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A conversation with Yuri Slezkine

tif.ssrc.org/2018/12/21/a-conversation-with-yuri-slezkine

by Yuri Slezkine , Sonja Luehrmann and Todd Weir

December 21, 2018



As the final installment of the Fall 2018 [book forum](#) on The House of Government, forum co-curators Sonja Luehrmann and Todd Weir interviewed author Yuri Slezkine. Many of the questions were sparked directly from other contributions to the forum. You can read the other essays [here](#).

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Sonja Luehrmann and Todd Weir: Thank you for agreeing to answer some questions sparked by contributions to this forum.

Some contributors seem convinced by your analysis of Bolshevism as millenarianism, others remain skeptical. We would like to ask you to explain your thinking a little more. In his review essay in [Canadian-American Slavic Studies](#), Michael David-Fox makes a distinction between “soft” and “hard” versions of the analogy between Bolshevism and religion. In his view, the soft version uses religious imagery and intertextual references as problems for analysis, while in hard versions they are treated as proof that Bolshevism is millenarian. Would you agree with his placement of your book as an example of the “hard” analogy?

Yuri Slezkine: I don't draw an analogy between Bolshevism and religion. I don't use the concept of “religion” at all, for reasons I explain in Chapter 3 of the book. I argue, rather, that Bolshevism is (not similar to, but *is*) a form of millenarianism, which I define as the expectation of an imminent and violent destruction of the existing order of things, followed by an eternity of harmony. By that definition, a great variety of faiths and movements—



Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, Rastafarianism, Taiping, Nazism, Khmer Rouge, Sabbateans, Branch Davidians, the Manson Family, the Yellow Turban, the Peoples Temple—are, or at one point were, millenarian. This does not imply similarity in any other respect any more than does a statement that Cuba, Hungary, and North Korea were all socialist countries (according to a certain definition of “socialism”) or that my friends Igor and Konstantin are both bald (defined as “having little to no hair on top of one’s head”).

SL and TW: Mayfair Yang has sought to situate the Maoist cult in relationship to Chinese peasant culture. She talked about deep structures present in the population that were acted upon by the Chinese communists. You largely avoid placing the Bolsheviks in relation to the religious history or culture of Russia. Yet, in the epilogue you make a big claim that Bolshevism was the attempted Reformation of Russia. This claim was not evident in the text itself. Could you elaborate a bit: How would you situate Bolshevism in Russian religious history?

YS: I don’t think that Bolshevism had much to do with Orthodox Christianity (if that’s what you mean by Russian religious history). Its millenarian doctrine came from Germany, and Party officials from Russian Orthodox backgrounds were underrepresented in the House of Government, compared to their Jewish, Latvian (formerly Lutheran), and Polish (formerly Catholic) comrades. The fact that most converts and ostensible converts came from the Orthodox tradition had serious consequences for the way Bolshevism was practiced outside the original sect, but that is not part of my book’s subject. In Chapter 33, I talk about “Reformation” as an attempted “disciplinary revolution,” not a particular Christian movement.

SL and TW: We’d like you to say something about your authorial voice and your relationship to different narrative genres, especially the novel. While some anthropologists write reflexively, historians generally like to appear invisible. But you, it seems to us, very often take the stance of the narrator of a novel. You allow yourself to work in irony and parody. This makes your texts daring, provocative, very readable, and humorous. However, there may be a cost. At best, the reader wonders where you stand; at worst, it leaves you open to easy dismissal. How does irony serve your aims as a historian?

YS: All historians create narratives. Some are more self-conscious about it than others. I called my book a saga (or epic) and structured it accordingly, with some novelistic elements as part of the architecture. I have been reading history books for many years, as a matter of pleasure as well as duty, but most of my sense of the past still comes from novels. My hope is that some of the devices I used will help the reader form more vivid and more durable memories of the people and places I write about. But of course I was not joking when I wrote in a special disclaimer that my book is about what actually happened (as I see it), as opposed to what might have happened (as I imagine it). Some parts of the book are in the tragic and comic key, but you are right that irony wins out. It creates a distancing effect and helps leave moral judgment to the reader. Sometimes it is good for the reader not to know where the author stands (and for the author to remain uncertain).

SL and TW: You clearly don’t share the attitude of many advocates of the theory of political religion, such as the writer Viktor Arlov quoted by Katya Tolstaya, who held that Christianity was the norm and communism the “satanic parody.” Nevertheless, as the contributors

suggest, your book is certain to bring political religion back into the study of communism. How would you respond to this association?

YS: With regret. All movements commonly known as “religions” are political. Pontius Pilate, whatever his private reservations, had good reasons for wanting Jesus out of the way. And who doubts the political nature and success of early Islam? And of course revolutionary politics are by definition “religious” in the sense of being matters of life and death (or sacred beginnings and ends). [Victoria Smolkin’s essay](#) is very insightful and eloquent on this score.

SL and TW: Why does it matter whether or not we consider Bolshevism, Fascism, or other political movements “religions”? What consequences does it have for theories of religion and theories of politics? Are there alternative conceptualizations that would fit the kind of materials historians of twentieth-century authoritarianism work with, for example, the umbrella concept of “ideocracy,” which you introduce in the final chapter of the book?

YS: By [Katya Tolstaya’s](#) “substantive” definition, Bolshevism and Fascism are not religions; by [Mayfair Yang’s](#) Durkheimian one, they are (along with nationalism and many other things). My own preference is to drop the word “religion” altogether. It impedes communication and blinds people to connections they would otherwise find illuminating. Can you think of a definition of “totalitarianism” that would not apply to Christianity, Islam, and most other ideologies Katya Tolstaya would call religions? The fixation on the need to keep “religions” separate is the only reason most scholars consider Nazism and Bolshevism bizarre modern inventions.

As for the term “ideocracy,” I use it interchangeably with “theocracy” and “hierocracy” to designate states run by ideology professionals (“priests”). It has a clear meaning and can be used productively for any number of comparisons.

SL and TW: Finally, an open question. What have you learned from the forum contributions? To whom would you like to respond?

YS: In an answer to one of your previous questions I said that sometimes it is good when the reader is not sure where the author stands. Well, now I know that sometimes it is not. There is only one thing that I would like to clarify. [Heather Coleman](#) writes that I consider the failure of Stalin’s reformation the result of “Orthodoxy’s purported inadequacies.” In fact, I consider it the result of Orthodoxy’s very real advantages. Because of Orthodoxy’s relatively lax disciplining practices, individual Russians tend to be less keen on self-censorship and mutual surveillance than most other heirs to the Christian tradition. The Bolsheviks tried to change that but gave up after a while, thank goodness. Big Brother is much less patient and effective than Big Nurse.

SL and TW: Thank you for this conversation.

YS: Thank you very much!