

Tomáš Bubík, Atko Remmel and David Václavík (eds.)

Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe - The Development of Secularity and Non-Religion

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This innovative book emerged from the research project “Atheism, Freethought and Secularization in Central and Eastern European Countries in the 20th and 21st Centuries”, which set out to study the development and variety of non-religion in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), instead of the usual analysis of the development of religion in this region.

The twelve countries covered by the contributors are Bulgaria (Dimitar Denkov, Georgi Vulchev and Valentina Gueorguieva), Croatia (Nikolina Hazdovac Bajić, Dinka Marinović Jerolimov and Branko Ančić), the Czech Republic (Tomáš Bubík and David Václavík), Estonia (Atko Remmel and Meelis Friedenthal), Hungary (Margit Balogh and András Fejérdy), Latvia (Māra Kiope, Inese Runce and Anita Stasulane), Lithuania (Milda Ališauskienė), Poland (Henryk Hoffmann and Radosław Tyrała), Romania (Lucian Turcescu), Russia (Elena Stepanova), Slovakia (Miroslav Tížik) and Ukraine (Anna Mariya Basauri Ziuzina and Oleg Kyselov). This choice of countries demonstrates and represents the huge diversity of the CEE region. It includes historically predominantly Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and religiously mixed societies; societies influenced by German, Russian or other thinkers and schools of thought; states that were part of the Soviet Union, Soviet satellite states and independent communist states; contemporary societies that are highly religious or non-religious.

The authors of the country case studies come from a variety of fields, comprising sociology, history, cultural studies, philosophy, political science and theological studies. This interdisciplinary nature is reflected in the chosen methodologies, which combine historical, sociological and anthropological methods. The country chapters follow a chronological analysis of the development of freethought and atheism, mostly structured into the three phases of pre-communism, communism and post-communism. Social historiography is applied for all of these phases, providing a rich study of primary and secondary historical sources, such as official documents, newspaper articles and pamphlets. Moreover, these analyses are complemented with statistical analyses for the post-communist phase.

The authors walk the reader through a dense analysis of how political and ideological changes impacted the development of freethought and atheism. Not only do they cover the more or less well-known shifts in Soviet policies of anticlericalism or ‘scientific atheism’, they also describe those influential events that are unique to their respective countries. Such events include the 133-day Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 whose regime applied forced atheization and achieved, in the end, that “every secular program in Hungary was discredited or at least frustrated for several decades to come” (118), as well as how the Second Vatican Council and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Yugoslavia and the Vatican led, in Yugoslavia, to a shift from a conflictual relationship between church and state to a relatively quiet one. The authors display the diversity of experiences of atheization under communist government, from Bulgaria – where the state continued working with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as it was a firm part of Bulgarian national identity – to the total devastation caused by

Stalin's 'Godless Five-Year Plan' (1933–1937), which left whole regions of Ukraine without a single functioning church.

Regarding contemporary CEE societies, the authors describe how the association between atheism and communist totalitarian regimes is still very strong. The most severe, general rejection of atheism can be found in those countries that experienced the most aggressive atheization (e.g., Ukraine), or in those where religion became a natural ingredient for building a new independent national identity after the collapse of communism (e.g., Hungary). This rejection of atheism is partially accompanied by a strong hostility towards individuals identifying as atheist. Thus, in many present-day CEE societies, 'atheist' has become a stigmatizing term that most people would not apply to themselves. In some chapters, after describing how strongly the term 'atheist' is stigmatized, analyses of the present-day number of atheists are restricted to data stemming from questionnaire items that explicitly include the term 'atheist'. Here, it would also have been insightful to see, for example, how many people believe or do not believe in god, or more generally in supernatural entities.

In some CEE countries, the rejection of atheism reaches even into academia, where research on atheism became delegitimized as an academic subject in the post-communist era. This might, in part, explain the small number of publications on the topic of atheism in CEE, which results in a massive gap in research on atheism in Europe. This gap seems all the more gaping because of all the literature on atheism (or, more broadly, on non-religion) in the CEE region, only a small portion is published in English. A quick analysis of this book's bibliography shows that only one-third of the literature is in English. While one might expect that many of the references used for the country case studies are in the respective native languages, it also demonstrates how little we have been able to learn about the subject of atheism in the CEE region so far. Here, the book adds greatly to understandings of the development of freethought and atheism in CEE.

The authors show abundantly that, while the mutual experience of communism makes countries in CEE markedly different from their Western European counterparts with respect to atheism, there has been, and still is, great diversity across the countries of CEE. They expose the over-simplified perception of former communist countries as a bloc with the same experiences of atheism because of their common communist past by displaying the great variety of historical developments and the contemporary statuses of atheism in CEE. This reviewer can easily imagine that this book will become a go-to reference for scholars interested in atheism in Europe.
