

10-1986

Pospelovsky's "The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982" and Ellis's "The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History" -- Book Review

Paul Mojzes

Rosemont University, Rosemont, PA, pmojzes@rosemont.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mojzes, Paul (1986) "Pospelovsky's "The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982" and Ellis's "The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History" -- Book Review," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 6: Iss. 5, Article 6.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol6/iss5/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

BOOK REVIEWS

Dimitry Pospelovsky, The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982. Volumes I and II. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984. 535 pp. paper. \$17.95 for the set.

Jane Ellis, The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986. 531 pp. hardbound. \$39.95.

Two recently published books on the Russian Orthodox Church by Pospelovsky and Ellis are a significant contribution to our understanding of the workings of the Russian Orthodox Church under communism.

Dimitry Pospelovsky is an associate professor of history at the University of Western Ontario in Canada. He provided an insider's view remarkably free of the subjective, politically exaggerated slants which abound in some publications of insiders. This is a judicious, insightful, comprehensive study of the Russian Orthodox Church both in the Soviet Union and in its branches abroad. Volume I treats the period from 1917 to 1944. Volume II covers the events and developments from 1945 to 1982. The material is treated in a balanced way, giving primary attention to the mainstream institutional life, but also providing due attention to the "church in the catacombs" and the dissidents.

The most important contribution of Pospelovsky is not the recording of events, which he does admirably, but his ability to shed light on the events and provide reliable interpretations which are true to Russian Orthodox self-understanding. He consulted a vast amount of literature, including works written by outside historians or observers, Russian emigres, official publications from the Soviet Union and the samizdat, as well as a very significant amount of information gathered from interviews and conversation. He points out the need to discern between the official speeches and statements made by Russian Orthodox clergy and their real views expressed only in private in confidence. He clearly points out the differences in views between various church leaders and carefully explains their common agreement of the importance to preserve a functioning episcopate and the liturgical life of the church so crucial from the perspective of the Orthodox understanding of the nature of the church. The treatment is scholarly but compassionate, searching for truth without vindictiveness. He displays the sure hand of one who has full control of his subject of investigation. It is a book which I wholeheartedly

recommend as a reliable source of information on the Russian Orthodox Church both for institutional and personal libraries.

Jane Ellis is a senior researcher and editor of Religion in Communist Lands at Keston College, Kent, Great Britain. Her investigation centers on a period of about twenty years, from the first half of the 1960s to the first half of the 1980s. Like Pospelovsky, she used a very large and varied number of sources, most of which were available to her at Keston College, which has become the main depository of information coming from the Soviet Union and other parts of Eastern Europe. This is particularly true of the samizdats.

Her narrative is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the institutional church, namely the dioceses, churches, clergy, monasticism, publications, laity, education, and church-state relations. The second part, nearly as long as the first, deals with the dissenters. This seems disproportionate since the dissenters are few and do not play that important a role in the U.S.S.R. as they do abroad, though Ellis feels that their importance is much greater than their numbers, especially in regard to learning the truth about the Orthodox Church's real situation. She also feels that the dissenters may save the soul of the church, for in her opinion, the official church leaders, particularly most of the episcopate and certainly the patriarch, have submitted to the will of the state in order to preserve the life of the church. These 167 pages on the dissidents probably present the most thorough investigation and documentation of the dissenting movement, which currently seems to be on retreat.

Ellis plods through her material. She piles her evidence in many layers, sometimes weighing its reliability, sometimes simply reporting it, and then makes her numerical estimates. The conclusion is that the Russian Orthodox Church has been steadily losing ground in many areas, although she does see evidences of a spiritual revival among the intelligentsia, and some improvements in theological education. She definitely succeeded in making the point that the Russian Orthodox Church is not free, but rather severely persecuted. In that respect her piling up the evidence has a steam-hammer effect. One cannot read this book without realizing the most massive destructive state interference in the life of the church and the sometimes heroic efforts of individuals to resist it. Sometimes her own gratuitous comments become irritating since the evidence which she amassed very clearly shows the picture, without the need of additional derogatory comments. Occasionally this gives the impression that the book was written not by an objective historian but by a protagonist in a debate who musters all arguments in order to prevail. She is knowledgeable but despite clear sympathies for the Orthodox Church it is apparent that Russia is unfamiliar territory for her. The total effect is less than

commendable; the author comes out as distinctly biased and boring so that one really has to want to read this book in order not to quit before finishing. But as a reference work with rich source materials, this book will be worth having by all those specializing in Russian Orthodox Church or Soviet history. These features are enhanced by extremely voluminous notes (52 pp. of very small, dense print!), a comprehensive bibliography (11 pp. of the same print), and an index.

Pospelovsky's is a book that specialists as well as non-specialists interested in the Soviet Union and its churches ought to buy, while Ellis's is for the specialist committed to a thorough study of Russian Orthodox Church life.

Paul Mojzes
Rosemont College