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Sonja Luehrmann. *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 256 pp. $74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-994362-3.

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This book is an inquiry into the possibilities, limitations, and merits embedded in the religious history of Russia and the USSR. Offering archival research, Sonja Luehrmann, an interdisciplinary researcher of religion and a trained historian-anthropologist, utilizes her experience and her rich understanding of archival sources and how they reflect on what was already written and what needs to be done in religious studies today. Drawing on her research on the Middle Volga, she presents findings useful to scholars of religion in the Soviet Union in general and of the Volga peoples in particular.

In her introduction, Luehrmann reminds us that a historian must look into the documents themselves and not only dwell in the analysis of their contents. This is especially true regarding the sources authored by government officials and written within a particular ideological frame. In this case, officially prescribed atheism influenced the nature of the reports created. The ideological format was reflected not only in standard formulae but also in the amount of knowledge of the religions held by the authors of the documents. Moreover, the careless handling of such reports, evident by the cavalier treatment of references and typography, is also telling. Looking beyond individual documents, however, she wishes to direct the readersâ attention to the arrangement and classification of these sources within the archives. Luehrmann points out that while some documents were discarded or otherwise disregarded through deliberate organization, other were âamplified through their placement in relationship to other documentsâ (p. 24).

In the first three chapters, the author analyzes the forms of documentation available. Focusing on the documents that were produced by the Council of Religious Affairs (*Sovet po delam religii*) as her main case study for chapter 1, she acknowledges her ambivalence toward these sources: âOn the one hand, it is impossible to write a history of Soviet religious life without them; on the other, it is hard to ignore the distorted understanding of the agents of an atheist state regarding the religious life of those they have supervisedâ (p. 38). They cannot be used, of course, as a most accurate assessment of actual religiosity, but can serve as a powerful documentation of the interrelations between the state and the groups of faiths.

Seeking to complement the flawed image given by the archival documents and compensate their shortcomings, Luehrmann turns to oral history in chapter 2. She notes that âorally narrated memory is always the result of a complex exchange between a present self, a remembered past, and immediately present and imagined audiences.â âWritten archivesâ, she asserts, âcan do as much to challenge present orthodoxies as oral histories can challenge established images of the pastâ (p. 74). She divides the relationship between archival sources and oral testimonies into three types: complementarity (that is, interpreting one source through the lens of another), convergence (compensating the deficiencies of the sources), and contradiction (focusing on the contradictions between the sources). If used carefully enough, she argues, one can not only glean missing details, but also spot gaps in the archival collections. Thus, in chapter 3, Luehrmann focuses on another source that can, and

should, be used to study religion–the sociological surveys ordered by the state and conducted in the 1960s and 1970s. Due to the stringent ideological framework and the harsh censorship, we have to be careful once again with the conclusions we draw, and yet the author suggests that we should broaden our fields of inquiry and use these sources along with other sources to ârecontextualize one another with a contested field of knowledge productionâ (p. 103).

The focus of chapter 4–the last–is a âcounter archiveâ found, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the United States. The Keston Archive at Baylor University, dedicated to the study of religious persecution in Eastern Europe, organizes its documents from a âuser-centered perspectiveâ (p. 138), with an unusual system of filing meant to serve the practical user, and does not exist merely for the sake of preserving information. It is a âcounter archiveâ due to its thematic grouping of documents, unlike the Soviet institution-based sorting. By doing that, the Keston Archive enables a different narrative and opens different avenues for research by forging connections in a deliberate, almost violent way compared to the traditional system of grouping by the agency that contributed or created the materials.

This book is addressed to historians of the Soviet Union and specialists in religious studies, and could be possibly used by students of history in general to learn how to use the archives in their scholarship. This research elicits an urge to rethink the way we approach archives, and how limited our perspective is when taking the organization of documents as a bureaucratic apparatus and neglecting the influence of archivists on our access to information or the attention we devote to certain groups of documents. This monograph is not a practical guide and does not attempt to prepare the researcher to handle post-Soviet archives. Instead it is a reflection of a researcher on the number of issues that she faced in starting the archival work. Instead of describing the key collections available in Moscow, St. Petersburg, or any provincial archive, this book focuses on how to circumvent certain obstacles and make informed use of the available collections.

Several minor shortcomings of this monograph, however, come to mind. First, one is left with almost no knowledge of the practicalities of archival research on religion in the Soviet Union. This book is certainly valuable for stimulating deep contemplation of our role as historians and patrons of archival collections. Thus, in particular the author includes an appendix that *does* tell the reader where to find essential collections on religion in the Soviet Union. This feature could certainly be beneficial for graduate courses in the history of religion. However, the sharp thesis offered in each chapter is often undercut by numerous examples, stories, and anecdotes that make the reader feel lost and do not necessarily relate to the argument.

This book is not designed for students just beginning to study history or those aiming to spend their first day in the archives. It is, instead, a guide to navigating archives equipped with an understanding of their pitfalls, forcing us to challenge the assumptions that lie at the heart of our quest for historical truth. Luehrmannâs insights are invaluable, for they humble us. The author remind us that archives are often compiled by people motivated by (implicit or explicit) ideologies, biases, and instructions; that oral history and documents do not necessarily complement, but often contradict each other; and above all, that a devoted historian should not only carefully utilize documents to fill the gaps, but consider the conditions in which these documents were created and collected.

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