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Tatiana Vagramenko and Nadezhda Beliakova, eds. *The Lives of Soviet Secret Agents: Religion and Police Surveillance in the USSR*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2025. ISBN 9781978774049.

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All bad edited volumes, to adapt Leo Tolstoy's famous dictum, are the same (typically filled with disjointed articles that are poorly connected to the overarching theme); each great edited volume, however, is great in its own way. Thankfully, *The Lives of Soviet Secret Agents: Religion and Police Surveillance in the USSR*, brilliantly conceptualized by the editors (Tatiana Vagramenko and Nadezhda Beliakova) with expertly executed chapters by 11 authors (including both editors), falls squarely in the second category. Building on the fortuitous convergence of an accumulation of scholarship on religious life under Soviet power and a revolution in archival access that has opened the Soviet security apparatus to new scholarly inquiry, the volume is able to illuminate three distinct but related questions. The first question is the volume's primary focus: What can the materials that scholars discover in Soviet security archives tell us about religious life in the USSR? The second question is methodological and flows from the first: How should scholars approach sources that were "never intended for external eyes" (p. 2) and which, as the editors unpack in the introduction, continue to carry tremendous moral and ethical weight for the individuals and religious communities involved, as well as for post-Soviet societies' evaluation of the Soviet past? The third question, though not explicitly posed in the volume, is implicit throughout: What do these accounts reveal about the KGB's "worldview" and the role of the security apparatus in the greater architecture of Soviet power?

The volume's introduction provides a nuanced overview of the relevant scholarly literature; the questions raised by each chapter; and the social, political, and methodological stakes of these questions. As Beliakova and Vagramenko note, thus far "the historical examination of intelligence activities in religious settings has largely developed within the context of repression history," focusing in particular on the martyrdom of the clergy and, to a lesser extent, believers (p. 4). The studies, moreover, were largely denominational, since "each group sought to conduct its own historical investigations independently, aiming to present its own faith community as the most persecuted confession in the USSR" (p. 5). The volume's move away from both trends—martyrology and denominationalism—is a welcome opportunity to reflect moral complexity in this history and to see the broader political and social context within which individual decisions—about, for example, collaboration—were made.

Beliakova and Vagramenko also acknowledge that the archives of the security apparatus present methodological traps and opportunities. On the one hand, scholars argue about the "truth value" of these sources (p. 2) and note the "ambiguous lacunae" that leave room for "speculation and rumors" (p. 7). On the other hand,

many scholars also acknowledge that even coercive and formulaic secret police files preserve rare traces of everyday religious life, especially in the underground, as Anna Samsonova and Vagramenko illustrate in their chapter on “Novice Sania,” a young woman who became a novice in Hieromonk Erasm’s secret monastery and later turned informer and chief witness for the prosecution in the case against Erasm and his network.

The volume makes clear that the Soviet project, from its revolutionary beginning until its perestroika-era end, identified religion as a central threat and “harbor[ed] particular fear and distrust” (p. 8) of religious communities—although its approach changed over time. Rather than simply closing religious organizations and arresting clergy and believers en masse, in the early Soviet period the state adopted a “divide and conquer” strategy intended to fragment religious communities to prevent unified resistance to Soviet power. In the postwar period, following Joseph Stalin’s famous 1943 pivot on the religious question—which moved away from the aggressive antireligious persecution and militant atheism of the early Soviet period—the state shifted to a new strategy of “unite and conquer.” It created centralized and officially recognized religious structures that could be more easily supervised and infiltrated, and new state bureaucracies—the Council on the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC) and the Council on the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)—to oversee and discipline these religious structures. Now the goal was to bring religious communities out of the “underground” so that they could be more effectively monitored and governed by the state.

As the editors argue, and the chapters amply illustrate, agent networks were essential to the success of both strategies. At the same time, it becomes clear that the security apparatus actively constructed the narratives of conspiracy and subversion that made the religious threat real. Not only did the recordkeeping of the security apparatus, from surveillance reports to diagrams of networks, make religious dissent legible (as several chapters show), it was often the KGB’s own agents and collaborators that made religious organizations engage in “conspiracy” (Roman Skakun, for instance, contends that at one point all 15 bishops of the Ukrainian episcopate of the Russian Orthodox Church were security service agents). Sometimes infiltration reached absurd conclusions, as when KGB agents inside the Jehovah’s Witnesses oversaw printing and distributing the Witnesses’ journal, *The Watchtower*, in effect orchestrating the very crime that the KGB was charged with preventing (p. 12).

The volume’s nine chapters cover a remarkable range of confessions, with chapters on Orthodox Christianity, Greek Catholicism, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Islam, as well as Baptists and Pentecostals. The book’s emphasis on the Soviet peripheries, especially the western borderlands, is both logical, since these are the areas where religion and nationality often intersected, and revealing, since Soviet power saw this intersection as connected to nationalism, political dissent, and foreign influence—which, in turn, turned religion into a central security concern. At the same time, while there are chapters on Kazakhstan, Central Asia, Latvia, and Russia, Ukrainian case studies are overrepresented: Five of the volume’s nine chapters focus on Ukraine. This, too, follows a clear logic: First, because Ukraine was the most

religious, and most religiously diverse, republic, thus producing a substantial archival record; and second, because Ukrainian KGB/SBU archives are fully open to researchers, thanks to the remarkable efforts of the archivists, even in wartime conditions.

Yet despite the volume's broad confessional coverage, its concentration on Ukraine, and its central focus on the engagements of religious communities and the security apparatus, the absence of Jews and Judaism is a noteworthy, and unfortunate, omission. In the early Soviet period, Ukraine was the demographic center of Soviet Jewry, with Ukraine's 1.5 million Jews comprising roughly 60 percent of the USSR's total Jewish population. While that demographic density changed over the next several decades—first due to the Holocaust and then, from the 1960s until the 1980s, due to Jewish emigration—even by 1989, Ukrainian Jews still made up around 35 percent of the Soviet Union's Jewish population. Moreover, Soviet Jews—with their allegedly divided loyalties, family ties abroad, and persistent suspicion of ties to the Zionist and imperialist adversary—embodied all the features that made religious groups suspect, namely the intertwining of national identity, political dissent, and foreign influence. Acknowledging that by the late Soviet period, Jewish life was not primarily concentrated in religious communities and practices, it would nevertheless have been interesting to consider the KGB's understanding of different groups' supposed threat relative to each other.

More generally, while the volume purports to move away from a typical denominational approach, advocating for "a comparative analysis of intelligence strategies within diverse religious communities" and their negotiations with state authorities (p. 7), it does not quite deliver on this promise. All the individual chapters focus largely on one denomination or confession, even if the scholars are not writing from within that confession. To be sure, the chapters collectively make comparative analysis possible, but the fact that few of the case studies overlap with others in time or place makes the broader tapestry of Soviet religious life difficult to grasp. Perhaps a fruitful next step for comparative analysis would be a microhistory of one place over an extended period of time, examining how local security organs understood and managed the plurality of religious communities that fell under their purview, and what the state's distinct approaches—if the approaches were indeed distinct—reveal about the Soviet understanding of how to manage religious diversity and state-confessional relations.

One of the volume's most significant contributions is showing how the KGB's transformation of religiosity into criminality reveals how it defined both "religion" and "politics," as well as how it understood the relationship—and more significantly, the appropriate boundary—between them. But what do these articles tell us about the role of the security apparatus in the architecture of Soviet power? Skakun argues that historians have generally underestimated the security apparatus as a central pillar of Soviet rule (chapter 2). In part, I think this lack of attention was less the result of deliberate dismissal than of the fact that the archives of the other two pillars of Soviet power—the state and the party—were simply more readily accessible during the archival "gold rush" of the first two post-Soviet decades.

Yet what this volume also suggests is that the availability of the security archives does not by itself yield insights beyond its immediate subject matter. Although the KGB archives have the seductive appeal of being “secret” and, as the introduction notes, not intended for external eyes, this does not make them unique. No institutional archives are intended for external readership, although some find it more readily than others. We enter the archives and read not just “against” but, as Ann Laura Stoler (2008) points out, “along” the archival grain. In the process, we sometimes adopt the often-implicit institutional logics that bleed into the archival record—in this case, the logic of the security apparatus itself.

One example: I was surprised, given the deep expertise of the volume’s editors, by their claim that “faith in God was considered a legal offense” (p. 8). Religious believers and communities in the USSR were not prosecuted for their faith *per se* but for the actions that expressed that faith if these actions transgressed the state’s articulated boundaries between both public/private and religion/politics. This is not to justify the state’s logic but to illuminate the strange legal framework that both allowed the state to prosecute religiosity and left a space for its continued existence. The security apparatus, however, was, by definition, an institution that operated on an extralegal logic, and though it could make claims about “legal offenses,” to take these claims to court, it still had to find (or manufacture) evidence not of faith but of activities that could be recategorized as political. Despite the machinations of its security apparatus, the Soviet state nevertheless had to demonstrate its adherence to its own legal norms.

Another example: The argument that ideological work was “in reality, orchestrated by the KGB” (p. 12) is not sufficiently substantiated and would not hold up to closer scrutiny. To draw this generalization from the KGB’s own materials is to fall victim to the blinders inherent to institutional archives, which privilege their own role and achievements. It also runs counter to the materials I encountered in my extensive research into the Soviet Communist Party organs and ideological apparatus, which had a significant degree of autonomy, if for no other reason than that those who worked for either the state or the security apparatus had no real interest in propaganda work and usually resented having to get involved in it.

My bringing up these criticisms is in no way meant to diminish the remarkable achievement of the volume’s editors and authors. This is among the most exciting scholarship I have encountered in years. If anything, it is a testament to the generative potential of bringing these sources and stories into broader conversations. The new availability of, and scholarly attention to, the archives of the security apparatus is perhaps the most promising development in the study not just of religion under Soviet power but of Soviet power in general. Still, to understand how the pillars of Soviet power operated individually and in concert with each other, there is no better subject for analysis than religion—it makes good sense that this would be where we start.

REFERENCES

- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2008. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.