

Dominic Erdozain, ed., *The Dangerous God: Christianity and the Soviet Experiment* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017), 277 pp., \$39.00 (pb), 9780875807706.

Ideas about religion and its place in society have always been central to our understanding of communism as a political system. In the 1930s, the Vatican warned the world of the dangers of “atheistic communism.” During the Cold War, the perceived oppression of religious believers in the Soviet Union dominated American critiques of the USSR and socialism more generally. For some observers, Soviet communism itself was considered a religion, and its adherents were portrayed as building socialism with the fervor and blindness of zealots.

This focus on religion in scholarly (and non-scholarly) understandings of the Soviet Union can be seen in the sheer number of titles on religion and Soviet power, as well as the volume of memoirs and other contemporaneous accounts by both clergy and believers. In the past decade, new works have emerged with a fresh perspective, thanks to the opening of Soviet archives, on topics ranging from the experience of marginal sects in the USSR, to the fate of religious buildings in the Soviet village. With a few notable exceptions, however, these works do not treat religion as central to the history of the Soviet Union.¹

In this edited volume, the centrality of religion—specifically Orthodox Christianity, as the book begins with a disclaimer that the only religion discussed in this volume is Russian Orthodoxy—is taken as a given to experience of living in the Soviet Union, for believers and non-believers alike. In his introduction to the volume, titled “The Rhythm of the Saints,” editor Dominic Erdozain describes the collection as “the story of the survival of the Christian faith under communist rule, a survival that evolved into something like resistance ... these essays describe the interpenetration of religious ideas within a hostile Soviet culture—and, it must be said, the permeation of Soviet ideology within the Russian Orthodox Church. The picture that emerges is not a religious communist rising up against a secular state, but a series of subtle subversions.” (2) In this description, and in the content of the essays that follow, it is

1 Two recent works have argued for the centrality of religion in understanding Soviet life, Victoria Smolkin’s *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (2018) and Yuri Slezkine’s *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (2017). Smolkin argues that Soviet atheism campaigns were a crucial part of post-Stalin efforts to build socialism, allowing the state to make incursions into domestic spheres that had previously been neglected. For Slezkine, the project of building a Soviet state and society should be seen as a utopian one and its proponents members of a religious sect.

clear that the editor and authors of this volume seek to frame religion (specifically Orthodox Christianity) and communism (Soviet-style) not as separate and opposing forces, but as ideas and epistemologies that co-existed—albeit uneasily—within the Soviet Union.

The essays that make up the edited volume can be divided, roughly, into two categories: historical and philosophical/theological. The essays of the former category apply the framework of tense co-existence of Christianity and communism to specific moments in Soviet history, using a new perspective on religion to add to our understanding of the Soviet period. The essays of the latter category deal more abstractly with the consequences of the proposed framework: *how* did these ideas co-exist in the Soviet Union and what are the *ways in which* they came to influence and frame the other?

The more historically-minded essays deal with topics such as the Soviet anti-religious campaigns (“Empowering the Faithful: The Unintended Consequences of Bolshevik Religious Policies” by Scott Lingenfelter; “Combating God and Grandma: The Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and the Battle for Childhood” by Julie deGraffenried), the Russian Orthodox Church’s role in the Soviet state (“Persecution, Collusion, and Liberation: The Russian Orthodox Church from Stalin to Gorbachev” by Michael Bourdeaux; “There are things in history that should be called by their proper names’: Evaluating Russian Orthodox Collaboration with the Soviet State by Geraldine Fagan), and the role of Russian Orthodoxy in contemporary Russia (“The Useful God: Religion and Public Authority in Post-Soviet Russia” by James W. Warhola). As a group, these essays explore how regulation and suppression of religious communities worked in the Soviet Union, from the perspective of Soviet policymakers as well as state-sanctioned Orthodox clergy, and the consequences of this context for religious life in the USSR and after.

One of the most fascinating examinations of religious policy in Soviet history comes from Scott Lingenfelter’s exploration of early Bolshevik religious policy, in an essay that sheds light on the effects of early Soviet religious policy on religious communities and their interaction with the newly formed Soviet state. Lingenfelter argues convincingly for examining early Soviet religious policy in the context of radically re-defining the role of state in the transition from imperial Russia to the USSR. Religious communities were mobilized into the Soviet project and empowered in 1917 just as others were in the transformation from the Russian Empire to the USSR, leading to important changes and revivals within religious communities, as well as radical shifts in parish politics. The Bolsheviks were not responsible for developments in parish politics, Lingenfelter explains, but the revolutionary context of 1917 meant that changes that began within parishes beginning before the October Revolution