

Book Reviews

Andrei Znamenski. *Socialism as a Secular Creed: A Modern Global History*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, an imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2021. Pp. 451. \$135.00.

Professor Andrei Znamenski of the University of Memphis is an expert on topics like the history of shamanism in Siberia and the wider role of religious practices in Russia and the Soviet Union. In *Socialism as a Secular Creed*, Znamenski provides a detailed explanation of the historical development of socialism, communism, Marxism, and related left-of-center ideological practices in a variety of national and historical contexts, both within nations and across international spaces. This sweeping and analytical global history of socialism and related ideological belief systems is timely given a recent rise of interest in the United States and globally in progressive and socialist policies, especially since the 2008 global financial crisis. Znamenski's main argument, as the title indicates, is that socialist and left-of-center ideologies have become and continue to be a replacement for religious practice for many people around the world. This is in part because socialism and related ideologies contain elements of religious practice, including quests for liberation from oppression and proselytizing, and by providing an all-absorbing belief system for followers. He argues that "the 'scientific' determinism of the Marxian teaching became a secularized form of the Judeo-Christian tradition customized for the age of modernity" (38). This is in part because numerous debates within the socialist tradition have led to splits between "true believers," "reformers," "fundamentalists," "adherents," and "blasphemers," all schisms which can be found in the history of world religions.

In many different national and historical contexts, communist or Marxist ideas were promoted with a zeal traditionally associated with religious practice. Znamenski notes that there were proselytizing tendencies in organizations such as the Communist International (Comintern), whose interest in fomenting revolutionary activity he analogizes with the Jesuit order in Catholicism. The comparisons between religious practice and ideological adherence are made many times in the book, including in a section on Eastern European Jews, many of whom embraced socialism as a form of identity, including in kibbutz settlements in Israel. In the Soviet Union, Marxism-Leninism served as a replacement for the influences of the Russian Orthodox Church and related denominations, with portraits of Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin serving as substitutes for religious icons. In the chapter on communist regimes in China, North Korea, and Cambodia, Znamenski notes how Communist Party leaders constructed their political activity around ingrained Confucian and/or Buddhist traditions, and how political leaders such as Mao Zedong, the Kim family, and Pol Pot utilized these existing frameworks of beliefs in order to promote ongoing revolution and state worship.

Socialism as a Secular Creed includes historical examples from a wide global spectrum of socialist experiments in nations such as Germany, Russia, Sweden, Israel, China, North Korea, Cambodia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and others. Each of the sections on national histories include discussions on the historical and political context of leftist politics, important individuals, and the cultural context which made socialism appealing or acceptable. There is notably little to no treatment of Latin American examples, though, and the majority of the discussion in the book centers around Western examples and scholars, with one chapter each devoted to Asian and African examples.

The time frame of the study is very broad, with sections on the early utopian socialist experiments which predated Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels on one end of the temporal spectrum and discussions which touch on how the global left today operate on the other end, including ample references to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbin, and others. Znamenski also investigates the causes behind the rise of the New Left and the recent transition in academia towards political correctness and "wokeness," which he sees as an extension of the earlier work of the Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies.

Znamenski's intense understanding of the complexity of the topic is evident throughout, as well as his general aversion to leftist ideas (Znamenski was originally from the Soviet Union and immigrated to America in the 1990s), though he stops short of turning the book into a complete refutation of socialist ideas. However,

his preference for the ideas of Ludwig von Mises and of Friedrich von Hayek, twentieth-century scholars who worked to refute socialist ideas, is evident. Those looking for a completely “balanced” approach to the history of socialism might look elsewhere, though admittedly most other studies of this topic tend to sway left in their interpretation, so Znamenski’s approach is unique in that respect.

This volume is a remarkable resource on the history of socialism and is unequaled in its encyclopedic compendium of this information. It is intellectually engaging and spares no efforts in bringing complexity to the topic. It will be useful for university instructors who wish to prepare an advanced undergraduate course around the history of socialism. In a modern world history survey course, instructors might use the many historical illustrations to prepare teaching activities around an exploration of the history of socialism in particular nations. This approach would best be done by supplementing one of Znamenski’s chapters with some historical primary sources related to that time and place. It might be especially successful for instructors to consider using comparative examples from the book alongside each other to illustrate how socialism was implemented and practiced differently in different cultural and historical contexts. This book might also be useful to assign to graduate students in seminars on modern world history or the history of socialism.

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David Eaton. *World History Through Case Studies: Historical Skills in Practice*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. 283. \$20.96.

Anxiety about just what content to feature and how to approach it often poses an almost paralyzing occupational hazard for anyone who teaches a world history course. Not only does the vast quantity of possible details to select about who did what, where, and when render a coverage model unfeasible, but the historiographical disposition of world history eschews traditional units of analysis that facilitate linear narratives neatly delineating what matters as history and who makes it. David Eaton proposes a path around this version of the “mile wide but an inch thick” dilemma by framing the world history course as an exercise in emphasizing habits of historical thinking through deeper critical analysis of specific situations, or “case studies.” The phrase “habits of historical thinking” seems a better fit for the subtitle than “historical skills in practice,” which implies guiding students in direct engagement with historical evidence, such as primary sources. Eaton’s approach—as clarified in his compelling introduction—engages the complexities of interpretation, argumentation, and narrative construction. The twenty case studies that form the main body of the book span a chronology that stretches from the Paleolithic era to the present millennium and encompass the global diversity of human societies from tribal communities to empires and modern states scattered across the map. Each reader will likely find some of these case studies ready-made for presenting to students, others that might be reframed to fit their own classroom needs, and yet others better set aside. When used flexibly this way, Eaton’s book offers a model for considering how to restructure the world history course and as a catalyst for individual instructors to develop case studies that reflect their own interests and expertise.

Each chapter aligns with one of five concepts that “illuminate specific procedural knowledge of the discipline of history” (2): historical significance, historical empathy, evidence, continuity and change, and progress and decline. The following inventory summarizes the case studies presented in each chapter as they align with each of these concepts:

- historical significance—Chapter 3 (“Ancient Egypt Matters”) scrutinizes the controversy elicited by Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*; Chapter 5 (“Whose Key to China?”) assesses Confucianism as a lens for understanding Chinese culture and society; Chapter 12 (“Orunmila Saves”) examines the persistence of marginal religious beliefs and practices absorbed into Caribbean Christianity; and Chapter 17 (“Shadows of the Past”) analyzes transformations in the *wayang* tradition of puppet theater in Indonesia as a way to make sense of colonialism.