

Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge. Oxford Series on *History and Archives*. By Sonja Luehrmann. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 256 pp. Bibliography, index, notes. Hardcover. \$74.00.

Organized religion in the post–World War II Soviet Union persisted in a hostile environment. Throughout the Cold War period, the assumption among Soviet officials was that religion, obviously incompatible with socialism, would disappear. Archives of groups such as the Knowledge Society, formed to promote atheism, demonstrate some of the complexities of working with original sources of this era. How Soviet officials dealt with the persistence of religious practices and interacted with religious leaders can reveal much about the workings of Soviet society. The opening of Soviet archives, beginning in the 1980s, has created new opportunities for exploring these topics, yet the reliability of these archives as historical sources is itself open to question. Sonja Luehrmann, associate professor of anthropology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, has written this study to guide researchers in using these often-difficult archives, but her reflections are valuable for archivists as well. Luehrmann's book, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*, won the 2016 Waldo Gifford Leland Award from the Society of American Archivists, an award given for "writing of superior excellence and usefulness in the field of archival history, theory, or practice."¹

This is Sonja Luehrmann's second book on atheism in the Soviet Union. Combining research conducted for her first book, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (IU Press, 2011), with new research, she considers archives in Moscow, several locales in the Middle Volga, and Waco, Texas. She studies Christian and Muslim groups as well as indigenous sects. The focus of this book is not the content of the archival documents as much as the "archival ecologies" and the levels of meaning that can be inferred from how these archives were created. Luehrmann also speaks about ways in which silencing can occur and is acutely aware of the role of the archivist in helping to shape the narratives of history.

Luehrmann describes documents in terms of genres (e.g., "report," "certificate," "petition," and "order") to examine what documents do—how officials and citizens alike used them. The documents reveal both vertical and horizontal communication. She stresses the "multi-vocality" of these archives; since document creators quoted from many other sources, the archives preserve the voices of diverse perspectives. But are these documents trustworthy? Luehrmann reflects that "the job of creating facts about religious life in the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly in the hands of organizations dedicated to its control and eradication" (p. 12). Soviet-era documents have certain biases built in, which researchers must take into account. Archives were a tool of Soviet officials, but they also served as a record of the precarious position of religious leaders and their relationships both with state authorities and with the people they served. In reading between the lines to discern the ways in which religion continued to function in an officially atheist society, Luehrmann considers the use of language, the placement of documents within archives, and the movement of documents through different offices.

If archival documents reflect a certain agenda, what about the books that were based on them? How should they be viewed now? Luehrmann considers different approaches that

researchers have taken: some still rely on them; some disregard them in the hope that newly opened archives will prove to be better sources; and some use a mix of published and archival sources. Luehrmann's approach is to put the two groups of sources on an equal footing, using an "archaeological approach" to allow books and documents to shed light on each other. Returning to her case study of the Knowledge Society, the author examines the publications of the society in light of records of meetings, surveys on religious practices, and other documents. Archives can tell us much about history and statistics published during the Soviet era, revealing the intents and methods of their authors.

In a final chapter, the author continues to look at archival ecologies in a very different setting: the Keston Archive, a counterarchive documenting dissent and the suppression of religion. The archive preserves *samizdat* publications (material censored by the government but reproduced clandestinely by dissidents), newspaper accounts, letters, and extracts from publications. In addition, once Soviet archives began to open up, photocopies from many different archives were added to the collection. Collected by Canon Michael Bourdeaux, an Anglican priest, the collection was originally housed at the Keston Institute in Oxford, England. In 2007, it was transferred to Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Unlike government archives, this collection was organized by topic, as libraries are organized. Researchers in government archives need to "think like a state," searching for documents by the office that created them. This collection is user-centered. But in making it easier to locate documents on a specific topic, the scheme also takes documents out of their context. Because many documents were spirited out of the Soviet Union, their origins were deliberately obscured. Researchers are unable to draw conclusions based on nearby documents, or the back-and-forth communication between different offices. Luehrmann's reflections on the effects that organizing principles have on users will resonate with many archivists.

This is a tightly written book, packed with insights on the role of archives in research. It will be an important book for archivists who are interested in the ways we as archivists help to shape research and the narrative of history. It leaves us with much to think about and discuss.

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1. Society of American Archivists, "Waldo Gifford Leland Award," <http://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section12-leland>.