

The end of Communism ushered in a new era of religious freedom in Russia and most of the successor countries to the Soviet Union. Over the last two decades or so, sociological and anthropological approaches to the study of religion in post-socialist Eurasia have tended to interpret the shift from the Soviet to the post-Soviet epoch as a movement from secularity to “religious revival” (Greeley), “de-secularization” (Karpov), or more enthusiastically of “rebirth” (Burgess) or “resurgence” of religions (Evans). Most attention has been paid to the Orthodox Russian Church in the post-soviet context, but Islam in Russia and Central Asia has similarly been viewed through the lens of “revival”.

More often than not social scientists have crafted detailed ethnographies of cultural realignment against historical backgrounds, which are premised upon notions of change mostly derived from Cold-War era historiography. In so doing, they have produced a body of work which risks to constitute a specious narrative according to which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Soviet secularist policies and atheism triumphed over religious sensibilities. Furthermore, emphasis on the notion of “revival” tends to overlook the rich and multifaceted realities of religiosity during the Soviet period. To date, the scholarly literature on religion in the post-Soviet space has not kept pace with historical research and has tended to be divorced from Religionswissenschaft and the hermeneutics of the archives of religion.

A historically-informed approach to manifestations of religiosity during the Soviet period can better assist scholars to find a metric to disambiguate transformations from continuities and avoid postulating changes which remain empirically unsubstantiated. The proposed historical exercise comes with several major benefits:

- (i) it facilitates our uncovering of and eliciting meaning from religious practices recorded in post-WWII Soviet Union;
- (ii) it complicates contemporary sociological and anthropological research on religion in Central Eurasia;
- (iii) it invites scholars working on manifestations of religiosity (or lack thereof) in the Soviet and post-Soviet space to consider the historiographies of other areas which underwent similar processes of forced secularization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century;
- (iv) it adds historical nuance to current debates in the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia over the meaning of ‘religious tradition’

The goal of this event is to foster a conversation on the hermeneutics of Soviet records on secularism and religiosity. Designed as a hands-on workshop, invited speakers will be expected to circulate copies of the material that they intend to discuss at our gathering.

#### ORGANISER

Commission for the Study of Islam in Central Eurasia

#### CONCEPT AND MANAGEMENT

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AUSTRIAN  
ACADEMY OF  
SCIENCES

JULY 4–5, 2023  
AUSTRIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES  
1010 VIENNA



INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP

# SECULARISM AND RELIGION IN THE USSR

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON ISLAM  
AND THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH

# PROGRAMME

**JULY 4<sup>TH</sup>, 2023**

Venue: Sitzungssaal, 1st floor, Dr. Ignaz Seipel-Platz 2, 1010 Vienna

## Welcome

**Paolo Sartori** | Austrian Academy of Sciences

## 18:00 Keynote Lecture

**Eren Tasar** | The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
*Religion and Communism: What the Future Could Hold*

### Abstract

In the past twenty years, social historians of the Late Socialist USSR have shown that the constraints and opportunities imposed by communist ideology, and the planned economy, shaped everyday life and culture in distinctive ways. As in the Stalin era, Soviet citizens continued to grapple with scarcity, inefficiency, corruption, and the absence of freedom of expression. Yet after the war, these constraints ran their course in counterpoint with major, largely positive changes, among them new patterns of consumption, a growing urban and rural transportation infrastructure, improvements in quality of life, expanded access to healthcare, and massive investments in housing and urban beautification, to name but a few. It is therefore surprising that historians, anthropologists, and scholars of literature have yet to find a place for religion in what can plausibly be termed a productive, organically developing, and dizzyingly complex social landscape. Research addressing this lacuna - much of it focusing on Islam - is already well under way, yet a vast amount of work remains to be done. Such work could proceed around three interconnected thematic spaces: sources, settings, and vocabulary. First, what are the implications of expanding the source base for the study of religion, beyond atheistic literature, official documentation about religion, and even the writings of religious figures themselves, to a broader constellation of popular production, such as everyday special interest, women's and men's, and vocational journals and newspapers? Second, how might assumptions about religion require modification, or rejection, if scholars started looking beyond houses of worship, to cemeteries, workplace cafeterias, markets and bazaars, parks, and to the dwellings of informal practitioners providing services in apartment blocks? Could religion be "hiding in plain sight" in these settings, as Devin DeWeese has suggested, and if so, what are the consequences for our understanding of religion itself? Third, while the term "religion" was used in highly specific contexts in the Late Socialist era, the concept of "spirituality" enjoyed far wider currency, both in Party rhetoric and in popular jargon. While a growing body of literature on Soviet Russia has begun to examine "alternative spirituality" during the 1970s and 1980s, no scholar has considered the way this term might also have created space for a broad segment of the Soviet population to articulate religious sensibilities, values, hopes and dreams.

**JULY 5<sup>TH</sup>, 2023**

Venue: Alte Burse, Sonnenfelsgasse 19, 1010 Vienna

## Welcome

**Paolo Sartori** | Austrian Academy of Sciences

- 09:30** **Miriam Dobson** | University of Sheffield  
*Surveying and Re-Structuring Religious Life After the War: A Case-Study from the Chernivtsi*
- 10:20** **Paolo Sartori** | Austrian Academy of Sciences  
*Saving Lost Souls: Fatwas Against Suicide in Socialist Uzbekistan*
- 11:10** COFFEE BREAK
- 11:30** **Nadieżhda Beliakova** | University of Bielefeld  
*'Religious Freedom' Confronts 'Freedom of Conscience' during Late Socialism*
- 12:20** **Michael Kemper** | University of Amsterdam  
*Are We Revisionists or Reactionaries If We Depict the USSR as a Religious Space?*
- 13:10** LUNCH
- 14:30** **Charles Shaw** | Central European University  
*The Red Army as Islamic Institution: 1924-1945*
- 15:20** **Eva Rogaar** | University of Amsterdam  
*Finding Islam in an Atheist State? Journeys, Exchanges, and the "Margins" of Muslimness in Late Soviet Russia (1970s-1980s)*
- 16:10** COFFEE BREAK
- 16:30** **Danielle Ross** | Utah State University  
*Mullah Sun'atullah's Children: Religious and Secular Narratives of Self and Family across Three Soviet Generations*
- 17:20** **Nadieszda Kizenko** | University at Albany, NY  
*Émigré, Unofficial, and Oral History Sources for 'Dissident' Clerics: The Case of Archpriest Dimitri Dudko*