

How Russians survived militant atheism to embrace God

Today, less than 20 years after the collapse of the officially atheistic Soviet Union, Russia has emerged as the most God-believing nation in Europe. That's a testament to the devotion of babushkas who kept the flames of faith alive in the face of state-sponsored repression.

By Walter Rodgers / June 16, 2011

Sometimes really huge news stories occur that receive almost no notice, but they are seismic just the same. Today, less than 20 years after the collapse of the officially atheistic [Soviet Union](#), [Russia](#) has emerged as the most God-believing nation in [Europe](#), more so than Roman Catholic [Italy](#) or Protestant [Britain](#). The independent Public Opinion Fund poll discovered this spring that 82 percent of Russians now say they are religious believers.

Given the brutal and ruthless repression by [Joseph Stalin](#) of the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) and all religion, this is truly a remarkable statistic. It is a testament to the babushkas who would not capitulate to Soviet bullying. Hoorah for the hero grandmothers of the motherland! Against all odds they have won.

Mocked

Those stooped, graying old ladies with head scarves, deeply creased faces, and stainless steel-capped teeth were scorned, mocked, and ridiculed by Communist officialdom during the 74 years of official Soviet atheism because they were religious believers. Dismissed as babas and crones, they were, however, the true soul of Russian society.

When [the Kremlin](#)'s Soviet Politburo or the Central Committee apparatchiks raced about in their Chaikas and ZIL limousines, the babushkas quietly went about dutifully kissing their religious icons because those were their only windows to a better world.

The babushkas devotedly stood guard over decaying churches, lighting candles amid the dilapidation and ruin. These spiritual sentinels were virtually helpless to prevent decades of Soviet looting of their churches. But the babushkas refused to allow the flame of faith to go out in Russia, even if it was only their own.

In the worst of times, Stalin's thugs dynamited spectacular Orthodox cathedrals. They sent the Russian clergy to the gulags; they discriminated against believers in hiring and education; and they stole the churches' priceless religious icons, selling them in the West for precious hard currency.

All the while, the impoverished babushkas eked out an existence living on a few kopecks and handfuls of lard as they scurried in the shadows of their darkened churches, doing their best to protect and police these shrines, demanding dignity and decorum from all who entered.

Central role

The babushkas' critical role outside their churches was at least as central to Russian society as their role in preserving religious ritual. With Soviet mothers working at full-time jobs, it was these grandmothers who raised generations of Russian children, teaching them whatever morality and ethics they could because the Communists had dismantled the traditional rudder of societal morality, the churches.

As a [Moscow](#) correspondent during the 1980s, it was my impression that the most traumatic event in a young Russian child's life was losing his babushka. In my mind's eye, I can still see a young Russian boy about 8 or 9 crying bitterly over what appeared to be the coffin of his grandmother. The boy was seated on a wooden bench, with his parents and a group of gravediggers, all of them bouncing along on an open flatbed truck in a heavy snowstorm just outside Moscow. This was no funeral train, just an uncovered farm truck followed by an American correspondent and his wife unable to pass on the icy roads. The raw image of the falling snow; that boy's red, tear-streaked face; and the babushka's coffin covered with spruce boughs still sticks with me a quarter-century later.

An enormous debt

Russian society owes an enormous debt to its babushkas, and not just for refusing to let the religious faith of its people be extinguished by the supercilious sneers of [Lenin](#) and Stalin. This indefatigable force of grandmothers helped preserve Russia's rich cultural heritage for 74 years. From the humble icon corners of their huts to the retelling of the classic Russian folk stories, they preserved and perpetuated a culture free of the socialist claptrap taught in state schools.

On reflection, perhaps the candles of the Russian soul were too bright to be totally extinguished by Marxist ideology; Russians never totally forsook their religious heritage. During World War II, as Russian soldiers were marching to the front, poems tell of Russian women whispering "God bless you" as the boys went off to the slaughter. Russian women even wore gold crosses inside their blouses. Asked why, one explained to me with some embarrassment, "Just in case."

The institutional church was re-created in later Soviet years to perpetuate the farce of religious freedom. But everyone knew the [KGB](#) had infiltrated the Orthodox clergy to make sure religion did not take root again. That may explain why adherence to organized religion (in particular the Orthodox church) lags far behind belief in God.

To honor this spiritual resilience, Russia's [President Dmitry Medvedev](#) should consider commissioning statues to "the eternal babushka." They could be installed on all those vacant Lenin pedestals. Why not pay tribute to all the fearless grandmothers who preserved Russian culture and faith when everyone else had given up?

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Walter Rodgers and the *Christian Science Monitor* have graciously consented to our request to post this article on the Community of Saint Anna website.