



Jan Tesař

The History of Scientific Atheism

A Comparative Study of Czechoslovakia
and Soviet Union (1954–1991)



Religiöse Kulturen im Europa der Neuzeit

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Introduction

During a heated discussion at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Charles University in Prague, a professor of Czechoslovakian history declared that scientific atheism is total nonsense and that it has never existed. He maintained that science and atheism are two incommensurable categories, and that the phenomenon itself is not worthy of research because everything is clear and, consequently, there is nothing to find. The present work is a rather long answer to this professor because it tries to document the modes of scientific atheism's existence in the national contexts of the Soviet Union and socialist Czechoslovakia in the period after Stalin's death until the dissolution of the authoritative regime in 1989, or 1991 respectively. Furthermore, it strives to understand how this "weird" scholarship came into being, how it survived in the given environment and what contributed to its deprecation.

Within this study, scientific atheism¹ is understood as a way of seeing.² Such a perspective allows the investigation to go beyond the borders of a highly ideologized approach that prevents us seeing atheist specialists as rational people who produced "ordinary" knowledge that fully corresponded to their surrounding socio-political and cultural context. This theoretical perspective opens the possibility of comprehending the limits of thinking as well as its structure and content in the context of an authoritative political regime. Scientific atheism is in this case a specific sphere of human activity analysis that can help to understand the more general process of knowledge production under socialism in two distinct national contexts. Such analysis will contribute to a sincere portrayal of the atheist specialists and their style of thinking. The goal is to approach them not as mere puppets in the hands of the all-mighty ideological apparatus of the Communist Party (CP henceforth), but as a relatively autonomous yet co-dependent unit which existed within the system, that is, within the galaxy

1 Because historical actors used the term "Marxist atheism" and "scientific atheism" as synonyms the present work also does not draw a distinction between the two expressions.

2 In his 1929 essay, Fleck wrote: "an experienced teacher has found that only a small minority of students independently notice something new without having their attention explicitly drawn to it, and that even then only a few see it immediately as it is shown to them. They first have to learn to see it. [...] it is just this 'seeing' that one first has to learn, which makes for the progress of any science, the progress which thus is again and again given its social imprint." Cit. *Fleck*, Ludwik: On the Crisis of Reality, in: *Cohen*, Robert/*Schnelle*, Thomas (eds.): *Cognition and Fact*. Materials on Ludwik Fleck. Dordrecht 1986, 48.

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of Marxist-Leninist thinking, but which also had its own, partially independent agenda.

The primary goal is thus to comprehend what exactly was this convoluted and seemingly haphazardly comprised doctrine and set of practices that existed as a subsidiary stream in the river of Marxist-Leninist ideology. How large was the phenomenon, what institutions, groups, and individuals were connected to it, and was it any different outside of Czechoslovakia? What were the goals of scientific atheists, and how did they try to achieve them? Questions like these began the investigation into the long-deceased scientific atheism. Its vestiges proved to be engaging on their own. Investigation showed that there was a considerable amount of knowledge generated by certain Marxist scholars such as Aleksandr Okulov, Igor Iablokov, Jiří Loukotka, and Ivan Hodovský about topics that were then seen as the domain of so-called scientific atheism and that form the main parts of the present study as well. This led to questions about the conditions of existence of such knowledge and questions about the nature and characteristic features, or “quality,” function and influence of that knowledge.

Looking into these matters, it is possible to uncover not only the relationship of allegedly “indispensable parts of Marxism-Leninism” towards the main body of the doctrine, but to make some claims about the nature of science and its agents during socialism as well. The intertwining of the scholarly discipline of scientific atheism with antireligious (or atheist) propaganda on the other hand sheds some light on the process of knowledge management, and importance of its dispersion throughout the population.

Scientific atheism was considered by western scientists of the time as “pseudoscience.” However, western scholars were not the only ones who used this description, as Marxist scholars also used this derogatory term also, although in a completely different context. First, they used it defensively in order to show the total misapprehension of Marxism by western scholars. Second, they used it offensively to expose theologians as real scientific charlatans in their scientific field. Yet, it is beside the point, and it would not bring us any further epistemological gain if we looked at scientific atheism from the same perspective and dismissed it as a crackpot or plain dogmatic endeavour. The approach taken by the historian of science Michael Gordin in his book about the pseudo-science of Immanuel Velikovsky in the US context is far more productive. He maintains that labelling a science as “pseudoscience” does not help us to understand why there were adherents to such a “pseudoscience” in the first place and why it was able to gain some space in the public sphere without being universally accepted by “establishment” (that is, official, institutionalized and publicly funded) science.³

³ See *Gordin, Michael: Pseudoscience Wars. Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe*. Kindle edition. London/Chicago 2012, position 345–384.

The aim of this book is, therefore, not to say conclusively whether scientific atheism was a form of scholarship, pseudo- or quasi-science or rather a form of ideological doctrine, completely detached from the scientific method of any scholarly discipline. It may be understood as a parallel science, or parallel scholarship, because scientific atheism was not in fact an “exact science” but rather an aggregate of the social sciences and humanities. By the term parallel science is meant the notion of the separation of Western and Eastern knowledge on political, philosophical, and ideological grounds. Thus, what was taken as a plausible explanation or very probable theory in the West was categorically rejected in the East on methodological and epistemological grounds and vice versa. Western and Eastern scholarship thus existed as two sides of one coin. They knew about each other but did not talk to each other, with one notable exception, which is described in the third chapter of the present work under the title “The Czechoslovakian Deviation.”

It should be emphasized at this point that this study does not pursue the goal describing and assessing political actions and technologies that had an anti-religious or atheist character. The bureaucratic measures and sometimes open hostility of the political and bureaucratic plenipotentiaries of the party in both national contexts is not denied.⁴ However, the methodology of the present work is founded on a distinction between the act of aggression initiated by the party “laymen” and the act of thinking which was the domain of the scientific-atheist experts. The line between those two groups was drawn quite clearly, and the latter group almost never joined the bureaucratic measures of the former; thus, it is possible to divide these two groups and focus only on the latter one for the purposes of the analysis.

The exception confirms the rule and although both, that is western and socialist specialists, dealt with similar social phenomena and were partially interested in similar questions—for example, the process of secularization—their interpretation of the gathered data was completely irreconcilable with one another. Therefore, even though there was some reception of western scholarship in Czechoslovakia and in the Soviet Union as well, it was almost always fundamentally critical. The characterization of scientific-atheist scholarship as a parallel

4 The secondary literature devoted to the appraisal of the relationship between the Soviet Union, socialist Czechoslovakia, and various churches has become abundant in recent years. The focus of such literature is predominantly on the coercive and disciplinary measures that sought to bring the defying church organization and its members into line. Therefore, it could be characterized as a narrative of martyrdom or oppression of the tyrant against the righteous. From the recently published literature see *Balík, Stanislav/Hanuš, Jiří: Katolická církev v Československu 1945–1989*. Brno 2013, *Chumachenko, Tatiana: Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*. New York 2002, *Shkvarovskii, Mikhail, Vitalievich: Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov v XX veke*, Moskva 2010.

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science can be supported by Ludwik Fleck's thesis, that "direct communication between the adherents of different thought styles is impossible."⁵ Fleck can be used to characterize yet another feature of the relationship between scientific-atheist scholarship and western scholarship that is understood as a different thought style:

the greater the difference between two thought styles, the more inhibited will be the communication of ideas. [...] The alien way of thought seems like mysticism. The questions it rejects will often be regarded as the most important ones, its explanations as proving nothing or as missing the point, its problems as often unimportant or meaningless trivialities.⁶

As opposed to Western scholarship, which was dealing with similar topics as scientific atheism but did not share a single scientific paradigm, a particular version of Marxism-Leninism was taken as an inevitable point of departure and epistemological paradigm by Eastern scholars. Therefore, it formed their reasoning, argumentation, choice of research topics, core methodology, and, of course, outcomes as well. Yet, whatever the underlining principles, whether the Marxist-Leninist paradigm was rigid over the course of time or whether there were shifts, changes in the tried and trusted instruments, approaches, and interpretation framework remains to be seen. The question concerning the magnitude of the change within the epistemological paradigm in both national contexts, that is whether it was a succession of evolutionary shifts or rather an abrupt cadence of revolutionary rifts, has to be investigated as well.

Being a parallel science, scientific atheism was ridiculed and rejected in the West, yet taken seriously by the scholarly community, responsible policy makers, and cultural institutions in the East, presumably because they all adhered to the similar paradigm of Marxism-Leninism. The question is, from which sources stemmed the legitimization of scientific atheism? Did it come exclusively from its embeddedness in Marxism-Leninism, or was it partially a result of the completed research projects and their own values? Or were there other prevalent external influences that cannot be explained from within the scholarship? How was the actual value of scientific-atheist research appreciated in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia? Finally, what were the benchmarks for "real" science in this context, and how was it achieved?

5 Cit. *Fleck*, Ludwik: *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*. Chicago 1979, 36.

6 Cit. *ibid.*, 109.

Analytical Categories and Underlying Theoretical Assumptions

As Jürgen Kocka put it, “Historical comparisons are asymmetrical in the sense that they investigate one case carefully while limiting themselves to a mere sketch of the other case(s) which serve(s) as comparative reference point(s).”⁷ The comparison of scientific atheism in socialist Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union is no different because it also perceives one set of phenomena as central and the other as peripheral.

For the purposes of analysis, the Soviet Union, more precisely Moscow with its research institutes, is taken as such a center and socialist Czechoslovakia with its regional centers in Brno and Bratislava plays the role of a periphery. This approach was dictated partially by chronology. It seems that the development mostly took place at first in Moscow and only then it moved to peripheries abroad. Partially, practical reasons lie behind this.⁸ Finally, this approach helps to distinguish what development was unique in the context of the Eastern Bloc and what was adopted as a universal institutional or research practice and explain why this was so. The analytical emphasis is put not only on similarities and differences between both countries. Rather, the focus is also oriented on such moments when both groups of actors met with one another. The nature of exchange, that is cross-national communication, networks and institutional relations, and their usage is put under scrutiny. In this sense, the methodological approach is similar to that of entangled history which has a lot in common with the concept of transfer studies.⁹

The combination of asymmetrical comparison and entangled history has its advantages. First and foremost, it enables not only the delimitation of the original form and its deviation but allows observation of the process of negotiation that lies behind the adoption or rejection of certain techniques, modes of thinking, or discursive practices. Furthermore, it brings to the fore the agency of historical actors who are not understood as passive recipients but rather active co-creators of the atheist content in the national institutional framework. To put it differently, if there were no capable scholars in Czechoslovakia, who would be

7 Cit. *Kocka*, Jürgen: *Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: the Case of the German Sonderweg*, in: *History and Theory* 38/1 (1999) 40–50, here 40.

8 One could conduct research of scientific atheism in the Soviet Union as such and observe the regional differences and communication between the center and periphery. However, such analysis would be impossible without extensive research in the archives of former Soviet republics and interpretation of sources predominantly in the respective languages of the republics.

9 In Michel Espagne’s definition, transfer is the process through which the norms and representations of one culture appear in another. Transfer studies follow the transmission of one culture into another, analyzing the process of change. See *Mikkonen, Simo/Koivunen, Pia*: *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe*. New York 2015, 12.

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able to participate in the collaborative project of scientific atheism, there would not be any Czechoslovakian scientific atheism either. Finally, the notion that scientific atheism was some kind of Soviet, or Czechoslovakian deviation, to be dispelled. Indeed, if a more comprehensive comparison was made, which would account for other socialist countries as well, then our understanding of variety and commonness of scientific atheism in the Eastern Bloc would be even more complete. In this sense, the present work is the first attempt to put scientific atheism into a wider context.

Thus, the comparison helps to distinguish firstly to what extent scientific atheism was centrally “governed” from the Soviet Union, and to what extent it was linked to and inspired by a national context; secondly, how the community of scientists communicated, and how this communication influenced scientific production; and thirdly, to what extent this type of science was susceptible to the political field. Generally, the purpose of the comparison is to measure how Czechoslovakian scientific atheism differed from its Soviet archetype and whether there was always a rather one-sided influence. Such a method will thus help us understand whether Soviet scientific atheism was “unique” or not.

The main categories for comparison are socio-political context, institutions, and field of knowledge. The purpose is to elucidate what formal and informal institutions were activated in order to promote the project of scientific atheism. In the case of institutions, the attention is turned to the question of who professional scientific atheists were, what type of career they could have, and what was their position in society, relative to other spheres of knowledge and practice. The field of knowledge perspective aims to look into the public and semi-public utterances, describe the main themes of scientific-atheist scholarship, and their role in the socialist public sphere or in the sphere of intraparty debate about the technology of society-construction. The goal is to explain why certain topics were claimed by scientific-atheist scholars, what they wanted to achieve by studying them, and how it helped them to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the CP and other scholarly disciplines who were in fact competitors for the limited resources in the party’s disposal.

If asymmetrical comparison and entangled history form the broadest analytical framework of this study, the more refined questions mentioned above can be answered only when scientific atheism is approached in a certain way. It goes without saying that behind every question is always a theoretical or at least hypothetical assumption that draws on concepts and categories, laden with specific meaning. There is also no denial that the formulation of a question itself partially constructs its own answer. In order to avoid epistemological confusion, and in order to achieve a higher degree of explanative clarity, the most important concepts and categories, along with their underlying theoretical assumptions must be briefly sketched out. This is also vital because in some cases the usage of a concept or a term comes from a different scholarly tradition which is slightly

modified for the purposes of the current analysis. The reason behind such amendments could be explained as the supremacy of historical sources which take the primary position over theory. In other words, theory and methodology are employed in order to enhance the interpretation of sources and not the other way around, as is sometimes the case.

A crucial heuristic question is how we approach the discipline of scientific atheism. One distinction has been made already, with the introduction of the term parallel science. Yet, this says more about scientific atheism's relationship to the West than about the nature of the discipline itself. Therefore, it is necessary to outline through what lens the phenomenon is studied. The first concept in need of explanation is a "thought style." The term's usage in this study is directly linked to Ludwik Fleck's classical book about the genesis and development of a scientific fact and other essays that served as a major source of theoretical and methodological inspiration.¹⁰

Fleck's theoretical framework is also useful for deeper analysis of the institutional framework of scientific atheism which can be understood as a specific thought collective. Such analytical category enables to delineate smaller and larger esoteric circles of various experts, specialists, and acolytes, which are characterized by

a) the ability to make assumptions and b) both mental and manual practice together with a research scientist's entire experimental and non-experimental fund of knowledge, including features clearly conceived, those that are uncertain, and those that are "instinctive."¹¹

Furthermore, it allows observation of the creation of bonds between the members of the collective through the construction of specific language and terminology and through the formation of restricted content viewed as a "special realm of thinking."¹² This special realm of thinking is another way to characterize a paradigm. All these concepts form the basic instruments that are used to approach the subject matter of this book.

Scientific-atheist propaganda and the group of scientific atheist propagandists may be understood as a specific type of popular science, i. e. an exoteric thought style and thought collective that adheres to the same paradigm but which does not have the same ambitions regarding knowledge production and fact genesis as an esoteric thought style. It is capable of setting the standard for the content

10 See *Cohen/Schnelle: Cognition*, 39–160. Fleck defines thought style as (the readiness for) directed perception with corresponding mental and objective assimilation of what has been so perceived. It is characterized by common features in the problems of interest to a thought collective, by the judgment that the thought collective considers evident, and by the methods that it applies as a means of cognition. Cit. *ibid.*, 99.

11 Cit. *Fleck: Genesis*, 96.

12 Cit. *ibid.*, 104.

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of expert knowledge and thus co-determines its development. Conversely, it disperses exoteric knowledge which is simplified, lucid, and apodictic. Precisely because of this it is able to influence a large circle of adults in favor of the paradigm thus presented.¹³

Whilst thought style is understood in this book as a broader category that allows accounting of the social, historical, and cultural forces in the process of scientific cognition and development, an esoteric thought style is perceived as its specific mode that is closely linked to the production of science as it is. Thus, it is more closely connected to the world of ideas that circulate in one specific discipline, which is in this case scientific atheism. Contrarily, the exoteric thought style puts the existence of a science into a broader social and cultural context. In other words, whereas scientific atheism as a whole (scientific-atheist propaganda, ritual practice, policies, and science) can be defined as a thought style, the epistemological, theoretical and methodological assumptions, and rules of scientific-atheist scholarship belong to the esoteric type of knowledge, which is a subcategory of the thought style.

Whereas for Fleck it was sufficient to explain the emergence and existence of the thought style from the inner logic of interaction within certain members of the thought collective and their scientific facts, it has to be extended in order to take account of the socialist socio-political context. Mainly, the external role of the CP in the inner workings of the esoteric thought collective has to be assumed and the extent of its influence on the knowledge production process thoroughly investigated. This is why the CP in the present work is conceptualized as one of the most significant reference groups. As a significant reference group, it entered into very close dialogue with the esoteric thought collective and, as the hypothesis goes, it influenced its knowledge quite profoundly. In contrast to Fleck's model, the present work thus presupposes a profound influence of the laymen on the realm of knowledge. Moreover, it maintains that the genesis of a scientific fact can be finished only if the fact is accepted as such not only by the members of the esoteric thought collective but by members of other significant reference groups as well.

The largest difference between the Marxist-Leninist paradigm and other paradigms is that the former was endorsed with force by the ruling communist party, whereas other scientific paradigms normally do not have such strong and direct ties to political power. However, even under the auspices of an authoritarian dictatorship it would not be possible to practice science without the consent of scholars who, for various reasons, decided to adopt the endorsed scientific worldview, that is, the paradigm, while designing projects and using Marxism-Leninism as a point of departure and mode of explanation. Moreover, even in the authoritarian context, where a scientific paradigm is co-determined

13 See *ibid.*, 113.

by political forces, change is possible, as the Lysenko affair and its end in the 1950s indicate.¹⁴

It should be noted that such conceptualization of the term paradigm views science from a perspective similar to Ludwik Fleck, who maintained, that “truth in science is a function of the particular style of thinking that has been accepted by the thought collective. To be correct is rather to be accepted by the collective.”¹⁵ Therefore, the aim is not to delineate truth and falsity, or science (that is, the pursuit of truth) from pseudoscience.¹⁶ In other words, it is not the goal to criticize and refute scientific atheism as a plain pseudoscience. Rather, the goal is to determine how it emerged and functioned as a science (or scholarship) in specific historical—temporal and spatial—boundaries. As Sonja Luehrmann pointed out, such approach moves us away from focusing on the truth value of the statements and points towards questions broadly related to Foucaultian concept of regimes of truth, the rules of their functioning, maintenance, and expansion.¹⁷

Finally, because it is impossible to think about function without the notion of influence and, therefore, power in some sense or other, it is necessary to explain what is meant by power, and where we look for it. Furthermore, it ought to be explained what role power plays in the concept of science outlined above, and how it contributes to the description and analysis of the scientific-atheist thought collective.

According to Foucault, knowledge and power go hand in hand.¹⁸ Foucault states that power is the activity of political technologies in the whole societal body.¹⁹ More precisely, it is the control of the controlled and ordering of the possible. To govern means to structure the field of possible action of others.²⁰

14 See *Graham*, Loren: “Stalinist Ideology and the Lysenko Affair,” in: *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*. New York 1993, and *Vucinich*, Alexander: *Empire of Knowledge*. The Academy of Sciences of the USSR (1917–1970). Berkeley 1984, 199–256.

15 Cit. *Fleck*: *Genesis*, 156.

16 The typical example is to be found in classical work of *Popper*, Karl: *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. New York 2002, 48. When truth is thematized, it is strictly in the manner proposed by Fleck: “truth is not a convention but rather 1) in historical perspective, an event in the history of thought, 2) in its contemporary context, stylized thought constraint.” Cit. *Fleck*: *Genesis*, 100.

17 On the Foucault’s use of the regimes of truth concept see *Foucault*, Michel: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York 1991, 23, 30. On the methodological application of the concept for research about socialism in the Eastern Europe see *Verdery*, Katherine: *Secrets and Truths: Ethnography in the Archive of Romania’s Secret Police*. Budapest 2014 and *Luehrmann*, Sonja: *Religion in Secular Archives. Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*. Kindle edition, Oxford 2015, location 410.

18 See *Foucault*: *Discipline*, 27 f.

19 See *Dreyfus*, Hubert/*Rabinow*, Paul: *Michel Foucault. Za hranicemi strukturalismu a hermeneutiky*. Praha 2002, 281.

20 Cit. *Foucault*, Michel: *Subjekt a moc*, in: *Dreyfus/Rabinow: Michel Foucault*, 329.

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Therefore, the reconstruction of rules that governed the formation, that is, institutionalization and organization of a certain thought collective in a given society, is a key to the power structure of the thought style. The most important powers in the context of scientific atheism were, firstly, the external, structuring and delineating heteronomous force.²¹ One has to take into consideration that the subject that come to understand something, the objects of knowledge, and modalities of knowledge are to certain degrees consequences of the fundamental implications of power-knowledge relations and their historical transformations.²² In our contexts this is the CP elite—the Central Committee (CC from now on)—who are the main representative of the heteronomous force. It is heteronomous to the thought collective because it is not part of it, but it exerts a considerable amount of influence over it.

The knowledge production cannot be analyzed as a composition of free floating radicals; therefore, it is contextualized by the socio-political development that includes the decision-making process of the CP elites. Such attitudes of these elites are conceptualized as important forms of direct influence which co-determined the “horizons of expectation”²³ for the other historical actors. Apart from that, the heteronomous force influences the form of the esoteric thought style indirectly. The most significant form of indirect influence, which is constantly analysed throughout this study, is the organizational structure of the esoteric thought collective, because without it the development of the thought style would be incomprehensible. Although the term is not used in the study, the conditioning of the thought collective and thought style through the internal rules of the epistemological paradigm and external influence of the heteronomous force could be understood as a “dispositive” that ultimately determined what could and could not be said in the framework of the scientific-atheist realm of knowledge.²⁴

Inspired by Foucault, scientific-atheist scholarly production is understood as a type of expert knowledge that is able to exert its own power over certain subjects of knowledge and emanate it back to other significant reference groups. The hypothesis goes that the result of such emanation can amount to a profound change of the reference group’s attitudes towards the object that has been constructed as a scientific fact by the experts. Such power stems from the fact that the esoteric thought style had the sole authority to describe certain objects of

21 The term heteronomous force is inspired by Bourdieu’s reflection on the preconditions for the field of cultural practice’s autonomy. In this context, his analysis of external—heteronomous—restrictions and possible reactions of the autonomous field on such a situation are especially fruitful. See *Bourdieu, Pierre: The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. New York 1984, 1–34.

22 See *Foucault, Michel: Archeologie věděni*. Praha 2002, 76.

23 See *Koselleck, Reinhart. Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlichen Zeiten*. Frankfurt 1979, 98.

24 See *Dreyfus/Rabinow: Michel Foucault*, 195.

research and put them into relations with other categories, thus making them not only visible but also intelligible in the framework of the given epistemological paradigm. This intrinsic power of the esoteric thought style had of course many implications that are partially explored in the next parts of this book.

Earlier and Contemporary Approaches to Scientific Atheism

Although the attention of researchers coming from various scholarly disciplines has turned to the problematic of scientific atheism in its broad sense only relatively sporadically, their approaches should be discussed in order to better understand the theoretical position of this book in the ongoing debate about the nature of scientific atheism.

The oldest and probably also most ideologically biased approach could be labelled the “Cold War perspective.” In regard of scientific atheism, its main aim was not to comprehend the phenomenon but to de-mask and criticize it as a propagandist failure and thus beat it in the ongoing worldview competition. The research concentrated on the so-called bureaucratic measures such as forced church closures, persecution of believers in the workplace, and curtailing of their religious freedom.²⁵ In short, the focus was predominantly on political action and its consequences. Therefore, scientific atheism, which was widely confused with antireligious propaganda in the secondary literature, as a whole had been seen from the point of view of propaganda, that is, as a type of political action. The scientific-atheist scholarship was either not taken into consideration, or it was dismissed as a defunct pseudoscience on the grounds of its adherence to the Marxist-Leninist paradigm, as the following quote clearly underlines: “Most of what passes for ‘scientific atheism’ is very crude, a mere repetition of the arguments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and where it raises above this level, its result can be to stimulate interest in religion.”²⁶

25 Illuminating is the statement of one of the chief proponents of the Cold War approach in the study of religion and atheism in the Soviet Union, Bohdan Bociurkiw: “Unleashed forces of ideological fanaticism and totalitarian arbitrariness have caused in the recent years the large-scale closing of churches, mosques and synagogues, the suppression of the large portion of monastic and theological institutions, and numerous renunciations of priesthood and faith, contributing to a marked expansion of ‘religious underground’ in the Soviet Union.” Cit. *Bociurkiw*, Bohdan: *De-Stalinization and Religion in the U.S.S.R.*, in: *International Journal* 20/3 (1965) 312–330, here 312. Later in his article, Bociurkiw interprets atheist propaganda along the same lines: “the post-Stalin religious campaign has featured a two pronged attack aiming at the weakening and the ultimate elimination of religious organizations, and, at the same time, attempting gradually to deprive the churches and sects of their popular base through the ‘conversion’ of believers to a ‘scientific-atheist’ worldview.” Cit. *ibid.*, 325.

26 Cit. *Lawrence*, John: *Observations on Religion and Atheism in Soviet Society*, in: *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 14/4 (1972) 577–585, here 581.

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The main function of scientific-atheist scholarship was ideological in essence. A typical quote from this “engaged” western scholarship illustrates the case: “There is no doubt that Soviet sociologists of religion are devoted to the task of facilitating the militant struggle against religion in their country.”²⁷ The overarching idea behind the cold war approach was to emphasize how the totalitarian regime, symbolized by the communist party, tried to oppress society in order to gain more power and leverage over it. The situation of religion, under the oppressing influence of antireligious policies and atheist propaganda was another case in point.²⁸

Heuristic problems of this black-and-white picture regarding atheism consisted of the fact that it was not able to explain why certain people actually adhered to scientific atheism, yet did not share the militant attitude against religion, as Pankhurst, Lawrence, Bociurkiw, and many others believed. The positive atheist identity, without abuse of power or inherently sinister ideological goals, going against the will and well-being of the believers, was virtually unthinkable when the Cold War approach created dichotomies of victims and perpetrators that was used as an analytical framework. Furthermore, the genuine belief in Marxism-Leninism was also hard to imagine, if one adopted an outlook presuming that ideology was used only as a tool for control and not as a guiding principle.

Another Cold War mode of explanation, implicitly touching on the topic of scientific atheism as well, was the pseudo-religion thesis. Dating back to Eric Voegelin and Raymond Aron, who introduced this concept, some political scientists and historians have maintained that Marxism-Leninism and the Soviet Union should be understood as an entity resembling religion, drawing most often on the structural similarities shared with the Catholic church, perception of sacredness, role of dogma, holy scriptures, and so on.²⁹ Apart from the fact that the pseudo-religion thesis was always closely connected with totalitarianism, it has primarily been used in order to slander. Therefore, it has been a political *Kampfbegriff* and far less a scientific concept. In other words, it has been employed less in order to analyse and more to assess, evaluate, and denigrate Soviet developments and delegitimize political tenure.³⁰

27 Cit. *Pankhurst, Jerry*: Soviet Sociology of Religion, in: Religion in the Communist Lands 10/3 (1982) 292–297, here 292.

28 See *Bociurkiw*: De-Stalinization, 329, and *Bociurkiw, Bohdan*: The Orthodox Church and the Soviet Regime in the Ukraine, 1953–1971, in: Canadian Slavonic Papers, 14/2 (1972) 191–212.

29 See *Maier, Hans*: Politická náboženství. Totalitární režimy a křesťanství. Brno 1999, 24–29.

30 The following quotation should illustrate the case in point: “Marxism as a pseudo-religion is at an end in the Soviet Union. Even among CP members it is a small minority that even pretends to take Marxist ideology seriously, whereas the religious believers are

Furthermore, the epistemological gain of Marxism-Leninism as religion is far from clear. Firstly, as the at least two-hundred-years long and ongoing debate about the nature of religion shows, no consensus regarding its definition has been reached yet.³¹ Then, the question immediately arises, to what type of religion should the “quasi-religion” of Marxism-Leninism be compared? In what ways does the analogy help us to understand the nature of the, in the words of Stephen Kotkin, socialist civilization? To say that Marxist-Leninist ideological doctrine is millennial is one thing, yet to compare CP secretaries to a hierarchy of the clergy, Marx’s *Capital* to the Bible, and statues of Lenin to statues of Saints completely another. The point is that such superfluous analogies and comparison of seemingly similar phenomena are often de-contextualized in order to fit the predispositions of a certain theoretical pattern with ideological repercussions. Most importantly, the historical dimension is overlooked by such approaches, and the self-definition of historical actors is neglected. Crucially, whereas all religious believers would describe themselves as such without hesitation, that is, no Christian or Muslim would deny his religious identity, the proposed adherents to the Marxist-Leninist “pseudo-religion” were in fact unanimous in believing that their actions and words were the exact opposite of religion. In other words, no Marxist would describe himself as a religious believer. Therefore, even if superficially similar, the driving forces, legitimization, and, crucially, the thought style and epistemological paradigm in the Soviet Union and other socialist states were not understood by historical actors followed in this study in religious terms. Moreover, due to the fact that the goal of the pseudo-religion approach is to ascribe and not to describe the identity of the analysed subjects, it is unable to help us understand the self-appreciation of the historical situation and mental horizons of the individual people living in those countries.

Notwithstanding the critical points just mentioned, this approach, especially when not applied rigorously, could point to a few interesting new aspects. William van den Bercken was among the first who actually acknowledged that scientific-atheist scholarship could be understood from the endemic and not exogenous point of view. In his book, he asserted that scientific atheism “is a science in the light of Soviet ideology’s concept of science which is esoteric and a priori declares itself closed to external (bourgeois) criticism.” Even though van den Bercken concedes that “from the standpoint of epistemology, one is obliged to call Soviet atheism ideological and not scientific,” he then adds that “it is true to say that Soviet ideological atheism is scientific—but with the same epistemo-

numbered by tens of millions. Similarly, Marxism as an ethical system has never taken hold.” Cit. *Lawrence: Observations on Religion and Atheism in Soviet Society*, in: *Religion in the Communist Lands*, 1/4–5 (1973) 20–27, here 21.

31 For a well-arranged overview of the most influential theories of religion see e.g. *Pals, Daniel: Eight Theories of Religion*. Oxford 2006.

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logical status as theology.”³² This conclusion is based on his view of the Soviet Union as a form of theocracy that controlled interpretations of its doctrine.³³

Scientific-atheist scholarship plays in this case a supportive role, yet it is unable to abstract itself from the ideological monoculture enforced by the state. Van den Bercken then asserts that it has decisive implications for the epistemology of scientific atheism. Although this model is not far from the views presented in this study, there is one important distinction. Whereas Van den Bercken emphasizes the centralist, totalitarian requirements and top-down governmentality of the Soviet state, he does not account for the role of experts, that is atheist scholars in this case, as opposed to the role of politicians in the Soviet Union. It is one of the central arguments of this study that atheist scholars were not only passive executors of the ideological line but active participants and co-creators of the seemingly monolithic ideology controlled presumably only by CP apparatchiks as well. In other words, they were able to create new spheres of knowledge and breach such topics that were previously hidden. By this virtue, they were changing the very ideological framework they, according to Van den Bercken, had to blindly follow.

Probably the best treatise from the Cold War era on the topic of Soviet scientific atheism was written by James Thrower.³⁴ In his voluminous book, he explores the ideational background of the esoteric thought style from its very inception in the works of Marx and Engels. The subsequent chapters are devoted mainly to the Leninist phase of militant atheism and to post-war development. Thrower’s analysis is predominantly written from the perspective of religious science. Although Thrower takes into account pivotal moments that influenced the form of the esoteric thought collective, he assesses scientific-atheist production of knowledge not from the perspective of the Soviet thought style but from the point of view of Western scholarship. However, notwithstanding a few penetrating observations about the method of Soviet thought style’s construction and development, his admirable attempt to begin a dialogue and find certain points of contact between both epistemological paradigms ultimately fails because all underlying assumptions of the Soviet scholarship are denied by the author in order to make way for the deconstruction of the false claims from the Western perspective. The Soviet ambition to participate in the formation of an objectified truth about religious phenomena is thus eventually denied and sole authority is attributed to Western scholarship. In other words, whereas the descriptive and some analytical parts of Thrower’s book can still be used as an important

32 Cit. *Van den Bercken*, William: *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union*. New York 1989, 125–7.

33 See *ibid.*, 9.

34 See *Thrower*, James: *Marxist-Leninist “Scientific Atheism” and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR*. Berlin 1983, 140.

source of inspiration and even guidance, his interpretation and evaluation of the gathered material bears some grievous marks of the Cold War approach.

Whereas Thrower's book tried to establish a dialogue between religious studies and scientific atheism, the same attempt was made by German scholar Bernd Groth in the context of theology.³⁵ Groth focuses on the worldview aspects of scientific atheism and analyses mainly its potential for social change and actual success in the framework of Soviet society. Although Groth does not completely disregard the scholarly aspect of scientific atheism, his attention is devoted mainly to the theoretical justification and expectation of the thought collective from the scientific-atheist propaganda. Unlike Thrower, who wanted to assess the scholarly endeavour in the Soviet Union from the position of Western religious studies, Groth looks on the object of his analysis through the optics of the dialogue introduced during the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican. Groth's conclusion does not completely disregard the scientific-atheist esoteric thought style because the dialogue between both systems of knowledge, that is theology and scientific atheism, is theoretically possible.³⁶ By this statement, Groth admits the existence of certain points of contact that document that his interpretation was not permeated by the necessity of denial but by the will to understand, which makes it an important source of inspiration for the present work.

The Cold War approach relied heavily on ascriptions stemming from theoretical presuppositions dictated by the ideological struggle between East and West. However, it was increasingly challenged and marginalized as a viable explanatory framework after the 1989 revolutions and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.³⁷ This change of perspective had its consequences for Western scholarship about scientific atheism in the Soviet Union which is called the "perceptive approach." The first scholar who took an unbiased look at scientific-atheist scholarship was the Finnish historian Kimmo Kaariainen. In his systemic study of the scientific-atheist scholarly discipline, he not only understood it as a legitimate "branch of science", but he also concurred that its various spheres of knowledge played a constitutive role in the social context of the Soviet Union.³⁸ However, Kaariainen's approach was centered predominantly on published sources which greatly inhibited his heuristic options. His analysis is thus based mainly on the selected aspects of the esoteric thought style that look rather disconnected from the socio-political aspect of the Soviet Union.

35 See *Groth*, Bernd: *Sowjetischer Atheismus und Theologie im Gespräch*. Frankfurt am Main 1986.

36 See *ibid.*, 325–328.

37 The programmatic book *Beyond Totalitarianism*, co-edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick, marks such change for history. See *Geyer, Michael/Fitzpatrick, Sheila* (eds.): *Beyond Totalitarianism. Stalinism and Nazism Compared*. Cambridge 2008.

38 See *Kaariainen*, Kimmo: *Discussion on Scientific Atheism as a Soviet Science 1960–1985*. Helsinki 1989, 11 f.

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Recent books about Soviet scientific atheism can be characterized by their departure from the Cold War interpretive framework. The typical example is the anthropologically oriented study of Sonja Luehrmann, which analyses the motivation of exoteric thought collective members to carry out scientific-atheist propaganda in the Volga region in the period of developed socialism and “perestroika” (restructuring). The main contribution of her study is the description of identity change after the dissolution of the overarching scientific-atheist thought style and the attempt of former propagandists of atheism to reinvent themselves in completely different epistemological frameworks that are characterized by worldview pluralism competing on the market of ideas.³⁹

Probably the most extensive treatise about scientific atheism was written by American historian Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock.⁴⁰ In her meticulously researched doctoral dissertation “Sacred Space is Never Empty,” she explored the phase of exoteric thought style’s emergence in the Soviet Union. Her pioneering analysis, based mainly on archival research and analysis of Soviet propaganda discourse during the 1950s and 1960s, introduces atheist specialists, that is semi/professional groups of people who created and steered scientific-atheist propaganda. Her conceptualization of the process shows the thought collective as a group of convinced activists who fought an uphill battle against a resistant population. Smolkin-Rothrock’s case study about the usage of space flights for propaganda purposes convincingly depicts the mental horizons as well as expectations of the historical actors at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s. In general, the part devoted to scientific-atheist propaganda is so comprehensively written that it was not necessary to devote it any special attention to it in the present work. Although her mainly descriptive analysis of archival sources is not supported by a deeper theoretical background, which would have brought the historical narrative nearer to more general conclusions, the book serves as a constant source of inspiration due to its richness of citations and attention to historical detail. Such a sober approach indicates how Western scholarship has evolved from the times of the Cold War approach, its rather shallow overview of antireligious propaganda epitomised by the work of David Powell. Moreover, the periodization coined by Smolkin-Rothrock as well as several other connections between the socio-political context and scientific-atheist thought collective were taken as a point of departure by the present study.

Another scholar who shares methodological approach regarding scientific atheism’s interpretation with Smolkin-Rothrock and the present work because

³⁹ See *Luehrmann*, Sonja: *Secularism Soviet Style. Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic*. Bloomington 2011.

⁴⁰ See *Smolkin-Rothrock*, Victoria: “A Sacred Space is Never Empty”: *Soviet Atheism, 1954–1971*. Unpublished PhD dissertation. Berkeley 2010.

she also takes it seriously is Sonja Luehrmann.⁴¹ Luehrmann's contribution to the contemporary debate about scientific atheism stems from her novel perspective based on the analysis of archives and the whole documentation process which enabled the existence, storing and reading of atheist documents. Furthermore, inspired by research on colonialism and notion of "hostile archives"⁴², she analyses the aspect of certain bureaucratic documents as "text acts"⁴³ which, based on an analogy with speech acts introduced by Austin, have certain reality building qualities. Luehrmann's research is illuminating especially in regard to regional workings of the Soviet bureaucratic anti-religious apparatus, especially the position of regional secretary of religious affairs, in relation to the religious communities which is explored as a case study of the Mari and Tatar republics during the Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's tenures.

Crucially, Luehrmann's book served as a great source of inspiration and methodological guidance for the present work because it understands archival records from Soviet-era scholarship not as means for its debunking but as archeological traces which can serve as evidence leading to recontextualization of a contested field of knowledge production. Consequently, these sources enable to reconstruct "what was at stake in Soviet attempts to understand religion from an atheist point of view."⁴⁴

A specific stream of scholarship dealing with scientific atheism has appeared relatively recently in Russia. The main focus of the debate held predominantly within the context of philosophy and religious studies is centered on the issue, if (and to what extent) it is possible to integrate certain aspects of scientific-atheist scholarship to the existing epistemological paradigm of Russian religious studies. One typical interpretation is represented by Smirnov, who maintains that the esoteric thought collective was essentially a victim of the Marxist-Leninist ideology that prevented the acquisition of un-deformed knowledge about religious phenomena in all spheres of knowledge developed within the scientific-atheist thought style. However, Smirnov admits that such stance was quite common in Russia, where everything was forever until it was no more because the values represented by the esoteric thought collective "were shared by the majority of the country's population."⁴⁵

Another approach is represented by Konstantin Antonov, who emphasizes the need to research the relationship of the esoteric thought collective with other factors that contributed to the development of scientific knowledge in the given

41 See *Luehrmann*: Religion, position 519.

42 See *ibid.*, position 361.

43 See *ibid.*, position 430.

44 *Cit ibid.*, position 1651.

45 See *Smirnov*, Mikhail, Iurievich: *Religiia i religiovedenie v Rossii*. Sankt Petersburg 2013, 210 f.