

Reviews

A History of Soviet Atheism

in Theory and Practice, and the Believer Vol. 3. *Soviet Studies on the Church and the Believer's Response to Atheism*,

by Dmitry V. Pospelovsky. London: Macmillan Press, 1988.

Paperback, 325pp. £14.95

Readers of the first parts of Professor Pospelovsky's study of the Russian Orthodox Church will be pleased that the publishers have not kept us waiting for the third volume.* Like its predecessors, it offers an impressive body of information, scholarly analysis, and displays genuine concern for Soviet believers.

Part One of this volume provides a detailed survey of Soviet writing on the history and theology of Christianity, followed by a discussion of the relationship between the church, Soviet science, culture and politics. Part Two traces the growth of religious feeling among Soviet philosophers, and examines the convergence between Russian nationalism and the country's religious heritage. The last part reviews sociological work done by Soviet scholars in this sphere; though designed mainly to demonstrate the growth of atheism in different social strata, such studies often illustrate (just as convincingly) the persistence of religious belief.

There is little doubt that the last decade and a half have seen a marked revival of spirituality in the USSR, particularly among younger people. Some Soviet data suggest that there may be 80-95,000,000 Orthodox believers, 20-25,000,000 Muslims, 10-12,000,000 Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Armenian Apostolic, 1,000,000 religious Jews, Buddhists and others, and up to 3,000,000 Old Believers. This represents nearly half of the total population, which apparently equals the proportion of believers in the late thirties. Such estimates may be on the generous side, but there is no doubt about the huge numbers involved today. The book concludes with accounts of the daily lives of church-goers and the means they adopt to honour religious practice.

*For a review of *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice, and the Believer* Vols. 1 and 2, see *RCL* Vol. 16 No. 4, pp. 368-71.

It is fortunate that Professor Pospelovsky finished the trilogy as late as December 1987, as this improves its perspective in a time of substantial change. The circumstances surrounding the millennium celebrations for Russian Orthodoxy and Gorbachev's relatively benign policies in the sphere of religion, give hope for the future. A number of striking promises have been made, covering (amongst other things) new state regulations on church administration, and the release of religious prisoners. Neither of these had been fully implemented by the time the volume went to press.

Volume Three, like its predecessors, is so full of interesting facts that one is tempted to quote a couple by way of conclusion. Thus the Marxist assertion that Christianity was born in Asia Minor, not Palestine, appears to be built on a mistranslation of a single sentence in the writings of Friedrich Engels (p. 6). Since the late seventies there has been a change in Soviet views on the historicity of Christ and the existence of Nazareth during his lifetime, both of which may now be admitted (p. 9). Professor Pospelovsky's approach may in some respects be contested — the subject is indeed vast and emotive. But there is no doubt that his three volumes represent an outstanding contribution to western scholarship on Russian Orthodoxy.

MERVYN MATTHEWS

*Symbols of Power: The Esthetics of Political Legitimation
in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*

edited by Clars Arvidsson and Lars Eric Blomqvist.

Almqvist and Wiksell International, Stockholm, 1987, 185pp.

This collection of essays on 'Symbols of Power' is the outcome of a conference on 'Symbols and Rituals: the Esthetics of Political Legitimation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe', which took place during October 1985 in the Swedish town of Uppsala. Speaking at this conference, Prof. Kristian Gerner asked 'Do we really understand how the Soviet system works; why workers, peasants, intellectuals and officers remain loyal to the regime and the system as such, although Soviet discussion and western research have revealed grave shortcomings in almost every field, from the economy to education?' (p. 114)

A proper understanding of the way this system works was the objective of the Uppsala lectures published here. But unlike many such collections and conferences the themes discussed at this

conference were not economics, politics, education etc. in themselves, but how they were shaped as a result of the long development of symbols and rituals. In principle such an approach is not new: it was developed in a particular branch of linguistics — semiotics — especially in the works of Soviet linguists of the Tartu and Moscow schools, (it is no coincidence that the authors of this collection often refer to the works of Yu. Lotman, V. Uspensky and other Soviet linguists).

In his substantial introduction to the volume, Prof. E. Blomqvist gives his own 'classification/definition of symbols'. 'The power of symbols is as old as are the symbols of power,' (p. 9). Blomqvist considers that to the individual, symbols are a means of forming a relationship with the world, a way of discovering one's place in the cosmos and explaining it. On the other hand, state authority tries to create its own system of symbols, to confirm its statute and adjust the reins between the rulers and the ruled. Once the system of symbols has been established, the symbols embark on their reign of power. The articles in this collection are devoted to analysing various aspects of public life in the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe from this viewpoint, as well as the evolution of the Soviet system of symbols and rituals from the time of Lenin, through the Stalinist epoch, right up to the beginning of Gorbachev's rule.

Prof. Richard Stites, in his opening article 'Symbols and Rituals: Style, Symbol and Festival in the Russian Revolution', describes the initial process of creating a new system of symbols. At that time the symbols of the old authorities were being replaced by new ones; changes were taking place in emblems, military uniforms, the names of streets and towns; new rituals for processions, demonstrations, funerals were being introduced and so on. But if the symbols of tsarist power were established in Russia spontaneously over the centuries, under Lenin a similar process was planned, organised and purposeful in nature. Prof. Stites is quite correct in attributing a special role in this process to Lenin's so-called plan of monumental propaganda, which the leader of the proletariat placed at the centre of his whole cultural policy. This plan included not only the removal from town squares of monuments 'to the tsars and their servants' and their replacement by memorials to leading revolutionaries, but also the creation of political rituals involving crowds of many thousands (festivals, demonstrations, funerals etc.). As part of this plan the symbolic system of the new authorities took shape: a pantheon of new heroes and martyrs grew up; the new rituals created cults revered like those which had once surrounded the saints. The plan was in essence the start of the aesthetic ritualisation of political life which finally became fossilised under Stalin.

Prof. Blomqvist, speaking of the power of symbols in any society, points out the qualitative difference between various types of symbolism. In an ordinary society symbols used, for example in commercial advertisements or political disputes, are of a rational kind. Religious symbolism, on the other hand, always has an inner meaning: it appeals to the emotions and intuitions and involves certain spiritual aspects of existence. According to Blomqvist, Soviet symbolism under Stalin was of precisely this type: 'The marked semiotic qualities of Soviet symbols should be seen against the background of Orthodox tradition. Existence is experienced as a totality, where that which is only overt takes on meaning in relation to the covert.' (p. 8)

Here we come to a more interesting and controversial idea put forward by many authors in this collection: the concept of a link between Stalinist political symbolism and the traditions of old Russia, particularly the traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church. This concept has its supporters and its detractors — K. Germer, for example, directly argues with A. Solzhenitsyn, A. Nekrich and M. Geller, who, in his opinion, reject any links between the Russia of the past and the present.

An article by Ulf Abel, curator of the National Museum in Stockholm, is devoted to the theme of 'Icons and Soviet Art'. Abel emphasises the role of the icon in not only the religious, but also the political life of Russia, especially in the time of Ivan the Terrible. In the Soviet era, a similar role began to be played by the works of socialist realism, especially portraits of Lenin, Stalin and other leaders, which became cult objects to be revered:

The pictures of party officials encountered in these and similar cases and consisting for the most part of touched-up photographs, have another point in common with the icon portraits. The icon is not a realistic portrait of the saint depicted; it does not present his or her actual physical appearance while living on earth. . . The Soviet cult images similarly show the transfigured, official side of these subjects. They too ignore all signs of advancing age and illness, disfigurements and birthmarks, etc. Just as icons are on special occasions carried in procession out of church and through the town and village. . . the modern images of the saints are carried in procession on May Day, on revolutionary anniversaries and on other important occasions. (p. 145)

Moreover, Soviet pictures began not only to fulfil the symbolic functions of icons but also to borrow their iconography, i.e., their style of depiction. Ulf Abel gives numerous examples of this: a poster from 1920, which shows a Red Army soldier on his steed, striking

down the hydra of imperialism, follows in detail the iconography of St George; the Palekh miniatures of the 1930s, with their reverse perspective and iconic hills differ from icons only in that the saints are replaced by peasants binding sheaves or workers forging iron. Such prominent masters of Soviet painting as Pavel Korin and Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin also appealed directly to the icon tradition.

This direct and deliberate appeal to the iconic style was encouraged in the epoch of the Stalinist High Renaissance. But Ulf Abel traces this tradition even in things that are quite unlike icons — for example, the well-known picture 'Lenin in Smolny' (1930), by one of the founders of socialist realism, Isaak Brodsky. Lenin is here bending over a small table and writing something on a piece of paper; opposite him is an empty chair. Abel claims that it was exactly like this, that the holy evangelists were depicted in Byzantine art.

It only remains to add that the whole iconography of Lenin and Stalin in Soviet art, worked out to its smallest details, was also based on existing models. Thus scenes from the leaders' youth are often reminiscent of the iconographic model 'Christ among the teachers'; countless depictions of speeches by Lenin or Stalin to the popular masses hardly differ from religious subjects such as 'John the Baptist preaching' or 'Christ's appearance to the people'; the differing Soviet subjects 'Lenin in Razliv' or 'Stalin in exile in Turukhan' suggest direct associations with depictions of 'Christ in the wilderness'. All these are symbols — inward, appealing not to reason but to intuition and emotion — which create a halo of cultic reverence around the personages thus depicted. The difference between the old and new systems of symbols (as pointed out by Prof. Blomqvist in his introduction) lies in the fact that 'while the chief task of the Orthodox Church was to realise the unity between God and man spiritually and materially in the rite, the Stalinist political liturgy aims towards a solemn realisation of the unity between leader and people, past and present, doctrine and power'. (p 14)

Has this symbolic system changed in character since Stalin's death? An indirect answer to this question is given in a number of articles. Prof. Gerner calls his extremely interesting and informative article 'Soviet TV News', giving it the sub-title 'Sobornost' secularised', taking as the object of his analysis a programme chosen at random — 'Vremya' of 12 July 1985. This programme lasted 40 minutes and consisted of 20 separate news items. Scrupulously analysing each of these, Prof. Gerner came to the conclusion that only one minute 55 seconds of the programme, i.e. one twentieth, contained real information; all the rest was a manifestation of political rituals, official ceremonies or pure myth creation. And so Gerner (out of all the collection's authors probably the most firm and consistent

supporter of the idea of direct links between the Soviet system of symbols and that of old Russia) ends his article with a florid aphorism: 'Ivan the Terrible would recognise his Russia in the 'Vremya' programme, should he return to the realm of his faithful contemporary heir to the Kremlin throne.' (p. 138)

A number of articles in the volume are concerned with analysis of political symbolism in Eastern Europe (Andres Amen 'Symbols and Rituals in the People's Democracies during the Cold War', Leonard Neuger and Bronsilaw Swidersky 'Ritualised Language: the Polish Obituary as a Signal of Different Social Values'; Kjell Magnusson, 'Secularisation of Ideology: the Yugoslav Case'; Anca Giurchescu, 'The National Festival "Song of Romania": Manipulation of Symbols in the Political Discourse'. The resemblance to the Soviet Union is striking: the same ritualisation of public life, the same pseudo-religious ideology, only slightly coloured by the tints of different national traditions. However, the authors, on Poland and Yugoslavia note that political symbolism of the Soviet type is less deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people here.

These arguments are summed up by Prof. Blomqvist in the introductory article: 'One general conclusion which can be drawn is that in many parts of Eastern Europe this symbolism comes into conflict with a native tradition in which Orthodoxy has played little if any part in the course of history or where there has been a great deal of Catholic or Protestant influence. In fact, this is one of the keys to understanding the failure to gain support for Soviet socialism among the peoples of Eastern Europe.' (p. 18)

It is hard to agree with this. However convincing the analogies with the past, it is much more important for an understanding of modern symbols of power to take into account the social developments of our time which are common to countries with widely differing national traditions. After all, the very expression 'political aesthetics', which is the sub-title of this volume, was first used by the German writer Walter Benjamin, who perished during the Nazi period. And he used it of the Third Reich. There can be no question of any Orthodox tradition in Germany over the centuries. National consciousness developed there under the influence of Catholicism and various forms of Protestantism. Nevertheless it was on this consciousness that Hitler based his system of political symbols and his political liturgy. At the risk of great oversimplification one may say that the system of symbolic thinking described here is characteristic of any 20th century totalitarian regime, regardless of its political colouring. The whole sphere of culture becomes part of the political liturgy and public life takes on a ritual character, becoming a form of art, in which every participant fulfils the symbolic role assigned to him in advance.

Symbols weld such a system into a unified monolith, or pyramid, crowned by the gigantic figure of the God-man-leader.

What emerges from this collection 'Symbols of Power' is precisely what upholds the Soviet system and makes it work, what distinguishes it from western society. Of course, the West uses its own system of symbols, but it is quite different in character. In the concluding article of this collection, Prof. Daniel Tazschyz of Uppsala University describes this difference as follows: 'What is pleasing in the Western version of behaviour modification efforts is its undirectedness, planlessness and thoroughly anarchic character. Symbols we shall have to endure; the danger comes from symbols in harmony.' (p 176)

IGOR' GOLOMSTOCK

Fear no Evil

by Natan Sharansky. London: George Weidenfeld
and Nicholson Ltd, 1988. 468 pp., £16.95

This is an uplifting book. The story of Natan Sharansky's imprisonment is told with a skill and a directness that lose little in Stefani Hoffman's excellent translation. There are only a few points where awkward phrasing or slightly uncontrolled anecdotal diversions disturb the flowing read. Sharansky's indomitable humour pervades the text, adding to, rather than detracting from, its dramatic impact.

Fear no Evil has many levels and contrasts: it is a tale of moral heroism struggling with sordid compromise, a story of unerring faithfulness in the face of separation, a triumph of humour in the midst of dreary isolation, and a record of loyalty overcoming betrayal. Superficially, the agents in the struggle appear to be the single hero against the faceless phenomenon of a corrupt legal system. But through the course of the book a much more complex pattern is revealed, as if Sharansky is sharing with the reader his own discovery of what the story is really all about.

One's first impression is that the pattern is a clear-cut one of personal strategy; in his Lefortovo Prison cell Sharansky maps out — literally — his mental defence. One is regularly astonished by the sheer force of will and powers of memory of this determined individual, and there are countless examples of his extraordinary mental discipline.

Sharansky himself, however, repeatedly emphasises that this is not one man's war. His wife Avital's presence in the book is almost as strong as his own; their unity of purpose and vision is a remarkable

story in itself. At one critical point when Sharansky's mother, ill with anxiety after his prolonged hunger-strike, suggests he might consider signing a request for release on health grounds, he asks, 'And what about Natasha [Avital's Russian name — *Ed.*]?' Did Natasha ask me to do it?' 'No, she asked nothing' . . . 'I sighed with relief, for otherwise it would be the first time I had to disagree with Avital since my arrest, which would have been a terrible blow to our spiritual unity.' One catches glimpses of Avital's tireless campaign for her husband's release, and although there are many moments of acute awareness of their physical separation, there is not one when they seem to doubt each other.

Beyond this rare partnership is the pattern of Sharansky's sustained conviction of unity with his family and friends in the USSR and abroad, and of his relationships with other imprisoned activists; not only fellow refuseniks, but also with Christian believers. He shared a cell, at different times, with Viktoras Petkus, the leading Lithuanian Catholic, and Vladimir Poresh, founder-member of the Leningrad Christian Seminar. Although their backgrounds to some extent weighed against it, a close friendship developed between Poresh and Sharansky. For one month during the winter of 1983-1984 they read together daily from Poresh's Bible (recovered from the prison authorities, like Sharansky's Psalm book, at the cost of lengthy and painful protest). This shared experience shed new light for Poresh on the links between Judaism and Christianity, and for Sharansky on his own personal struggle, his confidence in Avital and his feeling of unity with family and fellow activists. Remembering his earlier reading of the Psalms, and then Poresh's reading of Proverbs, he writes:

In time I began to understand that *yir'at shamayim* [the fear of the Lord] includes both an admiration of the grand divine design and worship of the divine might, as well as man's instinctive fear of being unworthy of his lofty role. . . . Yes, we were bound to each other not merely by memories of the past, or by photographs or a few letters, but precisely by that elevated feeling of freedom from human evil, and bondage to God's covenant, that lifted us above earthly reality.

Here is the key to the pattern of a story in which individual courage, human loyalty and faith, in a higher good work invincibly together.

CAROLYN BURCH

Books Received

Listing of a book here neither implies nor precludes review in a subsequent issue of RCL

Abayev, Sapardurdy, *Ateizm v Karakalpakistane: opyt i problemy*. Tashkent: Izd-vo 'Fan' Uzbekskoi SSR, 1987. 156 pp.

Carrère d'Encausse, Hélène, *Islam and the Russian Empire: reform and revolution in Central Asia*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1988. 267 pp.

Elliott, Mark R. (editor), *Christianity and Marxism Worldwide: an Annotated Bibliography*. Wheaton: Institute for the Study of Christianity and Marxism, 1988. 136 pp.

Filist, Georgii Mikhailovich, *Vvedeniye khristianstva na Rusi: predposylki, obstoyatel'stva, posledstviya*. Minsk: Belarus', 1988. 254 pp.

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Kosovo — Facts and Figures. Priština: The Provincial Committee for Information of the Executive Council of SAP Kosovo, 1987. 80 pp.

Kuz'min, Apollon Grigor'yevich, *Padeniye Peruna: stanovleniye khristianstva na Rusi*. Moscow: Molodaya gvardiya, 1988. 240 pp.

Libaridian, Gerard J., *The Karabagh File: Documents and facts on the question of Mountainous Karabagh 1918-1988*. Cambridge, MA: the Zoryan Institute, 1988. 171 pp.

Lobachev, Valeri & Pravotorov, Vladimir, *A Millennium of Russian Orthodoxy*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, 1988. 117 pp.

Novikov, M.P. (editor), *Prepodavaniye nauchnogo ateizma v vuze*. Moscow: Vysshaya shkola, 1988. 224 pp.

Prague Winter: Restrictions on religious freedom in Czechoslovakia twenty years after the Soviet invasion. Washington D.C.: Puebla Institute, 1988. 60 pp.

Santini, Alceste, *A Thousand Years of Faith in Russia: an interview with Patriarch Pimen of Moscow*. Middlegreen, Slough: St Paul Publications, 1988. 192 pp.

Tang, Dominic, S.J., *How Inscrutable His Ways: Memoirs 1951-1981*. Hong Kong: Aidan Publicities & Printing, 1987. 179 pp.

Tausend Jahre Christentum in Russland: Zum Millennium der Taufe der Kiever Rus', (edited by Karl Christian Felmy et al.). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988. 1107 pp.

Contributors

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Mikhail Heifets was a professional writer in the Soviet Union. From 1974-80 he was a political prisoner, sentenced for writing an introduction to a *samizdat* collection of the works of Iosif Brodsky. Since 1980 he has lived in Israel where he works at the Centre for the Study of East-European Jewry, University of Jerusalem.

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Dr Gerd Stricker is a member of the research staff of the Swiss based institute, *Glaube in der zweiten Welt*, and chief editor of the monthly journal of the same name. He has recently edited a collection of source materials *Orthodoxe Kirche in Russland. Dokumente ihrer Geschichte (860-1980)*, (Göttingen, 1988).