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## Review of Kotiranta's "The Finnish and Estonian Churches during the Cold War"

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***The Finnish and Estonian Churches during the Cold War*, ed. by Matti Kotiranta. Joensuu: University of Eastern Finland, 2016. Paperback, 109 pp. ISBN:978-952-61-2218-2.**

**Reviewed by: Paul Mojzes, professor emeritus, Rosemont College, Pennsylvania.**

This book is dedicated to Prof. Risto Lehtonen for his 90th birthday, in recognition of his initiation of a series of efforts to examine the effect of the Cold War on the worldwide Christian community. This particular volume is the first concrete published result of these efforts reflected in a collection of nine papers delivered at a meeting of Finnish and Estonian scholars and church leaders held in Tallin, Estonia, on November 11, 2013. Two scholars from outside the region also contributed to this exploration. Norman Hjelm, a Swedish-American Lutheran theologian provides biographical data in a *laudatio* to Lehtonen's lifelong service to the Christian communities around the world. Dianne Kirby, the Northern Irish scholar who is among the pioneers of the academic investigation of the role of religion in the Cold War, addresses local and global issues affecting the antagonistic relationship between communism and the churches.

The Baltic authors focus on issues affecting the Christians of Finland and Estonia and their interactions with the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet context. Eino Murtorinne, professor emeritus of church history at University of Helsinki, provides one of the finest overviews of the issue: "The Position of the Churches and Religion in Eastern Europe during the Communist Era," found in an article-length manuscript (pp.35-62). He addresses the "forbidden fruit" role of religion from the initial Leninist ideological attack specifically against the Russian Orthodox Church and restrictive legislation suppressing all religions, tracing the various adjustments in the treatment of religious communities as the situation changed not only in the USSR but also in adapting to circumstances in Eastern European block nations. Murtorinne focuses mostly on the Baltic states, GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary with scant mention of Romania and Bulgaria, but omitting (with some justification) Yugoslavia and

Albania. I am impressed by the accuracy and balance of his explanation and found the concluding evaluation of the strategies of survival by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians particularly perceptive.

Dr. Heta Hurskainen<sup>1</sup> and Marita Tuomi describe and analyze the nearly annual meetings between the top leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland between 1970 and 1989 (they are still occasionally meeting but the ROC now holds a distinctly anti-ecumenical position). The two churches sought to exchange views on theology and searched for common ground but their dialogue on socio-ethical issues were hampered due to the dramatically different societal context in the respective countries. Even when they jointly promoted peace, the language used in these discussions did not have the same meaning for the two partners.

For the readers of OPREE, perhaps the most important chapter is by professor of church history at the University of Tartu, Riho Altnurme, “Estonian Churches during Communism” (pp. 85-98) simply because there is a paucity of similar scholarly overviews. He describes the impact of the first Soviet invasion of Estonia, 1940-41, and then the much more permanent occupation beginning in 1944 and lasting till the break-up of the USSR. He examines the relationship between the churches and what he calls “the late Stalinist state,” which was characterized by persecution and mass deportation, coercion of clergy to become agents of the state, and pressure on the “free churches” to merge into a single denomination. He traces the times of relative relaxation of controls and then the resumption of the pressure which ultimately forced the churches into passivity and “withdrawal from everyday life” (95). In Altnurme’s opinion, the

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<sup>1</sup> See a longer article by Heta Hurskainen, “Socioethical Challenge and its Impact on the Bilateral Dialogue between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Russian Orthodox Church 1970-2014” in this publication (OPREE) Vol. 36, No. 1 (January 2016), second article.

churches did not play a significant role in the resistance to Soviet authority and they recovered their autonomy only upon the dissolution of the USSR.

One can presume that this book may not be readily available outside of Finland and Estonia, but it provides a valuable perspective on the impact of the Cold War in this region of the Baltic countries.