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# Ramet's "Protestantism and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia: The Communist and Post-Communist Eras" - Book Review

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## Book Review:

Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Protestantism and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia: The Communist and Post-Communist Eras* Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1992. +441pp.

This volume is the third of a series produced by the same editor, on Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and now Protestantism under Communist rule. It is the first to extend its field of study into the post-Communist era. It is packed with information, covering Protestant churches and groups in the former Soviet Union and all the countries that formed part of the Soviet bloc after World War II. The chapters are on the whole competent critical surveys by western scholars who have long studied the countries and the churches about which they write and have deep sympathy with their faith and life. They are historians and social analysts rather than theologians. None of them deals adequately with the theological struggles of these churches to define themselves and their witness under the pressures of Soviet power, Catholic or Orthodox culture, and Marxist ideology. With this limitation, however, editor Ramet has produced a reference book that will be useful to all who are concerned with eastern Europe and its believers for years to come.

The essays differ markedly in their emphases. Walter Sawatsky, a Mennonite scholar, does an extraordinary job of tracing the complex history of Protestant churches, from Lutheran to Pentecostal, from 1917 to 1991, and in all parts of the Soviet Union including the Baltic states. The late Paul Bock, out of long personal involvement, reports competently on Czechoslovakia and Poland, though his story ends before the bitter Czech controversies between the old leadership and the new, schooled in the Charter '77 resistance. Sabrina Ramet gives a fair, factual outsider's picture of East German Protestantism up to the moment of reunification, without, however, much reference to the intense theological controversies and tensions that were part of the Evangelical Church's witness there. Earl Pope presents a complex survey of Romanian Protestantism, emphasizing the neo-Protestant more than the traditional Reformed and Lutheran churches. And Lawrence Klippenstein, a Mennonite historian, gives a careful study of conscientious objection and alternatives to military service throughout the whole area.

With somewhat more passionate involvement Paul Mojzes and Gerald Shenk portray the harrowing experience of the small Protestant communities in Bulgaria and the peculiar problems and mission of Protestant churches in the lands of former Yugoslavia, now obsessed with religious nationalisms that are Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim. The most involved, and least objective, reporter in the volume is Josef Pungur, an emigre now teaching in Canada, who writes about his native Hungary. He presents much useful information, but his perspective is thoroughly nationalist, and within that nationalism thoroughly partisan. We are introduced here to one side of a controversy within the Hungarian churches, both at home and in the diaspora, about the character of Christian witness and church administration during the Communist period. It is a controversy colored more by political attacks and personal innuendo than by theology and pastoral concern.

Most difficult is the task of bringing this heterogeneous collection of churches and movements together into one picture. Ramet does an excellent job of setting the stage in an introductory essay and of bringing us up to date at the end. She would have done better to depend on herself alone. Sape Zylstra, a humanities professor from Florida, offers in thirty pages a sweeping history of Protestantism and politics from the Reformation to the present. It is a mixture of insights and misunderstandings, without a clear thesis. Gerd Stricker, of the Swiss institute *Glaube in der 2 Welt*, closes the book with an "Afterword" which is an appalling example of west European *hubris* toward the churches of the east. With no appreciation of the nuances of Christian freedom from--and witness to--the power and ideology of Marxist-Leninist states, he judges all church life by the standards of conformity or resistance. Responsibility for human welfare in a socialist society is not one of his categories.

This volume is useful, indeed irreplaceable as a comprehensive reference. It also points toward, and cries out for a fuller, deeper story still to be told. That story will be about the life of the churches--their piety, their insight, their witness both lay and pastoral--in the midst of a society and under a government dominated by an alien ideology and the coercion of an alien power. It will explore the work and inner struggle of pastors, laity, and church leaders to open areas of freedom and justice with room for the church to live and bear its witness in such a society. It will deal with the complex relation between human motives, which are often mixed, and human judgments about policy and action in the service of the church's survival and ministry. Above all it will be a theological story: about God's promise and judgment working through human faith in the midst of the confusion of human responses.

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