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# Demonizing Judaism in the Soviet Union during the 1920s

Robert Weinberg

The Kremlin's efforts to suppress Judaism are well known. During the 1920s the communist regime closed synagogues, frequently transforming them into workers' clubs; forbade the publication of prayer books and other religious texts; outlawed the teaching of and publishing in Hebrew; shut the doors of religious schools and rabbinical seminaries; and harassed, hounded, and often arrested rabbis. In addition, the authorities made it difficult for Jews to observe the Sabbath and other religious holidays, and, to spearhead the campaign against Judaism, they published antireligious works.<sup>1</sup>

Recent scholarship on the history and culture of Soviet Jewry has expanded on the work of a previous generation of scholars to provide a fuller picture of the efforts by party and government activists to secularize Soviet Jewish society as a prelude to the building of socialism in the first decade or so of communist rule. Along with coercion and repression, the communist regime also employed "softer" measures such as the printed word and visual imagery to undermine the hold that Judaism had on most of the nearly two and a half million Jews then living under Soviet power.

Many people tend to view Soviet Jews of the 1920s as victims of an unrelenting and vicious government program to snuff out their religious life and culture. Yet many Soviet Jews championed the communist cause and eagerly participated in the campaign against Judaism.<sup>2</sup> To use Yuri Slezkine's elegant formulation: "In Soviet Russia, young Jews had, in fact, grabbed the 'rings attached to heaven and earth' and pulled heaven down to earth

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1. Some of the better known works covering this period are Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917–1930* (Princeton, 1972), and Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, 2d ed. (Bloomington, 2001); Lionel Kochan, ed., *The Jews in Soviet Russia since 1917*, 3d ed. (Oxford, 1978); Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917: Paradox of Survival* (New York, 1988); Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988); Solomon Schwarz, *The Jews in the Soviet Union* (Syracuse, 1951).

2. See David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918–1930* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004); Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington, 2006); Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2004); Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Jewish Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage* (Bloomington, 2000); and articles in Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union* (London, 1995). See also Zvi Gitelman's pioneering work on the Jewish Sections: *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*.

(as Babel puts it).”<sup>3</sup> For every rabbi such as my grandfather who sought refuge in the United States in 1923, there was another Soviet Jew, such as my grandfather’s brother-in-law, who stayed behind and took advantage of the opportunities the Soviet regime offered to nonreligious Jews.

Antireligious activists relied on the power of the word to express their message that Judaism served the interests of the Jewish bourgeoisie intent on exploiting the vast majority of Soviet Jews who eked out meager livelihoods. In the 1920s Soviet representations of religious Jews and Judaism linked them to the evils of capitalism and the efforts to subvert communism and hold back the march of history. But like early Soviet filmmakers, who recognized that the moving image had the potential to reach more people than written material because it did not require a literate audience, the regime’s antireligious activists also valued the power of visual imagery to convey the communist message to as broad an audience as possible. In particular, the pages of various Russian-language antireligious publications provide a treasure trove of visual material that allows us to explore the attitude toward Judaism and observant Jews under Soviet power. For the most part, the use of visual images has escaped the sustained notice of scholars interested in the history of Soviet Jewish society and culture in the 1920s. One possible explanation is that scholars interested in this topic have relied primarily on Yiddish periodicals and newspapers and overlooked the Russian-language press. Correctly believing that the Russian publications devoted most of their space to Russian Orthodoxy, scholars nevertheless have neglected the not inconsiderable space allocated to attacking various aspects of Jewish life and culture, such as Judaism’s rituals and holidays, Zionism, and religious traditionalism, as part of a campaign to demystify religion for its readers. These portrayals of Judaism and religious Jews provide the opportunity to explore heretofore overlooked cultural and political dimensions of early Soviet policy toward Jews and Judaism.

Soviet depictions of religious Jews drew upon well-established stereotypical, anti-Jewish motifs such as big noses, thick lips, oversized ears, and greasy, scraggly beards and hair. But they also introduced new and obscure features such as a single eye and a nose in the shape of a fist. I focus on these two physiognomic traits in this article because they reveal the mixing of secular and religious motifs and illuminate the nature of antisemitism in early twentieth-century Russia.<sup>4</sup> A vast literature on the history of antisemitism in Europe exists, with most accounts stressing how, for the most part, secular concerns accounted for antisemitic policies and attitudes from the nineteenth century onward. In contrast to earlier manifestations of antisemitism stemming from medieval Christian values and prejudices, antisemitic behavior and beliefs for the past two hundred years have their roots in socioeconomic, political, and ideological developments con-

3. Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, 215.

4. Both the content and style of the drawings discussed in this article are extremely rich and evocative. I make no effort to analyze all aspects of their imagery and symbolism. All images presented in this article can be found in color on the *Slavic Review* web site: <http://www.slavicreview.uiuc.edu>.

nected to the civil and political emancipation of Jews, the development of the nation-state, the spread of capitalism, and the emergence of racial theories that used biology to explain differences among groups of people. In short, historians tend to distinguish between the religiously based Jew-hatred of premodern Europe and the racial and political antisemitism of late modern Europe.<sup>5</sup> This distinction notwithstanding, the legacy of Christian anti-Judaism continued to influence the form and content of antisemitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

John Klier offered a corrective to the view that evaluates Jewish policies in late imperial Russia and pogroms primarily using the lens of religious antisemitism. He noted that “religious prejudice alone” does not explain anti-Jewish attitudes and behavior and stressed that “the easy equation of Jews with the devil and satanic forces” and other myths about Judaism and Jews were “motifs of hatred . . . borrowed by Russia from the West.”<sup>6</sup> I share this skepticism that tsarist anti-Jewish policies can be explained in terms of religious prejudice and concur that social, economic, and political considerations better explain pogroms and government discrimination against Russian Jewry. Still, the impact of what Klier termed “traditional Russian religious Antisemitism” needs to be reckoned with when we turn to visual depictions of Judaism and its adherents in the early Soviet period. The ritual blood accusation and fear of the Talmud as a text that prescribed the path toward Jewish domination of Christians may have originated in non-Orthodox Christian Europe, but these prejudices were firmly entrenched in Russian religious and popular culture by 1900, sharing the limelight with secular considerations regarding the dangers Jews posed to Christians. The “fantastic, esoteric, or even supernatural” accusations that formed part of the anti-Jewish prejudices of late imperial Russia continued to shape attitudes toward Jews and Judaism after 1917.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, the illustrations examined here support Eugene Avrutin’s contention that racialist thinking, especially the belief that Jews possess “an ethno-racial” quality or “innate Jewishness” separate from Judaism, can be noticed to some extent in certain aspects of Russian antisemitism.<sup>8</sup> The critique of Judaism and religiously observant Jews during the early Soviet era suggests a tendency to attribute to Jews indelible charac-

5. For example, Marvin Perry and Frederick Schweitzer, *Antisemitism: Myth and Hate from Antiquity to the Present* (New York, 2002); Albert Lindemann, *Esau’s Tears: Modern Anti-Semitism and the Rise of the Jews* (New York, 1997); Robert Wistrich, *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* (London, 1991); Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700–1933* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980); Robert Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism* (Berkeley, 1997); and Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley, 1990).

6. John Klier, “Traditional Russian Religious Antisemitism,” *Jewish Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 30–31.

7. John Klier, *Imperial Russia’s Jewish Question, 1855–1891* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 417.

8. Eugene Avrutin, “Racial Categories and the Politics of (Jewish) Difference in Late Imperial Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 18–19. For a different view, see Eli Weinerman, “Racism, Racial Prejudice and Jews in Late Imperial Russia,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no. 3 (July 1994): 442–95.

teristics that mark them as Jews regardless of their religious proclivities, though this was a far cry from sharing the premises of biological antisemitism on the ascendance at this time elsewhere in Europe. As I hope to make clear in what follows, the illustrations examined here indicate that views toward Jews and Judaism in the early Soviet period drew sustenance from religious and secular antisemitism but stopped short of embracing the explicit racism that characterized Nazi antisemitism. A commingling of attitudes, prejudices, beliefs, and customs developed over centuries, with timeworn Christian shibboleths mixing with fears of Jewish economic and political exploitation and a tinge of biological racism to create a vibrant tableau of antisemitism.

This visualization of Judaism and religious Jews in the Soviet Union during the 1920s drew upon the timeworn religious belief that Jews are in cahoots with the devil and possess inhuman traits. As we learn from Joshua Trachtenberg, demonization of the Jews has a long and rich pedigree, emerging in medieval Christian Europe and enjoying an enduring legacy that helped to fuel the antisemitic movements and ideas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Trachtenberg had in mind the Nazi movement when he wrote nearly seventy years ago, “the figure of the ‘demonic’ Jew, less than human, indeed, antihuman, the creation of the medieval mind, still dominates the folk imagination.”<sup>9</sup> More recently, Debra Higgs Strickland analyzed the belief that Jews were inhuman, thereby underscoring the long history of depicting Jews as monsters in an effort to visualize the nature of evil.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Robert Wistrich has noted that “the kinship of the Jew with Satan was firmly established by the late Middle Ages” and explored how in the twentieth century the Nazis “exploited and secularized familiar medieval images of the Jew as . . . demons, sorcerers.”<sup>11</sup>

Trachtenberg, Strickland, and Wistrich paid scant attention to Russia, but their ideas regarding the linkage between Jews and Satan find particular expression in one Soviet publication—*Bezbozhnik u stanka* (The godless at the workbench), an antireligious journal from the 1920s in which religious Jews and their god frequently assumed freakish, devil-like, and nonhuman physical characteristics. These depictions of rabbis and their congregants did more than poke fun and have a laugh at the expense of organized religion. They were vicious and unforgiving in their attack on the adherents of Judaism, marking observant Jews as alien, monstrous, and inhuman. Such visual representations were an effective way of dehumanizing—as well as demonizing—religious Jews and underscoring how Judaism purportedly stood in the way of building socialism.<sup>12</sup>

9. Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven, 1943), xii.

10. Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, 2003).

11. Robert Wistrich, “The Devil, the Jews, and Hatred of the ‘Other,’” in Robert Wistrich, ed., *Demonizing the Other: Antisemitism, Racism and Xenophobia* (Amsterdam, 1999), 4.

12. It bears noting that Jews have not been the only group of people viewed as “sub-human . . . with evil overtones.” See Ziva Amishai-Maisels, “The Demonization of the ‘Other’ in the Visual Arts,” in Wistrich, ed., *Demonizing the Other*, 44.

Rich with imagery, the drawings under scrutiny here are also laden with ambiguity and the potential for varied interpretations and diverse readings. This diversity allows us to glimpse the multiple and at times contradictory cultural and religious values and knowledge undergirding society during the early years of communist rule. This article seeks to uncover the roots of the motifs exhibited in the drawings and assess how readers—Jewish and gentile alike—may have interpreted what they saw. Clearly not all readers of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* understood the drawings in the same manner. This examination will also highlight the contradictory aspects of the Kremlin's campaigns against religion and antisemitism. Indeed, the representation of Judaism and religious Jews in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* may have worked at cross-purposes with the regime's efforts to combat antisemitism. At the same time as these illustrations that drew on antisemitic tropes and motifs demonizing Judaism appeared, the regime was adopting a strident official and public stance against any manifestation of popular antisemitism and anti-Jewish animus.

Issued by the Moscow Communist Party between 1923 and 1931, *Bezbozhnik u stanka* was one of several publications with similar titles that promoted the antireligious values of the regime through a materialist explanation of religion. Along with the newspaper *Bezbozhnik* and a journal also named *Bezbozhnik*, *Bezbozhnik u stanka* sought to undermine religion's hold on Soviet citizens, be they Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Catholic, or Jewish, through a combination of written texts and visual representations.<sup>13</sup> The publications also provided political activists with the material they needed for their work of promoting antireligious sentiment and secular values among the populace. While the overall messages that appeared in the pages of these various publications were remarkably similar, *Bezbozhnik u stanka* stands apart from the others in terms of its strident, militant tone, which reflected the preferences of its editors, who believed in an aggressive, interventionist campaign against religious institutions. *Bezbozhnik u stanka* started out as a monthly but turned into a biweekly; a typical issue comprised twenty-four pages with four to eight in color.

Notwithstanding the Communist Party's hostility to organized religion, the Kremlin in the 1920s did not (nor did it seek to) have a single "party line" in regard to antireligious tactics. Daniel Peris has noted that *Bezbozhnik u stanka* followed the preferences of Mariia Kostelovskaia and her supporters in the Moscow Society of the Godless, who had little sympathy for what they believed to be the moderate tactics of Emil'ian Iaroslavskii, the party official in charge of the government's religious policy

13. The journal *Bezbozhnik* (The godless, 1925–1941) and the newspaper *Bezbozhnik* (1922–1934 and 1938–1941) were sponsored by the League of the Godless, which spearheaded the antireligious campaign and took its cues from the Kremlin. Another journal sponsored by the League of the Godless, *Antireligioznik* (The man against religion), appeared between 1926 and 1941 and was intended to provide propagandists with historical background and methodological preparation.

for most of the 1920s. A member of the Central Committee and head of the League of the Godless, Iaroslavskii argued that religious belief and practice could not be wiped out through heavy-handed tactics such as arbitrarily closing churches, mosques, and synagogues and arresting clergy. Although he tended to get his way in most disputes with more militant antireligious activists, he did not always prevail when it came to editorial disputes with *Bezbozhnik u stanka*. Nor did he necessarily temper the aggressive policy of hounding and harassing organized religion in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup>

Reflecting its name, *Bezbozhnik u stanka's* intended audience was urban workers, and presumably both Jewish and non-Jewish workers as well as antireligious activists read the journal. It lagged behind other antireligious publications in terms of the diversity of its readership and tended to rely heavily on illustrations to convey its message, perhaps because the editors believed the visual image offered an easier way of reaching the intended audience.<sup>15</sup> During the nine years of its existence, dozens of drawings similar to the ones presented here appeared on its pages, and comparable motifs found expression in other antireligious publications. The drawings examined here offer a small but representative sampling of illustrations concerning Judaism, though drawings about Judaism and religious Jews were a distinct minority of the images published in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* and other such publications.<sup>16</sup> The messages of these drawings were not novel, but their visual depiction was sometimes unusual and unsettling.

In his book on political cartoons, Charles Press describes three kinds of political cartoons—the descriptive, the laughing satirical, and the destructive satirical. Destructive satire is “meant to be cruel and to hurt . . . the message says unmistakably ‘These creatures that I criticize are not human; they should not be allowed to exist.’”<sup>17</sup> To complement the government’s offensive against the institutional and spiritual foundations of organized religion, the editors of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* did not shy away from using grotesque caricatures and antisemitic stereotypes to deliver their message. Caricatures of dehumanized religious Jews surely caught the eyes of readers who might then pick up the journal for a more thorough reading. Such illustrations also facilitated the activists’ work because they contributed in no small measure to viewers distancing themselves from the subject, thereby making it all the more likely that readers would accept the harsh criticism of Judaism that the drawings conveyed. By

14. Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, 1998), chap. 2; and William Husband, “Godless Communists”: *Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (DeKalb, 2000).

15. The print run of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* fluctuated between 35,000 and 70,000, similar to the journal *Bezbozhnik*, but significantly less than the newspaper *Bezbozhnik*, a weekly under Iaroslavskii’s control. Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 74nn20 and 21; and Husband, “Godless Communists,” 60.

16. For example, of the approximately 140 issues of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* that appeared between 1923 and 1931, the covers of 12 included depictions of the Jewish god or touched upon Jewish religious themes. Of these 12, 5 were devoted solely to Jewish matters.

17. Charles Press, *The Political Cartoon* (East Brunswick, N.J., 1981), 76.

contrast, photographs or even realistic drawings ran the risk of arousing sympathy for religious Jews and their way of life.

Replete with unflattering portrayals of religious Jews and unsavory stories about Judaism and its rites and rituals, *Bezbozhnik u stanka* stressed the superiority of a secular worldview and Soviet culture over the obscurantist and exploitative religious world of shtetl Jewry. From the regime's perspective, the production and use of visual images that promoted secular values was an integral part of its broader project of building socialist culture and society by fanning the flames of class conflict on *di yidishe gas* (the Jewish street). Not surprisingly, the journal used a didactic, strident "class" line that glorified proletarian values and showed how religion and capitalism worked together to ensure the Jewish bourgeoisie's stranglehold on Jewish society.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of whether the stories focused on genuine events in Poland in the 1920s or used fictional characters and settings to explain why Jews under the tsars lived in poverty, these accounts highlighted the exploitation and oppression endured by working-class Jews at the hands of rabbis doing the bidding of capitalists. A crude materialist framework explained all aspects of Jewish life, from the origins of religious holidays and rituals to the contemporary circumstances of impoverished Jews. The parallels between the conflation of rabbis and Jewish bourgeoisie in the 1920s and the identification of the Russian Orthodox clergy with the kulak during the initial years of collectivization are striking, particularly in how these associations served the regime's political agenda.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes Jews are portrayed as embodying the spirit of capitalism and relying on Judaism to buttress their socioeconomic standing. This is especially true of rabbis, who were always depicted as the willing accomplices of the Jewish bourgeoisie. At other times, however, Jews are shown to play the role of victim who falls prey to the machinations of religious officials and capitalists. Certain articles of clothing such as shoes, hats, trousers, and jackets serve as markers for class and religiosity. Even body type is significant, with capitalist Jews depicted as overfed, fat, and self-satisfied. Jewish proletarians are invariably male, often weak and defenseless, but heroic and muscular if they have acquired the political consciousness needed to join the ranks of the revolution.

Women are mostly absent from the drawings presented here. Elsewhere in the pages of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* they appear either as the oppressed and downtrodden compatriots of male workers or as the crass, materialist wives of rabbis and Jewish capitalists.<sup>20</sup> In some instances,

18. Material concerned with Russian Orthodoxy and Islam were similar in tone and content in *Bezbozhnik u stanka*.

19. Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park, 1997), 259–65.

20. Drawings focusing primarily on women's concerns do appear from time to time. In a full-page color illustration of three Jewish women in a *mikva* (ritual bath), one of the women assisting with the bath has a misshapen, simian face and body, and the *mikva*'s water is teeming with several kinds of insects. A brief discussion of the religious function of the ritual bath accompanies the drawing, but the writer emphasizes the bath's unsanitary





**Figure 1. *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1924, no. 5: 10.**

Jewish women appear in the guise of assertive members of the revolutionary vanguard of the younger generation that has rejected the religious world of its parents. But since the illustrations examined here tend to focus on religious occupations not open to women, such as rabbi, cantor, or ritual slaughterer, the scant attention paid to women is not surprising. The artists, therefore, set their sights on those Jewish men involved in the public world of Judaism and ignored women, who tended not to play a visible role in the public world of Jewish affairs.

According to antireligious artists and writers, rabbis did more than just the bidding of the capitalist exploiters of the common Jew: the complex set of Jewish dietary laws and rituals worked to keep the average Jew impoverished, while ensuring rabbis and others a decent living. For example, once a year religious dictates required Jews to clean their kitchens of all food that was not deemed kosher for Passover. The added expense of buying new food was compounded by the fact that rabbis frequently enjoyed a monopoly on the sale of Passover items, particularly the special flour for baking matzah. As the antireligious activists saw it, these unnecessary extra expenses went directly into the rabbis' pockets. This system of religious directives served only to keep the rank-and-file Jew downtrodden and beholden to religious authorities, thereby contributing to the socioeconomic and political oppression of capitalism. The aura of doing God's work and the authority of the clergy (especially rabbis) were seen as supporting the system in which workers were to obey their employers and accept their living and working conditions.

Figure 1 shows Jehovah, Allah, Buddha, and the Christian god assisted by Jesus attending to their respective flocks. Behind each deity stands a capitalist literally holding the tethers attached to each god's congregants. In the first panel from the left, the text reads: "Question: Which god is

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nature. Interestingly, the story on the mikva precedes one written by a physician who claims to expose the link between religious prejudice and the prevalence of venereal disease among Russian men and women. *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1924, no. 6: 16 and 17.



**Figure 2.** “The Rabbi Preacher,” *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1925, no. 5: 3.

real? Answer: All gods are real so long as the master supports them.” The message is clear: the capitalists control society and use religion to instill obedience among believers. The next panel notes: “Religion is, always and everywhere, a weapon of class rule. Religion helps the ruling classes control the thoughts of workers for whatever benefits the ruling classes. If a religion grows out of date, they change it. But the change in religion only means that a worn-out, decrepit bridle is replaced with a new, up-to-date one.”

Judaism served the interests of the bourgeoisie by encouraging docility among the workers. In figure 2, a stout, well-dressed man wearing a top hat—a marker of the capitalist in the socialist and communist press in Europe and the United States—tells the assembled workers, presumably his employees, to listen to what the rabbi says because “Jehovah speaks through his mouth.” Figure 3 similarly shows how the rabbi’s religious ministrations help the bourgeoisie to steal from the worker who is unaware of his victimization. The text, which is a play on the verb *to purify* or *to cleanse*, reads: “Rabbi: Purify your heart. Bourgeois: So I can clean out your pockets.”

In figure 4, a Jewish shoe store owner wearing a prayer shawl and phylacteries exhorts his dejected worker, “You are a Jew, and I am a Jew: we

Рисунки Горшмана.



Раввин: Очисти сердце твое.  
Буржуй: Чтобы мог я очистить карманы твои.

Figure 3. “Purify Your Heart,” *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1925, no. 8: 8.

are the children of one God. You toil, and I will trade—this is the way it should be and Jehovah wants it this way. But if you sell to the atheist *goyim* and listen to them, then misfortune will befall us, the Jews, and Jehovah.”<sup>21</sup> The reference to selling to “the atheist *goyim*” is a not-too-subtle jibe at the supposed clannishness of Jews. Watching over the Jewish shopkeeper is a one-eyed Jewish god with two fangs, a reminder of the supposed blood-sucking tendencies of Jewish businessmen (the significance of the single eye is discussed later in this article). The worker’s gnarled, calloused hands stand in sharp contrast to the smooth hands of his boss.

Figure 5 depicts a self-satisfied Jewish bourgeois on a walk with Jehovah, who, in addition to having only one eye, has acquired some of the physical attributes of a small dog. The dog, though, also has some of a rabbi’s stereotypical features: beard, sidelocks, skullcap, prayer shawl,

21. A phylactery (*tefila* [singular], *tefilin* [plural] in Hebrew) is a small, leather case containing pieces of paper with passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. During morning prayers a pious Jew uses leather strips to fasten one phylactery to the forehead and another to the left arm.



Figure 4. “Children of One God,” *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1925, no. 11: 9.

phylacteries, and thick lips. The smug-looking, well-fed capitalist, sporting spats and formal attire, other markers of the bourgeois, is walking alongside a military officer. There is no way to tell whether the event takes place in prerevolutionary, tsarist Russia or the capitalist west after 1917. Jehovah has picked up the scent of workers who are staging a rally, presumably led by a revolutionary, in the woods near a factory. In an allusion to the military’s willingness to come to the aid of the capitalist, the Jewish bourgeois says to the dog on the leash, “Jehovah, you should assemble all of your people, find your lost children who are hiding around here somewhere; this gentleman lieutenant-colonel will help us.”

Both parts of figure 6 also depict the Jewish middle class and clergy as avaricious, hypocritical, and self-serving. In the left panel, the one-eyed, thick-lipped Jehovah with his hands held in the priestly benediction watches over Yom Kippur services.<sup>22</sup> In the right panel this “Jehovah” is

22. Devotees of *Star Trek* will no doubt recognize the priestly benediction as the Vulcan hand greeting (“Live Long and Prosper”) used by Mr. Spock, played by Leonard Nimoy. Nimoy has said that he remembered the gesture from services in the Montreal synagogue he attended as a youth.



**Figure 5. “Jehovah, Assemble Your People . . .,” *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1924, no. 1: cover.**

unmasked as a double-chinned Jewish capitalist, complete with spats and ample girth, who is gorging himself on roast pig and wine on Yom Kippur, in sharp contrast to religious proscriptions. The hands hang on a coat rack, while the mask lies casually on the floor. Peering through the window are two workers who seem amused by their discovery of the capitalist’s deception. In this drawing the Jewish capitalist has disguised himself as the Jewish god, thereby illustrating how Judaism is an elaborate sham that ensures the servility of the community, fosters acceptance of the status quo, and thus secures the ability of the well-to-do Jewish bourgeoisie to not only live well but also hypocritically flout the norms of Judaism.

The bourgeois’s artifice underscores the communist belief that observant Jews pray to an illusionary god, a god who has no independent existence outside the self-serving machinations of the bourgeoisie. The

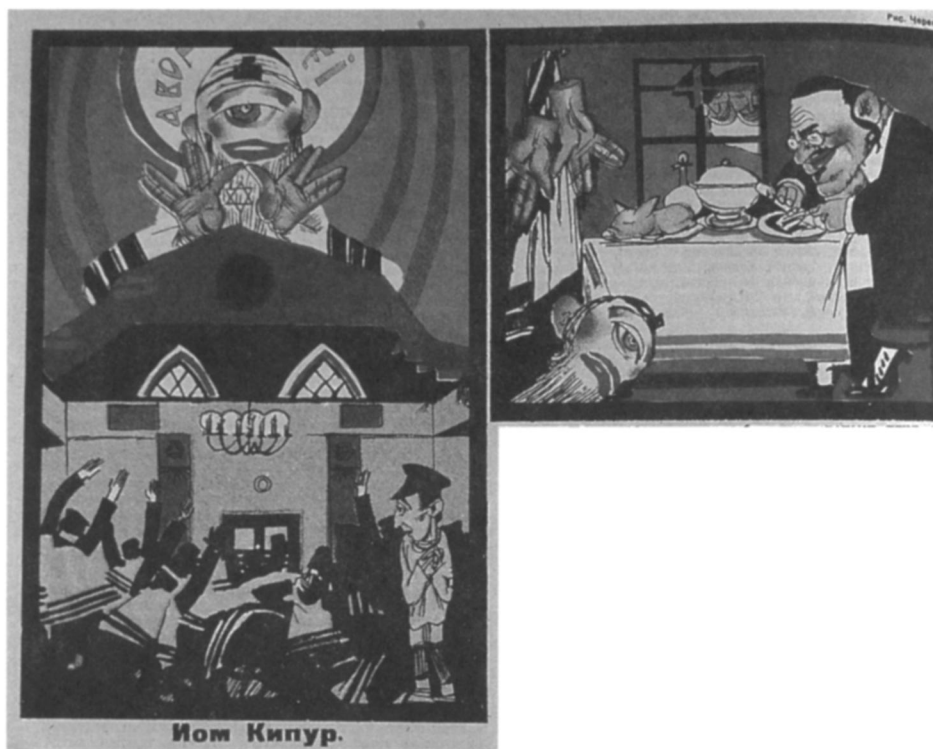
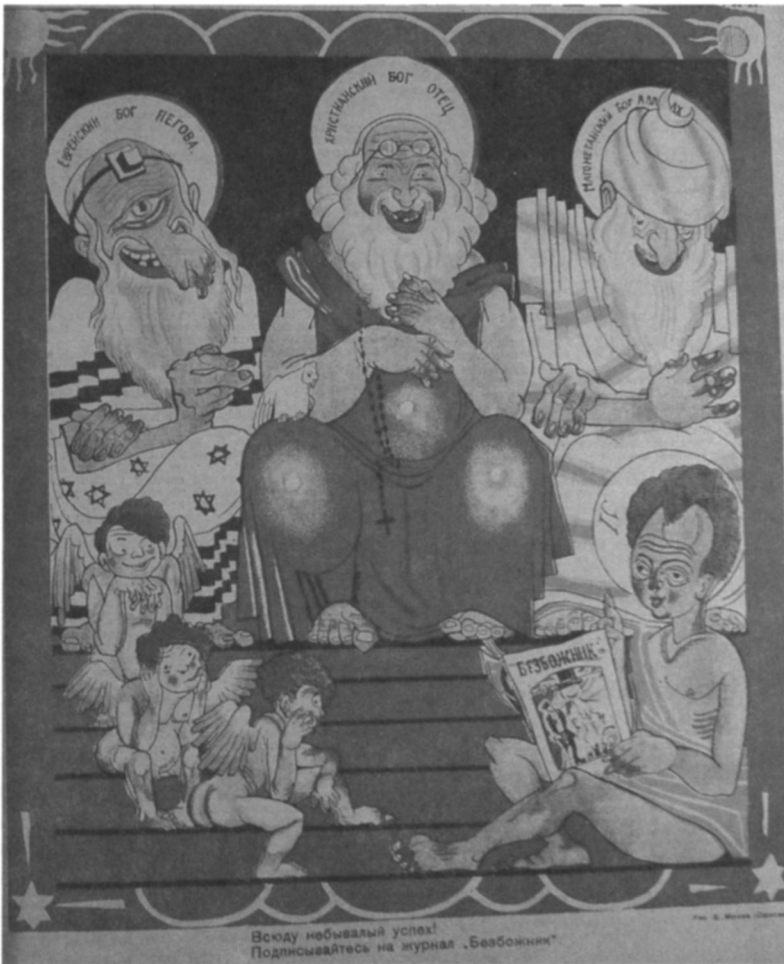


Figure 6. "Yom Kippur," *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1923, no. 6: 6.

fact that the capitalist, a class enemy of the revolution, wears a mask to deceive those whom he exploits underscores the Bolsheviks' preoccupation with political transparency. The fear that socialism's enemies concealed their true selves dominated the Kremlin's thinking and characterized the political witch hunts of the 1920s and 1930s. The regime exhorted society to unmask the enemies of the people in order to expose these efforts to fool the proletariat.<sup>23</sup>

The pictures of the Jewish god published in *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, virtually since its inception, depict a god with one eye. In these drawings a single eye dominates the face, which frequently features a long, white beard, thick lips, and big ears. The one-eyed Jehovah is usually wearing a prayer shawl and phylacteries. For example, the cover of the April 1923 issue (figure 7) depicts, from left to right, the Jewish god, the Christian

23. On the notion of political transparency during revolutionary eras, see Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984), esp. 44–46 and 72–74. See also Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, 1999), where she discusses the unmasking of enemies during the purges of the 1930s. The Bolshevik fixation on unmasking enemies can be seen in other visual representations of the time. For example, Viktor Deni's 1920 poster "The Entente under the Mask of Peace" shows a capitalist holding a face mask with a peaceful repose that conceals his real face, which is threatening and odious. For a reproduction of the Deni poster, see Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven, 1988), 17.



**Figure 7. *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1923, no. 4: cover.**

god, and the Muslim god. All three deities have bushy beards and halos, and they appear to be enjoying themselves as they look down upon three angels with varying expressions listening to an iconic Jesus read from an earlier issue.<sup>24</sup> Arrayed to the right of Jesus, the first angel holds his hands to his face with an expression of shock or horror, the next listens intently, while the third wears a mischievous grin that suggests he is relishing what he is hearing. The deities are all somewhat comical, but only the Jewish god has any inhuman physical attributes, namely the single eye and a nose in the shape of a fist.

In the next issue, a full-page illustration shows a barefoot Jehovah with one eye, thick lips, a long straggly beard, and no nose at all, wearing phylacteries and a skull cap. Suspended inside Jehovah's sagging (per-

24. The editors added “u stanka” soon after they issued the second number in order to distinguish the journal from the newspaper *Bezbozhnik*.



**Figure 8. “Jehovah,”** *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1923, no. 5: 4.

haps pregnant) abdomen is a fat-cat capitalist holding bags of rubles, underscoring the connection—indeed, one might say the biological link—between Judaism and capitalism. In Hebrew-styled lettering at the top of what appears to be a halo, is the word *Jehovah* spelled backwards—clearly a reference to the fact that Hebrew is written from right to left. The artist employs the antiquated letter *j*, which had been eliminated during the 1918 language reform of Russian. The lack of shoes is presumably an allusion to *Kohanim* (Hebrew priests from biblical times; singular *Kohan*) who performed their duties in the temple barefoot.<sup>25</sup>

This one-eyed Jehovah served as the model for the Jewish god. While in figure 8 Jehovah’s hands extend palm outward from the thumbs, it is clear in figure 6 (left panel) that he is engaged in the Priestly Benediction in which the *Kohan* stretches both arms and hands forward, extends the fingers straight ahead, while holding apart the middle and ring fingers. Other one-eyed Jehovahs appeared in scenes—with and without other deities—on a regular basis until the journal ceased publication in

25. This practice stemmed from God commanding Moses to remove his shoes as he approached the burning bush.





**Figure 9. "Talmud," *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1923, no. 7: 14.**

1931.<sup>26</sup> For example, figure 9 shows a rabbi preparing to cane a Jewish youth. A stout capitalist dressed in top hat, spats, and a black suit holds a volume of the Talmud, while a one-eyed Jehovah, impressed between the pages of the book, watches the punishment. The drawing vividly depicts religious authorities and Jewish capitalists literally beating knowledge of Judaism into Jewish youths, no doubt a reference to the idea of the abusive *kheder* (Jewish elementary school) teacher found in east European Yiddish literature and memoirs.

Figure 10 underscores the connection between Jews and capitalists by depicting a religious Jewish industrialist (again note the prayer shawl, phylacteries, sidelocks, spats, top hat, distended stomach, and watch fob) praying to God, who appears as a heavenly visage emanating from the smokestacks of the factories in the background. God's emanation from the smokestacks reinforces the communists' argument that religion is a ruse conjured up by capitalists to ensure their domination over the workers. Once again, this one-eyed god possesses the other identifying attributes, particularly sidelocks, beard, prayer shawl, phylacteries, and hands

26. For example, *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1927, no. 4: 20; 1928, no. 9: 6; and 1930, no. 22: cover.



Figure 10. *Bezbozhnik u stanke*, 1923, no. 8:12. “Hear, O Israel” (Deut. 6:3); “The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the people on earth to be his people” (Deut. 7:6–7); “And you shall blot out their name from under heaven; no one will be able to stand against you” (Deut. 7:24); “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:12).

held to form the sign of the priestly benediction. The caption makes ironic reference to the passages in Deuteronomy and Leviticus that refer to Jehovah’s selection of the Jews as the chosen people and his promise to defend them.<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, this covenant is seen as allowing the industrialist to vanquish the barefoot Jewish worker (whose hand curiously resembles a crumpled priestly benediction) simply by kneeling in prayer before God.<sup>28</sup>

Although the messages of these drawings may seem relatively transparent to the informed eye, not all features of the illustrations are easily parsed. Victoria Bonnell reminds us that visual images “mean nothing by themselves, taken in isolation from their historical context.” Indeed,

27. Deuteronomy 6:3 and 7:6–7, 24 and Leviticus 26:12.

28. The kneeling may allude to the injunction against Jews’ prostrating themselves before false gods.

analyses of visual images require us to understand the values, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge (“cultural repertoires” in Bonnell’s words) of those viewing the images.<sup>29</sup> One function of political art is to “provide a visual script, an incantation designed to conjure up new modes of thinking and conduct.” Yet Bonnell cautions that “however powerful and persuasive these images may have been, however shrewdly they incorporated popular mythologies, viewers’ responses were unpredictable because visual representations are inherently polyvalent.”<sup>30</sup> The absence of an explanatory text that could help decode and demystify the drawings’ imagery enhanced the likelihood that typical readers of these publications would interpret what they saw using the “cultural repertoires” at their disposal. Press notes that “fancy artistic practices” can obscure an artist’s political intent because the “allusions may be too complex, elaborate or obscure. They may also get too involved.”<sup>31</sup> But Katherine Verdery believes that symbols are politically effective if their meanings are ambiguous, thereby allowing diverse audiences a range of possible multiple interpretations. Not all people will understand the symbols, or in this case the posters, in the same manner, but it is their very ambiguity that mobilizes groups of people politically.<sup>32</sup>

These representations of the Jewish god are a case in point. What is the significance of a god whose nose in the shape of a fist gives new meaning to the stereotype of a hook-nosed Jew? And would a public less educated than the artists who drew the pictures recognize the sign of the priestly benediction, understand why Jehovah stands barefoot, and have an inkling of the significance of the Talmud if no explanation was provided? Since the artists did not elucidate their imagery and motifs, readers of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* lacked verbal guidance on how to interpret the drawings as the artists intended, notwithstanding the difficulties of knowing their intentions in the first place. Did readers understand only some of the images and ignore those that were not comprehensible? In other words, could these drawings, which qualify as political cartoons, be an effective form of propaganda if their messages were too opaque and arcane? And why challenge readers with intricate images when propaganda works best when presented simply? Definitive answers to these questions are not easily reached, and in some instances evidence does not exist that would permit this. Still, it is possible to explore the range of interpretive possibilities and offer some tentative conclusions, no matter how speculative they may be.

29. Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, 1997), 14.

30. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 19.

31. Press, *Political Cartoon*, 20–21. “A good cartoon does not contain unnecessary complications in its imagery. . . . A related point is that the imagery should not get too complicated, because the artist may run the danger of saying more than he or she wants to say” (22–23, emphasis in the original). The artist also runs the risk of saying less than was intended, however, leaving a viewer who cannot or does not understand the cartoon.

32. Katherine Verdery, “Whither ‘Nation’ and ‘Nationalism’?” *Daedalus* 122, no. 3 (1993): 36–46.

Depicting the Jewish god with a single eye suggests several possible allusions. The single eye could refer to the all-seeing and all-knowing Jehovah, a symbol of monotheism. The Jewish god has no physical manifestation, but the single eye may represent the unity that Jehovah embodies. Or it might be an allusion to the belief expressed in the Midrash that Jehovah has one eye in order to watch over the Jews. In some German synagogues, one eye above the Ark where the Torah is kept symbolized God's protection. A single eye also appears on some tombstones in Jewish cemeteries.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, the single eye may be nothing other than an expression of the evil eye. Russian popular culture is rich with references to the evil eye, which can symbolize envy, jealousy, hatred, and even stinginess.<sup>34</sup> The artists may have simply been giving expression to the sentiment that Judaism and its defenders wished the worst for the Bolsheviks. It bears noting, however, that the evil eye tends to exist on a conceptual level, and we encounter its visual representation infrequently.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, visual depictions of the single eye were frequently employed as protection against the evil eye.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, discussions and depictions of the other remedies, gestures, charms, amulets, and behaviors believed to counter the evil eye's baleful effect were also more plentiful than depictions of the eye itself. In addition, the fact that "single-eyed" connotes sincerity, straightforwardness, and honesty only highlights the contradictory meanings of this image and casts doubt on the argument that the one-eyed god possesses the evil eye.<sup>37</sup>

Orthodox Russians would have been accustomed to seeing images of the single eye. Drawing upon the work of Boris Uspensky, Bonnell notes that as late as the nineteenth century, Russian icon painters painted the *velikii glaz* (the great eye) on icons and wrote the word "God" underneath as a way to capture the viewer's attention.<sup>38</sup> It is likely that the artists drew upon this repository of folk belief rather than the more arcane and unfamiliar territory of Judaism. But just as we cannot know what the artists responsible for these drawings had in mind, the artists could not be sure that the readers of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* would share their understanding of the single eye, whatever that may have been. Indeed, the artists may have deliberately used imagery that is open to multiple readings.

33. I thank my colleagues Nathaniel Deutsch and Martin Ostwald for these observations. Similarly, an all-seeing eye located within a triangle was used to represent the Supreme Being during the rule of Robespierre during the French Revolution. Like the Jewish deity, Robespierre's Supreme Being lacked physical representation. See Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992), 154–56.

34. W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (University Park, 1999), 32–34.

35. Pierre Bettez Gravel, *The Malevolent Eye: An Essay on the Evil Eye, Fertility and the Concept of Mana* (New York, 1995), 6.

36. Roswell Park, *The Evil Eye Thanatology* (Boston, 1912), 17.

37. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford, 1993), 2:2870.

38. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 42 and 159; and Boris Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, ed. Stephen Rudy (Lisse, Belgium, 1976), 39.

Another possible interpretation of the single eye involves the association between Freemasonry and Judaism. A familiar symbol of the Freemasons, this eye is best known to Americans as the one in the pyramid on the back of the one-dollar bill. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries conservative political forces and antisemites fostered the fiction that a worldwide Judeo-Masonic conspiracy existed, with some positing a connection with Jewish mysticism.<sup>39</sup> Detractors of Freemasons also believed that the latter were simply disguised Jews who worshipped the devil in the form of a goat. Such a belief was in common currency in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century and no doubt found a receptive home among some of Russia's educated public. After 1917 enemies of the communist regime blamed the supposed Judeo-Masonic conspiracy for the revolutionary upheaval that had engulfed Russia. But the Bolsheviks also found it politically useful to label Freemasons as enemies of the revolution.<sup>40</sup> Artists for *Bezbozhnik u stanka* may have drawn upon this popular association between Jews and Freemasons in their effort to denigrate both groups as counterrevolutionary forces.

Figure 11 was drawn sometime in the early 1920s by Dmitrii Moor, an artist well known for his revolutionary enthusiasm. Each of the two teapots shown here is emblazoned with a pyramid containing a single eye, providing a clear link between the one eye and Freemasonry. The angel holding the copy of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* delivers the message, "We have settled accounts with the earthly tsars, and now we are taking on the heavenly ones."

The single eye can also be linked to socioeconomic conditions in the Soviet Union during the 1920s. One frequent criticism of the New Economic Policy (NEP) was that it hindered the building of socialism by promoting market relations and private trade. In particular, scathing attacks accused so-called NEPmen of taking advantage of imbalances in supply and demand and making exorbitant profits by providing urban inhabitants with food and other commodities. In figure 12 from 1927, a single-eyed Jehovah with earthly clothes and human features, except for the one eye, is linked to a not-so-subtle criticism of NEP. Given the popular image of the Jew as capitalist willing to charge customers whatever the market would bear, it is not surprising that Jehovah (in this instance Jehovah is not spelled in reverse) sports a cravat bearing the inscription "NEPman." The lack of a beard and sidelocks suggests the efforts of some Jewish community leaders to enhance Judaism's appeal to younger congregants. For example, one synagogue in Moscow attempted to stem the exodus of congregants by hiring a new cantor and choir and making the building more

39. Marina Aptekman, "Kabbalah, Judeo-Masonic Myth, and Post-Soviet Literary Discourse: From Political Tool to Virtual Parody," *Russian Review* 65, no. 4 (October 2006): 659.

40. On the history of Freemasonry in Russia, see Douglas Smith, *Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (DeKalb, 1999); and Andrei Serkov, *Istoriia russkogo masonstva*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1997–2000). See also the review essay by Raffaella Faggionato, "New and Old Works on Russian Freemasonry," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 111–28.



Figure 11. Untitled work by Dmitrii Moor from V. Polonskii, *Russkii revoliutsionnyi plakat* (Moscow, 1925), 25.



**Figure 12. “The Shaven God,” *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1927, no. 11: 19.**

fashionable through repairs and upgrades. Even though it is unlikely that the rabbi of the congregation shaved (or was encouraged to do so), the artist chose to link the synagogue’s efforts to clean up the “look” of Judaism with the rabbi’s supposed grooming habits.<sup>41</sup>

Though Jews had been condemned as NEPmen elsewhere in the press and public discussions, figure 12 and others like it mark the first time that Judaism itself was targeted in a specific attack on NEP in the pages of *Bezbozhnik u stanka*. Although NEPmen were treated as a necessary evil, their activities bothered the regime’s officials, and the timing (that is, 1927) of this explicit link between Judaism and the perceived shortcomings of NEP is rooted in more than the belief that Jews were inordinately involved in commerce. The appearance of this drawing owes much to the dispute raging within the party regarding the future of NEP. The drawing is clearly designed to stimulate hostility to NEP by highlighting the Jewish connection.<sup>42</sup> As Alan Ball writes in his study of NEPmen, “the stereotypical, odi-

41. *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1927, no. 7: 10, no. 8: 7, and no. 9: cover.

42. The connection among NEP, Jews, and Judaism continued to resonate even after the decisive turn against NEP a year or two later. An issue of the newspaper *Bezbozhnik* from 1930 shows a drawing of a rabbi with the inscription “NEPman.” The illustration accompanied an article on how to make antireligious costumes for celebrating 7 Novem-

ous private trader was often assumed to be Jewish, and thus antisemitism and popular aversion to the Nepmen fed on each other.”<sup>43</sup>

Since medieval times, oversized noses have been signs of evil. And the Jew with a large nose is a familiar, timeworn antisemitic stereotype, so the appearance of this image in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* should not surprise the reader. Nor is it surprising that Allah also has a larger-than-life nose, suggesting that Jews and Muslim Arabs shared a Semitic physiognomy in the eyes of the artists drawing for the journal.<sup>44</sup> But what is the meaning of portraying the nose as a closed fist with the thumb extending between the second and third fingers as in figure 7? One possibility is the connection to the word *kulak*, which means “fist” and refers to well-off peasants who exploited poorer peasants. In the context of NEP, though, the word could easily be applied to Jews.

Another possibility is that the imagery refers to the *mano in fica* (the “fig” hand) where the tip of the thumb is thrust between the middle and index fingers. The gesture has been commonly employed in Europe to ward off the evil eye, with many people wearing amulets and good-luck charms with the *mano in fica*. But it is also an insulting gesture that indicates indignation. In addition, it is equivalent to thumbing one’s nose at someone or telling someone to “get lost.” In some contexts it may also mean “up yours,” serve as an obscene sexual invitation, or refer to female genitalia.<sup>45</sup> Simply put, the Jewish god in figure 7 is telling the viewer to go to hell. Since this gesture enjoyed currency in pre-1914 Russian society and was surely known among the general populace, its various meanings would not have been lost on most Russians.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to representing the Jewish god as single-eyed and having a nose that thumbs itself at the reader or some other person in the drawing, some pictorial representations add a goat to the mix. Figure 13 shows a man attired in typical working-class clothes (boots, cap, worker’s coat) opening a curtain behind which Jews, in kneeling, prostrated, or genuflecting positions, are fervently praying to a one-eyed Jehovah. The

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ber, the anniversary of the Bolshevik seizure of power. *Bezbozhnik*, no. 59 (25 October 1930): 7.

43. Alan M. Ball, *Russia’s Last Capitalists: The Nepmen, 1921–1929* (Berkeley, 1987), 165.

44. In addition to the illustrations in this essay, see also *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1924, no. 5: cover; 1927, no. 4: 20; and 1930, no. 22: cover; *Bezbozhnik*, 1928, no. 13: cover.

45. Andrea de Jorio, *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity* (Bloomington, 2000), 214–15. De Jorio’s original work appeared in 1832.

46. Periodicals on both sides of the political spectrum used the image after the 1905 revolution. The right-wing, antisemitic journals *Plivium* (1906–1908), *Veche stol’ nago goroda Kieva* (1907), *Veche* (1905–1909), and *Knut* (1906–1908) displayed their dissatisfaction with the liberal reforms granted by Nicholas II, while the left-leaning satirical journals *Gorchishnik* (1906) and *Gudok* (1906) used the image to emphasize their opposition to efforts to turn back the achievements of the revolution. The cover of *Gudok*’s initial issue from 1906 shows two sinister-looking, devilish hands giving the *mano in fica* to a rising sun that symbolizes the dawning of freedom in Russia. The caption reads, “The double-headed . . . *fica*,” a play on the tsarist emblem of the double-headed eagle.





**Figure 13.** “Now Is the Time to Disperse the Fog . . .,” *Bezbozhnik* (before the addition of *u stanka*), 1923, no. 2: cover.

worker is literally unveiling the truth about religion. The reference to the opening of the curtains of the Ark that contains the Torah scrolls, the revealed truth of God, is striking. But unlike other Jewish gods we have encountered, this one is wearing a top hat emblazoned with a double-headed eagle, the insignia of the Romanov dynasty, thereby underscoring the link between autocracy and religion. Moreover, when rotated ninety degrees to the right, the face of Jehovah bears a striking resemblance to a goat (with “Jehovah” written on its snout). Lightning bolts emanate from around its head and hurtle toward the congregants. The caption reads, “Now is the time to disperse the fog that the bourgeoisie has let loose on you. Down with this bastard of a religion.”

Given the religious foundations of Russian society and culture, the association between a goat and the Jews would undoubtedly have resonated for Russian readers of *Bezbozhnik u stanka*. As Trachtenberg wrote, the medieval Christian believed that the goat was “the devil’s favorite animal. . . . So close was the relation between them that an early fifteenth-century illustration picturing four Jews . . . represents Satan himself as having goat’s horns. The purport of this association of Jew and goat is quite unmistakable. A fifteenth-century sculptured figure in a Flemish

church shows a Jew astride a goat, facing its rear; the animal's hind hoofs are cloven, and its forefeet end in claws."<sup>47</sup>

This association still enjoyed popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century because it was reinforced by, and perhaps had its origins in, popular legends and biblical texts such as Matthew's account of the Last Judgment when the good (sheep) will be placed near God's right hand and the bad (goats) will be placed near God's left hand before being thrown into the eternal fire. As W. F. Ryan notes, "Perhaps for this reason one of the euphemisms for the Devil in some parts of Russia is simply *levyi*, 'the left one.'"<sup>48</sup> Despite their secularist agenda and their efforts to mobilize society against organized religion, the contributors to *Bezbozhnik u stanka* evidently relied on religious culture to conjure up the image of religious Jews and their god as allies of the devil, purveyors of evil.<sup>49</sup>

Since many of these drawings displayed an intimate knowledge of Judaism, the intriguing question remains how two of the most prominent artists who contributed to *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, Dmitrii Moor and Mikhail Cheremnykh, came by their information about Jewish rites and rituals, since neither was a Jew.<sup>50</sup> Hence, their use of such arcane religious imagery as the barefoot rabbi delivering the priestly benediction deserves explanation, as does their presentation of Jehovah with a single eye, since they appear to be the first artists in the Soviet Union, if not elsewhere, to use this depiction, thus suggesting a coordinated effort by themselves, if not the editors of *Bezbozhnik u stanka*.

Born in 1883, Moor (real name Orlov) was the son of a Cossack mining engineer. Despite having studied the natural sciences and law at Moscow University, he chose to use his artistic abilities on behalf of revolution. Well versed in the history and techniques of icon painting, Moor became a political cartoonist, specializing in caricatures of leading tsarist political figures, including the first published one of Nicholas II soon after the tsar's abdication in early 1917. After the collapse of the Provisional Government later that year, Moor embraced the Bolshevik cause (though he did not join the Communist Party until well after 1917) and turned to political posters as the medium in which to celebrate the dreams and optimism of the revolution in its early days. He also helped decorate Moscow for May Day festivities in 1918 and contributed to decking out the *agitprop* trains that spread the gospel of revolution. But he continued to draw cartoons that appeared in prominent newspapers, and by the early 1920s he had become closely involved with the publication of *Krokodil*, a satirical magazine, and was one of the founders of *Bezbozhnik u stanka*.<sup>51</sup> Moor was candid and passionate about his dislike of religion.

47. Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 47.

48. Ryan, *Bathhouse at Midnight*, 55. See also Matthew 25:33, 41.

49. Nevertheless, the Jews represented in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* do not have horns, another hallmark of antisemitic iconography associating Jews with the devil.

50. Of the illustrations that appear in this essay, Moor drew 1, 4, 5, 7, 11, 13, and 15. Cheremnykh drew 6, 8, 9, and 10.

51. White, *Bolshevik Poster*, 41–43; and Iurii Khalaminskii, *Moor: Sovetskii khudozhnik* (Moscow, 1961), 74. According to Khalaminskii, Moor drew partial inspiration for his de-

He believed that he should apply his talents to destroying it, going so far as to note that “graphic art acquired its full meaning in antireligious propaganda.”<sup>52</sup>

Mikhail Cheremnykh was slightly younger than Moor, having been born in 1890, the son of a retired military officer. He began his studies as a medical student at Tomsk University, but he soon quit to pursue his real passion at the School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in Moscow, where he most likely studied icon painting. He helped support himself by drawing cartoons for various newspapers, and after 1917 he threw himself behind the Bolshevik revolution as a poster artist. Along with the poet Vladimir Maiakovskii, Cheremnykh was the guiding light behind the *Okna ROSTA* (Rosta Windows, or Windows of the Russian Telegraph Agency, the Soviet Union’s first national press agency) that appeared from the second half of 1919 to January 1922. Cheremnykh created the first of these brightly colored and hand-painted propaganda posters that combined visual images and didactic text, generally a poem, about current events. The posters adorned public spaces in Moscow and Rosta’s wire service offices throughout the country.<sup>53</sup> Following the Rosta Windows campaign, Cheremnykh became involved in publishing *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, and along with Dmitrii Moor and others contributed his considerable artistic talents to the production and dissemination of the regime’s antireligious messages.<sup>54</sup>

Given their artistic training and the prevalence of religious motifs in Russian culture, it is not surprising that the influence of Russian Orthodox icon painting is evident in their drawings. Figure 7, for example, is replete with Russian Orthodox iconography: the three deities, representing the Trinity, are seated with their knees facing forward, and a dove, representing the Holy Spirit, rests on the right knee of the Christian god. The artists could reasonably assume that most Russian Orthodox viewers of the drawing would have at least some inkling of its religious frame of reference. Similarly, figure 11 would have likely conjured up images of the Last Supper.

But although the source of Orthodox Christian iconography can be explained without too much difficulty, the inspiration for Moor’s and Cheremnykh’s depictions of observant Jews and their god is murkier. To be sure, portraying Jews with large hooked noses, big ears, and thick lips is certainly not surprising given the deep roots of these stereotypes in European and Russian culture at the time. But knowledge of more obscure Jewish religious rituals and observances indicates an intimacy that suggests intensive study or detailed discussions with others, undoubtedly Jews, who shared their knowledge of Judaism with the artists. Existing materials do not allow us to resolve this matter with certainty, but it is reasonable to

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piction of the Christian god from the writer Lev Tolstoi and the anarchist Petr Kropotkin, both of whom had long, flowing white beards (75).

52. Khalaminskii, *Moor*, 73.

53. White, *Bolshevik Poster*, 65–71.

54. Nikolai Cheremnykh, *Khochetsia, chtoby znali i drugie . . . Vospominaniia o M. M. Cheremnykh* (Moscow, 1965), 95–114.

assume that Moor and Cheremnykh turned to their associates, many of whom were from Jewish families, at *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, in the League of the Godless, and elsewhere in the party and government bureaucracies for guidance, inspiration, and ideas. Many radical Jews embraced the Bolshevik cause and spearheaded efforts to spread revolution within the Jewish community.<sup>55</sup> Iaroslavskii, for example, the head of the League of the Godless, was a Jew born Minei Israilovich Gubel'man. Many of these activists came from religiously observant families, and notwithstanding their break from the world of their parents and grandparents, these Jewish Bolsheviks undoubtedly possessed first-hand experience with Jewish religious life that they could pass on to gentile colleagues.

The portrayal of the Jewish god with grotesque features paralleled depictions of the revolution's enemies in political posters.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the Bolsheviks frequently depicted their political opponents in inhuman, bestial terms. Beginning in the late 1920s, for example, the accusations lodged against Lev Trotskii and his supporters rendered the accused into monsters since only inhuman monsters could commit such heinous crimes. Village priests and peasants who resisted collectivization and viewed the Kremlin's policies as harbingers of the anti-Christ were also portrayed in monstrous terms. Indeed, the representation of religious Jews in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* preceded the pictorial depictions of Trotskyites and other "enemies of the people" and may have provided inspiration for these characterizations. Equating religious and capitalist Jews falls within the parameters of Bolshevik thinking and practice.

It is difficult to know what a Jewish reader would see when looking at the drawings. An increasing number of Soviet Jews were living outside the traditional Jewish religious, cultural, and social way of life, but even these acculturated Jews unsurprisingly had a better chance than gentile readers of grasping the specifically Jewish religious references in the drawings.<sup>57</sup>

55. Gitelman's book *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics* remains the best book on efforts to spread the revolution to Soviet Jewry. Other accounts of the efforts of the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia to reshape Jewish identity in the 1920s are Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, chaps. 3 and 4; Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*; Veidlinger, *Moscow State Jewish Yiddish Theater*; and Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*. See also Shneer, "Having It Both Ways: Jewish Nation Building and Jewish Assimilation in the Soviet Empire," *Ab Imperio*, no. 4 (2003) and no. 2 (2005).

56. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 190 and 197.

57. The following data offer one indication of the changing rates of acculturation. In 1897, at the time of the first empirewide census, slightly more than 97 percent of Jews residing in the Russian empire (excluding that part of Poland under tsarist control) reported using Yiddish or another Jewish language (Judeo-Tadjik, Judeo-Tat, and Judeo-Crimean) as their mother tongue. Among this same group, 31 percent of men and 16 percent of women claimed to have reading knowledge of Russian. Some thirty years later, in 1926, the percentage of Jews who stated they used Yiddish or another Jewish language as their mother tongue had declined to just over 70 percent. The rate of linguistic acculturation continued apace, and by 1939 a majority of Jews (54.6 percent) responded that Russian was their first language, slightly more than double the percentage recorded in 1926. Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust: A Social and Demographic Profile* (Jerusalem, 1998), 90–91; and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews, 1948–1967: A Documentary Study* (Cambridge, Eng., 1984), 18.

Such Jews may have been alienated from their Jewish heritage, particularly the religion of their parents, and sympathetic to, if not actively supportive of, the atheist message of antireligious activists. But the religious imagery would still have had a cultural resonance for them. Clearly, religiously observant Jews would not have responded positively to the images presented in this article, nor would they have been sympathetic to *Bezbozhnik u stanka's* atheistic message in general. But how would the Jews who were sympathetic to communism have responded? These images might have jarred their sensibilities and correspondingly reduced the propagandistic effect of the drawings. Yet we should not dismiss the possibility that Jews might demonstrate their commitment to the revolutionary cause by being more unfeeling to their co-religionists than were gentiles.

Gods and clergy of all religions were caricatured and lampooned in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* and other antireligious publications. Yet in most depictions the Jewish god appears more grotesque and alien than either Allah or the Christian god, who never look inhuman or monstrous, though they may possess exaggerated physical characteristics. These deities frequently have deformed hands, missing teeth, and menacing features, and in some instances, they resemble rabid dogs. But the non-Jewish gods never acquire the unearthly traits reserved for Jehovah, even when depicted in the same illustration.<sup>58</sup>

A representative sample is figure 14, where the Christian god resembles Santa Claus, a plump, jovial man wearing glasses and sporting a beard, while Allah wears a turban and has a hooked nose, as he does in many drawings. The slanted-eyed Buddha shown in an effeminate pose, carries a shoulder bag containing two women resembling geishas.

At times the portrayal of religious figures included elements of bestiality. Moor's rendition of the Last Supper in figure 11, for example, explicitly shows clergy engaged in cannibalism or perhaps human sacrifice. The presence of sausage and a roast pig on the table only adds insult to injury to the Jewish god, as well as to Allah. The sense of bestiality is heightened by the placement of the skewered, black-skinned imp on the plate in front of a mistrelesque black man wearing what looks like a diaper with matching tie and holding his hands in a position that recalls those of Jehovah in figure 8. The writing on his halo is *Arapskii bog*, which could either refer to a black god or to a god of deceit, swindling, and chicanery. The presence of an ox with horns (labeled as god's secretary) adds an additional element of bestiality to the drawing, as does the inclusion of several black-skinned, cloven-hooved imps whose hands resemble claws and who have triangular shaped eyes and horns reminiscent of the devil. The color black represented spiritual darkness and was frequently used for demons. In addition, black youths have a long association with the devil. Moor drew inspiration from this drawing when illustrating the cover of *Bezbozhnik u stanka's* premier issue in 1923 (figure 15). Remarkable similarity exists among the faces of the various gods. Though the representations of

58. See figures 5 and 7 and drawings in *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, 1926, no. 7: cover and 1930, no. 22: cover.

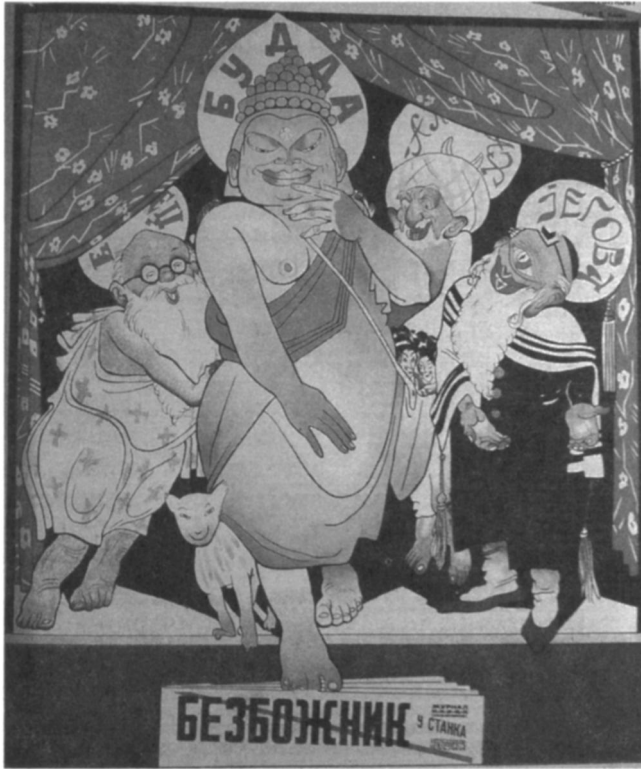


Figure 14. “Buddah,” *Bebozhnik u stanka*, 1924, no. 2: cover. In the drawing Jehovah, Allah, and Sabaoth are cajoling the evidently shy Buddha to go onto a stage. Sabaoth tells Buddha, “You are the only one, Comrade Buddha, who has not been publicly ridiculed.”

the Negro god and imps differ, in both drawings they have horns. In addition, the backdrop of teetering churches, mosques, and synagogues in both drawings suggest that they are on the verge of collapsing.

Moreover, the red tinge that appears on the fingers of the various gods in several drawings (figures 7, 11, and 14) conjures up images of bloodstained hands and reinforces the message that religion is murderous, impure, and dangerous, particularly for the younger generation.<sup>59</sup> Undoubtedly, the depiction of Jews with blood on their hands prompted thoughts of the infamous blood libel, the accusation that Jews need the blood of gentiles for certain religious rites and the baking of matzah.

From the regime’s perspective, people were redeemable, even if religion was not. *Bebozhnik u stanka* generally distinguished between deities and clergy, on the one hand, and ordinary people, on the other, who,

59. In the 1920s it was not an uncommon practice for the regime to accuse Orthodox priests of sodomy and pedophilia as a way to condemn organized religion as the corrupter of youth.

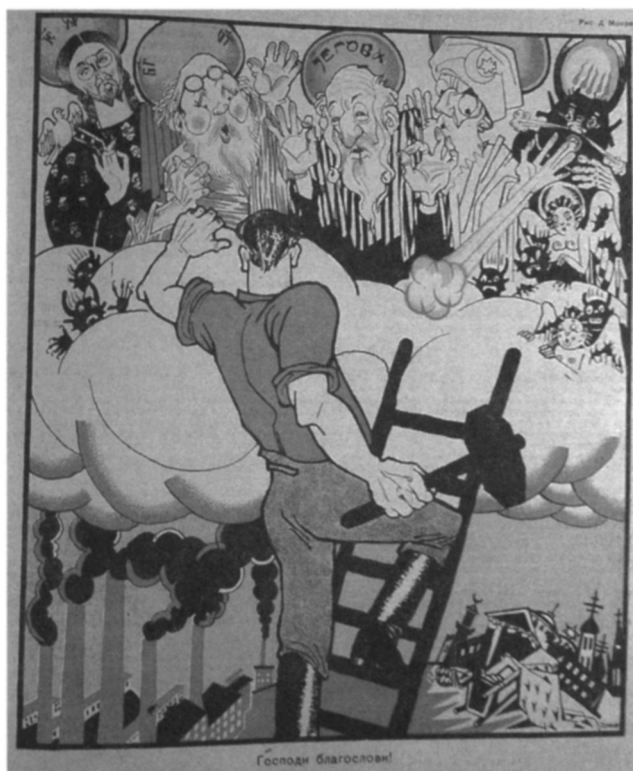


Figure 15. “God Bless,” *Bezbozhnik* (before *u stanka* was added), 1923, no. 1: cover.

notwithstanding their religiosity, could embrace the atheism of the communist movement. In other words, not all Christians, Muslims, and Jews were on the receiving end of *Bezbozhnik u stanka*'s ridicule. The depictions of observant Jews and their god, however, make one wonder whether the artists believed that ordinary Soviet Jews were redeemable. Lampooning an Orthodox or Catholic priest may have been considered poor taste and even blasphemous by many, but such caricatures did not associate all Christians with the perceived faults, shortcomings, and misdeeds of the clergy. Nor did viewers associate those physical traits with all Christians. After all, they could look in the mirror and see that they were not as plump and myopic as that priest caricatured in the drawing. But the same did not necessarily hold for Jews and Judaism, and the views of the vast majority of gentiles were shaped by popular attitudes, prejudices, and biases rather than by personal acquaintance.

Several considerations may help explain why antireligion activists singled Judaism out for “special” treatment on the pages of *Bezbozhnik u stanka*. As we have seen, the campaign against religion often drew upon antisemitic motifs in order to attack religion in general. In their effort to desacralize all religions, artists such as Moor and Cheremnykh may have relied on the long association between Judaism and the devil to under-

mine religion's appeal among the populace, an association that would have had less resonance if directed against Orthodoxy and was probably less risky in terms of sparking a backlash among religious believers.<sup>60</sup> Whether marking religious Jews as demonic and bestial reflected a conscious choice on the artists' part cannot be ascertained. But it is clear that the visual depictions of Judaism and observant Jews had "hazardous" consequences.<sup>61</sup>

The antisemitic heritage fueled a popular belief that all Jews, not just religious ones, possessed certain ineradicable physiognomic and character traits. Indeed, the caricatures of Jehovah not only fed off standard antisemitic stereotypes but also elaborated on them. The images of the Jewish god and religious Jews that appeared in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* in turn reinforced these perceptions. Familiar images or symbols may have confirmed what the viewer already knew, but unfamiliar imagery or symbolism may have confronted the viewer with an incomprehensible message that reinforced the mystery of Judaism and the Jews. Even if the general import of the drawings was clear, gentile readers may not have understood all the imagery and allusions. Still, the drawings would have resonated with readers on some level given how deeply antisemitic prejudices had permeated Russian society and culture. Perhaps the complexity of Jewish identity in terms of its religious, cultural, social, and historical components fostered the commonsense view that Jews comprised a minority group held together by more than religion. Jews therefore may have been seen to possess a set of physical features and attributes, or, in Avrutin's term, "ethno-racial characteristics," that Christians and Muslims lacked because their identities flowed primarily from religion, whereas Jews shared traits that were not only religious in origin.

But it would be unwarranted to conclude that the drawings in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* were cut from the same cloth as Nazi depictions of Jews. To be sure, the drawings of Jews that graced the pages of *Der Sturmer*, a Nazi newspaper that first appeared in 1923, are similar in many respects to those that appeared in *Bezbozhnik u stanka*. Though *Der Sturmer* did not depict Jehovah with one eye or a nose in the shape of a fist, the newspaper did show Jews with big hooked noses, oversized ears, and simian, and at times beastly, features such as talon-like fingers. Like *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, *Der Sturmer* also emphasized Jews' demonic nature. Interestingly, Jews depicted as Satan in *Der Sturmer* had horns, a characteristic that did not find its way into the work of Soviet artists.<sup>62</sup> Moor and Cheremnykh may have injected an element of ethno-racial categorization into their drawings, but their targets were only Judaism and religious Jews, whereas Nazi ideologues condemned all Jews, regardless of social class, economic circumstance, and degree of religious observance. For the most part, *Der Sturmer*

60. Islam could have served as a substitute for Judaism, but anti-Islamic prejudices lacked antisemitism's deep historical roots in Russia.

61. I thank Mark Steinberg for helping me with these ideas and coming up with the word "hazardous" to describe the impact of using antisemitic sentiments in *Bezbozhnik u stanka*.

62. *Der Sturmer*, no. 6 (February 1926): 1 and no. 28 (July 1927): 1.



paid little attention to Judaism, preferring to focus on the Jews' supposedly racial threat and economic and political exploitation of Germans. One exception was the connection drawn between the Talmud and the Jews' behavior that contributed to Jewish domination of German society.

The artists who drew for *Bezbozhnik u stanka* may have found it intellectually and politically convenient to dehumanize Jews because the devil analogy paralleled the Manichean worldview of the communist regime. As Elaine Pagels stressed in *The Origin of Satan*, secular fundamentalists view social and political conflict as a struggle between good and evil. This apocalyptic view of human society is one legacy of the Christian emphasis on Satan and the accompanying belief that Christians' "enemies are evil and beyond redemption."<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Pagels suggested that "Satan is a way of perceiving opponents. You may not believe the mythology of such a universe, but it's in you, a background perception."<sup>64</sup> Such an approach helps to explain the ease with which artists such as Moor and Cheremnykh presented images of Judaism that corresponded to those found in parts of the Christian scriptures.

Despite the regime's cautionary stance and concern not to offend religious sensibilities through propaganda, artists such as Moor and Cheremnykh and the editors of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* apparently ignored the warning, an indication that central directives were not always heeded, especially given the radical tendencies of the Moscow League of the Godless. In 1919 and again in 1921, the Communist Party expressed the concern that insulting the religious sentiments of believers would reinforce religious belief and play into the hands of the Soviet Union's enemies. A "soft" approach to religion characterized party policy until 1927 when repressive measures against clerics and religious institutions were revived.<sup>65</sup> It also lends support to the view that high Soviet authorities in the 1920s did not exercise, or even seek, total control of the media. The antireligious campaign was an important part of the Kremlin's policy in the 1920s and remained so after the end of NEP. The artists who published in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* may not have believed that their portrayals of religious Jews and the Jewish god with grotesques physical features would offend secular Jews. Or perhaps they were simply indifferent. The artists who drew Jehovahs with one eye and noses comprised of closed fists may not have intended for their depictions to buttress antisemitism. Nor did they necessarily believe that their caricatures were antisemitic, though we lack the evidence to know for certain. The same thing can be said about the explicit racist imagery in figure 11. In both instances the artists would, we can imagine, protest accusations that their political art reproduced

63. Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York, 1995), 182–84.

64. Elaine Pagels "The Devil Problem," in David Remnick, ed., *The Devil Problem and Other True Stories* (New York, 1996), 219.

65. See Richard Gregor, ed., *Resolutions and Decisions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, vol. 2, *The Early Soviet Period: 1917–1929* (Toronto, 1974), 65; Arto Luukkanen, *The Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917–1929* (Helsinki, 1994), 100; Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 313; and Arkadii Zel'tser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki 1917–1941* (Moscow, 2006).

and promoted antisemitism and racism. But the uncomfortable truth is that by drawing inspiration from a wellspring of anti-Jewish stereotypes and prejudices entrenched in Russian secular and religious culture they were probably incapable of grasping why their drawings could be labeled antisemitic or might bolster anti-Jewish feelings. This attitude would, in turn, reinforce prejudices toward Jews as an ethno-racial group of people whose physiognomy, along with their religion, marked them as essentially different from the rest of society and body politic. Intent on creating atheists, *Bezbozhnik u stanka*'s artists not only reinforced existing stereotypes and fears with their drawings that enjoyed wide dissemination, but they also created new images such as the one-eyed Jehovah with a fist for a nose. In the 1920s, for example, Moor and Cheremnykh's drawings (sometimes duplicates of what appeared in the journal) often appeared in other *Bezbozhnik* publications and inspired other artists who drew on the motifs.

After the demise of *Bezbozhnik u stanka* in 1931, drawings of Jews with hooked noses and Jehovah with one eye continued to appear in other antireligious publications, albeit much less frequently than in the 1920s.<sup>66</sup> The illustrations of the 1930s concentrated on demonstrating the supposed alliance between organized religion and fascism and other foreign threats to the Soviet Union, and it was not uncommon to see drawings of rabbis toting guns and wearing prayer shawls emblazoned with swastikas. The diminished attention paid to Judaism was also due to the energy now devoted to highlighting how organized religion, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church and its clergy, were undermining the regime's efforts to transform the socioeconomic landscape of the country through industrialization, urbanization, and collectivization.<sup>67</sup> Also, the regime may have viewed the publication of *Der apikoyres* (The atheist), the Yiddish counterpart of *Bezbozhnik*, as a sufficient use of resources in the fight against Judaism. During its brief existence between 1931 and 1935, *Der apikoyres* employed images similar to those found in *Bezbozhnik u stanka*, as did *Der emes* (Truth), the communist, Yiddish daily that was the equivalent of the Russian-language *Pravda*.<sup>68</sup>

As other historians have noted, the Kremlin's attempt to sow the seeds of atheism failed. The suppression of religion in institutional and structural terms did not necessarily translate into an increase in nonbelief among the populace. Closing houses of worship and harassing clergy were easier than erasing the belief systems of the religiously observant. Not only were antireligious activists too few in number, overworked, poorly trained, and ill-prepared, but they frequently did not understand the ideas and

66. As a publication of the Moscow party organization, *Bezbozhnik u stanka* likely fell victim to the efforts of the party's highest authorities to integrate all organizations devoted to the war on religion under the direction of one institution, namely Iaroslavskii's League of the Godless, renamed the League of the Militant Godless in 1929.

67. Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 75.

68. *Der emes* first appeared in 1918. Interestingly, the September 1934 issue of *Der apikoyres* has a drawing of a one-eyed Jehovah giving a bag of money to a capitalist.

tenets about religion that they were instructed to take to the people.<sup>69</sup> And by fostering suspicion of Soviet Jewry through their attacks on Judaism, the artists ironically countered the regime's efforts to combat antisemitism in the 1920s. The communist authorities wanted their propaganda machine to transmit the official values and ideas of the new socialist society in the making. Sadly, it is unlikely that the illustrations in *Bezbozhnik u stanka* succeeded in improving relations between Jews and gentiles, and they may have played no small role in keeping alive the persistent anti-Jewish feelings and attitudes that continued to characterize Soviet society for many decades to come.

69. See Peris, *Storming the Heavens*; Husband, "Godless Communists"; and Young, *Power and the Sacred*.