Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe

Volume 40 | Issue 8 Article 7

10-2020

Book Review: Victoria Smolkin, A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism

Nadieszda Kizenko

B O O K R E V I E W

Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018). 339 + xvi pages. $45 (paperback). ISBN 978-0-691-19723-4

Reviewed by Nadieszda Kizenko, Professor of History, University at Albany (SUNY), New York.

Everyone thinks they know about Soviet atheism. The rough outline goes something like this. With communism, atheism became the new religion. Lenin's body in the Red Square mausoleum was the functional equivalent of the relic cult. After the fall of communism, religion came back. Atheism is over. End of story.

Not exactly. In *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*—surely one of the most felicitous titles in years—Victoria Smolkin challenges just about every one of these easy assumptions. The first key shift is looking at atheism not as a 'new religion' but on its own terms. This means treating atheism not as something static or unchanging, but historically contingent. Smolkin offers a useful periodization: the militant atheism of the early Soviet period, Stalin's 1943 shift to accommodation, Khrushchev's renewed anti-religion campaign and "scientific atheism," Brezhnev's retreat, and finally Gorbachev's break with atheism. As she puts it neatly: 'Soviet atheism has a history—one that is intertwined with, yet distinct from, the history of religion" (4).

This shift in perspective allows us to understand both atheism and religion better. One of Smolkin's accomplishments is to make the reader follow the same trajectory as did Soviet propaganda cadres and ideology theorists. We begin in 1917 operating under the assumption that religion exists, that it poses a danger to the Communist project, and needs to be exorcized from Soviet life. By the end of the 1930s, we have destroyed both the political power of the Orthodox Church as an institution and the bodies of many of its priests. When war begins and German forces successfully curry favor with the local populations by opening churches, however, Stalin changes course: new bureaucracies, CAROC (Council on the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church) and CARC (Council on the Affairs of Religious Cults), now manage relations between religious organizations and the state. Khrushchev announces a return to ideological purity. Because he sees religion as a rural problem, we start to go after rural rites—pilgrimages, local saints' cults, local holy sites and local feast days—in particular. We close monasteries (from 145

in 1945 to 63 in 1959 and 18 by the mid 1960s) and churches: USSR-wide, by 1964, there are only half the functioning churches there had been in 1947 (79). We soon see, however, that more antireligious propaganda actually makes church attendance rise. Smolkin makes readers vicarious participants in the atheism project, wondering what new approach they can try against the specter of religion.

The lack of training and enthusiasm among the atheistic cadres is striking. Also striking is the space race's importance. Cartoons showed rockets breaking the priest's connection to Heaven and a cheerful cosmonaut flying high over church and mosque domes, along with former believers claiming to have lost their faith when they realized that man could fly higher than Elijah or the angels and not be shot down by God for his hubris. One forgets just how shocked the American public was to hear cosmonauts declare that they had seen neither God nor angels (statements that astronaut John Glenn and President John F. Kennedy countered with declarations of faith). Planetariums—more than a few in former churches—became centers of atheism. Here, too, however, both ordinary believers and Church hierarchs proved unexpectedly resilient. Appealing to science and reason was no more successful than anything else.

One almost starts to feel sorry for atheists who cannot figure out what they are doing wrong. They have access to radio, television, and the press; the Church does not. But priests are taught to preach; they are not. The Church has answers to ultimate life questions—the meaning of life, death, conscience, morality—and accompanies "each life from the cradle to the grave," (130) offering particular consolation in pain and sorrow; the party forgets the worker once she leaves the work collective. Atheists finally start trying to devise an atheism that is emotionally and spiritually positive.

They also start trying to figure out who the primary culprits are. It emerges that women and the elderly are not only bearers of religious survivals, but "the primary vehicle for the transmission of religion across generations" (153). Deep down, the run-of-the-mill Party member cannot believe that making his mother-in-law happy by eating a Paschal treat or having a baby baptized is all that bad. From this point of view, a particularly clever move in 1961 was to formally require the consent of both parents—although, as Smolkin notes, grandmothers now baptized in secret so as to give parents deniability (177). Creating alternative, civic rituals—weddings in particular, but also registering infants and issuing passports with new solemnity—was another approach. By the late 1970s, however, socialist rituals had not supplanted the old

rites—they simply supplemented them. Apparently too many people continued to enjoy and find meaning in the singing, the incense, and other ritual elements of Church sacraments.

This brings us to the only element one might have liked to see Smolkin develop. The extensive quotes from atheist cadres are vivid and entertaining. The perspective of the ordinary Soviet citizen who is the object of these atheist attempts would be good as well. What did it actually mean to people to see churches destroyed or shut down, and priests mocked? Is it possible that atheism actually had the effect of creating sympathy? When Smolkin does quote atheists describing the believers' rejoinders they hear, one suddenly remembers that subjects have agency. More from them would have been welcome. But this is after all *A History of Soviet Atheism*—and a fine one it is.