

Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty. A History of Soviet Atheism*, Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-691-17427-3

This book explores the history of atheism in the Soviet Union. It covers all periods of the Soviet state's existence, from the 1917 revolution to the end of Perestroika, when 'Soviet atheism was abandoned in the divorce of party and state, becoming utopia's orphan' (p. 245). It is composed of seven chapters, alongside the introduction and the conclusion, which examine the history of Soviet atheism, partly chronologically and partly thematically.

The author discusses atheism as a key indicator of success for the Communist Party, and the state, in their main goal: 'The Party increasingly read Soviet citizens' attitudes on religion and atheism as a critical barometer of their broader commitment to Soviet Communism' (p. 196). She reveals that the Party had to put aside the initial primitive interpretation of religion, as well as the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the origin of religion. It had to deal with practical manifestations of religion in Soviet society, which led to several redefinitions of the meaning of religion, and measures for the politics of atheism.

The interpretation of religion as a political problem resulted in the emergence of militant atheism, which was directed against religious institutions following the revolution. Subsequently, Stalin either normalised or bureaucratised relations with religious institutions, even utilising them as allies to some extent during the war (Chapter 1). Under Khrushchev's leadership, religion began to be regarded as an ideological issue (Chapter 2), and active ideological propaganda, employing scientific atheism, was employed to counter it, with the aim of enlightening human consciousness. This propaganda also capitalised on the Soviet Union's achievements in space, and the notable statements made by cosmonauts claiming the absence of God in space (Chapter 3).

Unable to achieve the desired results through scientific atheism, the Party came to understand that lived religion differed from religion as dogma that it fought against using ideological means (Chapter 5). From the late 1960s, the Party constantly faced the problem of indifference, which

was also associated with the insufficient development of Soviet spiritual culture. Indifference meant that, even though religiosity appeared to be declining, atheist convictions did not prevail in Soviet society: 'Even if Soviet people considered themselves unbelievers, atheism had not made great inroads into their spiritual world' (p. 160).

The Party attempted to understand, through social research as well, what actually keeps people attached to religion. It was leaning towards the consensus that the family plays a crucial role in the functioning of religion, and the importance of 'psychological, emotional, aesthetic, and ritual elements' was discovered. Religion began to be treated as a spiritual problem and a problem of everyday Soviet life. Efforts were made to develop socialist rituals for births, weddings and funerals (Chapter 6). Other ways were sought to fill the void left by religion with positive socialist content. During the period of Perestroika, religion once again came to be seen as a political problem. Until the end of the Soviet era, religion remained, in a sense, an unsolved mystery for the Party, and Soviet people did not fully internalise atheist convictions.

As has been mentioned, the book reveals how atheism, depending on the interpretation of religion, underwent several stages in the Soviet Union: from militant atheism to scientific atheism, and then transcending atheism solely as criticism of religion to a quest for positive atheistic content. It also uncovers the daily challenges of atheist propaganda, and fluctuations in the motivation of atheists. The intelligentsia were hesitant to actively engage in atheist propaganda and contribute to it, and this was perceived as a loss to the quality of atheist propaganda. Moreover, the intelligentsia also influenced the direction of atheist policies by expressing their attitude in the early 1970s associating religion with an important part of the cultural heritage, which the Party leadership could not ignore.

To sum up, the book offers several insights. Firstly, it shows that the dogmatic concept of religion proved to be overly simplistic, and the practice of atheism and the political pragmatism of the Party necessitated constant adjustment to understand the nature of religion and its importance to people.

Secondly, the absence left by religion could not be effectively filled by the scientific, ideological and spiritual content generated by the concept of communism. Atheism, as a mere critique of religion, also failed to acquire positive content that could resonate with people. The policy of atheism resulted in indifference.

Thirdly, the book contributes to a broader discourse on the last century concerning the relationship between modernisation and secularisation.

The history of the Soviet state, as revealed in the book, demonstrates that a particular (Soviet) modernisation project did not inevitably lead to secularisation. Religion exhibited a remarkable persistence, even in the face of targeted measures by the state to eradicate it.

I would like to continue discussing some of the issues raised in the book. The author proposes that interpretations of religion underwent changes throughout the history of the Soviet state. The book suggests that religion was regarded as a political problem after the revolution, and it was not considered a problem during the Stalin era. Subsequently, there emerged an understanding of religion as an ideological problem. Furthermore, it was later viewed as a spiritual problem. It is worth considering whether the different interpretations of religion are linked to the Party's chronological reinterpretation, where certain measures did not yield the desired results, or whether it was rather parallel interpretations generated by different institutions, each responsible for different goals, aiming to achieve their respective objectives. It is also worth considering whether the 'spiritual' stage of atheism is more a part of the ideological stage, rather than a distinct stage on its own.

The author acknowledges that a separate analysis of religions on the Soviet Union's periphery, such as Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, is not extensively covered. She focuses primarily on the decisions made by the central authorities, and government decisions, concerning the Russian Orthodox Church in the RSFSR.

For further research, the question remains as to how applicable the conclusions presented in the book are to the Soviet Union's periphery, where different confessions prevailed. Evidence can be found throughout the entire Soviet period to support the argument that the Catholic Church in the Lithuanian SSR was regarded primarily as a political factor, particularly from the perspective of the leadership of the Lithuanian SSR. However, other measures of atheisation related to religion as ideology or spiritual factors were also implemented.

When the situation regarding religion in the Soviet Union was relatively calm after the war (until the campaign of 1954), and a new wave of anti-religious activity began only under Khrushchev, the Lithuanian SSR witnessed the most severe political repressions against the Catholic Church. These repressions involved the closure of churches, the liquidation of monasteries, the persecution of the clergy, and other measures similar to those described by the author in Russia after the revolution.

The declared goal of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was to create communism. However, whether the leadership of the republics

internalised this goal when selecting various atheist measures is a question that remains open. As is mentioned in the book, during Khrushchev's time, there were no clear, universally applicable policy guidelines, and initiatives were encouraged at a local level. The Party leaders in the republics had a certain discretion in choosing atheisation measures. For example, the establishment of new Soviet rituals was promoted with the consideration of local cultural and ethnic specificities.

Measures of atheisation and the discussions among propagandists in the Lithuanian SSR indicate that citizens' loyalty to the state, rather than the creation of communism in the state, was one of the motivations that prompted the choice of certain atheist measures, or the softening of others.

The book leaves the question of how to evaluate the success of Soviet society's atheisation. The author chooses the criterion of success declared by the Communist Party, which viewed atheism as a necessary precondition for building Soviet communism, as communism's 'calling card' (p. 20). The Party's policy could be considered successful if there was a complete internalisation of atheist convictions and the embrace of the socialist way of life at individual and social levels.

In this respect, we can agree with the author that the Soviet state did not achieve these goals. However, an unanswered question remains as to whether the atheisation of society can be deemed unsuccessful when considering the impact of policy measures on societal attitudes, beliefs and practices. A significant portion of society became disconnected from religious practices, and religion started to be seen as a cultural tradition that might not necessitate active belief. Religious practices were marginalised in public spaces and confined to a narrow private sphere, among other changes. While the Soviet state failed to create a completely irreligious communist society, it undeniably shaped a certain kind of strongly secularised modern society. The nature of this secularism remains to be explored in future research.

*Nerija Putinaitė*

Vilnius University

ORCID: 0000-0002-4033-5142