

## Conference Paper

# "Reading" Urban Religious Landscape in the Late 19th–Early 20<sup>th</sup> Russia: Ekaterinburg City Case

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### Abstract

This article presents preliminary results from the project "Religious diversity in a Eurasian city: statistical and cartographic analyses". The project focuses on the evolution of the religious landscape in the late 19th – early 20th century Ekaterinburg. The research is based on documents extracted from state and private archives, statistics, and visual materials. We have reconstructed how different religious denominations formed their institutions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Ekaterinburg and how this diversity increased due to mass migration and a relatively tolerant religious policy in the early 20th century. The paper argues that religious institutions played important roles in evolving civil society in Russia, for most of them promoted non-governmental forms of socialisation, education, and charity activities.

The decade after the Revolution, often called "the Golden Age" of Protestantism in Russia, ended with the Soviet state's socialist modernization and Atheist policy. That resulted in the destruction of the city's religious landscape. All the changes manifested in this religious landscape can be presented as a text, which can be "read" and interpreted.

**Keywords:** Religious landscape, Russia, Soviet Union, revolution, Orthodox Church

## 1. Introduction

Ethno-religious relations are an important factor of stability and successful development of cities, states and regions. A growing number of recent studies shows that Christian urban corporations were crucial for the rise of civil society in the late Middle Ages in Europe, providing precursors and models [9]. Some also point towards regional variations, and stress religious models of social assistance in Southern Europe [6]. Our research on the religious development in Ekaterinburg proved that religious minorities, especially representatives of Evangelical movements in opposition to the Orthodox Church, contributed to the development of civil society in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>

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century Russia [4]. When the Bolsheviks seized the power, religious institutions played an important role in the mobilization and maintaining of their groups' identities. The Soviet state gradually banned religious institutions and deprived them from the rights they had managed to obtain through centuries of state oppression: to register life events, to worship and preach, to have their own prayer buildings, to educate, to help the poor and those in need. In other words, the Soviet authorities seized control over the civil society process in Russia, which had been developing within the religious institutions.

This article focuses on the history of religious landscape change in Russia and the Soviet Union in 1917–1941, namely in Ekaterinburg city. We use the *religious landscape* concept to analyze the representation of different religions in the city, in particular the number and types of church buildings, which were the main elements as well as visual markers of the city's religious landscape. The research is based on the 20<sup>th</sup> century statistics and narrative data on Ekaterinburg's religious institutions and minorities. After extracting the information from the sources and entering it into the database "Ekaterinburg religious institutions" we run statistical analyses.

While Russia is often perceived as a religiously homogeneous entity with the Russian Orthodox Church dominating the country, in reality, it has a long history of coexistence with different religious traditions. There have always been provinces with majority Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, or shamanistic populations as well as those characterized by religious diversity. The Ural region located in the middle of the Eurasian continent with Ekaterinburg (at 56°5' / 60°4') as its capital has always been multi-religious due to immigration. Peter the Great founded it in 1723 as the main metal – copper, iron, and cast iron-producing plant in Russia. As a booming center of metal production in the eighteenth century, Ekaterinburg needed engineers and managers and the Europeans often filled the jobs, since there were not enough Russian specialists. As exiled prisoners of war or workers contracted by the state, they got employment at the Ural metal plants and composed the nucleus of the Lutheran and Catholic communities, which developed into established religious institutions in the city by the late nineteenth century. Urgent need for labor attracted the Old Believers, religious dissenters since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to the Urals. Being persecuted by the state, they found opportunity to settle, get jobs, and relative freedom to practice their religion away from the Moscow authorities. The city owes them its fast development and prosperity in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the state initiated a new wave of religious dissenter persecutions. Ekaterinburg's Muslim and Jewish communities were

formed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: the first one due to urbanization and the second due to the accession of Poland.

Regrettably, because of lack of state monitoring of religious affiliations in Russia and the Soviet Union, scholars interested in the religious composition of Russian population cannot rely on comparable statistics. There were two precedents when such a question was included in the census forms in 1897 and 1937, but the primary materials were destroyed. Only a small piece of information collected in 1897 resulted in aggregate tables. As to the 1937 census, the soviet authorities destroyed not only the primary materials but also the aggregates. We may, however, study religious associations and institutions and analyze religious dynamics following changes in the early 20th century urban landscape. Religious landscape, in our understanding, is a religious situation that developed in a certain place and time, and one of its main markers are religious institutions, which manifest religions in the public sphere. The religious landscape is the product of the dominant group in society and one of the means by which it retains its power. As Robertson and Richards pointed out, landscape is one of the principal ways by which the powerful in a society maintain their dominance ([8], p. 4). In the very same way, first the monarchy and then Bolsheviks imposed their view on the majority through the landscape they created: with orthodox dominance until 1917 and ultimate atheism afterwards. However, alternative religions also manifested themselves in the landscape, making it less homogeneous. A religious landscape carries encoded information about the religious situation, that can be "read" and interpreted [5, 7]. As Black argued, buildings are central to the symbolic reading of landscapes, for they frame and embody economic, social and cultural processes (Black). The purpose of this study is to read and to interpret the Ekaterinburg religious landscape change from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1941, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union; how the state politics effected the religious landscape; the number of religious buildings operating in the city; the non-Orthodox institutions ration and religious institutions number to the population size.

## 2. Sources

The research is based on statistics, including the First All-Russia Population Census, as well as local police, church and municipal records. In addition, local newspapers, photo documents from private archives are analyzed. The information extracted from the sources was transcribed into a database to monitor how many religious institutions

operated in each year between 1917 and 1941. That allowed tracing the evolution of the city's religious landscape and to find out when the destruction policy peaked.

### 3. Results

Pre-revolutionary Ekaterinburg was an industrial city with marked ethnic and religious diversity. While the majority were members of the Russian Orthodox Church, there were congregations of Old Believers, Muslims, Catholics, Lutherans and Jews, (see table 1).

TABLE 1: Religious denominations in Ekaterinburg.

Denomination	1897			
	Male	Female	Sum	%
Orthodox	18534	21211	39745	91,8
Old Believers	766	1024	1790	4,1
Muslims	386	292	678	1,6
Lutherans	167	176	343	0,8
Catholics	167	156	323	0,7
Jews	150	153	303	0,7
Other	23	34	57	0,1
<b>Total</b>	<b>20205</b>	<b>23075</b>	<b>43280</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 1897 census aggregates.

The more than 90 percent Orthodox in the city according to the 1897 population census were overwhelmingly ethnic Russians, which was also the case for the four percent Old Believers. The city's Muslim community was the second biggest (after the Old Believers) a religious minority composed of Tatars and Bashkir – in-migrants from rural suburbs. The overwhelming majority of the 0,8 percent Lutherans were Germans and the 0,7 percent Catholics were mostly of Polish origin; while the same proportion of Jews came from diverse places, mostly within Western Russia. In addition, there were 41 persons with roots in other European countries: 24 Calvinists, seven Anglican Church members, six Baptists and a Mennonite, adding to the well-established Protestant congregation.

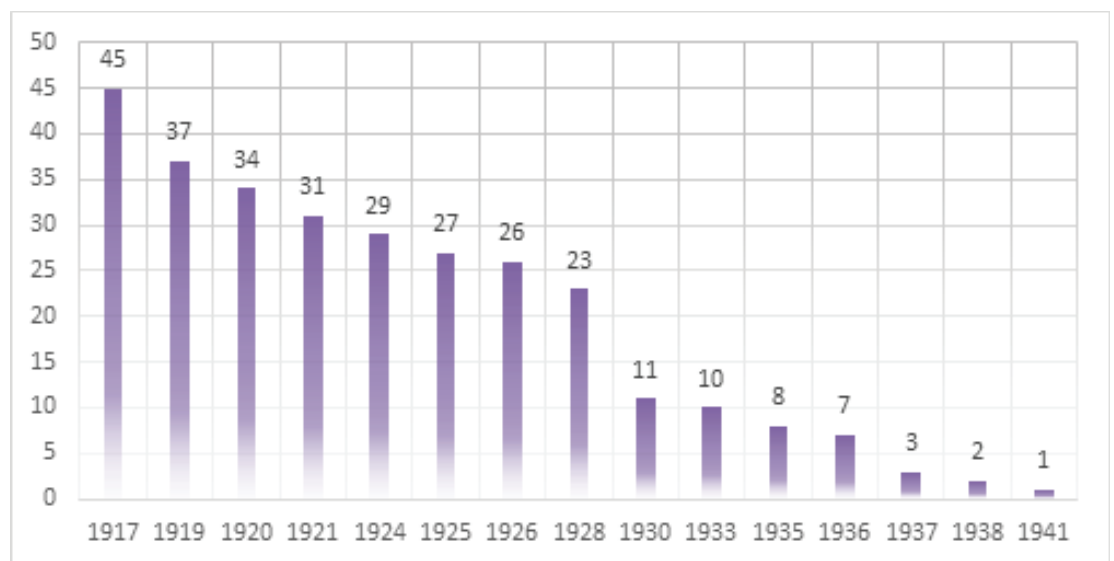
Naturally, the Russian Orthodox Church institutions with its church buildings dominated Ekaterinburg city's religious landscape until 1917. There were 45 church buildings, including five parish churches with several thousand members each, three cathedrals

and a nunnery with about 1000 nuns, which itself had five churches and a cathedral. In addition, there were two parishes of Old Believers and three parishes of Edinovercyc, which altogether made Ekaterinburg's Eastern Christianity landscape consisted of ten parish churches. The city's non-Orthodox landscape consisted of four parishes with Catholic and Lutheran Churches erected in the very centre in the late 19th century, and a Synagogue and a Mosque placed in private houses. Thus, at the turn of the 20th century there were eight parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church, including Edinovercyc (Moscow Patriarchate); two parishes of Orthodox minorities – the Old Believers; two parishes of Western Christians and two of non-Christian religions. The number of non-Orthodox parishes demonstrated Ekaterinburg religious landscape diversity; it may even suggest religious tolerance, taking into consideration the low numbers of the non-Orthodox communities in the city. However, the number of Orthodox buildings, other than parish churches should include a nunnery, chapels and *domovye* (home) churches (Those churches erected or possessed by rich families, schools, nurseries, prisons, military regiments etc), churches in schools and army – (group quarters), which manifested the Russian Orthodox church's dominance and its strong support by the state. The ratio of all Russian Orthodox Church buildings to non-Orthodox reached 9:1 by 1917. Political changes in early 20th century Russia entailed the country's changing religious landscape. Catholics, Lutherans, Jews and Muslims got more civil rights, they started to develop educational institutions and ran charity programs centred at the prayer houses. Jews and Muslims got a right to register vital events. They actively participated in the city's social life. Small groups of newly emerged Ekaterinburg Baptists and Evangelical Christians got a chance to form their religious institutions after the revolution of 1917. Over the next ten years, they were developing dynamically: they got several thousand followers, organized public sermons; held regional congresses, which gathered hundreds; established training courses for preachers [4]. Meanwhile the Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) was gradually losing its privileges due to secularization and atheist politics. In addition, several internal schisms weakened the Church, and it was steadily losing followers in a changing religious situation with growing religious indifference and rise of Baptists and Evangelical Christians groups' popularity, that started to spread already in the late 19th century.

The Bolsheviks started to close churches and expropriate the Russian Orthodox church properties, including buildings almost immediately after the Revolution. between 1917 and 1929, the number of Orthodox churches was rapidly reduced. Already in 1919, the city's authorities closed the Novo-Tikhvin nunnery and most

of the city's *domovye* churches (group quarters). In 1921, four of the former Novo-Tikhvin nunnery's churches ceased to exist; and in 1925 their fate was shared by the Assumption Church operated in the same nunnery. In addition, the authorities closed three other churches, the Bishop's church, St. Nikolas group quarter of the local regiment, and St. Nikolas group quarter of the Nurovskii Shelter. The practice of closing Orthodox churches and depriving the church of its buildings continued, and by 1928 only 11 Orthodox churches remained in the city, nine of which were closed in 1929. In addition, the authorities closed all four churches belonging to Edinovertcy: first the Salvation Church and St. Archangel Michael (former cemetery church) in 1929, and the Nativity and the Holy Trinity Churches a year later ([10], 83–88).

Most of the closed churches' buildings were conveyed to secular institutions, and the main centrally located churches, the Catherine and the Epiphany Cathedrals, as well as the Holy Spirit (Zlatoust) Church and St. Alexander Nevskii (Luzin) Church were destroyed. As a result of this ten-years campaign, there were only two cemetery churches left in the city. The destruction that started just after the Revolution and peaked in 1929 at the beginning of the social reconstruction campaign and in 1937, when religious activity qualified as counterrevolutionary activity and was punished as a crime. In both cases the authorities managed to close half of the existing Orthodox churches (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** The number of the Orthodox churches operating in Ekaterinburg in 1917–1941.

Other religious denomination experienced the same blow although some, for example Baptists and Evangelical Christians, after enjoying unusual religious freedom for a decade. There was no Mosque in Ekaterinburg before the Revolution and the Muslims gathered for Friday prayer and holidays at the house of Tatar merchant Agafurov. This

family did not support the Revolution and left the city after the White Guard retreated. The soviet authorities expropriated their house and the Muslim prayer room ceased to exist as early as 1919.

The Lutheran church was closed between 1920 and 1921. It was probably due to the Muslim leaders' anti-Bolshevik position and the predominantly German Lutheran congregation with high number of foreigners, that they were the first religious minorities to be suppressed in Ekaterinburg. The communities of Baptists and Evangelical Christians that emerged in the 1920s and attracted socially active and mobile strata of urban youth and women, were closed in 1929 [4]. The Catholic Church was closed in 1930 and the Catholic community of the city disintegrated [3]. At the same time, the authorities closed churches and chapels where the city's Old Believers used to gather for prayer: the Holy Trinity Church of Belokrinitskie or the 'Austrian' congregation and the Assumption Chapel of the Chasovennye (priest less) congregation. However, the Old Believers managed to defend the St. Nicholas chapel where both congregations together with Edinovercty gathered for worship since 1929 until 1941.

Ekaterinburg's Jewish community grew rapidly due to migration from the western provinces, i.e. contemporary Poland, Ukraine, Byelorussia and Lithuania in the early 20th century. The city's Jews and wealthy families of Jewish origin (even if being baptised to the Russian Orthodox Church) established several institutions to help the refugees: an employment bureau, a housing agency, credit foundations for small business start-ups, a society for the support of the poor, free medical services, as well as free kosher dining and bathing [1]. There were two Synagogues in the city, but the authorities closed one of them in 1926. When they closed the second Synagogue in 1930, the believers managed to insist that it should be reopened before long. Thus, most of the non-Orthodox Christian churches were closed in 1929–1930.

## 4. Discussion

Ekaterinburg city religious landscape formed by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century reflected the position of the powerful towards the religions. They supported the Russian Orthodox church, whose institutions dominated the religious landscape of Ekaterinburg. However, there were alternative religions presented in the city's landscape: the most established were the Lutherans and Catholics, whose church buildings were very visible and centrally located. The Old Believers, Muslims and Jews were less marked but still presented in the city. All non-orthodox religious communities presented the civil society sprouts, mediating between the state and the religious minorities. Ekaterinburg

city religious landscape evolution in the very early 20<sup>th</sup> century could be interpreted as further development of civil society with the religious institutions taking responsibility for promoting education, medicine and charitable activity. The Evangelical movements, attracting socially active and mobile urban youth and women contributed to the development of civil society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia as well.

## 5. Conclusion

It took two decades for the Soviet authorities to destroy the religious landscape of the Ekaterinburg city: the liturgical buildings of all religious denominations were closed; Churches located in the historical part of the city were demolished or undergone considerable restructuring. First, the authorities crashed down non-parish churches, and later – the rest. There was the crucial attack on religious organizations in 1929, when nine of the eleven Orthodox churches and most of non-Orthodox religious organizations were banned and their buildings expropriated.

The 1937 census, the only soviet census that contained a question on religious affiliation, proved an obvious misbalanced religious situation in USSR and Ekaterinburg particularly. More than 50% of its adult population were religious, and answered positively to the question if they *believed in God*? Most of them we have grounds to identify as the Russian Orthodox Church followers, taken the historic and cultural background as well as the city's ethnic composition into consideration. Therefore, for the believers who could have very well reach up to several dozen thousand people, there was the only church left to conduct the services – John the Baptist Cathedral, the former cemetery church. Old Believers' Chapel of St. Nicholas; and a Synagogue. Other religious buildings were destroyed or used as storage places, dorms, schools, etc. All three institutions remained outside the public sphere: according to the law, religious organizations were deprived of the right to carry out any other than liturgical activity, which only adults could attend. There were two religious minorities, who managed to defend their buildings to gather for communal prayer and keep their religious identity. They were the Old Believers and the Jews: both with centuries' long history and experience to withstand religious oppression and maintain their religious traditions and values even under the threat of life. The rest had to disappear from the city's religious landscape for almost 70 years.



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