

JAKUB OSIECKI

**JOURNAL “ANASTVATS”. INTERPRETATIONS AND
CONTEXTS REGARDING ANTIRELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA IN
SOVIET ARMENIA.**

In 1923, three years after the Bolsheviks took power in Armenia, anti-Church propaganda reached most of the districts, although it was rather random and chaotic in character. Typically, propagandist actions and all kinds of persecution would happen before Christmas and Easter. They were the most regular in Yerevan and Echmiadzin, the two cities that were given top priority. In the countryside, action against the clergy and laymen was taken sporadically¹. However, the overconfidence of the local officials caused social disapproval, which made the common countryman lose trust in the new authorities. On this background it was decided to take necessary action to make the anti-Church policy more uniform and strong and to commence the anti-Church propaganda on a broader scale².

Excellent occasion was The Third Convention of the Communist Party of Armenia (from 1924) which accepted a new resolution toward religion and the Church. It was decided that anti-religious activities should be better organized and most of all education of lower-level instructors should be implemented – especially in terms of antireligious agitation. To this end, Communists established party schools and ran classes in politics for future propagandists. Officially the Bolsheviks seemed to be planning a relative reversal of political repression, but that was only outward appearance. In fact, the CheKa was intensifying its activities. The years 1923-1925 proved to be crucial in this respect. During the same Third Convention of the Party Deputy President of the Armenian CheKa Sergiey Melik-Osipov gave his secret lecture on ways to eradicate the clergy and religion. Special role was given to unofficial propagandists, who were to hold unofficial meetings with local communities (rus. yacheyka). Equally emphasis was given on propaganda newspapers,

¹ ANA (Armenian National Archive) F. 1/o. 3/d. 109, p. 1 *Information of the ukoms of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Armenia on their anti-religious activities for 1923.*

² ANA F. 1/o. 4/d. 70, p. 1, *Lecture by Melik-Osipov no. 6 “On the Activities of the Armenian Clergy in Armenia”.*

journals and publishing, which allegedly were supervised by the Agitotdel'³.

However, the Agitotdel' in Armenian CheKa was not able to coordinate all antireligious activity – not yet. To support CheKa, in 1924 Aleksander Miasnikov (from ZakKrayKom - Tbilisi) strongly advised to establish at the Central Committee of Communist Party of Armenia a special commission, the main aim of which was to deal with sects' issue and to perform antireligious propaganda. President of this commission Sarkis Hambartsumyan (he was also the Chairmen of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party) was not able to recognize the real situation in the Armenian Church. S. Hambartsumyan was convinced that the new Soviet intelligentsia and the inhabitants of the cities of Yerevan and Leninakan was ready to continue antireligious policy in Armenia. Hambartsumyan also wanted to cooperate with lower clergy (married priests). That was why he officially supported archimandrite Benik Melyan (outsider in Armenian Apostolic Church). Benik wanted to implement deep reforms in the Armenian Church. In opinion of Benik, the Church could operate without churches (buildings), sacraments (Holly Liturgy) and even without clergymen. In 1924 Archimandrite Melyan was nominated editor in chief of first Armenian antireligious journal: "Azat Yekeghetsi". Of course, the real motivation of Hambartsumian was not to reform the church, but to create division inside it (as institution). Archimandrite Benik was needed to fulfil this plan.

The first issue of "Azat Yekeghetsi" was published in November 1924. It was a weekly 4-pages newspaper and was affiliated with the pseudo-clerical organization with the same name, "Azat Yekeghetsi". It was a historical, religious and "ethical" journal mostly addressed to the believers, Armenian lower clergy, former social-activists and "intelligentsia"⁴. Journalists from the editorial board were using sophisticated propaganda – and, as a language tool – literary Armenian. Despite of the involvement of many clergymen in the 1926, the Central Committee decided to suspend the publication of this newspaper. The results of that kind of agitation were not sufficient.

The Central League of Militant Atheists from Moscow and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decided

³ ANA F. 1/o. 4/d. 116, p. 11, *Protocol of CheKa Agitotdel's session from April 16th, 1924.*

⁴ "Azat Yekeghetsi" nr 1-1/1924, p. 1.

to commence a more straightforward agitation in Armenia. Furthermore, the main recipients of the propaganda became the peasants. A significant problem was the illiteracy of the half of the Armenian population. That is why with the support of the Armenian new branch of the League of Militant Atheists another antireligious Armenian journal was established: "Anastvats"⁵. The journal was modelled after the Russian „Biezbozhnik". Editor-in chief of the "Anastvats" became Petik Torosyan. Taking into account the above-mentioned facts, a significant part of the journal took caricatures' and other forms of graphic and pictorial propaganda.

In general, in many aspects "Anastvats" was a turning point for anti-religious propaganda in Armenia and also it was a significant change in Armenian journalism. Editors were using irony, satire, and of course formal slogans of Soviet ideology, but first of all they were very accurate and convincing. Taking into account the artistic aspect of the "Anastvats" we can divide the caricatures and pictorial propaganda into several models: comic strips, posters and photographs. The "Anastvats" received independent budget (it was published in 7 000 copies) and last but not least – it was partly a colourful journal. Some pictures, caricatures were copied from the Russian "Biezbozhnik", but the majority of them had Armenian authors. It is possible to divide the contents of "Anastvats" into several categories:

I. Caricatures on the Armenian Church and the clergy:

With no doubt the main opponent of the Soviet power in Armenia was Archbishop Melik-Tangian from Tabriz. He was presented very often as: a representative of "Armenian Religious Fascism" and the leader of a contra-revolutionary organization in Persia⁶. The term "Fascism" had a negative connotation as well as "Papism" and "Social-Fascism". Furthermore the Mechitarists of Vienna and Venice were attacked. Allegedly, Armenian monks only drank, ate and feasted. The author of a caricature resumed the religious attitude of the Armenian clergy using the following citation from the Gospel of Luke: "There will be only weeping there and gnashing of teeth"⁷. Armenian priests were shown as lazy and greedy. In the caricatures the editorial board attempted to insure the readers of "Anastvats" that clergymen were most active and "saint" just before Easter, Christmas and indulgence. In that period the

⁵ ANA F. 1/o. 8/d. 20, p. 35 *Protocol of session of Central Committee from the 2nd of February 1928.*

⁶ *Parskastani Antrpatakani temakan arrachnord*, "Anastvats" 1928/3, p. 8.

⁷ *Viennayi Surb Hayere*, "Anastvats" 1928/5-6, p. 28.

clergy used to gather gifts (mostly food) from parishioners. The Soviet propaganda underlined this activity by showing also the poverty of ordinary people. Readers received false information about a very high salary and other incomes which allegedly the clergy got from Echmiatsin and ordinary believers. In one of the typical caricatures the author used biblical rhetoric (Gospel of Mathew) and formed ironical conclusions: “Come to me, all you who are troubled and weighted down with care, and I will give you rest”⁸. This confirms the theological knowledge of the editor-in-chief and other journalists. Many Soviet politicians ruling in Armenia in the 20’s, as Khachik Mugdusi, Ashot Hovhanisian, and Grigor Vartanian, before the October Revolution had graduated from the Theological Seminary in Echmiatsin.

II. Church and science/education:

This model (juxtaposition) of agitation was very popular in the 20’s and 30’s not only in Soviet Armenia, but in the whole USSR. The confrontation of religion and science was present in every issue of “Anastvats” from the very beginning⁹. Any Church and religion as itself in the opinion of the propagandists was the enemy of development and science. This form of Soviet antireligious agitation was often based on the “Darwin case”. The Church was described as a “conservative” organization having as its main task sustaining ignorance and illiteracy. The persecutions against Copernicus and Darwin in the past were another confirmation of this policy of the Church in respect of open-minded scientists. Bolsheviks regarded the struggle against religion as a real struggle for culture and science¹⁰. The “Anastvats”’s editorial board used slogans like “the religion is a poison for science” or “the religion closes the peoples’ eyes”¹¹. According to the official policy of the USSR, no person educated in the Soviet school could become religious. Anti-Church pressure was visible not only in newspapers but in general in primary schools and in rabfaks¹² in Gyumri and Yerevan. In this situation the journal “Anastvast” was a significant instrument for propagandists to disseminate their instructions on the practical side of agitation. Also a list of the most important Armenian antireligious literature was placed in the

⁸ *Yekek indh mot*, “Anastvats 1928/1, p.8.

⁹ **R. Gabrielyan**, *Kroni masin...*, “Anastvats” 1928/1, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Hakakronakan paykar...*, “Anastvats” 1928/4, p. 12; *Gitutiun ev Kron*, “Anastvats” 1928/4, p. 18.

¹¹ *Kron Gitaktsutiun mtagnogh e*, „Anastvats” 1928/9-10, p. 12.

¹² Rus. Rabochiy fakultet – Workers’ Faculty.

journal¹³. It was typical that the authors of articles and drawings used militant terminology and totalitarian language¹⁴. The fight against religion was supposedly a real struggle with a real enemy. This language of propaganda became more insistent after 1929, when the campaign of collectivization commenced.

III. The Church as an opponent of collectivization:

The future of the deprived Soviet agriculture according to the political leaders in Kremlin was collectivization. Implementation of this crucial policy was a necessary step leading to, as Stalin called it, "second revolution". As the First Secretary stressed, the collectivization was a revolution in terms of a "total transition on all fronts of the construction of the Soviet system"¹⁵. The collectivization was linked with the Soviet policy of industrialization. Stalin needed loyalty of all branches of economy – especially in agriculture. The collectivization was an obligatory step forward in the direction of social-communism. In this case, Stalin was the follower of Karl Marx's idea according to which communism could be built only in a country with large homesteads. On the other hand the implementation of the collectivization was one more occasion for Stalin to discipline the society.

In Armenia the collectivization began in 1929, like in the whole USSR, as a part of the Five-year Plan. In the first year the results were frighteningly weak. Only a 3,7% of all farms jointed the state homestead¹⁶. Moscow reacted promptly: the old government in Yerevan was replaced, and new authorities were brought to Armenia. First secretary of the Communist Party in Armenia became Aghasi Hanjian. In the same time the Soviet-Armenian propaganda found main culprits. For the initial failure of the collectivization the "Dashnks" and the clergy were declared responsible. According to the Soviet press, the anti-kolkhoz agitation was conducted by clergymen, often during Sunday masses and religious feasts¹⁷. This conception was convenient for the Bolsheviks.

The intention of the members of the editorial board of "Anastvats" was not to attack the Church hierarchy, but to manifest competently the crisis in the Church and to convince the Armenian nation that the liquidation of the Church (as an organization) is only a matter of time.

¹³ *Bovandakutiun*, "Anastvats" 1932/1, p. 32.

¹⁴ *Gitutsyamb zinwats, kroni himkin, tur uzhegh harwats*, "Anastvats" 1929/3, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Istoria Rossii*, red. **Sacharow**, Moskva, 2001, s. 561.

¹⁶ **R. G. Suny**, *Looking toward Ararat*, Bloomington 1993, p. 151.

¹⁷ *Katolitsizm i zashchita sobstviennosti*, "Bezbožnik Gruzii" 1/1931, p. 17.

The real and imaginable crisis in the Church was presented by Soviet journalists broadly as the economic, political and spiritual collapse of faith¹⁸. Apparently the Church was marginalized and lost its prestige and respect in the Armenian society. Allegedly only the older generation of Armenians was still religiously involved. “Anastvast” used the slogans of the “New young generation” or “Young Soviet World”¹⁹. Everything young was regarded as atheistic and antireligious.

In the Soviet propaganda 1932 was another turning point. It was a crucial year in the frames of the policy of collectivization in the USSR. Antireligious propaganda seems to be good a reflection of the social situation in Armenia and inside the Armenian Church. It is obvious that after the elections in Echmiatsin in 1932, the agitation changed significantly. The Church was not the main adversary for the Armenian Bolsheviks. As is evident from the contents of the journal “Anastvats”, the Church and the Catholicos were treated as non-dangerous opponents of the Soviet policy; either Choren Muradbekian was in good terms with the Soviets or it was the idea of the Communist Party to present Choren I as an allegedly Soviet-man in the Church.

This led to an absurd situation. Catholicos Gevork V passed away in May 1930. Promptly after his death nationalistic and Dashnak organizations made efforts aiming to replace the Catholicos’ headquarter from the USSR, Echmiatsin, and to establish a new one in the Middle East or in Europe. The reason was obvious. The Armenian Church was strongly persecuted and there was no perspective of further friendly relationships between the state and religion in Soviet Armenia. This scenario was highly undesirable for the GPU, which had a plan of influence on the Armenian clergy via the Catholicos in Echmiatsin. Although it would sound ridiculous, the task of “Anastvats” was to defend the idea of holding the elections of the Catholicos in Soviet Armenia²⁰.

What can we say about the effectiveness of propaganda conducted by “Anastvats”? According to the preliminary results of the study of the oral history in Soviet Armenia, it seems obvious that studying Soviet propaganda requires more specification. First of all it is necessary to distinguish audio materials as: those gathered in the province and those taken

¹⁸ *Echmiatsin ev ir iskakan derum*, “Anastvats” 1932/19-20, p. 1.

¹⁹ *Menk nor ashkharh kshinenk*, “Anastvats” 1929/4, p. 1.

²⁰ *Katoghikosakan yntrutunnneri artiv*, “Anastvats” 1932/19-20, p. 1-3; ANA F. 1/o. 10/d. 45, p. 61, *Written correspondence between GPU USSR and GPU of Armenian SSR (October 1930)*.

from the inhabitants of Yerevan and Gyumri, besides, according to the categories of males and females, the well educated and the illiterate part of the society. The observation that the evaluation of audio-recorded materials requires specific patterns and use of social, historical, psychological methods perhaps would not seem extraordinary.

In these circumstances it is reasonable to cite only brief fragments of interviews and just outline the problem:

“Of course, I remember “Anastvast” (...) Priests are thieves. Nothing more. Isn’t it so? My mother said this and I believe her. That was in the past and now. They only steal and rob people. I taught my children and now my grandsons and granddaughters: the Church and clergy, they are all thieves”²¹.

“Vartapet was friend of our family. Even when my parents were absent he was visiting us. Once he brought chocolate but did not eat it. When he went out I crushed it with sorrow, since the teacher in my school had told us that religion is poison and everything from clergy is poisoned. Only when my father came, he explained me my ignorance and the words of the teacher”²².

“I remember praying from my childhood. My father was a religious man. Every morning and evening he read the Book of prayers. Some of them he knew by hard. Also when they were putting out tonir with my mother they were saying some prayers”²³.

This only leads to the conclusion, that some additional study is still necessary. Propaganda and agitation were of course only soft means of the influence on the Armenian society. In general, real persecutions and real struggle with the clergymen and believers destroyed the Armenian Apostolic Church in the 30s, but it must be stressed that further historical research on Soviet Armenia and the Soviet Church policy requires elaborations about anti-religious propaganda. These Soviet tools (radio, cinema, books, and journals) played a significant role in the plan of building atheistic society and requires a full and competent academic description.

²¹ N. N., Stepanavan, 2013.

²² S. B., Jeghegnadjor, 2014.

²³ S. M., Arevik, 2012.

**Ֆակուլտ Ծախցկի
«Ազատ եկեղեցի» և «Անաստված». Հակակրոնական գաղափարախոսությունը Խորհրդային Հայաստանում**

Սովետական կարգերի վաղ շրջանում Հայաստանում հակակրոնական քարոզչությունն իրականացվել է ոչ թե մամուլում, այլ հիմնական քաղաքներում Ալեքսանդրապոլում ու Երևանում գործող ազիտատորների միջոցով: 20-րդ դարի սկզբին կոմունիստներն այդ գործելակերպին էին դիմում միայն Ծննդյան տոնի և Զատիկի նախօրեին: Ակտիվ դեր էին խաղում, ինչպես և Հայաստանի կառավարման ողջ գործընթացում, Կենտկոմի աշխատակիցները, հատկապես նրա ազիտ բաժանմունքից (агитотдел): Առաջին կանոնավոր լույս տեսնող թերթը «Ազատ եկեղեցի»-ն էր, որի նպատակը ոչ թե ողջ հասարակության, այլ հատկապես հին ու նոր մտավորականության վրա ազդելն էր: Ավելի լայնամասշտաբ քարոզչություն սկսվեց ՀԽՍՀ Մարտնչող անաստվածների միության հիմնումով և նրա օրգան «Անաստված» պարբերականի լույսընծայումով: Հոգվածների ու ծաղրանկարների թեմաները փոփոխվում էին բոլշևիկների ներքին քաղաքականության զարգացմանը զուգընթաց: 1929-1932 թթ. ամենից տարածվածներն էին հոգևորականության կաշառակերությունն ու անբարո վարքը, եկեղեցու պահպանողական դիրքը զանգվածների կրթության և գիտության ու տեխնակիայի զարգացման հանդեպ և ի վերջո՝ գյուղատնտեսության կոլեկտիվացման եկեղեցու սաբոտաժը:

Այս հակակրոնական հրատարակչական գործունեության արդյունքները դժվար է գնահատել: Տվյալներ չկան նաև այդ գործողությունների հանդեպ հայ հասարակության իրական վերաբերմունքի մասին: Հայաստանում հակակեղեցական քարոզչության ամբողջական պատկերը ստանալու համար անհրաժեշտ են լրացուցիչ հետազոտություններ: Այս հարցում էական դեր կարող են խաղալ ընդլայնված ազգագրական պրպատումներն ու ձայնագրությունների ուսումնասիրությունը: