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*COMMUNISTS VS. CLERICS: THE SMOLENSK
CHORAL SYNAGOGUE, THE KHISLAVICHI
ROV SHTIBEL SYNAGOGUE AND THE
NEP ANTIRELIGIOUS CAMPAIGN*

The early Soviet regime viewed the Jewish communities of the former Pale of Settlement and in the western provinces of the RSFSR as a declassed or petit-bourgeois element to be transformed through productive labor.² When, during the “Jewish NEP,” the Communist Party’s Jewish Section (Evseksiia) turned its “Face to the Shtetl,” its primary goal was to make Jews productive or productivize them by transforming them into workers and peasants.³ Productivization became intertwined with the regime’s other major goal on the Jewish street – dismantling traditional religious culture and replacing it with a secularized Soviet culture and identity.⁴ In Smolensk and other locales where relatively large numbers of Jews lived in compact concentrations, Soviet policy mandated that these aims be met through indigenization (*korenizatsiia*), which entailed providing state services and conducting

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2. On Soviet “Jewish experts” and the “shtetl problem” during NEP, see Deborah Yelen, “‘On the Social-Economic Front’: The Polemics of Shtetl Research during the Stalin Revolution,” *Science in Context*, 20, no. 2 (2007): 239-301, esp. pp. 253-63.

3. Evseksiia leaders used the term “Jewish NEP” as a rhetorical means of tying programs aimed at “productivization,” such as the promotion of agricultural resettlement, vocational education, and production cooperatives among Jews, to the Soviet state’s larger economic goals. On the Evseksiia and Soviet Jewish policy during the NEP era, see Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917-1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972). On the project of productivization, see, for instance, Jonathan Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924-1941* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2005).

4. As before the revolution, commentators on Jewish affairs used the term “the Jewish street” to refer to the Jewish public sphere. On attempts to transform Jewish daily life, see Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006).

party agitprop campaigns in Yiddish.⁵ While the general outline of these policies was laid out decades ago in pioneering studies by scholars like Zvi Gitelman, recent research has been refining and revising our picture of Soviet Jewish life during NEP and has begun examining its local contexts.⁶

This essay examines the NEP-era Jewish antireligious campaign in Smolensk Province, and in particular attempts to transfer two buildings to secular use – the Smolensk Choral Synagogue and Rov Shtibel Synagogue in the shtetl of Khislavichi. It is based largely on evidence from the archives of the Evseksiia of the Smolensk provincial party organization, the Jewish Section of the provincial department of public education (GubONO), and the Nationalities Sub-Department of the provincial soviet executive committee (Gubispolkom).⁷ This evidence highlights the importance of local contexts and cautions us against treating all conflicts over religious institutions as regime-driven. It also demonstrates ways in which Jewish religious communities employed Soviet legality and mobilized public support to defend themselves – albeit temporarily – against the regime’s antireligious drives.⁸

The general contours of the NEP antireligious campaign

The NEP-era antireligious campaign was part of the larger project of creating socialist consciousness by eradicating “pernicious forces of darkness”

5. See David Shneer’s discussion of contemporary debates among the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia over the goals of *korenizatsiia* (which he translates as “nativization”) in *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004).

6. Much current work recognizes Gitelman’s influence while challenging some of his arguments (and, by implication, those of earlier scholars of Soviet Jewish life, like Solomon Schwarz). In some cases, these criticisms are implicit (e.g., Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004]), while in others it is explicit (e.g., Shneer’s *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture*; Jeffrey Veidlinger, *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2000]). One of the most noteworthy recent studies of a provincial Jewish community in the early Soviet period is Arkadii Zel’tser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917-1941* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2006).

7. Most regional Evseksiia documents are located in the State Archive of the Recent History of Smolensk *Oblast*, hereafter GANISO, fond 3 (records of the Smolensk Party *Gubkom*). The files of the Jewish section of GubONO’s nationalities sub-department, in the GubONO fond at the State Archive of Smolensk *Oblast*, hereafter GASO, fond r-19. The records of the Jewish sub-department of the *Gubispolkom* Nationalities *Otdel* are in the *Gubispolkom* fond, GASO, fond r-13. I also have made use of *Gubkom*, *Gubispolkom*, and Evseksiia documents in the formerly US-held Smolensk Archives material, National Archives and Record Administration Microfilm Publication T 86, “Records of the All-Union (Russian) Communist Party, Smolensk District, Record Group 1056,” hereafter cited as “Smolensk Archives” (with file numbers preceded by the German acronym for the All-Union Communist Party, “WKP”).

8. On the resilience of Jewish religious communities in 1921-1927, see Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality*, p. 314, Zel’tser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii*, pp. 246-47.

and mobilizing the population behind regime-defined values and goals.⁹ The campaign's prime target was the Orthodox Church, but it was also directed against all religious institutions and personnel, including those of Jews. Like other NEP-era campaigns, it proceeded in fits and starts and passed through distinct phases.¹⁰ During the Civil War the regime had routinely subjected clergy and religious institutions to "administrative repression" (arrests, confiscation of property, and, of course, disenfranchisement). In 1921-1923, administrative repression slowly began giving way to a "softer" approach that relied upon antireligious agitprop and *politprosvet* (political education).¹¹ Then, in late 1923, the regime adopted "a more liberal public policy regarding religion" based upon legal toleration of religious practice and religious communal organizations ("obshchinas of believers").¹² The Center decreed, for example, that local authorities could not close synagogues or prayer houses without authorization from the VTsIK.¹³ In 1924-1926, the Evseksiia restricted its antireligious campaigns to agitprop and *politprosvet* activities.

When, however, the regime's line on religion began shifting again in spring 1927 the Evseksiia's central leadership endorsed more aggressive administrative measures, such as the arrest and trial of melameds (teachers at elementary-level religious schools called khedars) and mobilization campaigns to "legally" close down synagogues. In fall 1928 new directives from the Center formalized the return to administrative-repressive measures which would characterize policy during the "Stalin revolution" of 1929-1932. The regime, however, still maintained the façade of legality in the closing of synagogues, in the name of protecting citizen's rights.

9. On the antireligious campaign as part of the project of creating a "new Soviet man," see Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in the Village* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1997). See also Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1998); William Husband, *Godless Communists: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 2000); David L. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2003). On legal restrictions against Jewish religious institutions and clergy during the NEP period, see Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, pp. 2-3 and *passim*; Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, 2nd, expanded ed. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 77-82.

10. This paragraph summarizes Zeltser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii*, pp. 230-52.

11. In Vitebsk, for example, the Evseksiia held public disputations and mock trials of melameds and rabbis, but it also used administrative measures to requisition synagogue buildings and shut down Jewish religious schools.

12. Zel'tser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii*, p. 244.

13. As Gitelman points out (*Jewish Nationality*, p. 313), resolutions of the Thirteenth Party Congress had restricted the antireligious campaign to "agitprop and educational methods," and in fall 1925 the Evseksiia Central Bureau called for an end to the most belligerent varieties of mass antireligious events, such as mass demonstrations and mock trials.

1922-1927: “The right to study and teach Hebrew to their children in their own homes.”

In a fall 1922 report on its work, the Smolensk Provincial Evseksiia claimed to have carried out “a firm and decisive struggle against clericalism which has picked up as a result of NEP.”¹⁴ The archival record, though, provides few examples of any such struggle. The provincial Evseksiia failed to conduct extensive antireligious agitprop, let alone implement repressive measures. It simply lacked the resources to do so: through 1926, the Smolensk Evseksiia was woefully under-staffed and under-funded and had very few cadres at its disposal.¹⁵ In early 1924 the provincial Evseksiia bureau confirmed that the cadre shortage had seriously undermined its antireligious campaigns.¹⁶

Although the Smolensk Evseksiia was (typically) slow to comprehend the shift in the Center’s antireligious policy, in 1924-1926 it restricted the antireligious campaign to *politprosvet* activities in schools and clubs, *Komsomol* agitation against the khedars, and annual agitprop drives in spring (vs. Passover) and in fall (vs. Rosh-Hashanah and Yom Kippur).¹⁷ In spring 1925, for instance, the Evseksiia organized anti-Passover events for needle-trade

14. *Sud’by national’nykh men’shchinstv na Smolenshchine, 1918-1938 gg.: Dokumenty i materialy* (Smolensk: SGPI, 1994), p. 51. The association of the revival of petty capitalism with the revival of rabbinical activity was characteristic of local Evseksiia rhetoric throughout the NEP period.

15. Secondary sources often present inflated figures on Jewish Communist Party membership in Smolensk. Merle Fainsod, and others following him, have reported that there were 732 Jews in the provincial Party organization in 1926. (See Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*, p. 443, citing Smolensk Archives WKP 303, 62-65; Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality*, p. 390, citing Smolensk Archives WKP 303 with no specific page reference). The 1926 Evseksiia report cited by Fainsod and others, however, clearly states (four times!) “Party members, together with candidates, as of January 1, 1926 [=] 333.” Smolensk Archives WKP 303: 58, 62, 63, 64; GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2614, ll. 92 ob, 103, 122, 125, 130, 133; GANISO f. 215, op. 1, d. 51, ll. 20-21.

Most local Jewish Communists showed no interest in “Jewish work,” a fact lamented continually by the *Gubkom* Evseksiia Bureau. Few had enough command of Yiddish to conduct agitprop in that language. The most able members of the region’s Evseksiia were former Bundists, Poalei-Tsionists, and SERPists from other provinces. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2931, l. 243; *Sud’by national’nykh men’shchinstv*, p. 79; GANISO f. 3, op. 2 (*Gubkom* personnel records), ed. khr. 148, kor. 28; ed. khr. 283, kor. 52; ed. khr. 214, kor. 40; ed. khr. 156, kor. 30; GANISO f. 1 (personnel records of the Smolensk *Gubkom*), op. 1, ed. khr. 2165, t. 3, d. 22504; op. 14, ed. khr. 1943-2, d. 78.

16. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2613, ll. 1, 2.

17. On antireligious agitprop and shtetl antireligious events, see Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, ch. 1. The Evseksiia had only a minor role in the most routine form of repression leveled at Jews, disenfranchisement. On disenfranchisement, see Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin’s Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2003) and “Soviet Citizenship, More or Less: Rights, Emotions, and States of Civic Belonging,” *Kritika* 7, no. 3 (2006): 487-528.

workers in the city of Smolensk; in fall 1925 it instructed local *Komsomol* cells and Pioneer units on how to conduct agitprop against khedars. In 1926 the high point of the spring antireligious campaign was a March 26, 1926 mass anti-Passover meeting at Smolensk's "Tomskii" workers' club.¹⁸ In fall 1926, though, the provincial Evseksiia failed to organize any antireligious activities for the Jewish high holidays.¹⁹

In 1924 and 1925, the Smolensk Evseksiia had the opportunity to mobilize behind attempts to secularize the Smolensk Choral synagogue building and the Rov Shtibel synagogue in Khislavichi.²⁰ Both attempts had been initiated "from below." Both failed, partly because they had run against the current of mid-NEP antireligious policy and partly because the local Evseksiia still had few resources at its disposal for mass mobilization.

In October 1924 the city's Jewish workers' club asked the Smolensk Evseksiia bureau to support a proposal to move the club from its current site – two small rooms in Zadneprov'e – into the spacious Choral Synagogue in Smolensk's central district. The synagogue already was state property, since the Soviet government had nationalized the land and buildings of all religious institutions in January 1918. But under Soviet law, religious communities contracted with local soviets for the use of such state property, and the Smolensk Jewish community of believers (*obshchina*) held a contract for the use of the Choral Synagogue building. Previous to 1924, petitions like that of the

18. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2613, l. 15; d. 3383, l. 6; Smolensk Archives WKP 14: 254; GANISO f. 3, p. 1, d. 3383, l. 13; GASO f. r-19, op.1, d. 4515, l. 259.

19. The Evseksiia's only achievement on the antireligious front in fall 1926 was the creation of two small, short-lived Yiddish-language "Godless cells" (sections of the League of Militant Godless). *Sud''by natsional'nykh men'shinstv*, 79; GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3383, l. 259; Smolensk Archives WKP 303: 61; GASO f. r-19, op.1, d. 4515, l. 167.

20. The following table presents the Jewish population in the city of Smolensk, Khislavichi, and other locales mentioned in this essay in absolute numbers and as a percentage of total population in 1920, 1924, and 1926.

Locale	#Jews In 1920	as % of total population	#Jews in 1923	as % of total population	#Jews in 1926	as % of total population
Smolensk	8,782	5	11,796	11	12,887	16
Roslavl'	2,673	11	5,786	20	3,254	13
Khislavichi	2,203	71	2,231	67	2,102	59
Liubavichi	1,320	58	877	49	987	50
Monastyrshchina.	1,944	71	1,787	77	1,350	62
Rudnia	2,203	71	2,097	71	2,235	62

Source: GASO f. r-13, op. 1, d. 667, ll. 6, 33, 48; GASO f. r-19, op. 1, d. 4515, ll. 18-20; Smolensk Archives WKP 14, l. 245; GANISO f. r- 3, op. 1, d. 2935, ll. 15, 30; L. G. Zinger, "Chislennost' i geograficheskoe pazmenshchenie evreiskogo naselenie SSSR," in *Evrei v SSSR, materialy i issledovaniia*, vypusk IV (Moscow: Izd. Pravleniia Vserossiiskogo ORT, 1929), l. 47. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

Smolensk Jewish workers' club had provided local officials with adequate legal justification for the secularization of church and synagogue buildings. In April 1924, though, the Commissariat of Justice informed the provinces that the VTsIK alone could authorize the dissolution of contracts made with religious communities.²¹ The provincial Evseksiia, confused as to how to proceed, sought guidance from the Evseksiia Central Bureau, which explained that "groups of citizens" could still petition for the transfer of synagogue buildings to public use, but that provincial soviets must direct all such petitions to the VTsIK.²² In this case, the Central Bureau instructed the Smolensk Evseksiia to work out new terms under which the city's Jewish *Obshchina* would continue leasing the synagogue property.²³ That appears to have brought the issue to an end, at least for the time-being.

In late 1925 the Smolensk Evseksiia received another petition regarding the take-over of a synagogue, this time in Khislavichi. In early November 1925, teachers and parents of students at the shtetl's Jewish primary school met to discuss deplorable conditions in that building. A section of the roof had collapsed and rain leaked into classrooms that were already cold (the building had no working furnace) and overcrowded. The situation was dangerous, but the local soviet would not fund necessary repairs.²⁴ One parent proposed that the soviet take over the new building of the Hassidic synagogue Rov Shtibel, one of nine synagogues in Khislavichi, and give it to the school. Fifty-nine parents signed a petition to that effect which they addressed to the local *sel'sovet*.²⁵

A flurry of local mobilization followed that appears to have been initiated not by the Evseksiia or the *Komsomol* (although party members participat-

21. Orthodox Christian communities also used cited legal contracts for the use of church buildings to defend themselves from the antireligious campaign. See Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred*, pp. 226-27. It should be noted that the Smolensk Jewish *obshchina* never based its claim to use the synagogue on the idea that it "owned" the building, although in Spring 1922 the *obshchina* did protest the local soviet's attempt to confiscate artifacts from the local Jewish museum on the (technically erroneous) basis that the law had not nationalized movable property. TsDNISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3986, l. 25. On seizures of movable church property generally, see Jonathan W. Daley, "Storming the Last Citadel: The Bolshevik Assault on the Church in 1922," in *The Bolsheviks in Russian Society: The Revolution and the Civil Wars*, ed. by Vladimir N. Brovkin (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 235-70.

22. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2613, ll. 1, 2.

23. On March 2, 1925 the provincial Agitprop Otdel and the Jewish *obshchina* signed an agreement that allowed the religious community to continue using the Choral Synagogue. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, l. 293.

24. The protocol of this November 1925 parents' meeting is in GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2935, l. 5. On ongoing funding issues regarding repairs to the school, GASO f. r-19, op. 1, d. 4515, ll. 25, 122, 223 ob.; d. 4588, ll. 19, 55; d. 4748, op. 1, l. 72 ob.

25. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2935, l. 5.

ed), but by the school's staff. On November 11 the school staff called a "citizens' meeting" that approved a resolution asking the provincial soviet "to take one of our nine synagogues and use it for a school . . . so that our 183 children are not put out on the street."²⁶ On November 12 the school's students took to the streets and marched from the school to the *volost*' Soviet carrying placards reading "Fathers, give us a place for a school!" and "Parents, help us get a new school!" After meeting with *volost*' soviet officials, the children paraded around the town center chanting "Give us a synagogue for a school!"²⁷ If the local *Komsomol* organized this demonstration, it is not reflected in archival files; rather, the driving force seems to have been the teachers (none of whom were party or *Komsomol* members) and the school's director, Rivkin (a non-party member), who did not enjoy good relations with the local party and soviet leadership.²⁸

The issue quickly divided the local Jewish community, as was obvious at a general assembly of the local kustar union on the evening of November 12. Rivkin addressed the kustar assembly, which did *not* follow the script of a well-orchestrated party event. Skeptical kustars asked why the soviet could not just pay to repair the school or relocate it to some other building. One said that they should collect money from the community to fix the existing school. Another added that his rabbi would help collect money for this purpose. A third blamed the teachers for ruining the school in the first place. Several kustars, however, spoke in favor of moving the school to the Rov Shtibel building, which they described as "new and clean." Over the objection of a sizable minority, the meeting decided to ask that the *Gubispolkom* give the synagogue building over for use by the primary school.²⁹ A November 13 resolution at a meeting of local Jewish trade unionists also resolved that the synagogue should be turned into a school. In addition, the trade unionists' resolution provides a hint that the synagogue's supporters already had begun a counter-mobilization, in that it noted that "twenty men, mostly traders" were agitating to keep the synagogue open.³⁰

In late November 1925 the group demanding the expropriation of Rov Shtibel took two more important steps towards pressing their legal claim to

26. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2935, l. 6.

27. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2935, l. 4.

28. GubONO inspection reports on Khislavichi (in GASO f. r-19, op. 1, d. 4515; d. 4558) give no indication that the teachers had acted in consultation or coordination with the local party cell, and other documents reveal a very tense relationship between the school's director and local party officials. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2614, l. 49; d. 2934, l. 15; GASO f. r-495 (Prokuror Smolenskoi gubernii), op. 2, d. 34, l.13.

29. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2935, ll. 8-9.

30. The trade unionists' resolution alleged that the synagogue's supporters used the building "as a center for their trade operations and exchanges." GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2935, l. 7.

the building. First, school director Rivkin convinced the *sel'sovet* to form a commission charged with examining conditions at the school. That commission's November 25 report concluded that the current building was unsafe and proposed moving the school to a new location.³¹ Next, on November 27, a group of "Citizen Jews of Khislavichi" delivered a petition to the *Gubispolkom* requesting that it turn Rov Shtibel's building over to the Jewish primary school. The "Jewish toilers" addressing the petition claimed that few of Khislavichi's 2,000 Jews were "actively religious," while the great majority of citizens had "no religious feelings." Some of the shtetl's nine synagogues had fewer than a dozen members, they claimed, so "we need no more than three or four synagogues." In the meantime, nearly two hundred students had to attend school in a building so decrepit that it actually made them ill. "Our children are more important than the synagogues," the petition concluded, and so "it is entirely legal" to take at least one synagogue as public property "so that 180 children can begin the [next] school year in a new school."³²

The 1925 Khislavichi petition met the same fate as the 1924 petition regarding the Smolensk Choral Synagogue. On January 9, 1926 the provincial Evseksiia bureau resolved that it "must help the Khislavichi population carry out legal measures to take the synagogue for use as a Jewish primary school."³³ The matter then died, and there are no further references to the citizens' petition in the regional archives. At the end of NEP the Khislavichi Jewish elementary school was still located in the same building and still in desperate need of repairs.

Archival records on these two failed efforts to secularize synagogue buildings in the mid-1920s reveal little about *obshchina* efforts to defend religious rights, but it is clear that local rabbis were pressing soviet officials to uphold the regime's rhetoric about "religious freedom." In January 1927 Rabbi Abram Rabinovich, who identified himself both as a "citizen" and as "a Jewish clerical preacher," petitioned the Monastyrshchina *volost'* executive committee for permission to hold four Yiddish-language public talks at the shtetl's main synagogue. Rabinovich insisted that the talks would be "of a purely religious nature, with no discussion of any sort of any political questions."³⁴ In support of his request, Rabinovich referred to a recent Smolensk *Uezd* Soviet Executive Committee resolution acknowledging that Soviet law protected "full freedom of antireligious and religious propaganda." He also

31. The commission was made up of Rivkin and two kustars, Iudson and Stiller. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2935, l. 3.

32. A copy of the petition – without signatures – is in GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 2935, l. 1.

33. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3382, ll. 1-2; d. 3383, l. 266.

34. Rabinovich's four lecture topics were "Jews and Religion," "Religion and Daily Life," "Jews and the Talmud," and "Holding Requiems for the Death of Jews."

pointed out that similar lectures had been allowed in Khislavichi, Pochinok, Viaz'ma, and other towns in the province.³⁵ Rabinovich's request shows that Jewish clergy used Soviet law and the rhetoric of legality to their advantage when possible.

Soviet officials in Monastyrshchina, unsure how to respond, turned the request over to the local Evseksiia, which sought guidance from the provincial Evseksiia bureau. The provincial bureau focused attention on one of the lectures, "Religion and Daily Life," which offered the greatest room for expression of anti-Soviet sentiment. Rabinovich's carefully-crafted outline frequently echoed Soviet rhetoric in texts designed to counter antisemitism. It stressed, for instance, that "The Jewish religion demands that Jews partake in honest labor."³⁶ Rabinovich also pointed out that Soviet law recognized Jews' "full right to study and teach Hebrew to their children in their own homes." While this and other points regarding Jewish ritual and observation of the Sabbath surely rankled the Evseksiia, the rabbi kept within the confines of Soviet law.³⁷ The Evseksiia bureau therefore informed officials in Monastyrshchina that they must authorize Rabinovich's lectures. Although the *Gubkom* Evseksiia was compelled to revisit the matter in late 1928, in January 1927 this decision was entirely consonant with the relatively "softer" approach mandated by the Center.

"Those who support Passover or bake matzo support the class enemy."

In spring 1927 the Smolensk Evseksiia and GubONO Jewish section began to redouble their antireligious and anti-khedar campaigns in response to directives from the Center.³⁸ Despite the expansion of the local network of

35. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990, l. 76.

36. According to Rabinovich's outline, Judaism required that Jews aid the poor, that they live a "clean and hygienic" life, and that they "never lose courage." It also provided answers for difficult questions of life; for example, he pointed out that "the Jewish religion forbids suicide." Rabinovich's theses are in GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990, ll. 77-78 ob. For useful discussions of the arguments made in defense of Jews and Judaism in materials produced for the party's campaigns against antisemitism, see Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, *passim*.

37. Rabinovich's theses noted that "Jews should not smoke cigarettes on Saturdays, they should not eat pork . . . [and] they should strictly observe the Sabbath day." GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990, ll. 77-78 ob.

38. In the 1927-28 minority *polisprosvet* work plan that Glavpolitprosvet and Tsentrosovnatsmen sent to the provinces, the section on "Jewish work" ranked intensifying "the struggle against clericalism and Zionist influence" third among priority tasks. Other immediate practical measures stressed were increasing participation of youth in the campaign against khedars and yeshivas and the distribution of clearer methodological instructions on the conduct of antireligious propaganda. The plan also noted the importance of strengthening "revolutionary legality in the Jewish sphere." But it did not specifically discuss the prosecution of melameds, since such actions were outside the purview of Narkompros. GASO f. r-19, op. 1, d. 4588, ll. 47-96 ob.; for passages on the Jewish antireligious campaign, l. 93 ob.

Soviet Jewish schools and years of agitprop, Jewish children still attended khedars (often after completing their day at the Soviet school).³⁹ Therefore in 1927 local authorities began using “administrative-repressive” measures – arrests and public trials – against melameds for the first time since 1923.⁴⁰ Still, those efforts remained limited and poorly organized until 1928.

In spring 1928 the regional Evseksiia laid out more systematic plans for an anti-Passover, antireligious drive than it had for any previous effort in the antireligious campaign. In April 1928 in Smolensk, for example, the Evseksiia coordinated dozens of antireligious meetings and events designed to mobilize cadres and attract the broadest possible public participation.⁴¹ The campaign’s slogans all defined the struggle against religion as a class struggle and reflected the escalation of class-war rhetoric that marked the end of NEP. The lead campaign slogan, for example, stated that “The struggle against matzo and Passover is a class struggle, and those who support matzo and all those who support Passover or bake matzo support the class enemy.”⁴² In previous years antireligious activities had faded into the background between Passover and the fall holidays, but in 1928 the Smolensk Evseksiia sustained a year-round antireligious campaign.⁴³ In spring 1928 the Smolensk Evseksiia also began linking the antireligious campaign to drives to shut down local synagogues. In response, synagogue communities mobilized their own supporters to an extent unprecedented since the revolution.⁴⁴

At the end of March 1928 the Evseksiia revived efforts to turn the Smolensk Choral Synagogue into a Jewish workers’ club. This time the provincial Evseksiia bureau took a leading role in initiating and mobilizing the drive to

39. GASO f. r-19, op. 1, d. 4515, ll. 122, 192, 330-31.

40. *Sud’by natsional’nykh men’shinstv*, 116, 122; *Leninskii put’*, no. 11 (Nov. 1927), pp. 54, 57; GANISO f. 140, op. 1, d. 612, ll. 39-40 ob.

41. There is a summary of these campaign activities in GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3986, ll. 11, 45-46, 56-57. See also GASO f. r-19, op. 1, d. 4588, l. 46.

42. Following this class line, other slogans noted that “Not one worker, employee, peasant, or kustar should prepare matzo or celebrate Passover”; “Not one work day should be wasted on Passover and instead the days May 1-5 [during which the holiday fell that year] should be turned into a five day [festival] of culture”; and “Not one kustar worker should take part in the preparation of Matzo.” Campaign slogans depicted the struggle against Passover as a matter of the international class struggle. The final slogan stated that Soviet Jews must come out “Against gifts of matzo from the foreign bourgeoisie,” a reference to international Jewish aid organizations that were linked to the clerics (“Against counter-revolutionary clericalism”), as well as to the fascists (“Against fascism”). GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3986, ll. 11, 46, 57.

43. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3986, ll. 8, 47, 48a, 49-50; d. 3990a, l. 102; d. 3990, l. 11-12 ob., 88.

44. On the Smolensk synagogue and political mobilization in 1917, see Michael C. Hickey, “Revolution on the Jewish Street: Smolensk, 1917,” *The Journal of Social History* 31, no. 4 (1998): 823-850.

close the synagogue.⁴⁵ In early April 1928 (in connection with the anti-Passover campaign), an Evseksiia-created “initiative group” began holding mass meetings that approved resolutions stating that the workers’ club must be moved from its current location (at a Jewish school) into the Choral Synagogue.⁴⁶ These meetings were part of a well-orchestrated campaign that featured a series of articles in Smolensk’s main newspaper, *Rabochii put’*, attacking the synagogue’s members as a “small clutch of bourgeois exploiters” and “lackeys of the old order.”⁴⁷ The campaign also included petition drives meant to demonstrate mass support for taking over the synagogue.

By the end of April, the Evseksiia’s initiative group had hosted nine mass meetings and thirty-two smaller gatherings at enterprises, offices, and schools. At each meeting it had distributed petitions so that in all it collected the signatures of 2,834 civilians and 167 Red Army soldiers attesting to their support for turning the synagogue building into a workers’ club. The majority of those signing identified themselves as workers (804 signatures) or as kustars (373 signatures). Employees made up the second largest group of signatories (683 from state institutions as well as 222 teachers and medical staff). The other civilians were students (441 signatures) or people who had not listed their occupations.⁴⁸ The initiative group forwarded these petitions to the Gubispolkom with a cover letter explaining that in Smolensk the “mass of Jewish workers, employees and kustars” needed a new workers’ club, “a strong Jewish institution . . . to satisfy their cultural needs.” The letter described the club’s current facilities as overcrowded and pitifully inadequate, while the large Choral Synagogue “is literally deserted year round.” The initiative group insisted that taking over the synagogue would not violate anyone’s religious rights, since the small congregation’s few members could attend one of the city’s four other synagogues.⁴⁹

The synagogue’s board of elders and Smolensk’s Jewish *obshchina* responded with their own well-organized campaign. On April 24, they sent the *Gubispolkom* a letter reminding it that under Soviet law “every citizen in the free Soviet republic should be able to exercise the right to freedom of conscience and religious expression.” The petitions collected by the Evseksiia, the synagogue’s defenders claimed, proved only that the signatories favored “depriving other citizens of their rights.” While the synagogue’s leaders recognized the legality of the Evseksiia’s antireligious propaganda (the law also protected the rights of those who opposed religion), they pointed out that

45. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532.

46. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, l. 24; *Rabochii put’*, April 7, 1928.

47. *Rabochii put’*, April 7, 8, 17, 1928.

48. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 28-280, 394-667; Smolensk Archives WKP 33: 292.

49. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 16-17.

“Soviet authorities must follow Soviet law and must not make groundless charges against people.” Recent antireligious propaganda, the board complained, had included slanderous and baseless charges. Their letter systematically refuted assertions in *Rabochii put* that “violated the spirit of the law,” “willfully distorted the truth,” and slandered the synagogue board, “a legal association.”⁵⁰ *Rabochii put* should print retractions and the *Gubispolkom* should take steps to restore “normal relations” with the synagogue because, as the letter concluded, “Our government recognizes the right to the free practice of religion and should protect the rights of believers as well as non-believers.”⁵¹

The synagogue board and *obshchina* also mounted their own petition drive. Distributed door to door and after religious services, their petition stated simply that “We, the undersigned, declare that the Choral Synagogue is necessary for our religious needs.”⁵² At the end of April the synagogue’s board presented this petition to the *Gubispolkom* with 150 pages of signatures, listing approximately 2,500 names. Based upon information on age and occupation that followed each signature, it appears that the struggle over the Choral Synagogue had divided Smolensk’s Jewish community along generational and ideological lines (in the broadest sense), but not by occupation or “class.” Like the *Evseksiia*, the *obshchina* had successfully rallied Jewish kustars and worker-trade unionists. The synagogue’s defenders, however, appear to have been significantly older than the advocates of the *Evseksiia*-backed plan to close the synagogue.⁵³

By collecting petitions and framing their counter-mobilization campaign as a defense of their legal rights, the synagogue and *obshchina* leadership employed the only means at their disposal to prevent secularization of the

50. The letter’s authors provided several pages of evidence against the charges made in *Rabochii put*. In a column on the left side of each page, they copied the claims made in specific articles in *Rabochii put*, while in a column on the right labeled “the truth” they pointed out the errors in these claims. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 312-13 ob.

51. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, l. 313 ob.

52. *Rabochii put* no. 93 ran a short notice entitled “Clerics organize petition,” stating that “a clutch of synagogue artists” led by Smolensk Rabbis Fridman and Vaisbord and aided by a cohort of Nepmen and *torgovtsy* were gathering signatures so that they could keep the Choral Synagogue under their personal control. There is a clipping of this page in GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, l. 26.

53. The pro-synagogue petition is in GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 316-90. A random sampling of 38 signatures suggests that the synagogue’s supporters indeed were “elderly,” as the *Evseksiia* had charged: the average age of the petitioners in the sample was 61. The sample does not, however, support the *Evseksiia*’s characterization of the synagogue’s supporters as Nepmen and traders: of these 38 signatories, only 3 were *torgovtsy*, 1 was an employee, 21 were kustars, and 13 were workers who belonged to soviet trade unions.

Choral Synagogue building, an appeal to Soviet legality.⁵⁴ The synagogue's petition drive temporarily blunted the Evseksiia's campaign by demonstrating that large numbers of citizens believed that the building was critical to the exercise of their religious rights as protected by law. While in 1928 the political context of the synagogue's appeal differed from that in 1925, and while new administrative procedures had stacked the deck against communities of believers, the regime still sought to preserve the façade of legality in such matters. At its June 16, 1928 session, the Smolensk *Gubkom* Bureau discussed a report that described the campaign to close the Choral Synagogue as a great success.⁵⁵ The *Gubkom*, though, also made note of the *obshchina*'s counter-mobilization and resolved simply that it was "expedient" to close the synagogue and that the Evseksiia must find a "practical resolution to the issue."⁵⁶

On June 29, 1928 two secret memorandums from the *Gubispolkom* secretary to the provincial Agitprop Otdel (which oversaw the Evseksiia) laid out practical steps by which the Choral Synagogue building could be taken legally. A 1927 circular from the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) allowed for the seizure of the synagogue if the *obshchina* had broken its contract by failing to keep the building in good repair. A special "technical review" of the building should be conducted to determine if the board's "misconduct" had endangered the people's property.⁵⁷ This review, of course, was pro-forma.⁵⁸ On July 27, 1928 the *Gubispolkom* declared that the *obshchina* had broken its contract by failing to maintain the synagogue building which therefore would be turned over to the workers' club.

The synagogue's defenders appealed this decision at a special *Gubispolkom* session on July 31, 1928. They argued that the *Gubispolkom* resolution violated the legal rights of the thousands of citizens who had petitioned to keep the synagogue open. They claimed that the synagogue board had in fact maintained the building, and that the *Gubispolkom* therefore was violating their 1925 contract. The *Gubispolkom* resolved that the appellants had "pre-

54. Again, it is important to note that synagogue leaders never based their protests on appeals to property rights and that they freely acknowledged that the state owned the synagogue building.

55. According to this report, only twelve people attending the mass meetings in April had voted against shutting down the synagogue and "the great majority of workers were fully sympathetic with the campaign." There were, however, "individuals who wavered and complained in essence that [taking the synagogue would be] an injustice." The full text of this report can be found in Smolensk Archives WKP 33: 492.

56. The text of the *Gubkom* resolution is in its June 16, 1928 session protocol, in WKP 33: 483 ob.

57. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 314, 315.

58. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990a, l. 102.

sented no new information on the matter” and that the July 27 decision stood. The synagogue was to be closed and its building used “for the cultural needs of the Jewish worker population of Smolensk.”⁵⁹

The *obshchina* leaders immediately drafted an appeal to the VTsIK and to Soviet President Mikhail Kalinin. “We are asking in the name of the entire *Obshchina* of Believing Jews of Smolensk,” it began, “that you defend us against the deprivation of our right to practice religious ceremonies.” The appeal “categorically refuted” the *Gubispolkom*’s justifications for taking the synagogue: the *obshchina* had kept the synagogue in good repair, and the congregation had more than a thousand members, many of whom could not reasonably attend services at the city’s other Jewish prayer houses, and whose religious rights therefore would be violated by closing the building.⁶⁰ They also argued that “the [*Gubispolkom*] resolution not only is wrong from the point of law, but also is harmful to internal order” and that preserving the synagogue would bolster the legitimacy of Soviet power in the Jewish community.⁶¹ First, they explained, religion instilled people with respect for law and order. Second, “satisfying their religious needs not only makes people happy, but also makes them more satisfied.” Conversely, letting the local soviet violate Soviet law by depriving citizens of their rights would seem like “a return to pre-revolutionary times” and to the sorts of “Jewish disabilities” from which Soviet power had freed the Jews, and so would weaken the population’s faith in Soviet power.⁶²

59. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, l. 306 (excerpt of July 27, 1928 GubIK protocol), l. 307-08 (text of two drafts of resolution on closing the synagogue), l. 310 (excerpt of July 31 GubIK protocol).

60. The letter to Kalinin, written by synagogue board chairman M. Kh. Dolgin and Rabbi A. Iu. Fridman, was dated August 1, 1928. The *obshchina* and synagogue board presented a copy of the letter to the GubIK on August 2, 1928. Dolgin and Fridman claimed that without the Choral Synagogue, Jews in the city’s upper district [the *verkhnyi chast*] would have to travel to Zadneprov’e, the location of other synagogues, and that this would prove a great burden to a great many citizens. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 304-05. These arguments directly echoed points made by *obshchina* leaders twenty-five years earlier in their effort to win the Tsarist government’s permission to build the Choral Synagogue. GASO f. 1, op. 7, d. 576.

61. In 1902 the *obshchina* had similarly insisted that opening a new synagogue would increase Jews’ devotion to the monarchical regime. GASO f. 1, op. 7, d. 576.

62. In their letter to Kalinin, Dolgin and Fridman asked that the Soviet President “consider the historical dimensions of the issue.” Many of Smolensk’s Jews remembered that the Tsarist government in St. Petersburg had issued a *prikaz* demanding that the building’s cupola be removed and that its façade be altered to resemble a “normal building” because ““Outside of the Pale of Settlement, the Jews can only have prayer houses, not synagogues.”” The *Gubispolkom* did not understand this “historical fact,” and therefore Kalinin and the VTsIK must overrule the provincial soviet and defend the legal rights of Smolensk’s Jewish believers. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 304-05.

The Smolensk *Gubispolkom* directed its own explanation of the matter to the VTsIK. It based its case on three points: the great majority of Jews in the city had expressed support for turning the synagogue into a workers' club; the *obshchina* had broken its contract for use of the building by allowing it to slide into disrepair; and four other local synagogues could accommodate the Choral Synagogue's members. The *Gubispolkom* insisted that it had acted in complete accord with NKVD guidelines and that the VTsIK therefore should uphold its decision.⁶³

Matters were now in the hands of the VTsIK, which on August 6 informed the *Gubispolkom* that it had received the *obshchina*'s appeal and asked that all relevant materials be forwarded to Moscow for review. The *Gubispolkom*, though, went ahead and formed a commission to begin transferring control over the synagogue building.⁶⁴ When, on August 10, the *obshchina* protested that the *Gubispolkom* could not take the building until the VTsIK had ruled on its appeal, a *Gubispolkom* deputy informed the *obshchina* leaders that the VTsIK already had rejected their appeal.⁶⁵ Synagogue board chairman Dolgin, though, had arranged a meeting in Moscow with VTsIK Secretariat official Petr Smidovich, reputedly a "soft-liner" on cultural questions who, according to historian Terry Martin "specialized in 'reopening' illegally closed churches."⁶⁶ Whether Dolgin knew to contact Smidovich from close reading of official publications or had been advised to do so through networks of Jewish contacts is unclear. In any case, Smidovich informed Dolgin that the

63. The *Gubispolkom* noted that as many as 8,000 Jews had attended meetings that approved closing the synagogue, without noting that only 3,000 had signed petitions to this effect or that the synagogue's supporters had gathered almost as many signatures on its counter-petition. The *Gubispolkom* claimed that only 1,600 Jews in the entire city had registered as members of the *Obshchina* of Believers, and that 1,366 of these belonged to the four other synagogues. Therefore closing the Choral Synagogue at most posed an inconvenience to some two hundred believers. Moreover, the city's Jewish workers had no adequate meeting space, so taking over the synagogue was critical to the cultural development of the Smolensk's toiling Jews. For these reasons, the *Gubispolkom* explained, it had resolved to close the synagogue on July 24 and then had rejected the *obshchina*'s appeal on July 31. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 293-94.

64. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 295-300 ob. At the same time, the Evseksiia mobilized displays of mass support for the *Gubispolkom*'s decision to close the synagogue. *Rabochii put'*, no. 181, Aug. 5, 1928; GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990a, l. 97; *Sud''by natsional'nykh men'shinstv*, pp. 136-37.

65. The next day the Agitprop Otdel sent the *obshchina* formal notice of a meeting to coordinate the transfer of the Choral Synagogue's property to the workers' club, to be held on August 13.

66. Terry Martin, "Interpreting New Archival Signals: Nationalities Policy and the Nature of the Soviet Bureaucracy," *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 40, no. 1-2 (1999): 114-15.

VTsIK had *not* yet ruled on the matter, something Dolgin pointed out to the *Gubispolkom* in a letter dated August 13, 1928.⁶⁷

Again, the *obshchina* temporarily staved off the seizure of the Choral Synagogue. On August 17, 1928, the Smolensk *Gubkom* complained to the party's Central Committee that the VTsIK review was impeding the transfer of the Choral Synagogue to the Smolensk Jewish Workers' Club. The gambit could not have sat well with the VTsIK Secretariat, which rejected the July 27 *Gubispolkom* resolution on the synagogue. Now it was the Smolensk *Gubkom*'s turn to send supplicants to Moscow, to the VTsIK, and to the Central Committee. Direct appeals worked, and on August 27, 1928 the VTsIK Presidium reversed the decision of its Secretariat, rejected the *obshchina*'s appeal, and approved the closing of the Choral Synagogue.⁶⁸

The Evseksiia's victory was soiled, however, when it became clear that the Choral Synagogue building indeed was in very poor repair and that the cost of refurbishing the building for use as a club would be far greater than the Evseksiia had anticipated.⁶⁹ The project stalled. The city's Jewish clergy, having lost the legal battle, also did what they could to spoil the Evseksiia's triumph. At services on Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Vaisbord read a ritual *kheirem* (a ban) declaring anathema any Jew who entered the club at the former synagogue. The Evseksiia proposed that the "essential court organs" put Vaisbord on public trial for his "bellicose clericalism."⁷⁰ There is no record, though, that any such trial took place. Simultaneous with those events in Smolensk, similar developments were unfolding in the region's shtetls.

In the shtetls the Evseksiia, its ranks strengthened by young activists recruited and trained in 1926-1927, began mobilizing Jewish "toiling elements" to demand that synagogue buildings be used for public purposes. As in Smolensk, in the shtetls, synagogue supporters responded with legal appeals and

67. Dolgin explained Smidovich's response in a hand-written letter to the chair of the *Gubispolkom*, dated August 13, 1928. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, ll. 301-01 ob.

68. At its August 23, 1928 morning session, the Smolensk *Gubkom* decided to protest against the VTsIK Secretariat's decision and dispatched two local party bosses to Moscow, one to meet with members of the VTsIK Secretariat and its Presidium and another to meet with members of the Central Committee. That same evening, *Gubkom* member Bek met with members of the Secretariat. The next day he met Presidium members. Smolensk Archives WKP 33: 566, 580; GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990a, l. 6; GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, l. 281 (excerpt of the August 27, 1928 VTsIK Presidium protocol).

69. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990, ll. 13, 93, 94; d. 3990a, ll. 92, 94, 145; GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, l. 280.

70. In his report to the *Gubkom* on the matter, Evseksiia bureau secretary Iakov Lerman also claimed that Vaisbord's statements had intimidated a few elderly Jews, but that most of the city's Jewish kusters and workers were indignant and considered his comments scandalous. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990a, l. 93.

their own petition drives.⁷¹ Based on current guidelines from the Center, the legal process in these disputes had to play out all the way to the VTsIK before local Soviet officials could seize a synagogue building.⁷² In Khislavichi, the dispute over the Rov-Shtibl synagogue would drag on into early 1930.

The 1928 drive to close Khislavichi's Rov-Shtibl synagogue began with a petition from the local stocking-makers' artel "Standart." In mid-July Standart asked the Roslavl' *Uezd* Soviet to give it control over the synagogue building which it would subdivide into an electrified workshop, a day care center for workers' children, and a workers' club. While it does not seem to have initiated the artel's action, the Evseksiia immediately threw its support behind the effort.⁷³ In early August Standart sent the *Gubispolkom* petitions asking that the synagogue building be turned over to the artel. The local Jewish *obshchina* quickly filed its own petitions to defend Rov Shtibel.⁷⁴ After almost two months in which the matter seemed to be in limbo, the *Gubispolkom* requested further evidence of public support for taking over the synagogue. In response, on October 20 the 200 members of the Standart passed a resolution requesting that the *volost'* executive committee give it the synagogue for use as a modern, electrified workshop.

According to the artel, Rov Shtibel was Khislavichi's smallest congregation but had the town's best building. The interests of 200 Jewish toiling families, they argued, were greater than that of a few dozen believers who in any case had eight other synagogues at their disposal.⁷⁵ Within a week, *volost'* officials announced that they would turn the Rov Shtibel building over to the stocking makers.

The synagogue board immediately appealed to the *Gubispolkom*, claiming that the *volost'* soviet had broken the law in four ways. First, the *obshchina* and the local soviet had signed a legally binding agreement for the use of the synagogue. Second, NKVD guidelines said that the synagogue could be taken only if the *obshchina* had failed to keep the property in good repair, but that was not the case: the artel wanted the building because it was new and in good condition. Third, the law specified that the building could be taken only if the majority of the community approved; but again that was not the case. Finally, the law specified that synagogues could be taken over only for use as cultural institutions, such as schools or clubs; but the local authorities wanted

71. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990, l. 11 ob; d. 3990a, l. 29, 30.

72. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 532, l. 10.

73. GANISO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990a, l. 102 (protocol of July 24 Evseksiia bureau session); d. 3990, ll. 51-52.

74. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, ll. 1, 10.

75. The meeting's decision was publicized in a story in the October 27, 1928 issue of *Rabochii put'*. See also *Sud* "by natsional'nykh men'shchinstv", pp. 141-42; GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, l. 7.

to use Rov Shtibel as a workshop. Local authorities had demonstrated a “false understanding of the law on freedom of conscience” and ignored the will and the rights of the majority of Khislavichi’s Jewish population. The *Gubispolkom* therefore must “defend the legal rights of the *obshchina*.” Appended to this appeal was a petition with 150 signatures.⁷⁶ The synagogue board’s appeal forced the *Gubispolkom* to order the local soviet to provide still more evidence that would demonstrate the legality of its resolution.

The elaborate dance of appeals and counter-appeals, petition and counter-petition continued through November 1928. In early November the Evseksiia organized a series of local meetings that passed resolutions and circulated petitions designed to demonstrate mass support for giving the synagogue to the artel.⁷⁷ At a November 10 mass meeting, held at Rov Shtibel without the *obshchina*’s permission, an Evseksiia speaker described the synagogue’s leaders as lackeys of the Tsarist regime and claimed that everyone in the shtetl “except for the clergy and the fanatics” approved of using the building for a workshop.⁷⁸ The next day the synagogue’s board of elders complained to

76. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, l. 4. In the archival file, the petition is no longer appended to this letter, which was stamped as received by the *Gubispolkom* on November 1, 1928.

77. On November 6 the local Evseksiia held a meeting of trade unionists which passed a resolution supporting the transfer of the Rov Shtibel’s building to the Standart artel. According to this resolution, the electrified workshop would provide incomes for 200 families and so directly benefited at least 1,000 people. The refurbished building would provide day care for the children of women workers as well as a club, and so would improve the cultural life of Jewish toilers. In comparison, Rov Shtibel served only a small group of people, who in any case had eight other synagogues to meet their religious needs. Appended to the resolution, which the meeting sent to the *Gubispolkom*, was a petition signed by 110 adult Jews. Only a few of the petition’s signatories were women. All signatories were workers (painters, carpenters, tailors, and so on); and all were at least 18 years old. Most, however, were under 30 years old, which again suggests a generational dimension to the conflicts over synagogues. The resolution and the signed petition are in GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, ll. 7-10.

78. The November 10 mass meeting at Rov Shtibel was attended by 546 people. The key local organizers were Iudson and Stiller, two kustars who had been involved in the 1925 effort to turn the synagogue building over to the Jewish primary school. At the meeting provincial Evseksiia bureau member A. K. Bliumberg referred to the “golden words cried to God for the Tsar’s health” at Khislavichi’s synagogues while the Tsar’s government would not allow the shtetl’s Jews to leave that Pale and cross into Smolensk Province, “three versts from Khislavichi.” Soviet power had freed Jews from the clerics and others who had exploited them under the Tsar and was transforming Jews’ lives through labor. Bliumberg argued that the stocking makers’ artel was an instrument for building this new life. The shtetl needed the electrified workshop which required taking property away from the exploiters and turning it over to the artel. The ORT had instructed the artel to open an electrified workshop, and Rov Shtibel’s building was perfectly suited to this need. The meeting “unanimously resolved” that, “since the artel directly benefits two-thirds of the population of Khislavichi,” the local administration should begin negotiations with the *obshchina* to transfer the building, for which the *obshchina* would be paid 500 rubles. GANSIO f. 3, op. 1, d. 3990, ll. 5-6; GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, l. 7.

the *sel'sovet* that the “illegal” meeting at Rov Shtibel had violated its rights, as did any proposal to use the synagogue as a workshop. Again, the elders claimed that the law and NKVD guidelines protected the synagogue unless the *obshchina* broke its contract for use of the building. The anti-synagogue activists, they insisted, “should be made aware of the laws on freedom of conscience.”⁷⁹

Ignoring the board’s protests, the *sel'sovet* and the *volost' soviet* again voted to turn the synagogue over to the artel. On November 20 the synagogue board complained to the *Gubispolkom* that the *volost'* administration had acted illegally. It produced another petition, this time signed by 151 parishioners, stating that the *obshchina* had upheld its legal contract for use of the synagogue and that the *volost'* soviet had no right to take the building. The *Gubispolkom*, careful to stay within the letter of the law, requested a full report from the *volost'* soviet.⁸⁰ In the last week of November, the Roslavl' *Uezd* Soviet, the provincial kustar union, the provincial Evseksiia bureau, and the Standart artel all lobbied the *Gubispolkom* regarding the transfer of the synagogue in Khislavichi.⁸¹

79. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, ll. 13-14, 15-15 ob.

80. At its November 14, 1928 session, the *sel'sovet* decided to give the synagogue building to the artel. At a November 20, 1928 session devoted to the matter, the *volost'* executive committee also found in favor of the artel. Its decision noted that Rov Shtibel had only seventy-eight members and that hundreds of toilers have come out in favor of the artel, claiming that the needs of the majority outweighed those of the minority. It also noted that the Rov Shtibel congregants could, if they wished, attend different synagogues. Therefore the *volost'* administration would request that the *Gubispolkom* approve transfer of the building to the artel. It is worth noting that in their November 20, 1928 petition, Rov Shtibel's supporters suggested that some other synagogue building might be more suitable for the workshop! GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, ll. 2, 3, 7, 11-12 ob., 16.

81. At its November 21, 1928 session, the Roslavl' *Uezd* Soviet Executive Committee resolved to revoke Rov Shtibel's contract for use of the building and to turn the property over to Standart; it then sent this resolution to the *Gubispolkom*. The next day the Smolensk Provincial Union of Kustars sent a memorandum to the *Gubispolkom* expressing its support for Standart and urging that the building be transferred to the artel. At its November 24 session, the *Gubkom* Evseksiia Bureau reiterated its support for the transfer of synagogue property in Rudnia and in Khislavichi. The bureau, however, seems to have been confused as to the details of the Khislavichi case; it resolved that Rov Shtibel should, in accord with local wishes, be turned over to the local Jewish elementary school! In a letter to *Gubispolkom* member Kolygin, the artel's members noted that most of their workers were women who labored in their own homes, often for 14-16 hours a day. Opening an electrified workshop would mean more productivity, better pay, and better conditions for the workers' children. The artel's letter systematically hit the most important buttons for the *Gubispolkom* in fall 1928. They were eager to “organize on the principle of collectivization” and insisted that the project also would improve the “cultural development” of the workers and their children. Their opponents, according to the letter, had not even rallied the entire synagogue membership: 10 of the 80 members had agreed to give up the building, as had 2 of 5 members of the board of elders. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, ll. 5, 20, 22.

The legal fight continued through December and on into 1929. At its December 4, 1928 session the *sel'sovet* again declared that Standart could take possession of the synagogue. This time it added a new legal twist: the synagogue board allegedly had violated its contract by using a portion of the building for storage and letting several rooms go without maintenance. On December 21 the Roslavl' *Uezd* Soviet agreed that the synagogue had broken its contract which justified seizure of the building under April 1923 VTsIK guidelines. The synagogue board appealed again, this time directly to the VTsIK. On January 3, 1929 the *Gubispolkom* ordered local Soviet officials to delay action regarding the synagogue until the VTsIK issued its final decision on the case.⁸² It took another full year for the VTsIK to resolve the matter of Rov Shtibel – it ruled against the synagogue board in a laconic resolution that provided no explanation – by which time NEP was in the past and the Evseksiia itself was being dismantled.

Conclusion

The history of attempts to secularize the synagogue properties in Smolensk and Khislavichi generally fits within the framework of recent studies of antireligious campaigns during the NEP era. The shifts in Smolensk first to what might be termed a more “liberal” (or “softer”) approach to the antireligious campaign in 1924 and then to a more aggressive approach in 1927-1928, for instance, accord with the periodization presented by Arkadii Zel'tser in his recent study of Jews in Vitebsk.⁸³ In Smolensk, though, the manifest weakness of the Evseksiia, its disorganization, its limited funding, and the paucity of able cadres figured more in limiting antireligious campaigns in 1924-1926 than had been the case in Vitebsk. The 1924 and 1925 drives to close local synagogues had been initiated by non-party groups for reasons that had more to do with immediate local contexts than with the Evseksiia's project of secularizing the Jewish street, and the Smolensk Evseksiia lacked the resources to bring these grass-roots efforts to fruition. The 1927-1928 turn towards a more militant posture against clericalism came at a point when the Smolensk Evseksiia had begun to overcome its cadre shortage. Even then, Evseksiia mobilization campaigns had to overcome obstacles of a surprising sort – the Center's insistence, in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, on attention to legal guidelines and procedures.

Smolensk's rabbis and *obshchina* leaders framed their defense against the antireligious campaign in ways that reveal a sophisticated understanding of

82. GASO f. r-13, op. 2, d. 791, ll. 24, 26, 27, 29.

83. Zel'tser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsi*, pp. 230-52.

laws and procedures.⁸⁴ The primary argument made by synagogue supporters was not that they owned the synagogue buildings (they did not), but that seizing the synagogues violated Jewish citizens' religious rights as guaranteed under Soviet law, a theme raised in Rabinowich's 1927 petition for approval of his lecture series. Most of their corollary arguments also depended upon appeals to law, e.g., that local soviets had violated VTsIK procedures. In contrast, the central argument made by those who wanted to seize the synagogue buildings – be they teachers and artel members in Khislavichi, the Jewish club organizers in Smolensk, or the regional Evseksiia leadership – appealed to a kind of moral economy based upon numbers (what might be termed a “majoritarian” argument).⁸⁵ The interests of the “a few dozen” believers were less significant, they argued, than the interests of nearly two hundred children, hundreds of women workers, or nearly three thousand people who wanted a workers' club. Fairness, the synagogue's opponents insisted, dictated that the buildings be used for the benefit of the majority. The synagogues' supporters also made reference to numbers (the numbers of people who signed their petitions or who attended services), but only to buttress arguments rooted in the terms of Soviet law. Legal procedure, though, trumped arguments based upon the benefits of economic construction, workers' cultural advancement, and even class composition. The Center ultimately approved the closure of these two synagogues, but only after the ritualistic legal procedure had been played out. In other words, despite its well-documented practice of arbitrary repressive measures, the Soviet leadership considered it important to preserve the façade of legality, even in 1928.

Finally, these stories of mobilization and counter-mobilization suggest that such disputes split communities along generational and ideological lines more than they did along the sorts of occupational lines that the regime used in ascribing class.⁸⁶ At a fundamental level, these were disputes over access to resources (a common problem in the early Soviet era) and over values as well. Poor Jewish artisans, like the kustars at the November 12, 1925 meeting in Khislavichi, might well agree that their shtetl's children needed a new school yet still reject the idea of closing a *shule* for that purpose. Close examination of local contexts, such as the conditions at the Khislavichi Jewish primary school, provides a key to understanding these fissures.

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84. Again, appeals to law discussed in this paper resemble accounts of resistance by Orthodox church communities analyzed in Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred*, pp. 226-29. This awareness and use of law represents an important continuity with the pre-revolutionary relationship between the local Jewish community and Tsarist state officials.

85. I owe this observation to Golfo Alexopoulos, who commented on a draft of this article at the November 2007 AAASS conference in New Orleans.

86. Here, again, there are strong parallels to Young's findings in *Power and the Sacred*.

