

Alternative Religiosities in the Soviet Union and the Communist East-Central Europe: Formations, Resistances and Manifestations

Editorial

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Editorial for the Topical Issue “Alternative Religiosities in the Soviet Union and the Communist East-Central Europe: Formations, Resistances and Manifestations”

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This topical issue of *Open Theology* addresses alternative religiosities in the communist regime countries up to 1990. In this context, alternative religions are understood as comprising phenomena from the margins of society, usually perceived as subcultures, which present alternatives to the wider culture, mainstream religious beliefs, and practices.¹ The circumstances for the existence of socio-cultural alternatives and religious communities during the Soviet regime were specific, for most religious and spiritual activities existed here when atheism was the officially established ideology. In general, the religious policy under the Soviet regime in the USSR (as well as in the communist region) up until late 1980s comprised three main elements: 1) a socialization process aimed at the formation of the new Soviet (i.e., atheist) man; 2) the administrative and legislative regulation of religious bodies with the apparent intention of finally making them become extinct; and 3) coping with the responses of believers to official policies, if necessary, by repressive means.² Due to such a controlling Soviet approach, alternative religiosities were mostly active underground and could exist only if expressed clandestinely.³

In the late-Soviet period, the underground activities, including access to alternative spiritual and esoteric ideas and practices, generally existed in parallel, or even jointly, with the official culture and institutions.⁴ In addition to the officially-established Soviet culture connected with the Communist Party's aim to control all aspects of the public sphere, there was an unofficial cultural field that was very receptive to the arrival, formation, spread and expressions of diverse alternative religiosities and spiritualities. The “unofficial culture emerged as an autonomous field from inside Soviet society as a result of its own tensions”.⁵ The disappointment with the existing narrowness of the official communist ideology and the loss of the absolute allegiance to it led to the formation and rise of unofficial socio-cultural alternatives within the system.⁶ Continuing nonformal spiritual seekership was as well enforced by a defense of religious rights and human rights, an area of activity which was given a specific boost by the Soviet Union in its signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975.⁷

1 Hunt, *Alternative Religions*.

2 Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 3.

3 Pranskevičiūtė and Juras, “Acting in the Underground”, 4.

4 Komaromi, “The Unofficial Field of Late Soviet Culture”, 626; Menzel, “The Occult Underground of Late Soviet Russia”.

5 Komaromi, “The Unofficial Field of Late Soviet Culture”, 610.

6 Pranskevičiūtė, „Alternatyvaus religingumo raiška“, 31-32.

7 Ramet, *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, 27.

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Until now, the research on alternative religiosities during the Soviet period has been more of a sporadic than a thorough and proper analysis of this phenomena and its many aspects. Previous research on religion in communist regime countries has been mostly focused on restrictions on traditional religions and their survival strategies, while the research on alternative religiosities under the regime basically has consisted of several individual and group research projects.⁸ Nevertheless, we might expect such a topic to receive more of a scholarly attention as researchers are increasing their interest and discussion of the topic. There is a wide range of questions related to the phenomena of alternative religiosities in the regime countries and their attendant fields of influence: e.g., politics and strategy of activity of the regime towards alternative religiosities; restrictions, repressions, survival ways and resistance of representatives of alternative religiosities; the milieu of alternative religiosity as a space of resistance; socio-cultural practices (both open and covert) used to express alternative religious identities; alternative religiosity networks and inter-community relations; formation of individual/group alternative religiosity identities and values under the regime; formation and transfer of religious and spiritual ideas within the Soviet Union and East-Central Europe and from the outside; centers and peripheries of the milieu of alternative religiosity in the region; and methodological problems in research of alternative religiosities within the Soviet Union and the East-Central European region.

The articles published in this issue of *Open Theology* initiate a discussion on formations, resistances and manifestations of alternative religiosities within various time periods in the communist regime countries. The project was initiated and organized by Rasa Pranskevičiūtė and Eglė Aleknaitė panel (P128) “Alternative Religiosities in the Communist East-Central Europe and Russia: Formations, Resistances and Manifestations” at the 14th conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) held in collaboration with the University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy (20-23 July 2016) on the theme: “Anthropological Legacies and Human Futures”. Panel presenters, as well as later invited anthropologists, historians, religious studies and other scholars contributed works on diverse variety of topics, concerning the phenomenon of alternative religiosity in the Soviet Union and the communist East-Central Europe.

In this issue, Aleksandra Djurić Milovanović, by applying qualitative interviews and archival research, discusses the Nazarene community, which was persecuted during the communist period and used a migration during 1945-1960 as a survival strategy of the Nazarene in communist Yugoslavia. Alexandra Coțofană reveals the ways of the circulation of the knowledge of magic which was practiced underground in communist Romania in the 1970s and investigates how the methodological problems faced by Romanian ethnographers have influenced their research on ritual magic as a space of resistance. Stanislav Panin introduces Astral Karate, which was active in the late-Soviet esoteric underground in the 1970s. Irina Gordeeva presents a general historical overview of the spiritual search of Soviet youth in the 1970s-1980s, highlighting a religious revival among the representatives of the Soviet counterculture in Russia in the 1970s. By using *samizdat*⁹ texts and personal archives, she analyses the movement of Tolstoyism, which was active in the late-Soviet cultural underground. László Koppány Csáji examines the dynamics of the Hungarian ethno-pagan group (Bolyanest), active from the early 1980, and complex Neopagan survival strategies in communist Hungary. Anita Stasulane and Gatis Ozoliņš present a historical overview of Neopaganism in Latvia, describing the persecution and repression faced by the Latvian Neopagan community Dievturi (1940-1953), the life in exile and trials during the Soviet regime (1953-1986), as well as its renewed activity since the 1980s.

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⁸ Some examples of well-known published research: Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*; Menzel, Hagemeyer & Rosenthal, *The New Age of Russia*.

⁹ Underground samizdat publications were mainly written with a typewriter and/or copied with a copy machine. They were individually produced and distributed between the late 1950s and mid-1980s.

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