the Russian Orthodox Church boasting around 100 million members and standing as a pillar of the empire to bolster the legitimacy of the tsarist government.¹ The Orthodox religion was “deeply rooted” in the popular culture and psyche of the population of the Russian Empire and thus became a major target of the new Bolshevik regime’s efforts to wipe away the old order and create a new Soviet, socialist, and secular society.² Orthodoxy’s strong association with tsarist rule did not help its case after 1917 when faced with the rule of a party determined to destroy everything associated with the former order.³ Furthermore, the Bolsheviks had an ideological motivation to suppress religion and the Orthodox Church, as atheism and socialism had been closely related since the nineteenth century.⁴ Core party belief anticipated the achievement of an enlightened culture which could be foisted on the peasantry, rescuing them from their backwardness—exemplified by the superstitions and rituals of religious belief—and educating them out of their “misguided worldview.”⁵ The complete transformation of culture and society would justify their “ideological[...] obsess[ion] with the eradication of religion” that played out after the 1917 revolution and through the 1920s.⁶ Although atheism was not one of the Bolsheviks’ core tenets in the path to gaining and maintaining power in the collapsed Russian Empire,⁷ their anti-religious and secularization efforts became a crucial component of the Soviet endeavor to remake society in the image of socialist ideology.

This paper will examine the successes and failures of secularization efforts in the Russian region of the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1929 by discussing the methods of Bolshevik anti-

¹ Peris, Daniel. 1998. *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1.

² Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 20.

³ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 21.

⁴ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 21.

⁵ Husband, William B. 2000. “*Godless Communists*”: *Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 35.

⁶ Young, Glennys. 1997. *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1.

⁷ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 35.

religious action, the most significant challenges to successful secularization, and the results of Bolshevik anti-religious secularization efforts. Atheism was a necessary component of the Bolshevik—or Communist—ideal of a rational, socialist, Soviet society, but attempts to secularize the former Russian Empire were only partially successful and failed to eliminate religion, religious belief, and religious behavior among the greater population of Soviet Russia in any meaningful way, forming a disconnect between Soviet atheist ideology and reality.

Methods of Anti-Religious Action

Bolshevik anti-religious action began in 1918 and continued in earnest after the civil war in the Russian Empire.⁸ The Soviet state first had to confront the institution of the Orthodox Church and the social class of clergy, abandoning the initial “heroic phase” of “immediate and radical” change to focus on more tangible concerns,⁹ although such ideals of cultural change remained a motivating force throughout the 1920s. The institutionalization of secularism began with official anti-religious policies, but the Soviet state also engaged in class antagonism, violence, propaganda, and attempted cultural transformation.

Official state policy on religion was conflicted, partly due to inconsistencies in Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin’s public position on the subject.¹⁰ The Communist party’s legislation and decrees on religion would never create a totally non-religious society but still affected the development of Soviet society and offer insight into the official party line regarding religion and atheism—and its ultimate goal of transformation. The 1918 Decree on Separation of Church and State is the first official Bolshevik policy on religion, and it essentially disempowered the Russian Orthodox Church, confirming the secular nature of the state and forbidding religious instruction outside of the home.¹¹ Imperatively, this decree made it illegal for churches to own property and confiscated existing church lands and properties.¹² The separation decree was limited because it was aimed at the church as an institution, thereby

⁸ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 82.

⁹ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 24.

¹⁰ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 23.

¹¹ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 25.

¹² Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 47.

leaving individual worship alone for the moment.¹³ However, the state lacked the ability to control rural interpretation of an essentially anti-religious decree. Local cadres in rural regions abused the decree and used it to justify any and all anti-religious actions, including arresting, torturing, and murdering clergy members.¹⁴

Clergy members were a target, especially in rural areas, because of Soviet use of class antagonism that allowed party members to ideologically paint clergy as class enemies and the very existence of religious institutions as anti-Bolshevik. Clergy members were associated with the Whites, those who opposed the Bolsheviks during the bloody civil war from roughly 1918 to 1922, and many clergy members did in fact side with the Whites in the conflict, leading the clergy to be treated like criminals.¹⁵ Throughout the 1920s, clergymen continued to be vilified and even accused of active conspiracy against the state.¹⁶ Their supposed greed was blamed for the resistance to cultural change because they earned fees from rites like weddings and burials and thus hindered the secularization of such rituals.¹⁷ The abuse against clergy manifested as exorbitant taxes,¹⁸ political disenfranchisement,¹⁹ and a complete dispossession of legal rights.²⁰ Clergy were put in the same category as kulaks, the supposedly well-off peasants who hoarded wealth and were the target of extreme class antagonism and persecution in the pursuit of a classless society. Favoring the church was associated with kulaks, so therefore, any interaction with a religion-related person like a priest could be anti-Soviet.²¹

Bolshevik anti-religious policy and ideology could lead to violence, especially in rural areas. The clergy was one particular target of violence, and even immediately after the Bolshevik takeover in October/November 1917, uncoordinated attacks broke out, not just against clergy, but against cathedrals, monasteries, and

¹³ Husband, *"Godless Communists"*, 47.

¹⁴ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 76.

¹⁵ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 25–26.

¹⁶ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 77.

¹⁷ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 92.

¹⁸ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 126.

¹⁹ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 173.

²⁰ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 61.

²¹ Husband, *"Godless Communists"*, 37.

church parishes alike.²² In 1924, attacks on clergy, lay activists, and church buildings broke out during secular holidays in the Saratov province, led by Komsomol members—the youth branch of the Communist party—and young non-party peasants, who challenged believers and vandalized and destroyed grave sites and church buildings.²³ Most violence was not state-sanctioned, and in fact the party, at its Twelfth Congress, warned against violent methods that could create martyrs and increase fanaticism, thereby undoing the Bolsheviks' purpose.²⁴ However, much of the violence was carried out by party members, such as the Komsomol youth, which demonstrates the state's inability to control the implementation of either their policies or ideologies in the massive region of Soviet Russia.

The Twelfth Congress also called for heightened propaganda against religion, which became an increasingly crucial component in the Bolshevik secularization effort. Instead of violence, the Communist party turned to anti-religious agitation and campaigning, usually carried out by local party members. In 1923, when the end of the Civil War freed up resources for the regime, the Bolsheviks commenced an extensive, systematic propaganda campaign against, not the Church as an institution, but against religion as a whole.²⁵ This pivot in strategy corresponded with the party's increased emphasis on culture in the quest to remake society in the image of an ideal socialist order. Anti-religious and atheistic propaganda was vitriolic and pervasive, carried out "on the streets, by the military, in the workplace, and throughout the public sphere" and included demonstrations, lectures, public debates, speeches, discussion groups, and newspapers.²⁶ The role of so-called "propagandists" and "agitators" in Soviet society was significant because the Bolshevik regime considered propaganda to be the "dissemination of undeniable truths" about the shining socialist future.²⁷ One key method of propaganda was print, such as the newspaper *Bezbozhnik*—meaning "the godless" or "atheist"—which commonly ridiculed religious institutions while presenting an

²² Husband, "Godless Communists", 47.

²³ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 105.

²⁴ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 32.

²⁵ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 25.

²⁶ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 69.

²⁷ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 71.

alternative values and rituals.²⁸ *Bezbozhnik* and other newspapers like it could only reach a small percentage of the population—those who were literate—but it hammered home the key themes of Bolshevik secularism: clergy and kulaks as corrupt class enemies and robbers of the peasantry and the wonderful nature of secular culture and all the modernizing values and technology it brought.²⁹ Low literacy rates made the printed word all the more valuable and venerated, adding more gravity to Soviet printed propaganda efforts.³⁰

The Soviet state's most significant method of challenging religion that underscored other strategies was cultural transformation, or the attempt to restructure society according to a scientific materialist outlook.³¹ Bolsheviks labored under the assumption that the new scientific and rational worldview and society would “supersede” peasant culture,³² thereby offering a replacement for Orthodox superstitions and rituals as Soviet society and culture transformed into the new socialist order. The method of cultural transformation emphasized improvements in material conditions, without which secularization would not be successful.³³ For example, the Bolsheviks sought to eliminate illiteracy and introduce more advanced agricultural techniques and technologies,³⁴ as well as improved hygiene and sanitation practices.³⁵ By seeking to improve material conditions, Bolsheviks hoped to overcome existing religious sensibilities that informed everyday life in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union and transform the way of life into a Soviet socialist one.

Challenges to Secularization

Bolshevik anti-religious and secularization efforts faced many challenges as ideology clashed with reality. The two main challenges to secularization in Soviet Russia were the entrenchment

²⁸ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 75.

²⁹ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 120–122.

³⁰ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 75.

³¹ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 24.

³² Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 93.

³³ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 72.

³⁴ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 114.

³⁵ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 72.

of Orthodoxy in peasant culture and the failure of party organization and bureaucracy.

Arguably the most significant challenge the Bolsheviks faced in their program of secularization was how ingrained Orthodoxy was in Russian peasant culture, in both personal and private spheres. If the Bolsheviks' goal was to eliminate religion, they confronted the necessity of recreating rural culture.³⁶ The Communist leadership struggled to replace existing rites and rituals informed by Orthodox religious culture. One example is the replacement of Christian holidays with the secular Komsomol Christmas and Easter.³⁷ Orthodox holidays were a sticking point in cultural recreation because of the sheer number: between 150 and 200 a year with the average peasant estimated to observe at least 50 days of rest per year.³⁸ Bolshevik efforts to replace religious holidays with secular ones did not succeed in erasing the cultural traditions that enforced the observance of holidays in the first place. Another cultural ritual the Communists contended with was marriage, struggling to replace church weddings with civil ceremonies, and even Bolshevik leader Lenin admitted that "church marriage prevail[ed]" in rural regions.³⁹ Marriage was central to established culture, informed by Orthodox traditions, and the Soviet civil ceremony, complete with a singing of "The Internationale" socialist anthem, was not only a poor substitute but created administrative problems in deciding the validity of certain unions.⁴⁰ Beyond holidays and marriage, other, more minor religious beliefs and habits persisted, such as belief in spirits and demons, and the continued presence of Orthodox saintly icons in peasant homes, despite the Bolshevik demonization of icons.⁴¹

In addition to the struggles of upending centuries-established cultural norms and traditions, the Bolsheviks faced their own weaknesses in their secularization campaign through the failure of Soviet organization and bureaucracy, most notably through the party apparatus of the League of the Militant Godless. The Communist party felt pressured to establish an organized force to atheize Soviet society, which resulted in the formation of the

³⁶ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 21.

³⁷ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 103.

³⁸ Husband, "Godless Communists", 88.

³⁹ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 74.

⁴⁰ Husband, "Godless Communists", 95–96.

⁴¹ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 85.

League of the Godless.⁴² The League was yet another apparatus of the Communist party with the role of “promot[ing], control[ing], and measur[ing]” the propagation of atheism throughout the Soviet Union.⁴³ Despite limited successes, the League ultimately took on too many campaigns to act effectively.⁴⁴ League activists relied on the sporadic “campaign style”, which failed to pervade rural society when compared to Orthodox activists’ consistent and systematic methods.⁴⁵ Furthermore, once the Cultural Revolution began in the late 1920s, the League was robbed of its purpose and had little to contribute other than “superfluous” propaganda machine.⁴⁶ Like many other party apparatus, the League became bloated with bureaucracy and redundancy. Most Communist and Komsomol members considered themselves atheist by virtue of being in the party; therefore joining the League was unnecessary.⁴⁷ The poor organization of the official secularizing party apparatus illustrated the weakness of the Soviet state in their ability to realize their own utopian ideology.

Results of Secularization Policy and Action

Lofty ideals of a totally secularized society failed to materialize in Soviet Russia and the Soviet Union as a whole, not only due to the difficulty of transforming a centuries-embedded cultural mindset but the weaknesses of the Bolshevik anti-religion approach. The anti-religion efforts of the late 1910s and 1920s resulted in limited levels of secularization compounded with the integration of secular, atheistic attitudes into existing cosmological beliefs.

Bolshevik anti-religious efforts were not entirely unsuccessful—they accomplished limited secularization of peasant society. The attack on religion created a void where faith once was that the Bolsheviks could fill with anti-religious propaganda, atheism, and scientific materialism—a new “philosophical worldview.”⁴⁸ In more tangible terms, by 1929, Bolshevik

⁴² Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 44.

⁴³ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 44.

⁴⁴ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 115.

⁴⁵ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 108.

⁴⁶ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 115.

⁴⁷ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 152.

⁴⁸ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 93.

campaigning forced churches to close at a higher rate than before.⁴⁹ Bolsheviks also managed to remove all Orthodox education from public schools (at least on paper) and replace it with non-religious pedagogy that found limited success.⁵⁰ In a school in the Penza province, 75 percent of students were atheist due to their teacher's anti-religious instruction, and public school sex education courses based on rationalist ideas surrounding general health and protection were successful in certain regions.⁵¹ The successes of secularization were still largely restricted. The 1929 Central Committee decree limited Orthodoxy, at least officially, by restricting the church's rights to assembly and property as well as prohibiting religious proselytizing, education, and propaganda,⁵² and the Commissariat of Enlightenment in the Soviet government agreed to begin promoting atheism.⁵³ At the very least, anti-religious efforts in the period from 1918–1929 led the Soviet state to devote more resources to the cause of secularization. Increasingly in the late 1920s, pro-religion attitudes were associated with being anti-Soviet,⁵⁴ meaning it was becoming increasingly difficult to openly be a believer. These policies indicate a stronger devotion to the cause of secularization but not necessarily a victory against religion in the Soviet Union.

For the most part, Orthodoxy and religion in general persisted in the Soviet Union and Soviet Russia, and new atheistic, anti-religionist, scientific-rationalist ideas were integrated into culture and society rather than successfully replacing the preexisting worldview. Orthodoxy persisted because it “informed the collective values and rituals” of everyday life,⁵⁵ and Soviet scientific materialism was simply not ideologically strong enough to replace it in such a short amount of time. The Soviet regime found that its mass propaganda did not fundamentally change internal beliefs,⁵⁶ and most people retained their religious beliefs, even when they did find their place in Soviet society.⁵⁷ For example, some members of

⁴⁹ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 136.

⁵⁰ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 86.

⁵¹ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 86–87.

⁵² Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 135.

⁵³ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 164.

⁵⁴ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 143.

⁵⁵ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 162.

⁵⁶ Husband, “*Godless Communists*”, 130.

⁵⁷ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 224.

the Communist party remained Orthodox and continued attending church and partaking in religious rituals,⁵⁸ and especially in rural regions, local Party cells did not participate in secularization efforts because they were still faithful to Orthodox traditions.⁵⁹

Orthodoxy and atheism were thus forced to coexist. While the Soviets succeeded in eroding and disempowering the institution of the Orthodox church, Orthodox beliefs were not necessarily undermined.⁶⁰ This allowed for the promulgation of Soviet and atheist institutions while the internal mindsets, behaviors, and cultural patterns of society remained largely religious, thus resulting in the intertwining of Orthodoxy and Soviet secularism. The relationship between the two outlooks manifested both privately and publicly, notably in the invisible influence of religion on socialism, where so-called “militarized socialists” employed Christian values and themes, like Christ’s martyrdom, to bolster their atheistic propaganda.⁶¹ Furthermore, atheism succeeded as an alternative to, not a rejection of religion,⁶² because “godlessness” was a religion unto itself.⁶³ Because atheism is the lack of belief rather than the presence of faith, it could not properly replace religion in Russian society,⁶⁴ resulting in the integration of two worldviews that were more similar than might first be assumed.

Conclusion

If the goal was to transform society, inside and out, into an atheistic socialist state, the Bolshevik anti-religious and secularization efforts were largely unsuccessful. Even by 1937, only about 42.9 percent of Soviet society reported that they were nonbelievers.⁶⁵ It is difficult to measure the extent to which Russia became less religious under the Soviet regime from 1918 to 1929, not only due to external factors like the violent conflict of the Civil War and governmental instability, but because of the nature of religion. Outward-facing elements like church attendance and icon

⁵⁸ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 37.

⁵⁹ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 89.

⁶⁰ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 20.

⁶¹ Young, *Power and the Sacred*, 262.

⁶² Husband, “Godless Communists”, 1.

⁶³ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 52.

⁶⁴ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 93.

⁶⁵ Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 224.

possession can reasonably be measured, but attempting to quantify or qualify internal beliefs is another task altogether. Increased surveillance and repression as Stalin's Cultural Revolution began around 1928 made learning and recording the truth of individual Soviet citizens' inner psyches even more difficult.

What can be determined is that Bolshevik anti-religious and secularization efforts helped shape early Soviet society and contributed to the solidification of socialist ideology, while the failure of total secularization indicates the distance between such ideology and reality. In reality, in Soviet Russia from 1918 to 1929, religion and state-sponsored atheism coexisted. Much like Christianity was adopted and integrated with existing pagan beliefs in the Russian Empire's past, Soviet atheism overlay enduring religious beliefs and, rather than replacing them, melded with Orthodox traditions and rituals in a strange integration that highlights the failure of Soviet ideology to manifest into reality.

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