

Reviews

Crescent in a Red Sky: the Future of Islam in the Soviet Union

by Amir Taheri. London: Hutchinson and Co. Ltd., 1989.

287 pp., £18.95.

This book is not for specialists. It is, however, a useful and worthwhile one, geared primarily for those interested in world affairs but with no special knowledge of this particular area. Taheri, an exiled Iranian journalist, brings a point of view not often heard in works about Soviet Islam: an Islamic one. This alone makes the work valuable and engaging.

Taheri's first six chapters are devoted to the history of the Muslim regions in what is now the Soviet Union. Here he makes it clear that the nature of relations between Muslims and Russians has deep historical roots. The Mongol invasion in the 13th century can be seen as their first 'shared experience'; though Central Asia may be remote from Moscow, it was the key to the Volga and hence to the heart of Russia, as the fall of the Muslim kingdoms opened up the path for the Mongol conquest of the Slavic ones. In his brief look at Russian history through Islamic eyes, Taheri makes the point, perhaps not new but important in this context, that it was the final victory over the Tatars that sanctioned the Russians in their belief that Christ had bestowed a mission upon them. This enabled them to expand at the expense of the Muslim tribes with a sense of righteousness, and has coloured their attitude toward the Muslim people to this day. After 1917 Marxism-Leninism replaced Christianity as the principal component of this messianism.

Turning to the Muslims themselves, the main point the author wishes to make is that over the centuries these mostly Turkic people were united primarily by Islam, above any form of ethnic or linguistic loyalty. The fragmentation of the various Tatar and other Turkic tribes and their resulting failure to unite on an ethnic basis led to a situation whereby it was 'to Islam that all the Turkic dominated

societies looked for a basis of shared values in whose defence the entire population could be united. The threat from Russia was seen as a threat to Islam.' (p.31) Taheri's conclusion certainly was true in the past, and the extent to which it remains true is now under discussion not only by western scholars but Soviet Muslims themselves. His is a strong argument, however, since the absence of awareness of ethnic identity among the Muslims in the Russian Empire (except for the more westernised Tatars), was replaced in the 20th century by an, albeit Soviet formulated, set of separate and distinct national identities based on the modern division into republics, autonomous republics and regions. In previous centuries, Islam was the only uniting factor the people were aware of, and in the time after the revolution it continues to be the principal one that cuts across the national boundaries.

The Islamic response to Russian encroachment came from two different and opposing groups: the conservative clergy, who saw salvation only in the stricter application of the Sharia; and the Muslim, primarily Tatar, intellectuals, the Jadids (the term refers to reform), who felt that Islam must be reformed and modernised. Unusually, Taheri makes a case for the clergy, asserting correctly that their view has been all but totally ignored by those who study the region, and that they should not be dismissed as 'fanatical reactionaries' wanting only to protect their own corrupt privileges, for many were sincerely concerned with the future of Islam.

The author follows this with a certain amount of pointed criticism of the Jadid movement for their determination to link the fate of the Muslims in the Russian Empire with Russia. He is almost scornful of the Jadids' failure to understand that the root cause of the Muslims' plight was Russian colonialism and domination and claims, rather sarcastically, that the Jadids felt that self-determination for Muslims was possible only if they became as much like Russians as possible. They are accused of desiring only to ape western ideas, culture, music and even dress, since they felt that, 'Islam did not have to re-invent the steam engine, and could therefore also adopt the wholly developed and fully packaged political ideas offered by the west.' (p. 76)

This is not an entirely fair characterisation of the movement. It is true that many of the Jadids were distanced from the Muslim masses (no one has suggested anything to the contrary), but it is difficult to imagine any society at the equivalent stage of development where the intellectuals — the leaders and writers — are not removed from the generally illiterate masses. This does not necessarily render them insincere or useless in that society's struggle to survive. Taheri's further accusation that the Jadids served only to facilitate the process of Bolshevik political domination because of their indecision and

confusion is not legitimate either. Without these reformist intellectuals, the Muslim lands in the Empire, especially Central Asia, would have been as weak, backward and fragmented as they were at the time of Russia's relatively easy conquest over them 50 years before. Taheri does, however, demonstrate that the deep divisions between the more westernised Muslim intellectuals and the traditional clerics prevented Russia's Muslim peoples from playing a more significant role in the turbulent events of the early part of this century.

The second half of the book describes the life of Muslims under Soviet rule, including how they fared under Stalin. Taheri's brief and generally accurate description emphasises the brutal and tragic nature of that period; the list of Muslim intellectuals who had cooperated with the Bolsheviks only to be executed in the late 1930s was endless. No one was spared. After Stalin, official Soviet policies in the 1950s-1980s continued to include strict manipulation and suppression of Islam and its traditions. Soviet ideology, with its Russian and atheist content, remained absurdly alien to the vast majority of the Muslim people.

The collapse of that Marxist-Leninist ideology in Gorbachev's USSR has left the Muslims there with the feeling that Islam was right all along. Taheri suggests that this has provided a strong impetus to more religious based political movements, especially with the Muslim people's recognition of their virtual colonial status in the Russian controlled Soviet Union. Unfortunately, Gorbachev has not demonstrated an understanding of what Islam is and what it means for these people, but has continued the old tradition of condescending to them, in the part of the Russian elder brother to whom they should be grateful for saving them from barbarism.

There is a good, lengthy account of the events during and after the riots in Kazakhstan in December 1986, the first serious demonstrations under Gorbachev's rule. Taheri's description makes painfully clear the extent of the chaos and anger that permeates much of society in Central Asia and the Caucasus. For here, as in Eastern Europe, it was only 'naked force' that kept the 'international proletarian order' i.e., Soviet power, in place. Part of the chaos can be seen in the complex and contradictory attitude of Muslims toward their own leaders, corrupt though still Muslim, whom they hated because they were part of the Soviet system which was nothing more than Russian domination, yet admired because they were able to cheat those Russians out of billions of roubles.

Taheri brings the situation to the immediate present with the assertion that, perhaps not unexpectedly, the Muslims in the USSR are returning to Islam, the 'only fallback position they have after 70 years of Soviet rule'. The author's Islamic roots have enabled him to gain

information about a number of the Islam-based societies and movements there, some of which are fundamentalist and militant, and most of which are secret and hence virtually unknown to western scholars. This information is particularly valuable, though with the caveat that the actual strength and influence of any of these groups cannot be known only by talking to its leader, who would after all be its greatest promoter. Most of these groups, Taheri believes, are not 'terrorists' in the western understanding of other secret Islamic organisations, but are only fighting to enable the Muslim people to recapture from the Soviets control of their own lives and destinies.

The question of the existence and relevance of an unofficial and underground Islamic movement is addressed, an issue which has divided scholars in the west. Of the secret Sufi brotherhoods, Taheri suggests that they are present and influential, but at the same time is not dismissive, as some western observers have been, of the official Islamic clergy. If the official muftis were suspected by the believers of being more loyal to the communist state than to Mohammad, they would have lost credibility long ago, something which has not happened in the eyes of the bulk of the people.

That any kind of struggle at all, secret or otherwise, is still necessary is hardly surprising given that under *glasnost*, the Soviet leadership continues to apply a double standard in its attitude toward religion. There have been moves to accommodate, even to encourage, Christianity, but Islam is still proscribed and feared. And where are the Muslims in Gorbachev's 'common European home'?

An excellent, well-balanced chapter on the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaidzhan itself makes the book valuable. The profound sense of fear, fear of being surrounded and engulfed, which pervades the Armenian psyche is set against the deep resentment on the part of the Azeris that they as Muslims are written off, especially by Christians, as mere savages. Both sentiments are very real and have only been made worse by 70 years of Soviet rule during which both nations have consistently felt threatened.

There are some problems with this book, however, from relatively minor errors to large inconsistencies. A footnote stating that the Kazakhs were originally known as the 'Kara-Kirgiz' is incorrect; in the 19th century the Russians referred to the Kazakhs as 'Kirgiz', and the Kirgiz, when they came upon them, as the 'Kara-Kirgiz'. To claim, as the author does, that there are no differences between these two groups is also incorrect, since though their languages are closely related, in fact their origins are quite different. The term 'Chagatai peoples' is said to refer to all Turkic speaking peoples in Russia. 'Chagatai', the name of Chinghiz Khan's second son, was used to denote the area (and eventually the people) of the empire he

controlled, which approximated the area of Central Asia. It came more specifically to denote the Turkic literary language of the Khanates of Central Asia, not spoken by the masses, but the precursor of modern Uzbek. The other main Turkic literary languages, Azeri, Tatar and Crimean Tatar were (and are) quite separate and distinct.

The author is not entirely consistent with his arguments that attempt to prove the position of Islam as the prime unifier among all the different Asian peoples of the Russian, and Soviet, Empire. He makes the point rightly that the differences between the various Turkic languages, ethnicities and origins prevented any real-unity on ethnic or linguistic grounds. However, he is later in the book highly critical of Stalin's policy of dividing and even 'creating' separate nations and languages where, he now claims, no differences had existed in the past. (Then after chastising this policy of 'creating nations' he is critical that there were smaller 'nations' that were left out of the process.) One cannot, after all, point out how different the Turkic languages are in order to demonstrate that the main link between the people is Islam, and at the same time then claim that the differences between the languages were entirely fabricated for Stalin's political purposes.

Overall, however, Taheri's extremely readable work has made it clear that Islam has not benefitted under *glasnost*' as has the Christian religion in the Soviet Union, and has attempted to explain why this is so. For it remains true that, 'more than seven decades of communist propaganda against Islam (have made) it difficult for many Soviet officials to recognise Islam not necessarily as a subversive force in Soviet society but as the undeniable and legitimate culture of a substantial section of the population of the USSR'. (p. 233) This work, commendably up-to-date in view of the bewildering rapidity with which events unfold there, helps to illuminate the nature of both Russian ignorance and Muslim endurance.

PATRICIA CARLEY

Conscience and Captivity by Janice Broun, with a chapter on Poland by Grażyna Sikorska. Washington DC: Ethics and Public Policy Centre, 1988, Paperback, 376 pp.

Janice Broun, a freelance journalist living in Scotland, dedicated her book concluded in mid-1988 to the courage and Christian love of

'those who bear the mark of the Cross on their foreheads'. She is unable to reveal the names of those amongst them who helped her to describe the trials and oppression of religious people in the eight countries that she loosely refers to with some qualification in her introduction as Eastern Europe, those dominated by Marxist-Leninist communist regimes other than that of the Soviet Union itself, 'As they or their relatives must continue to live on the other side'.

Some of the value of this book is lost as these people no longer live on the 'other side' of Europe. Neither the land mass nor the consciousnesses of East Europeans are divided any more through the practice and belief of a rigid Marxist-Leninist ideology. The peoples' revolutions have overcome that awful division. We now live in a multipolar, not a bipolar Europe, in which even in those parts still under communist rule believers can exercise almost all of their natural rights even if in the case of the Soviet Union the appropriate legislation has yet to be passed.

Nearly all of the exhortations to the reader in this book therefore now belong to the past and we judge the book by quite different criteria: how truthfully does it describe the past rather than how well does it empower the reader to make responses to the present? Had she been writing today I suspect that her book would be quite different for she could then have better illuminated her narrative with the testimony of those who kept the candle of faith alive through their resistance to calling true what was false, and false what was true, the diabolically absurd doubletalk of many of the communists in power in the age that has now gone, following the conversion of the Soviet leadership to truth.

After introductory chapters giving a brief perspective of religion in Eastern Europe before and after 1975, Janice Broun moves into the substance of her book: description of religion in the eight communist countries, followed by a summing up of the problems and prospects of believers in these countries. The book also contains 50 pages of appendices of original documents written by these believers in their moments of trial, and an extensive bibliography.

Two months after the non-violent ten-day 'velvet' revolution in Czechoslovakia, I spoke in Prague with a scholar and Christian socialist who had translated the Old Testament into modern Czech. For his resistance to the suppression of the reform movements of the Prague Spring, he had been deprived of his licence to preach and his university position. For nearly twenty years he had had to work as a lavatory attendant at a car factory and as a manual worker on the waterways of Prague. Mixing the politics of the Old Testament with the inner transformations of the New, he told me that as with Moses' people who were led out of bondage to the promised land, by the

parting of the Red Sea, so the seemingly powerless young people of his country had been empowered by the Holy Spirit to lead his people out of the bondage of communist oppression. They were led out of the life of lies and double talk to a life in truth as manifested incredibly enough by the elevation of the dissident Havel to be president in Prague Castle.

Janice Broun includes as an appendix the 1977 remarks of Vaclav Benda of the 'Absurdistan' in which believers had to survive; 'we are right but we are called lunatics. The Emperor is naked'. But everyone was expected to talk about his clothes.

It is these personal accounts that, as with the Acts of the Apostles and the early church, will best stand the test of history. But apart from one or two references like that to Benda there is little in the way of such peaks of testimony in this book. The apparently endless arid plains of suffering arising from the tensions between the communist system and the church may weary the senses of the reader.

Nevertheless the historical background and some of the key events of the tension described in this book are of interest but it is a long and necessarily disjointed narrative to digest. The reader will glean details hitherto unknown or forgotten. But to my mind the author lacks a balance of perspective and indeed of truth itself, for the drama enacted on that East European stage of human affairs was more complex than she portrays in such black and white hues: all believers were good, all communists were bad. This is to deny other gradations of colour in the spectrum of human experience and predicament under totalitarianism, an extreme word that does not of itself encompass all the truth about the principles and practices of Marxism-Leninism in Eastern Europe.

Although not for a moment should oppression be called by any other name, I feel that the author would have seen more colours than black and white if she had spent some time face to face with East European communists and with a broader spectrum of Christian believers than she appears to have done. Her appetite for truth has been satiated by digesting a pure diet of Keston College publications: rich in valour but rather lacking in the fibre of discretion and public responsibility.

In March 1983 I was in Moscow and my host, the Secretary of the All Union Congregation of Baptists, advised me that he had just heard on the radio that President Reagan in a speech to Southern States' fundamentalists referred to the Soviet Union as the source of all evil in the modern world. An hour later when I met a Soviet communist he begged me to have a Quaker silence with him, as after those remarks he felt that he could say nothing about the means of improving confidence between the superpowers which is what we intended to do.

He was very bothered about such enemy stereotyping. He was also troubled by the oppression of believers in the Soviet Union and with other communists that I knew did at least as much to redeem the situation as some of the hierarchy of the churches, even though so many believers referred to people like him as evil beings. He had a sense of social and individual justice and a wish to build a world free of all tyrannies. It was the communist system that had become so hellish in its vain pursuit of a utopia, a pursuit shored up by an absurdly deterministic view of history.

The reader may well wither at the many wild generalisations that litter the book. For instance, 'German Communists were efficient and ruthless', 'courage is not a Romanian characteristic', 'Albanians are intensely proud, wild and primitive', 'As usual in Yugoslavia it is almost impossible to arrive at the truth'.

Grażyna Sikorska has contributed an experienced and more balanced chapter on the Polish experience with many hard facts about the brutality of the Second World War. Her accounts of the Solidarity experience and of life and death of Jerzy Popieluszko are illuminating.

The book was written for the Ethics and Public Policy Centre, a non-partisan research foundation in Washington. For an American readership it will reveal much about the diverse background and experience of believers in Eastern Europe whilst it will reinforce the black and white view of 'the relentless struggle waged by Communist regimes against religion', as Zbigniew Brzezinski describes the book on its back cover. It will reinforce the Cold War warriors who wish to eliminate even Christian socialism alongside the Marxist-Leninist aberration.

But the author will not be weighed in the balance and found wanting when it comes to being on the side of the oppressed in a dark period of post war European history that, thank God, is now history. For this and for the diversity and accuracy of much of her book we are indebted to her.

PETER JARMAN

38. *Internationaler Kongress in Königstein. Christen in Osteuropa: 'Perestrojka' und Religion* (38th international conference in Königstein. Christians in Eastern Europe: *perestrojka* and religion) edited by Wolfgang Grycz. Königstein: Albertus-Magnus-Kolleg/Haus der Begegnung e.V., 1988. Paperback, 178 pp.

This book is a collection of papers given at the annual international conference of Aid to the Church in Need, which took place during September 1988 in Königstein, West Germany. The conference set out to explain what *glasnost*' and *perestrojka* meant for Christians in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Gerd Stricker notes some positive developments in the Soviet Union. He detects two phases of official policy towards the church since Gorbachev became party leader in March 1985. During the first phase church-state relations improved. The primary motive for this was propagandist. Gorbachev wanted to show the West that human rights were improving in order to win western economic support. In the second phase, after August 1987, the state showed a more conciliatory policy towards the church. The reason for this was Gorbachev's need to gain the support of Christians at home for his policies, as well as the church's help in overcoming social problems. However, although the atmosphere had improved astonishingly, Stricker notes that practical steps taken to help the church's situation had so far been small. He concludes that in a more subtle way the state continued to control church life and that its aim was not real religious freedom.

These limited positive steps are reflected in the chapters on Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Tamás Nyíri traces the progress of Christian-Marxist dialogue in Hungary since the Second World War and reveals changes for the better in official attitudes towards the church during the 1980s, Josef Rabas detects notable progress in relations between the Czech government and the Catholic Church since the end of 1987. But he too could only speak of concessions, not of true religious freedom.

In Poland, Wolfgang Grycz states that the Catholic Church was strong and not dependent on state concessions. The Church was therefore only indirectly affected by the Soviet reforms. However, there had been greater freedom of expression in the press and in party literature. For example, a Marxist professor writing in the June 1988 issue of the party journal *Nowe Drogi* (New Ways) suggested that the communist party should drop its atheist standpoint. East Germany presents a different picture again. According to Theo Mechtenberg, Gorbachev's policies had sharpened the conflicts between the state and the Evangelical Church.

In bleak contrast to other countries, Dionisie Ghermani states that nothing had changed in the situation of any of the denominations in Romania since 1985. The regime demanded as before their total subordination. The leadership of the Orthodox Church supported Ceausescu in his policies, which included destruction of some churches. Perestroika had left Romania unaffected.

Other chapters in the book include an eyewitness account of the millennium celebrations by Robert Hotz, and an analysis of the significance of the celebrations for Ukrainians by Dmytro Zlepko. The concluding chapter by Coelestin Patock looks at ecumenical relations between Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians.

Whilst the book reveals varied consequences of the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* for Christians in the countries studied, there is no analysis of their situation in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria or Albania. Recent events in Eastern Europe render the accounts an historical document rather than a contemporary analysis. Despite these limitations, for those who read German, the book presents a sympathetic and scholarly study of the situation for the church prior to autumn 1988.

LOIS HOLDEN

Kirche und Glaube in Rumanien (Church and Faith in Romania)

Munich: Kirche in Not, 1990. 136 pp.

The preparation of this book appears to have been overtaken by history. It looks as though work was begun during the old Ceausescu era, but that the book was later updated to include the dramatic events of December 1989 (revolution or putsch?) and subsequent church events. At the time the book was begun there seemed little sign that the aging dictator was about to be overthrown. The book's description of the restrictive laws governing all aspects of religious life seemed as if it would be valid for a long time to come. The sad histories of the main churches after the communist takeover, including the forced merger of the Eastern-rite Catholic Church and the simultaneous ban on that church included nothing to suggest the sweeping changes that were about to happen.

The final part of the book, however, brings in a series of snapshots of life since the fall of Ceausescu. The revolution is referred to only

indirectly in the recollections of an emigre who returned to his home town of Timisoara one month after the uprising. Most of the final section relates to the Eastern-rite Catholic Church which, despite the ban on the church being lifted, has not regained its property. The book chronicles its first steps into freedom, briefly touching on the chaos in the hierarchy after years of secret consecrations, but takes a pessimistic view. Doina Cornea is quoted as saying that the Securitate is still in business. The hostility of the Minister of Cults, Nicolae Stoicescu, to the Vatican's naming of new Catholic bishops is seen as a sign that the old order still persists.

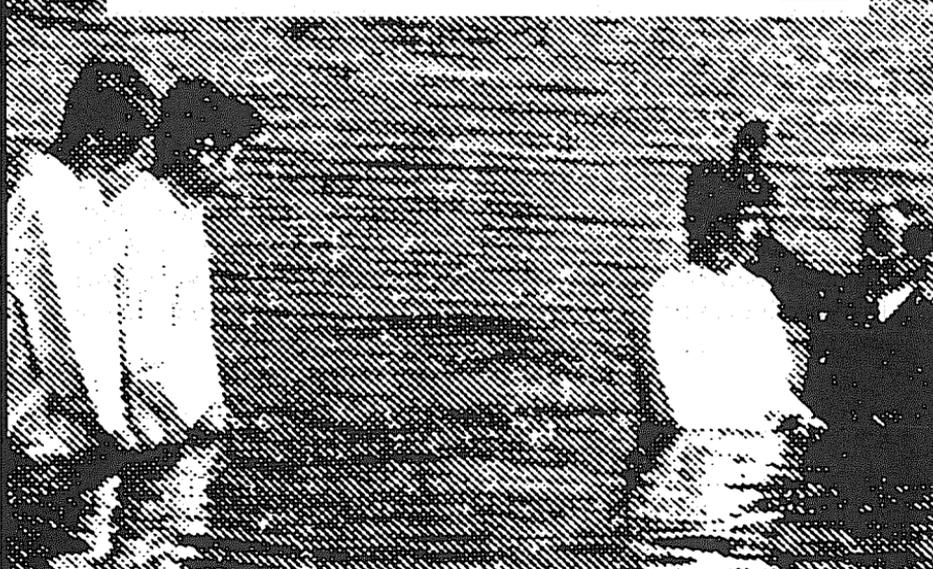
This collection of documents and articles, published by the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need, inevitably concentrates on the Latin-rite and Eastern-rite Catholics and the Orthodox. It brings together useful information about the history of these churches both before and during the communist era. It is particularly useful on the history of the Eastern-rite Church, with portraits of key church figures, such as Cardinal Iuliu Hossu of the Latin-rite Church and Alexandru Todea of the Eastern-rite Church.

This book remains more of a background volume to students of the present situation than a current guidebook. Inevitably it has been unable to address the new issues facing the churches — will the Orthodox Church become even more powerful as a state church, how many Eastern-rite Catholics still adhere to their church, will the Orthodox-Catholic dispute over church property be resolved, will the old restrictive laws on religion (which this book chronicles in detail) be revoked?

FELIX CORLEY

TRUE WITNESS

The story of Seventh Day Adventists
in the Soviet Union



MARITE SAPIETS

FOREWORD BY
Rev. Canon Michael Bourdeaux

Books Received

Listing of a book here neither implies nor precludes review in a subsequent issue of RCL.

Bessonov, Mikhail Nikolayevich, *Pravoslaviye v nashi dni*. Moscow: Politizdat, 1990. 303 pp.

Billy Graham in Romania, Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1989. 131 pp.

Ekonomtsev, Prot. Igor', *Pravoslaviye, Vizantiya, Rossiya: sbornik statei*. Paris: YMCA Press, 1989. 298 pp.

Garton Ash, Timothy, *We the people: the Revolution of '89 witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*. Cambridge: Granta Books, 1990. 156 pp.

Istoriya evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov v SSSR. Moscow: Vsesoyuznyi sovet evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov, 1989. 622 pp.

Nauchny ateizm i ateisticheskoye vospitaniye: sbornik statei. Minsk: Belarus', 1989. 112 pp.

Pelikan, Jaroslav, *Confessor between East and West: a portrait of Ukrainian Cardinal Josyf Slipyi*. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990. 249 pp.

Protestantizm: slovar' ateista. Moscow: Politizdat, 1990. 320 pp.

Religious Life in Romania: essential information. Bucharest: The Consultative Council of the Religious Denominations in the Socialist Republic of Romania, 1987. 47 pp. (illus.)

Report on the situation of the Hungarian minority in Rumania. Budapest: Hungarian Democratic Forum, 1988. 204 pp.

Selbourne, David, *Death of the Dark Hero: Eastern Europe 1987-90*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990. 274 pp.

Shenderovsky, Lyudvik, *Ivan Prokhanov: biograficheski ocherk*. Toronto: Izd-vo Evangel'skaya Vera, 1986. 229 pp.

Solov'yev, Vladimir Sergeyeovich, *Literaturnaya kritika*. Moscow: Sovremennik, 1990. 422 pp.

Contributors

Marie Broxup is Director of the Society for Central Asian Studies and Editor of *Central Asian Survey*.

Patricia Carley is conducting post-graduate research into nationalism and identity on Turkey and Central Asia at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Felix Corley is completing a book on László Tökes and the Romanian revolution.

James Critchlow is a Fellow of the Russian Research Centre at Harvard University.

Lois Holden was formerly archivist at Keston College.

Peter Jarman is East-West Secretary of Quaker Peace and Service.

Anthony P. B. Lambert works for the Overseas Missionary Fellowship and is based in Hong Kong.

Neal Pease is Associate Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

S. P. Ramet is Associate Professor of International Studies at the University of Washington and the author of several books, including *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1963-83*.