

# Delicious symbolism in 'Leningrad branch'

Beyond the sheltering barrier of the Wasatch Mountains there are developments of immediate relevance to Utahns.

Last week in the Soviet Union there were two developments of epochal significance to Mormon Utahns, as well as Utah residents in general: The Soviet Legislature enacted legislation to end official persecution of religion in the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Council on Religious Affairs recognized the Leningrad branch of the LDS Church.

There is delicious symbolism in the name "Leningrad branch." Prior to the calamity of 1917, Leningrad was St. Petersburg — named not for Peter the Great, but for the Apostle Peter. The city's name was changed as part of the cultural auto-da-fe that ensued as atheism was enshrined as the Soviet state religion.

G.K. Chesterton warned that when a man stops believing in God the danger is not that he will believe in anything. Despots need subjects who can suspend disbelief. The state is a profoundly jealous god, and modern Caesars — determined to re-cast mankind in their likeness — have demanded not only the taxes of their subjects, but their souls as well.

In his poem "The Rock," T.S. Eliot described the dogma of modern secularism: "Men have left God for other gods, they say, but for no God; and this has never happened before ... that men both deny gods and worship gods" — such gods as reason, money, power, race, and history. Each of these 'gods' has spawned a modern dogma.

In Russia, official atheism spawned the cult of personality. Lenin has been an object of veneration for over six decades; in some cases Soviet schoolchildren have been taught to pray to Lenin. In 1936, Pravda published a hymn of praise to Stalin: "O Stalin, you plan the birth of the day; the stars of the morning obey thy wish. Your incomparable genius reaches heaven, your penetration the depths of the ocean ... you who giveth birth to man ... O sun that shineth in a million hearts."

The totalitarian project — in Revolutionary France, in Soviet Russia, in Nazi Germany — has been to pound human society into dust, and then to take the



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dust and create from it a "New Man." The continuing revolt against Marxism is evidence that man is not as malleable as social engineers had hoped — and pessimists had feared.

It is possible that the Soviet regime is attempting to co-opt religion now just as it did during WWII. But Stalin's tactical toleration of religion did not extend to the dis-establishment of atheism as the official state religion. Last week's declaration of religious freedom will bring Russia boldly into the 18th century — just in time for the 21st.

While the significance of last week's developments for Mormon Utahns is obvious, there is ample significance for all Utahns. Utah is the site of an important skirmish in a continuing culture war in America.

Utah County residents are wearily familiar with the graduation prayer controversy. Salt Lake and Duchesne counties have been presented with demands to halt the practice of using churches as voting sites. In St. George and Logan legal battles have raged over the use of public funds to light LDS temples. The Logan temple has been removed from that city's official seal.

In Idaho, the ACLU is preparing a lawsuit similar to the one here in Utah. In Texas the Society of Separationists — the same group that presented demands to Salt Lake and Duchesne counties — is laboring to stop the practice of voting in churches. In July, the editorial page of the Philadelphia Inquirer branded the Catholic Church an "Un-American" Institution because its values "Are sharply at odds with those ... of American secular society."

History's most vigorously secular society has re-considered the wisdom of the course America appears determined to pursue.