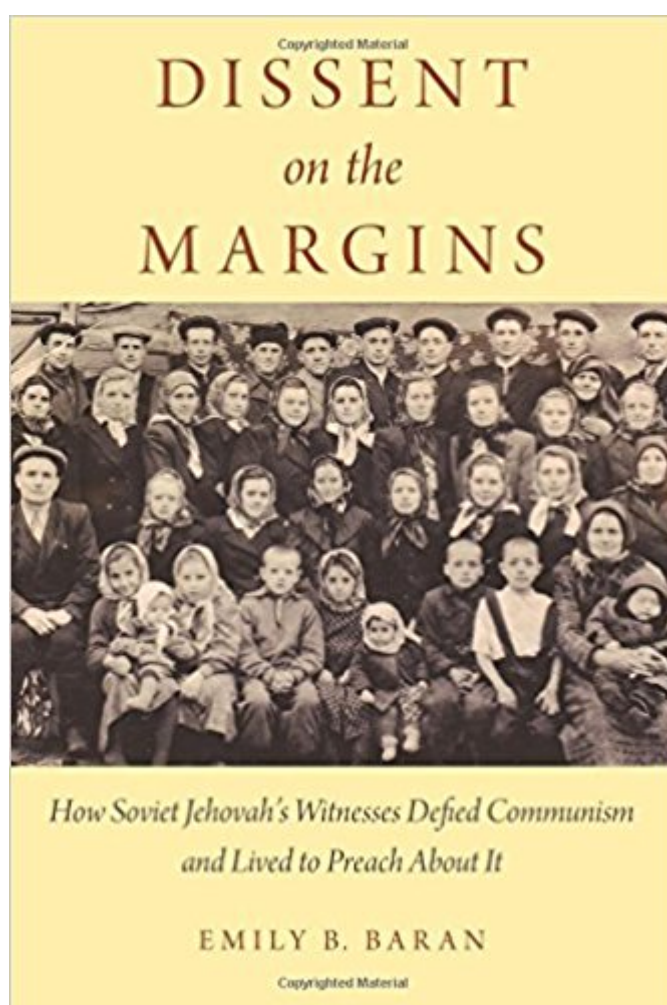


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Dissent On The Margins: How Soviet Jehovah's Witnesses Defied Communism And Lived To Preach About It



Synopsis

Emily B. Baran offers a gripping history of how a small, American-based religious community, the Jehovah's Witnesses, found its way into the Soviet Union after World War II, survived decades of brutal persecution, and emerged as one of the region's fastest growing religions after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. In telling the story of this often misunderstood faith, Baran explores the shifting boundaries of religious dissent, non-conformity, and human rights in the Soviet Union and its successor states. Soviet Jehovah's Witnesses are a fascinating case study of dissent beyond urban, intellectual nonconformists. Witnesses, who were generally rural, poorly educated, and utterly marginalized from society, resisted state pressure to conform. They instead constructed alternative communities based on adherence to religious principles established by the Witnesses' international center in Brooklyn, New York. The Soviet state considered Witnesses to be the most reactionary of all underground religious movements, and used extraordinary measures to try to eliminate this threat. Yet Witnesses survived, while the Soviet system did not. After 1991, they faced continuing challenges to their right to practice their faith in post-Soviet states, as these states struggled to reconcile the proper limits on freedom of conscience with European norms and domestic concerns. *Dissent on the Margins* provides a new and important perspective on one of America's most understudied religious movements.

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Customer Reviews

"Dissent on the Margins offers an excellent contribution to religious studies and serves as a welcome new resource for those interested in the history of lived religion in the Soviet

Union."--Kathleen Hiatt, *Journal of Church and State*"Dissent on the Margins is an amazing piece of research and analysis: sophisticated in its conceptualization, exhaustive in its research (in hitherto-secret state, party, and even police archives), this study shows how a small religious group survived decades of Soviet repression, won legalization in 1991, and has since expanded its flock to several hundred thousand adherents. A must-read for historians, political scientists, and sociologists of religion." --Gregory L. Freeze, Victor and Gwendolyn Beinfield Professor of History, Brandeis University"This thoughtful and skillfully researched monograph tells the history of the Jehovah's Witness in the Soviet Union and three of its successor states. It recounts the troubled relationship between state and 'sect,' arguing that the survival of Witness communities shows the limits of state power even in a repressive country like the USSR. The historical sections draw on an impressive, and carefully referenced, body of archival material but Baran also takes her story forward into the first decade of the twenty-first century. It will appeal not only to students of Soviet history but also to all those following the religious situation in the post-Soviet space today." --Miriam Dobson, author of *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin*"This is the first comprehensive treatment in English of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Soviet Union."-- Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Nova Religio*"Baran has produced an excellent work that analyzes the Soviet Union from the perspective of a marginal group while making it relevant to the Soviet story as a whole."--Andrew Drozd, *Slavic and East European Journal* "...[T]his book offers an unusually well-informed, *longue durée* account of Soviet and post-Soviet religious history. Moreover, it rewards readers with insights from a fascinating array of voices." --*Journal of Modern History* "Baran's book can be considered extremely successful. She has given us an entirely new and comprehensive account of how this organization was created and how it functioned in the USSR from the beginning of the 1920s to the 1950s."--*Slavic Review*

Emily B. Baran is Assistant Professor of History at Middle Tennessee State University. She specializes in the intersection of religion, modern state politics, and human rights in the postwar Soviet Union and its successor states. She received her PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2011.

Well written and easy to read.

It has been said that where there is no temple in the forum, the state tends to assume the role of God. In terms of dictating what is and is not acceptable behaviour the atheist Soviet state ruled

supreme following Stalin's revolution in 1918 until the late 1980s. During most of this time, despite some periods of relative calm, there could be little toleration for subjects who were not prepared to support Communist ideals. One group who inevitably found themselves at loggerheads with the ruling elite were Jehovah's Witnesses who, as Baran's title suggests, lived both geographically and socially on the margins of Soviet society. While some may consider the discussion of the resistance of a small religious community under a Communist regime as simply an interesting study in history, more informed readers will find the subject most timely, especially in view of recent legislative changes which appear to threaten religious freedom in a way some thought would never be seen again in Russia following glasnost and perestroika. Indeed, outside the former Soviet Union itself, so little has been written about JW's in this region that this book may be considered not so much a welcome addition, but - with the exception of some fine articles by Zoe Knox - more a necessary introduction to the subject. Baran is to be congratulated for compiling such a comprehensive record of resistance from multiple sources, especially for her personal interviews. Although not a Witness herself, I would suggest she knows what makes them tick. The fact that she is fluent in Russian and can read the Ukrainian and Romanian languages helps enormously. More than this, she recites these accounts in an evocative manner that engages the mind of the reader. No easy task. The history lesson starts in World War II, when the Soviet Union annexed territories along its western borders only to find small, but close-knit Witness communities which doggedly refused to modify their beliefs and practices to suit the demands of the Soviet authorities. However, Baran shows the Witnesses were by no means passive victims of the Soviet state but, as their name suggests, outspoken Witnesses promoting a Godly Kingdom which promised to crush and bring an end to man-made governments, Communism included. Consequently she recounts intriguing stories of individuals gatecrashing and undermining lectures on atheism simply by asking basic questions (What is the law of nature? Can there be a law without a lawgiver? What came first, wisdom or matter?), bus drivers preaching to their passengers, children failing to follow nationalistic ceremonies in schools, secret bunkers stashed full of typewriters printing illegal Watchtowers and even Witnesses preaching to officers who arrive at their home to arrest them. Even so, it would be a mistake to think Baran's work is a hagiography. Baran also records instances of families split apart when a child abandons the faith, individuals who lie to avoid arrest and elders who compromise under severe interrogation. Blundering authorities endeavouring to curtail Witness activity have a habit of scoring political own goals. Two instances Baran relates in some detail, were termed Operations North and South and involved the unannounced state sponsored overnight mass deportation of thousands of Soviet Witnesses, including children and the elderly, who were put on

cattle cars, and railroaded into forced exile on nights in July 1949 and April 1951 en route to Siberian work camps. Short term the action appeared to provide a wholesale elimination of Witnesses considered a threat to Soviet society. Long term however, as Baran states, "the Soviet Union had made a monumental error" in enabling the Witnesses to make new converts in previously unreached areas or, as the Watchtower wryly commented, "The government has paid their fare to new territories to preach the Kingdom message." In 1965, the state removed the terms of exile, but continued to threaten Witnesses, who suffered job discrimination, police harassment, media prejudice and the public scorn of their neighbours. One subject of particular interest involved the path to legalisation. Earlier attempts by the Soviet state to eliminate the Witnesses had failed as they continued to smuggle Watchtower literature into the USSR, to meet and preach covertly. Indeed, it was said that even a Witness in a punishment cell in the strictest of camps could still manage to receive the latest Watchtower issue from Brooklyn. As a result, by the time of the Breshnev era the state took a more strategic approach. With the intention of controlling religious opponents, the authorities hoped to register the Witnesses so as to monitor their activities more closely. However, the Witnesses insisted that there should "no strings attached" so that they would be allowed to practice their faith as they did in Western democratic countries, a step too far for the state. As a result, the Witnesses concluded it would be better to remain unregistered. It took until the late 1980s for advances in registration to take place. As Baran notes, "in the end, the Witnesses version of legalisation won out, as the Gorbachev-era state agreed to register the Witnesses on the terms of the Governing Body." In her introduction, Baran acknowledges regarding Witnesses that "While I know their perspective on events as devout believers may differ from mine as a historian, I hope that they can find value in this account of their remarkable history." She is right on both counts: Witnesses will disagree on occasion with her interpretation of some events, but they will also be impressed and find much value in her enthralling work. So where would a Witness perspective differ than Baran's? I will concentrate on this while holding considerable admiration for her work. One area involves context. Baran understandably sees the experience of Witnesses beside their Second World War experience elsewhere, when they even faced state opposition in several democratic countries. I prefer to see their experience in a wider context of the last century during which the Bible Students/Witnesses have existed peacefully alongside hundreds of governments in multiple countries. In the rare cases where conflict between the two groups has occurred this has usually, though not always, been either under totalitarian regimes or democratic governments facing extreme circumstances (i.e. war). Another involves definition. As had been the case in Nazi Germany, the Witnesses in Russia saw their resistance as spiritually necessitated by

an extreme government which made unreasonable demands which they could not keep without compromising their belief in and responsibilities toward their God, Jehovah. Commentators have tended to see Hitler's suppression of Witnesses as a sign of State insecurity and paranoia. However Baran sees things differently in respect the Soviet Union by contending that the Witnesses "did represent a real threat by their refusal to participate in Soviet society and obey secular authority." She considers that while the Witness stand was religiously motivated, it had political implications, and since its underground organisation showed similarity with those of political dissidents, it is understandable that the regime considered them political enemies. In determining whether an action is religious or political, I would argue that the motivation and intention of the believer is a more reliable gauge than the designation of the ruling authority and that it is inevitable that similarities exist between any organisations, religious or political, when they are driven underground by the imperative of survival. Quite simply, I question the ability of such an extreme regime to make a sound judgement in these circumstances. Given the anti-religious stance of the Communist state it is inevitable that the authorities saw the Witness stand as political rather than religious. In their religiously myopic eyes, for them to have seen it as anything else would, of course, have been to indirectly honour something it considered to be an exercise in unreality. Indeed, as Baran notes, "the characterisation of the Witnesses as a political organization and not a religion acted as a further justification for its continued illegality." It is so much easier to justify suppressing an opponent one sees as 'political' whereas doing so to a religious minority has implications relating to human rights and smacks of overreaction. Baran brings her study very much up to date by considering the rapid growth of Witnesses in Russia, Moldova and the Ukraine since 1991 and the corresponding backlash of anti-cult group propaganda which has permeated the news media to the extent that the term 'totalitarian sect' has now been used to label Witnesses. Despite their international status, Jehovah's Witnesses are still perceived to be very much an American religion in Russia and the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic and resented accordingly. Recent legislative changes appear to threaten their activities with the likelihood that they will once more be driven underground. Even so, Baran notes that "ultimately, the legal fate of Soviet Witnesses and the international Society make it clear that Witnesses will continue to exist, to preach, and to meet together as a faith community, regardless of the circumstances." What lesson might be learned by Baran's excellent study? How should a government deal with citizens who have no interest in supporting its political philosophy but provide, as I see it, only an ideological challenge? When governments treat them aggressively, as Baran notes, this merely fulfils the Witnesses expectations and reaffirms the Witnesses faith that they are indeed Christ's followers. Despite knowing this fact, opposing governments have

repeatedly taken harsh measures and, in so doing, encouraged adherents to reach this conclusion. As a result, Witnesses have been viewed as 'the canary in the coal mine' in terms of human rights issues, in that they provide an early warning system for other endangered minorities whose suppression will likely follow. Since even the most extreme forms of governments have not yet been able to rid themselves of the Witnesses, might a more successful approach therefore be to tolerate these views and direct attentions away from repressive measures toward constructing the society that their manifestos initially promise? Just a thought! Extending this reasoning further, I now reach a theoretical conclusion that is certainly not anything Baran herself proposes. It is the Witnesses belief that without God "man cannot direct his own step" successfully to bring about the utopian society that political parties promise. If, somehow, something remotely like utopia could be satisfactorily achieved by them it may be argued that this argument would be disproved and that, as a consequence, there would no longer be any Jehovah's Witnesses. Meanwhile, until governments manage to deliver on their manifesto promises and provide lasting stable societies that don't threaten minority groups and truly satisfy the long term aspirations their citizens desire, I would suggest that the Witnesses, who do not support anti-government protest marches or militant activism, are actually useful to society in respectfully reminding governments of their human frailties, how far they have fallen short of their lofty ideals and the need to pull their socks up. In this they bring to mind both a scriptural citation (1 Corinthians 1:27-29) and a character from King Lear. The Royal Shakespeare Company writes: "As Shakespeare conceives it, the Fool is a servant and subject to punishment ('Take heed, sirrah, to the whip ' 1:4:104) and yet Lear's relationship with his fool is one of friendship and dependency. The Fool acts as a commentator on events and is one of the characters ... who is fearless in speaking the truth. The Fool ... ridicules Lear's actions and situation in such a way that audiences understand the point ... His 'mental eye' is the most acute in the beginning of the play: he ... has the foresight to see that Lear's decision will prove disastrous."

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