

## BOOK REVIEWS - BOOK REVIEWS -

**The Armenian Church Under the Soviet Regime**By Hratch Tchilingirian**Religion in the Soviet Union: An Archival Reader.** By Felix Corley. London: Macmillan Press. 1996. 402 pages.

How did the Soviet government deal with religion in the USSR? For many years it has been possible to read the reaction of believers to the Soviet state's attempt to control religious groups. But now, Felix Corley's **Religion in the Soviet Union: An Archival Reader**, for the first time in English, provides a collection of documents that reveal the struggle between religion and the Communist state from the other side. In their own words, the bureaucrats debate policy, issue orders and seek to maximize their control over all aspects of religious life. Using KGB, Central Committee, Council for Religious Affairs and local official documents, Felix Corley has built up a picture of how policy was applied to religious questions in many different areas of life, with the unchanging aim of control.

The book follows the story from the implementation of control in the early Soviet years (1917-1929) right through to the coming of openness towards religion in the dying days of the Soviet regime (1991). The varying response to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Old Believers, the Catholics, Protestants, the Armenian Church, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists is shown, as well as how the Soviet state tackled newer groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses and Hare Krishnas.

There is considerable discussion of Armenian Church affairs in **Religion in the Soviet Union**. We read: "The concern both in Yerevan and in Moscow that the overseas Armenian dioceses should remain loyal to Etchmiadzin was a key factor determining Soviet policy towards the Church. The Council of the Affairs of the Armenian Church [attached to the Council of Ministers of the Armenian SSR] recognized that for Etchmiadzin to retain its authority it had to function above the bare minimum needed for it to survive in order to refute allegations by those like the emigre Dashnak political party who maintained that the Church was a tool of the regime." (p. 177)

In another place we read: "Because of their key role in relations with overseas Armenians, employees at the Armenian Church's headquarters in Etchmiadzin were particularly closely vetted by the KGB. By 1954 the authorities in Armenia had already noted that many of the more active believers defying legislation on religion were 'repatriates' and there were already concerns about their loyalty to Soviet Armenia." (p. 195)

For years many religious leaders in the USSR were accused of cooperating with the Soviet government but, as Corley demonstrates, "The KGB had all the church leaderships [in the USSR] under such tight control that it was difficult or impossible for the top leadership of [any church] to refuse to give information" (p. 261)

of the Communist Party concerning "The Work of the League of Militant Godless of Armenia and the State anti-Religious Propaganda."

**1948 - Document 100**

An "informational report on the state of religious cults in the Armenian SSR." The groups that are discussed include: Molokan religious community, Evangelical Christian Baptists, Muslim religious community, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Catholics.

Interestingly, the document reveals that the Armenian Catholicos "desires to change faith" and join the Armenian Apostolic Church.

**1950 - Document 104**

Catholicos Kevork VI and "the desirability of maintaining his prestige before the overseas dioceses" and discussion of a decree (kontak) by Kevork VI to withdraw two Armenian archbishops from Iran.

**1952 - Document 105**

Concerning the Yerevan Committee of Armenian Evangelical Christian Baptists' petition to the government for "permission to conduct the rite of baptism of six believing Baptists (women) in the canal of the small town of Nork."

**1951 - Document 108**

Discusses the issue of "rendering organizational and other help to the Etchmiadzin Catholicosate, to achieve there the more active leadership of the overseas dioceses of the Armenian Church."

**1951 - Document 109**

Concerning the discussion of the Evangelical-Lutheran archbishop of the Baltic republics with Catholicos Kevork on the possibility of having the Catholicos ordain bishops for the Lutheran Church. We read, "The Catholicos came to the conclusion that they apparently want, in the words of the Catholicos, 'the antiquity and apostolic origin of the Armenian Church to be extended in the same form to the Evangelical-Lutheran churches of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.'"

**1952 - Document 110**

Concerning the "unfair" arrest of priests and closure of churches.

The message reads: "Such an approach by representatives of local organs of power is crude."

**1952 - Document 111**

The case of a "self-declared" priest.

**1953 - Document 116**

Permission "to destroy the dilapidated building of [a] church, built in the 19th century -- with the aim of opening up the more valuable historical monument of the 7th century."

**1954 - Document 120**

Concerning "Artun Atityan's [Hadidyan] appointment as chancellor (secretary) of Etchmiadzin."

**1954 - Document 121**

**Religion in the USSR** will be of interest to students of political science and the sociology of religion, as well as historians of the Soviet era and of the different religious faiths.

### **NUMEROUS DOCUMENTS**

Felix Corley is also the author of **The Armenian Church Under the Soviet Regime - Part I: The Leadership of Kevork: State and Society** (Keston Institute, Oxford) vol. 24, No. 1, 1996. This is the first part of an article, based on archival material, that covers the history of the Armenian Church from 1938 up to the death of Catholicos Vazken I in 1994. Part 2 will be published in the forthcoming issue of the same journal.

Corley has conducted extensive research since the Soviet archives were opened to scholars and has written widely on religion in the former Soviet Union.

Here is a list of state documents related to the Armenian Church:

#### **1932 - Document 48**

A long report concerning the election of new catholicos in 1932. The report discusses:

- Etchmiadzin in the days of the February Revolution;
- The Dashnak Government and Etchmiadzin;
- Etchmiadzin and Soviet Power
- The Dashnaks and the Election of a new Catholicos

The report concludes: "Either the Soviet government must ban the election of a new catholicos or by all kinds of machination introduce into Etchmiadzin one of its agents, the aim of which would be to destroy the Armenian Church and all the Armenian national organizations completely."

#### **1938 - Document 78**

Decree of the Bureau of the Central Committee

concerning complaints by Archbishop Vahan "that former priests insulted him in the church in the presence of parishioners" and about those who conduct "illegal religious services in believers' homes."

#### **1955 - Document 122**

Concerning the "fanatical sect of the 'Jumpers' in Armenia."

#### **1957 - Document 128**

Concerning "places of pilgrimage outside the churches and sale of home-made candles, photographs of 'saints,' alcoholic drinks and fruits."

#### **1976 - Document 164**

Concerning the visit to the United States of a delegation comprised of representatives of churches in the USSR, including the Armenian Church, invited by the 'Appeal of Conscience' organization.

#### **1979 - Document 167**

A report mentions that "the Vatican is especially interested in the sending of Catholic priests to Armenia."

#### **1985 - Document 173**

Statistical report on "Religions and Churches in the USSR."

Statistics on Armenia include: "religious organizations; cult servants [clergy]; marriage ceremonies."

#### **1980 - Document 199**

Concerning Catholicos Vazken I's planned visit to the United States and its postponement "with the aim of frustrating the plans of the secret services of the USA to exploit the visit of the head of the Armenian Church."

**London, England**