

**Book Review:
*Doubt, Atheism, and
the Nineteenth-Century Russian Intelligentsia,*
by Victoria Frede**

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The Soviet Union was the first state that systematically attempted to eradicate religion and impose atheism as a state ideology. Because of the Bolshevik Revolution, however, Russian intellectual historians have focused on social and political questions, taking atheism as a given for the Russian intelligentsia. Only in recent years has there been a revival of interest in other intellectual trends in prerevolutionary Russia, including vibrant religious thought. Victoria Frede's excellent monograph does not take doubt and atheism for granted, but rather explores the evolution of their development in nineteenth-century Russia to discover why it became an axiom for Russian revolutionaries. Indeed, she asserts that religious questions were inseparable from political and social questions for Russian intelligentsia.

Frede argues that doubt about the existence of God and atheism developed differently in Russia than in the West. In the West, atheism was the result of historical-critical doubts about the veracity of the Bible, the development of modern science, and epistemological questions about the human capacity to know anything with certainty. In Russia, by contrast, atheism had much more to do with the intelligentsia's relationship to the autocratic state. The autocracy allied itself with Russian Orthodox Christianity, maintaining that the tsar was anointed by God to rule and that Russians ought to be good Orthodox Christians to be good citizens. Therefore, as Russian intellectuals came to question and ultimately reject the autocracy as detrimental to Russian society and its progress, they rejected the faith to which the autocracy was allied. Rejecting the tsar necessarily entailed rejecting God. Atheism was never an abstract philosophical notion, and Russian atheists were unconcerned to debate theology with believers, because their concerns focused on political and societal realities. Books and ideas about atheism from the West (such as Feuerbach's) were influential not because of Russians' eagerness to debate the existence of God, but because Russia was politically fertile soil.

Frede explores the evolution of doubt and atheism from the 1820s to the 1860s. The book begins with the "Wisdom Lovers," a circle of romantic intellectuals in the 1820s, influenced by Schelling, for whom doubt became a temporary phase for those who were not content with the conventional answers provided by church and state and felt themselves called to discover higher truths. They

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did not, however, reject Russian Orthodoxy, let alone God. For the next generation of intellectuals in the 1830s, such as Alexander Herzen, doubt became a way of life, the only honest intellectual stance. Although they were extremely critical of the Orthodox Church, they regarded denying the existence of God as being too extreme. According to Frede, explicit atheism was only publicly declared for the first time in 1849—significantly, among a group of radicals who derived not from the nobility (as earlier intellectuals had been), but from the merchant class. They could never hope to be accepted into higher intellectual circles, and as a result their willingness to be more daring was an assertion of a different kind of power. Nikolai Chernyshevskii and Nikolai Dobroliubov, the two leading intellectuals of the 1850s and both sons of provincial priests, systematically developed atheism and made it an article of faith for the radical intelligentsia; for them, rejecting faith was a way of replacing the old Russia with a new one. They argued that only educated society (and not the state) could direct Russia toward a better future, and that individuals could be self-directed only when they abandoned faith. What followed were different views about how to live without faith, one a communitarian approach to revolutionary activity, the other a radical individualism, developed by the influential journalist Dmitrii Pisarev, which refused to recognize any externally imposed ideals, whether religious or revolutionary.

Rather than focus primarily upon published tracts by important individual thinkers, Frede situates those individuals in their intellectual communities. She draws heavily upon diaries and personal correspondence to discover nuances in the development of their thought. She also argues that “Russian atheism of the nineteenth century was not secular” (147), but rather remained infused with religious language and ideals. The book is refreshing because it does not assume that members of the intelligentsia were de facto atheist, but rather seeks to show how atheism became an article of faith for the radical intelligentsia; she is always aware that this was only one option among many for educated Russians (many of whom did not lose their faith). Moreover, she consistently situates doubts about God in the context of Russian Orthodox thought, and even if her presentation of Orthodoxy is sometimes one dimensional or oversimplified, she has done much more than previous historians of the Russian intelligentsia have.

This book makes an important contribution and is also a pleasure to read; it will be appreciated by both Russian historians as well as those interested in the development of religious and secular ideas in the modern world.

References

Frede, Victoria. (2011). *Doubt, atheism, and the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.