

Reviews

*A History of Soviet Atheism
in Theory and Practice, and the Believer:
Vol. 1. A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism
and Soviet Anti-Religious Policies;
Vol. 2. Soviet Anti-Religious Campaigns and Persecutions*
by Dimitry V. Pospelovsky. London: Macmillan, 1987.
Paperback, 189pp & 275pp, £12.95 & £14.95.

There can be few educated Christians in the world today who are unaware that Soviet rule, despite the material progress it engendered, brought disaster to the spiritual life of generations of Soviet people. Of the multitudes who suffered deprivation, imprisonment and death, religious believers make up a significant proportion. Professor Pospelovsky is well known as an active Orthodox Christian, and these volumes are an earnest account of the decades of repression revolution. Although some of the story may be familiar to us, the author adduces a wealth of fascinating detail and historical fact which may have been somewhat forgotten or blurred by the passage of time.

Volumes 1 and 2 of the proposed three-part set are each intended to be chronological in approach, with generous appendices of officially published, restricted, and *samizdat* documents. The first volume deals with the state's legal and political control of the Russian Orthodox Church, prefaced by a brief discussion of the philosophy of Soviet atheism. The second explores the content of anti-religious propaganda and the actual persecution of believers.

In his general introduction Professor Pospelovsky lists no fewer than nine distinct waves of persecution, further analyses of which form the substance of the work. The first, beginning in February 1918, involved the persecution of clergy and prominent parishioners for their opposition to Soviet rule and supposed sympathy with the Whites. Church property was confiscated throughout the land. This onslaught was followed, during the next two years, by widespread arrests, and in some cases executions, of church leaders. Between 1922 and 1934 refusal to join a state-supported "Renovationist Church", secret attempts to elect a patriarch, a refusal to accept Metropolitan

Sergi's declaration of loyalty to the Soviet regime provoked, according to the author, another three waves. These take us up to the massive closure of churches associated with the enforced collectivisation of the peasantry, "dekulakisation", and the general destruction of village tradition. Professor Pospelovsky goes on to distinguish, during the Great Terror of the 1930s, other waves of repression, namely, the suppression of the remaining monastic communities, intensified persecution of religious leaders, and the "almost total liquidation" of religious places of worship.

The last concerted attack was organised by Khrushchev between 1959 and 1964, but it left a deep imprint on the Brezhnev years as well. Given Khrushchev's relatively humanitarian policies in other spheres, this has always been something of a puzzle. Nevertheless, the fact is that by the time he fell only some 7,000 Russian Orthodox churches remained open for upwards of thirty million believers, as against 60,000 at the time of the Revolution. The author delineates, on the other hand, but two periods of relative quiescence in church-state relations. The first was from 1943 to 1954, following Stalin's acceptance of church support against foreign threats and invasion, up to Khrushchev's initial clamp-down. The second coincided with Brezhnev's rule, from the mid-sixties to the early eighties, though Khrushchev's restrictions remained in force. The tale is a sorry one.

Among the better-known "milestone" documents reproduced or cited by Professor Pospelovsky, one might mention the original 1918 decree on the separation of church and state, the constitutional formulations of church activity, the April 1929 law on religious associations, the 1975 amendments to that law, and clauses from the Soviet criminal code normally used against believers.

There is, however, other documentation which, though less commonly available, is hardly less interesting. Three examples must suffice. Firstly, there is the "top secret" instruction, attributed to Lenin, of April, 1922. This concerned the Bolshevik suppression of a riot in the industrial town of Shuya, and the need to "wage a merciless battle against the reactionary clergy and suppress its resistance with such cruelty that it may remember it for several decades." Though the authenticity of this document has not been proved, it has a genuine ring, and certainly reflects the Bolshevik practice of the time.

Secondly, there are the rules which palpably reduced the civil rights of men who went into the priesthood. For example, as a result of tax changes introduced in 1928, priests were assessed as private earners, and subjected to punitive rates, sometimes reaching 81 per cent — 100 per cent at relatively low thresholds. The rural clergy were excluded from membership of collective farms and needed to get

special permission to work a household (or private) plot. Many lost the right to reside in state-owned housing or were charged much higher rents if they did so. There followed exclusion from the normal social security and pensions systems enjoyed by state employees.

A third illustration is the decree of March 1961 (not published in the USSR) by which Khrushchev struck a humiliating blow against priests' professional status in the parish. This decree actually deprived the priest of any direct control over the functions of the local church, and reduced him to the status of an employee of the locally registered "group of twenty" parishioners. He thus found himself on par with anyone whose services might be required for minor matters, like cleaning or repairs. His difficulties were exacerbated by the activities of the local watch (or administrative) committees which were increasingly encouraged to monitor church activities from a critical standpoint, and alter the membership of the groups of twenty so as to include "non-fanatical persons who sincerely fulfil Soviet laws and the [watch committee's] suggestions." It was recommended that "priests, choir directors, church watchmen. . . and other persons working for the church should not be included." (p. 89)

Professor Pospelovsky throws light on the interesting disagreements which sometimes occurred in Soviet officialdom over the conduct of atheist policies. Lenin and other leaders believed, of course, that religion was an entirely negative phenomenon, totally incompatible with Marxist precepts. Yet Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar for Education who was most directly involved, appears to have adopted a sort of deism, and held that the common people's faith in a (non-existent) God could be advantageously converted to faith in humanistic socialism, and the inevitability of a socialist millennium. In the early years of Soviet power differences on how to combat religious belief played a small part in the struggle for leadership of the Party.

The second volume of this work provides information on the persecution of individuals from the revolution up to the eighties, while no fewer than 70 individual cases of trial and imprisonment are presented in an appendix. Chapters on anti-religious propaganda provide distressing illustration of the crudity of this genre, including cartoons of grotesque deities and of Jesus doing card tricks at the last supper.

No study of atheism and religion in the Soviet Union, even one as invigorating as this, can satisfy every reader. There are, in my view, some ways in which the writer might have improved on the presentation. Although his basic approach is chronological, the volumes contain several distinct themes, for example: state policy

towards the church, as expressed in decree and official document; the closure of institutions and persecution of believers; atheistic propaganda, its content and vehicles. There are times when Professor Pospelovsky, carried away by the momentum of the story, passes from one to the other with some disregard for any guidelines, leaving the reader unaware of where he is going. The work somewhat is at variance with the title, in so far as it is devoted not so much to atheism and the believer in the broader sense, as to the trials and tribulations of the Russian Orthodox Church in a militantly anti-religious state. The writer is perfectly justified in choosing his own subjects, but some readers may feel that a detailed study of Russian Orthodoxy needed more than a dozen pages on other faiths. The tragedy of the Uniate Church in Ukraine and Galicia gets but one sympathetic paragraph, while Islam and Judaism are rarely mentioned. There was room, in my view, for a consideration of the weaknesses as well as the strengths of Russian Orthodoxy at the time of the Revolution and later. The enthusiasm of Soviet atheists, grossly misplaced though it may be, also deserves some explanation. On a less substantive plane, the language editors have overlooked countless stylistic infelicities, including a disconcerting opening sentence.

The work is concerned with the period up to the advent of Gorbachev. We do not know how successful *perestroika* will be in the sphere of religion, and prognosis must be cautious. We may hope that the substantial signs of relaxation — Gorbachev's personal exchanges with church leaders, the reopening of some churches, the new destalinisation of cultural life, the promised annulment of the 1961 restrictions, and the new emphasis on charity — will in fact herald a genuinely benign policy towards religious belief. In any case, Professor Pospelovsky's study forms a fitting epitaph to the repressions of the first seven decades of Soviet power.

MERVYN MATTHEWS

The Triple Myth: A Life of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac
by Stella Alexander. New York: East European
Monographs, Boulder, 1987. 257pp.

Nearly thirty years after his death, the name of Archbishop Alojzije Stepinac of Zagreb still arouses strong emotions. His 1946 show trial by the new Yugoslav communist regime, for alleged collaboration

with the Axis puppet Croatian state of the *Ustaše*, and his subsequent sentence to 16 years' hard labour (he was conditionally released after five years and exiled to his native village of Krašić) caused a worldwide stir. But many Croats, who form the majority of Yugoslavia's Catholics, hold that Stepinać was more than just a church leader who refused to compromise church independence; he was a national hero, a Croatian patriot, and a symbol of Croatian nationalist aspirations.

Both these characterisations cause problems for the Yugoslav communist authorities, and help explain their stubborn persistence in linking the Catholic Church in Croatia with the unsavoury *Ustaše*, with their penchant for mass murder, persecution of Jews and forced conversion to Roman Catholicism of Serbian Orthodox Christians.

In reality of course, as Stella Alexander's new biography of Stepinać makes clear, while there undoubtedly were clergy who actively collaborated with the *Ustaše*, Stepinać was emphatically not of their number. He recognised the *Ustaše* for what they were; it is not his guilt or innocence of a trumped-up charge which is the real issue here.

Stella Alexander, who has considerable experience of writing about Yugoslav affairs, is determined that this should be an "objective" biography. She accuses all the sides involved of myth-making; her obvious distaste for portraying Stepinać as an "icon of a spotless saint and suffering martyr" will not endear her to the streams of Croats who light candles at his tomb in Zagreb Cathedral. Instead, she sums up Stepinać from the start as a "conscientious and brave man of deep piety and considerable intelligence, but with a blinkered world view", a man "not quite great enough for his role". While she never doubts his innocence of the communist accusations, she nevertheless stresses the "ambiguity" of his behaviour under the *Ustaše*, which was to render him "vulnerable". This refers to his initial welcoming, as a Croatian patriot, of the "independent" Croatian state, and his alleged tardiness in speaking out in public against *Ustaše* atrocities — though she cites ample evidence of his efforts in helping Jews and Orthodox Christians behind the scenes.

But we need more analysis in this book of why Stepinać chose to behave as he did. It was not just blinkered Croatian patriotism. He was walking a tightrope in common with countless other churchmen under totalitarian regimes. His defenders argue that, for example, the 7,000 children whom Stepinać helped save would not have been alive today had the Archbishop early on been strung up on a tree by the fascists like his brother. It is no small point that Stepinać received constant and unequivocal support from the Vatican (which is shrewder in these matters than is often supposed) — support which went as far as elevating him to the rank of Cardinal in 1952, which

infuriated the Yugoslav authorities.

The book suffers, as the author admits herself, from a lack of access to primary sources. She has not been allowed to see Stepinać's official diary, which is still impounded by the Yugoslav government. The official version of his trial lacks both the Archbishop's statement and those of his lawyers, and the author has had to draw on local press reports and earlier church inspired biographers, Fr Aleksa Benigar and Dr R. Pattee. She has not had access to relevant Vatican documents, nor to the diary of the priest with whom Stepinać lodged in Krašić. These are serious handicaps in appraising the complexities of recent Yugoslav history which, for those who were not personally involved, is something of a foggy minefield.

One would like to see Tito's motives with regard to the church given tougher independent scrutiny, if only to put into perspective Stepinać's hardline anti-Communism. While his protests against Tito's repression are extensively quoted, there is a danger that the reader will come away with the impression that the Archbishop was little more than a "reds under the bed" ranting. In fact Stepinać had a canny perception of communist methods, and a strong hunch that any pious remarks Tito might make, for example about the separation of church and state or a more independent Croatian Church, had nothing to do with religion and everything to do with his aim either to suffocate the church completely or, failing that, to domesticate it for his own use. It was after all a powerful rival ideology with a great deal of support.

It would be worth also making a more detailed differentiation between those of Tito's victims who actually were willing fascist collaborators and the thousands who were innocent. Post-war Yugoslavia suffered from a bad dose of the "if you're not with us you're against us" syndrome, which produced a surfeit of unlikely "war criminals" of which Stepinać was just one example.

Whether by accident or design Tito tends to emerge as a reasonable sort of chap faced with tricky political decisions, without much questioning of how he got himself into this unenviable position in the first place. Hence the church is confronting the communists at an "extremely difficult time for them", while the church's demand for a return to its traditional freedoms is "every bit as sweeping as the government's". When Tito reportedly offers concessions in return for clergy cooperation and an end to "hostile propaganda", urges priests to join a national union and insists that Stepinać quit the country, the author describes this as a "good deal": surely, however, Stepinać would have seen through such a deal immediately. On the other hand, when the church explains its position under the *Ustaše*, it gives a "deplorable impression of self-righteousness and self-justification".

Stella Alexander does objective history a service by refusing to get sucked into the Stepinać-as-hero camp, but not by an apparent reluctance to put his opponents more firmly on the spot.

The "truest" judgement of Stepinać she leaves to Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović, who designed his memorial, and who said, "he was a just man condemned as it has often happened in history that just men are condemned from political necessity", which is true enough but leaves a lot unsaid.

ALENKA LAWRENCE

Grey is the Colour of Hope

by Irina Ratushinskaya. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988.

286pp., £12.95

Pencil Letter

by Irina Ratushinskaya. London: Bloodaxe Books, 1988.

Paperback, 96pp., £4.95

Grey is the Colour of Hope chronicles the brutal treatment meted out to a handful of gallant women in the Small Zone of Mordovian Camp ZhKh 385/3-4. The letters disguise the fact that this is a concentration camp. These women, "too good for the world," can stand in the great peroration of Hebrews 11.

The poet Irina Ratushinskaya — we step into poetry with her very name — was sentenced in March 1983 to seven years in strict regime labour camp to be followed by five years' internal exile. Her offence, as she later told a BBC radio audience in her low and haunting voice, was writing poetry. She was released on the signing of a secret order by Soviet President Gromyko just before the Reykjavik Summit in October 1986.

Her eyes, in the fine cover portraits of these two books, arrest us as much as her voice. As she recounts, "when you emerge, your friends, embracing you, will exclaim. 'your eyes! Your eyes have changed!' " Echoing Solzhenitsyn she asserts that their tormentors in the camp were unable to bear their captives' scrutiny, turning away from it like beaten dogs.

She writes this at the end of a chapter in which she has recounted the breaking by the KGB of one of her fellow prisoners ("Zeks") and has named the grosser sadists among their guards. She tells us that overseers for the Perm Camps and the notorious Chistopol prison are actually chosen for sadistic tendencies uncovered in psychological tests. The purpose of the camps is the destruction of personality.

In the punishment cells, known as SHIZO (*shtrafnoi izolyator*), women must receive their salted sardelles in their bare hands through a hatch, are given no plates, knives, paper, water, elementary toiletries or proper clothing. Filthy smocks and slippers give them scabies and fungus diseases. They must freeze, breathe the stench of the slop bucket, exist in squalor, be stripped naked in searches, leered at by KGB officers, all in a continuous babble of obscenities. And encasing all and worse than all is the constant lying, that lying by high and low, in small matters and great which is the dark mortar, the necessary condition of keeping the Soviet system in place.

The health of all the women is broken in various ways by cold, starvation, filth. Yet in all this they rally themselves again and again, for mutual support and for broader causes, to go on hunger strikes, covering the better food then put out for them with scraps of plastic so as not to be maddened by its aromas.

Yet Miss Ratushinskaya goes straight from this black litany to warn against hating, for this would reduce the prisoner to a "maddened and bedevilled husk". She can even find compassion for most of her gaolers because they are crushed between the KGB and these fearless women who will not back down.

At the still heart of all this degradation the poet gives us a consoling picture of loving sisterhood in the quarters of the Small Zone where the "politicals" were lodged together in "normal" times, times when they were not in SHIZO or being reeducated by the KGB at Saransk. Here the half-fit protected the seriously ill from the glove-sewing demands. Here, deciding individually, they refused to wear the prison tags and took every privilege loss this incurred. Here they "darned" saucepans, made salads, teas and broths from nettles, dandelions and dillweed, grew chives and vegetables and even wild strawberries from smuggled seeds — until Lieutenant Podust destroyed their pathetic garden. Here they laughed, prayed and made birthday cakes and dresses, all from the scraps and trifles that fill our bins. And here Irina wrote poetry, coaxed to do so on any pretext by the marvellous Tanya Osipova who made Irina settle chore and treat debts with so many lines of poetry.

There is an undertow of smaller creatures running through both the book and the poems — Nyurka the cat offers her fresh-caught mouse to each mistress in a hunger strike before reluctantly taking it outside to eat herself. There are the mice in SHIZO:

Mashka Mouse has filched a rusk
 And is nibbling it behind the latrine pail.
 A two-inch robber,
 The most innocent thief in the world. (From *I Sit on the Floor*)

And there are the ghastly mosquitoes, lice and bed bugs, the last as bold in their invasions as the KGB in their lies about them. The girls present the governor of Pot'ma transit prison with a bottleful of these predators and smuggle more into the post when back in their Small Zone. The reply comes back: "There are absolutely no bed-bugs in Pot'ma prison."

The tenderest portrait is of Tat'yana Velikanova, crooning out of tune, cradling Irina's head in the twelfth day of a hunger strike, the poet recovering from concussion after six men threw her head-first against a wooden trestle. Of her Irina writes, "when there is so much light in one person, its brilliance obliterates all shadows."

She points beyond herself to other beings she holds nobler than herself. First the "True Orthodox"; gentle, steadfast and humble women who would make no concession whatever, treating Soviet documents and even money as of Satan. So they got sentence after sentence, had languished twenty, thirty and more years in the camps, and would not even accept papers ending their sentences. Eight of these *babushki* as they were known, had moved like saints through the Zone before Ratushinskaya was there.

The other portrait engraved on the reader is of the Lithuanian, Jadvyga Bielauskiene who, taking on herself the scandal of sacrilege when guards trampled her communion wafers on the floor, vowed and kept a year's total silence; the green wood indeed.

The courage, the values of Irina Ratushinskaya are nudged into occasional reflective passages. "We are not dogs, and we will not jump at your command. . . address us formally or we shall not respond." "I have no values other than to tell no lies and to endure whatever I must." "Lying to an adversary is tantamount to sanctioning his lies to you." "At least by sitting in camp we were being of some use, if only by proving that one can bear anything and not recant one's convictions. . . And if the men in our country can overcome their fear, then our situation is bound to change for the better beyond all imagining."

She savages the comfortable critics of the broken who have never experienced a tenth of what those they vilify have borne — "who have never had to swallow camp skilly". She turns to us, "Believe me, you of the third side; it all depends on you, and you are capable of achieving much more than you think." "World public opinion, where are you? Do you hear the appeals made to you now by prisoners driven to the edge of despair?" She asks us this after quoting an appeal smuggled out perilously on behalf of Natal'ya Lazareva who, seriously ill, was dragged half-naked through the snow then kicked and beaten by a posse of men. We abet persecutions we do not try to alleviate.

Having no Russian I cannot evaluate Alyona Kojevnikov's translation but the text reads clearly and naturally; labour and art well masked.

The survival of Irina's poems at all has depended upon the ingenious smuggling of tiny strips of paper, upon a granite will and upon staggering feats of recollection. Night after night she disciplined herself to go mentally over rotating sections of her work, even when freezing, starving and nearing delirium in SHIZO. And she tested her poetry in the most demanding theatre: carriage-loads of common criminals. They asked for more. So, later, did her companions in the Small Zone. She is a poet for everyone.

All poetry loses or gains, alters at any rate, in translation — so the reader in the new language is left in the lee as well as the debt of the translator. I can only aver that, in English, Irina's poems charmed, chilled and moved me.

Most rise starkly from what she underwent, the title poem, *Pencil Letter*, typically:

I know it won't be received
Or sent.

she begins, soon going on:

You've grown used to it
Reading between the lines that never reached you. . .

Song of the Mice, a parable in neat metaphors, blends kindness for the creatures themselves with irony for those they represent. *A Clumsy Saw* appears both in the book and in the collection and deserves to. It is devoted to Tat'yana, her angel in SHIZO:

Just let's survive!
Well, until we meet somewhere. . .
‡ Here's Zeks' luck — smile!

I will Live and Survive evokes her darkest episode.

I will live and survive and be asked:
How they slammed my head against a trestle,
How I had to freeze at nights,
How my hair started to turn grey. . .

Try to Cover your Shivering Shoulders re-etches another terrible scene from her book and *The White Hot Blizzard* ends:

To know that the angels of Russia
Freeze to death towards morning
Like sparrows in the frost
Falling from their wires into the snow.

But she takes us to a happier night in *If It's a Long Snowy Walk*. It includes these lovely lines:

And the youngster moon, frozen on its long watch,
Thrusts its horns at the window, like any little
beast of the Earth.

Irina Ratushinskaya loves the little beasts of this Earth — and rises before its great beasts like an unscalable mountain that stupefies them.

The most rending of the camp poems is the long *To the Children of Prison Warden Akimkina*, she being one of the poet's listed sadists.

They lie
On the floor, in spite of the cold
While the prison mice fearlessly
scamper across their faces

The poem flags the childlessness that SHIZO causes

They'll cry in the corridors
Of countless maternity clinics. . .
Do you remember you dreamt
That you'd given birth to me?
Now the mice, the grey mice
Have eaten me up.

In *Believe Me*, last, she thanks those who *did* pray, *do* pray and *do* remember those in prison.

A-huddle by an icy wall.

These are two mighty books to inscribe in the canon of the Gulag testament.

KEVIN GRANT

Books Received

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

Adeney, David H., *China: The Church's Long March*. Eastbourne: MARC, 1988. 256 pp.

Azicri, Max, *Cuba: Politics, Economics and Society. Marxist Regime Series*. London: Pinter Publishers, 1988. 276 pp.

Christianity and Russia. Religious Studies in the USSR, No 3. Moscow: *Social Sciences Today* Editorial Board, 1988. 176 pp.

Fricke, Karl Wilhelm, *Zur Menschen- und Grundrechtssituation politischer Gefangener in der DDR*. Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1988. 256 pp.

Francis, Bob (editor), *De Levende, de sprekende, de zwiigende en. . . de verzwegen Kerk: Dossier Millennium*. Westerlo: Kerk in Nood, 1988. 310 pp.

Peacemaking in a Nuclear Age. A report of a Working Party of the Board for Social Responsibility of the General Synod of the Church of England. London: Church House Publishing, 1988. 176 pp.

Pospielovsky, Dimitry V., *Soviet Studies on the Church and the Believer's Response to Atheism. Volume 3 of A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory and Practice, and the Believer*. London: Macmillan Press, 1988. 325 pp.

Religion and the Soviet State. A Report on Religious Repression in the USSR on the Occasion of the Christian Millennium (May 1988). Washington DC: Puebla Institute, 1988. 68 pp.

White, Stephen, *USSR: A Superpower in Transition*. Glasgow: Pulse Publications, 1988. 85 pp.

Whyte, Bob, *Unfinished Encounter: China and Christianity*. London: Fount Paperbacks, 1988. 537 pp.