Victoria Smolkin

A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism

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Victoria Smolkin, Associate Professor of History at Wesleyan University, Connecticut (USA), presents the first ever written history of Soviet atheism from the Bolshevik Revolution to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. While many books have been (and will be) published on religion in the USSR and the relationship between communism and religion, Smolkin sheds light on atheism and therefore forces the reader to change his point of view. Many aspects of Soviet politics, ideology, and daily life have been related to questions of religion and communism, but the author introduces Soviet life in the light of atheism, although, as her main thesis contends, "Soviet Communism never managed to overcome religion or produce an atheist society" (3). Smolkin wants to understand why religion posed a problem for Soviet communism, and therefore "we need to shift our attention from religion to atheism" (3). Religion represented an obstacle for Soviet communism and its monopoly on political, ideological and spiritual authority in the country. Soviet leaders and the atheist apparatus had to learn through the course of Soviet history that it was not enough just to exorcize religion, but to fill former "sacred space with positive meaning" (5).

To prove her thesis and to analyze how and why "this sacred space was produced, contested and revised" (5), Smolkin identifies three oppositions between religion and Marxism-Leninism/communism: the *political opposition* between ideological purity and effective governance forced the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) to define what kind of *state* the USSR should be; the *ideological opposition* between religion and science that the party needed to solve in order to answer the question of what kind of *society* Soviet communism should establish; and the *spiritual* opposition between indifference and conviction, which prompted the party's effort to define what kind of *person* should be produced in the Soviet Union (5). Naming these three oppositions, Smolkin has also directly identified the Bolsheviks' understanding of religion, consisting of three components: the political (religious institutions), the ideological ("false" worldview), and the spiritual (values and practices; 15).

Smolkin has structured her book in a comprehensible way. In her introduction (1–20), she identifies and clarifies her research interests, gives an overview of the current state of research, and offers a brief introduction into Marxist and Leninist theory while she identifies atheism as precondition for communism's arrival. Chapters 1 (21–56) and 2 (57–83) can be seen as a (short) history of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party, and their behavior toward religion, exemplified by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), following a chronological approach from the 1917 Revolution to Khrushchev's antireligious campaign. The following four chapters focus more explicitly on thematic issues such as the "Cosmic Enlightenment" (chapter 3, 84–105) during the 1960s and the Communist Party's attempt to bring the atheist worldview to the masses (chapter 4, 106–41). Still focusing on the 1960s, chapter 5 (142–64) examines the attempt to look at Soviet atheism as a social science while chapter 6 (165–93) traces the secularization of Soviet life by the introduction of socialistic rituals intended to sacralize Soviet life within the framework of a strong state. Chapter 7 (194–227) sheds light mainly on the last two decades of the Soviet Union by focusing on atheism and spiritual culture. The conclusion (228–46) focuses on Gorbachev's perestroika and contextualizes it within the larger framework of social

and political developments in the USSR. The "break with atheism in favor of universal values and ideological pluralism signaled the party's monopoly on truth, ideological coherence, and thus moral authority" (246) which led directly to the "Death of the Communist Project" (228). Soviet atheism had failed to fill the sacred space it had cleared: "Atheism's inability to address existential questions, meet spiritual needs, and produce atheist conviction among the masses created the perception that atheism was an empty space rather than a meaningful category" (241). The conclusion is followed by endnotes (247–302), a bibliography (303–32), and an index of names and keywords (333–9).

The book is written in an accessible way, and it is even quite entertaining. Smolkin offers highly interesting insights from her research in Eastern European archives and interviews, conducted in Russia and Ukraine during 2008 and 2013, relevant not only for scholars of religion and history, but also for an interested audience. Especially for the wider audience, it is helpful that Smolkin illustrates her findings and arguments with several figures to underline her conclusions. This is evident, for instance, when Smolkin traces Soviet atheism as a science (*ideological opposition*) and offers insights in the "usage" of the Soviet space travels, and especially of the cosmonauts Gagarin and Titov, and its significance for the promotion of the narrative of scientific enlightenment by presenting examples from the Soviet press as well as cartoons and figures claiming "There Is No God!" (84–94). Cosmonauts, once again, were seen as useful supporters of ideological work, e.g., by promoting the introduction of atheistic rituals (*spiritual opposition*). When Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev as the head of the party, "socialist rituals were considered the party's most powerful weapon in the battle against religion" (166) in order "to create an emotional bond with each Soviet person from the cradle to the grave" (183). Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the wedding of the cosmonauts Andrian Nikolaev and Valentina Tereshkova was reported widely by the press. It is not just that Gagarin, Khrushchev, and other prominent party people had attended the wedding in the newly established Moscow "Wedding Place," but also the birth of the "first cosmic family" should be captured by the press, and through this, the new socialist wedding rituals were introduced to the public in detail (171–6). Despite such efforts, the transformative potentials of socialist rituals did not succeed: Although Soviet people adopted the new rituals, by the end of the 1970s it had become clear that they used them in addition to religious rituals and not instead of them (192).

Using and showing such concrete examples and linking them with the theoretical framework of her study is an added value of Smolkin's work. Smolkin has managed to show that under Stalin it was the political threat of religious institutions that set the tone of Soviet politics and that it was the ideological threat of religious belief that forced atheist work under Khrushchev. The final step, the spiritual threat of religion underscoring the weakness of the party's claim on Soviet spiritual life and the ideological indifference of the Soviet youth, had to be solved from Brezhnev onward (198). The circle closes when for Gorbachev religion, again, had become a political problem because Soviet society had turned "to the emerging marketplaces of religion, ideologies, spiritualities, and countercultures" (226) and in this way filled the sacred space, which, according to the Russian proverb, is never empty. With the celebration of the millennium of the baptism of Holy Rus (*Svyataya Rus'*) in 1988, religion had become a normal and highly visible part of Soviet public life.

Smolkin's opus focuses mainly on ethnic Russians, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), and the ROC, what is quite understandable due to the fact that the ROC was the church most connected to Russian history and culture. However, one might wonder what the changes and upheavals in State atheism meant for those who were not ethnic Russians or were living in Georgia or Armenia, where independent local church structures existed? Did the "Sovietization" of sacred space contribute to the "Russification" of the USSR, and if so,

how? How was this perceived by the people at the edges of the Soviet Union? And how did the maintaining of religious rituals contribute to the identity of people?

Questions like this could be answered in studies, which could also focus on the effects and reception of the taken decisions: What did it mean for Soviet atheism when, at the peak of Khrushchev's antireligious campaign, the ROC was allowed to join the World Council of Churches in Geneva to strengthen the public image of the Soviet Union, claiming at international conferences that religious freedom existed in the USSR while at the same time Khrushchev aimed to eradicate the "alien ideology" of popular religiosity? What does this behavior mean for the ideological threat religion had for communists? Of course, this was a political project aiming not at the national sphere of the USSR but at the international one. How was this "use" and "instrumentalization" of the Moscow Patriarchate justified within the party and its organizations, if indeed it was?

These are just a few further questions resulting from the excellent work undertaken by Victoria Smolkin, which is a "must-read" for historians, social scientists, and religious scholars interested in the history of the Soviet Union, the ROC, the communists' shifting approach(es) toward religion and atheism, and its (non-)acceptance by the Soviet people.

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