

Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge. By Sonja Luehrmann. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. xii, 229 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$87.00, hard bound. Paper.

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In this book, Sonja Luehrmann offers some welcome new approaches to the challenges that arise from studying religion and religious practice in archives that were designed and maintained by government bureaucracies that were hostile to religious practice and belief. Throughout this book Luehrmann investigates a rich and varied set of archival, oral, and published materials and finds “that the richest narratives emerge when we allow these different sources to complement and challenge one another. A crucial step in creating such unsettling dialogues is to consider what each type of source was meant to do in a particular context (31-2).”

While Luehrmann’s focus in this book may be on the records of religious groups and their interactions with an officially atheist state, the ramifications of her arguments and methodology extend beyond the study of religion. Her project’s ultimate goal is to “attempt to show how an awareness of ‘archival ecologies’ can open up documents as richer and more multi-faceted historical sources, especially in cases where the good faith and expertise of the authors in relation to the phenomena described must be questioned (3).” Luehrmann fulfills this brief in spectacular fashion, providing lively examples that highlight the interactions and contradictions that emerge when considering different archival genres.

In Chapter One, Luehrmann explores the various types of documents housed in the official archives themselves and proposes that “we can gain a richer reading of past lives *and* a deeper understanding of how documentation sustains systems of power if we do not see archival documents as passive traces of actions and interests that played out ‘in real life.’ Rather, processes of producing, exchanging, and compiling documents were integral to the ways in which administrative apparatuses acted on populations and in which historical change unfolded (36).” Her focus on these different kinds of materials is especially useful in understanding the different paths that documents took within the Soviet system, the audiences that they were intended for, and the types of narratives that we can piece together from them. Luehrmann asks us not only to read documents as containing textual information but also as impetuses toward certain social actions.

Chapter Two takes up the role of memory and oral histories in how we read archives. Luehrmann warns against turning to oral histories as “a view of personal ‘memory’ as a morally pure alternative to official, ideologically biased ‘memory’ (73).” Oral histories are contingent upon the time and place that they are gathered with a multitude of social and historical factors influencing them. How then should we think of the role of oral histories when studying Soviet archives? Luehrmann makes the important point that oral histories should not be seen as always offering an oppositional or alternative vision of history. Indeed, within Soviet archives, oral histories played an important role in the creation of knowledge concerning religion and also provided justification for the continued need of atheist activism. What she notes throughout is an important dialogue between archival sources and oral histories that point to a picture of a “late Soviet society, that far from stagnant and monopolistic, contains surprising ideological diversity, and whose governing authorities are becoming less vigilant about combating it” (99).

In Chapter Three, she analyzes published sources from Soviet academia. For many years, these were some of the only sources that Western researchers, interested in questions of religion in the country, could access. Their legacy still hangs over the field with some scholars still relying on them to give a picture of religious life in the Soviet Union while others largely ignore them due to their methodological issues and ideological biases. Luehrmann advocates for an “archaeological vantage point plac[ing] documents and publications on the same plane and allows them to recontextualize one another within a contested field of knowledge production (103).” Such an approach seems the most logical for the continued use of Soviet sociology in research going forward that at once recognizes the provenance of these sources while also maintaining their importance in understanding the history of religion in the country.

Luehrmann moves to a rather different type of archive in Chapter Four. Here she turns her attention to materials in the Keston archive housed at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. This archive is quite different than the Russian ones that she draws upon in the rest of the book and constitutes an important counter-archive filled with materials that document the religious life in the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. She writes of how *samizdat* dominates the narrative present in the archive, leading to what she refers to as an “individualistic conception of religiosity” as primary throughout the archive (147). Through her investigations of the Keston archive she also finds that denominational distinctions become functional equivalents, the important aspect is not the author’s individual beliefs, but rather that they were all struggling to express religious sentiment in the face of an antagonistic and repressive state. In her estimation, “Keston is not really an archive; it is a private collection of records accumulated by a group of users in the way that best served their immediate needs (153).” She proposes that future researchers think about the archival

categories present in the Keston archive as “historical artifacts in their own right” which will allow for more interesting inquiry beyond the ideological preferences of the organizers of the archive (161). It is this systematic challenging of the structure and nature of archives and proposal for new approaches that makes Luehrmann’s book so refreshing.

Anthropologists and historians of religion as well as anyone else who works in archives, Soviet or other, will find that this book offers exciting theoretical provocations. Luehrmann’s emphasis on different genres of archival materials and their relationships with each other in the construction of historical narratives opens new vistas for researchers to consider and explore in the future.