Review of Beljakova, Bremer and Kunter's "'Es gibt keinen Gott!' Kirchen und Kommunismus. Eine Konfliktgeschichte [There is no God! Churches and Communism: A Conflict Story]"

Reka Juhasz
University of Vienna, Austria

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Reviewed by: Reka Juhasz, Evangelisch Faculty of Theology, University of Vienna, Austria
Review translated from German by: John Gyorgy, King’s College, Wilkes-Barre, PA, USA

In recent history, the relationship between church and communism has proved to be difficult on a political, social, and economic level. The processes of social transformation in the post-communist countries demonstrate this historical conflict and can be best understood in a transnational and confessional context, according to the three authors of „Es gibt keinen Gott!“ Kirchen und Kommunismus. Eine Konfliktgeschichte.

After the expansion of Soviet authority, the authors point out that in the so-called Eastern Bloc, violent attempts were made to prevent the expansion of religion(s) in these countries. According to the communist ideology, religion prevents the construction of a communist classless society. As a result of this holistic demand for power an aggressive confrontation with churches arose.

The authors offer an overview of the conflict between church and communism in what are now the post-communist countries of Europe and Russia. The overview ranges from the beginning of the conflict between church and communism in the 19th century to the present, and at the same time offers a good insight into the western assessment of this relationship by the ecumenical movement since 1948.

The structure of the book, which is separated into four parts, orients itself chronologically into four developmental stages of church persecution, but with different territorial priorities.
The first part of the book describes the basic principles of communist ideas in their historical, political, and religious contexts. Industrialization in the 19th century brought about numerous social, political, and religious changes. Communists and churches decided to go their separate ways to reach solutions to the social problems that arose. The focus of this part of the book is on Germany and the attempts at solving the conflicts between the two great churches (Protestant and Catholic Church). A look at similar events in Central and Eastern Europe could have helped to clarify the social and religious situation of these countries.

In the second part of the book, the authors focus on the historical conflict between 1917 and 1945 in Russia and communist Soviet Union. This period signifies the second stage in which the main focus is the violent combat against religion and church. The turning point of this phase (around 1940) is given its own chapter by the authors to present the new church policy of the Soviets: Instead of destroying the Orthodox Church, the Soviet leadership gave the church life to a limited extent in the USSR. This change in Stalin's religious policy brought about new methods of dealing with the churches and was passed to the next two stages of conflict history.

The third part of the book focuses on countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where communist regimes were established post-1945. The challenges and attitudes of religious organizations as well as the effects on Christianity outside Europe are highlighted. The authors point out that the religious policy of the USSR shows parallels to features of prominent national examples in Eastern and Central Europe.

In this part, Soviet religious policy after 1945 and its consequences for the individual churches and confessions are presented across countries. The marginalization of the churches took place in different phases, until the churches reacted--at least outwardly--by converting resistance into cooperation. The chapter title, “Marginalization of Christianity: The Power
Consolidation of Communism after 1945,” summarizes the authors great insight into this historical period, in which they detail the resistance, adaptation, and cooperation of the four main churches (the Orthodox Church, the Greek Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, and the Catholic Church).

The fourth part of the book is devoted to present discourse of the communist past, as well as the ongoing conflicts in today's communist countries, such as China and North Korea. In the political transformation processes of 1989/90, the churches had different roles, as the authors demonstrate in many scenarios. The assessment of the role of pro-communist religious leaders, as well as the reactions of Western religious partners during the Communist era, leave many questions unanswered. According to the authors, answers can only be found if the entirety of religious and personnel policies of the communist regimes is considered.

The book presents various discourses, at an international and interconfessional level, on the conflict between church and communism in the 20th century. This presentation provides comprehensive and significant insights into existing scientific research and discussions. The reading and understanding of this context is made easier through the use of clear and concise language and footnotes. Although the selected bibliography is not directed towards countries/regions and their confessions, which would be helpful for further research, there is a broad range of additional literature available. The book is recommended to anyone who is interested in history.