

## Book Review

*Church under the Pressure of Stalinism: The Development of the Status and Activities of the Soviet Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church during 1944–1950* by Jouko Talonen. Jyväskylä: The Historical Association of Northern Finland, 1997, xviii + 376 pp.

As the archives of former Soviet lands begin to yield their secrets, our ‘glimpse through a mirror darkly’ is rapidly becoming much clearer. In *Church Under the Pressure of Stalinism* Jouko Talonen has provided us with a fascinating account of how, in the span of six years (1944–50), the Soviet authorities subordinated the Lutheran Church of Latvia and transformed it into an unquestioning mouthpiece for Soviet policies.

Two figures dominate the post-Second World War historical landscape of the Latvian Lutheran Church – the incorruptible Acting Archbishop (1944–46) Kārlis Irbe, and his successor, the notorious ‘Red Archbishop’ Gustavs Turs (his nickname, naturally, referring to more than his trademark red cincture).

As the Soviet Union regained control of Latvia in the summer of 1944 a Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults was established to monitor the churches. Its director, Voldemars Šeškens, was well aware that the Soviet authorities had resorted to harsh measures in the past against Latvian churches. So Šeškens proceeded from the perspective that he would avoid conflicts when necessary, and above all, not create a Church of martyrs.

The initial plan was to restrict the Lutheran Church to a ‘ghetto existence’. Foreign missions were halted, publishing decimated, radio programmes discontinued, outspoken pastors arrested, and evangelisation efforts within Latvia forbidden. Unfortunately for Šeškens, Acting Archbishop Irbe, accustomed to the vital role the Lutheran Church had previously played in Latvian society, resisted attempts to make the Church an adjunct of the Communist Party. Nonetheless, Irbe usually refrained from overt political attacks against the ruling power. His circulars to the churches instead had a spiritual tone, concentrating on the joy and hope inherent in Christianity. But on the matter of the Church’s independence, Irbe would not compromise. His readers learned to ‘read between the lines’ as he condemned liars and those who spoke evil, veiled references to the KGB’s efforts to infiltrate the Church. He refused to celebrate Soviet holidays, unless, he sarcastically replied, the communists themselves would like to attend services. Irbe’s desire for a politically neutral Church was clearly at variance with the Soviet plan for Latvia; so in February of 1946 he was arrested and sent to the Siberian Gulag for a ten-year prison term.

With Irbe out of the way, Šeškens set about finding a replacement who would be compliant with Soviet demands. He found his man in Gustavs Turs, a nondescript pastor serving in Alūksne. Turs had already developed a reputation for being an opportunist during both the Nazi (1942–44) and previous Soviet regimes (1941–42).

He avidly supported collectivisation of agriculture, with all its attendant hardships for the farmers, echoed the Soviet line on peace, and promoted participation in the bogus Soviet elections. In short, Turs was the prototypical Soviet puppet. At one point, confused by his fellow citizens' accusations of disloyalty to his country, Turs expressed his disappointment to Šeškens. To his dismay Šeškens replied, 'If calling you a communist is not right, what do you think you are, then?' A good question and one that I am sure Turs struggled to answer adequately.

To his credit, though, the author does not present us with a simple caricature of this highly complex man. Taking the tone of the dispassionate historian, Talonen reveals a man who actually thought he was preserving the Church, not corrupting it. Turs indeed fought for the establishment of a theological institute, recognising its necessity for the preservation of the Church. Though unsuccessful, he asked the Soviet authorities to pardon imprisoned pastors and urged that confirmation classes be allowed to continue. In fact, he seems to have convinced Šeškens that the Lutheran Church could be a loyal servant of the Soviet state in the guise of a state Church. Ironically, Šeškens was removed from his post after Moscow realised that its representative never quite understood: Moscow was not interested in a state Church, it was interested only in a Church marginalised, firmly recognising its position in the 'ghetto'.

How seriously Turs believed Soviet propaganda is an appropriate question. Talonen indicates that when a mother asked Turs if her exiled son would be welcomed home with open arms, in line with Soviet promises, Turs told her that he should stay put. So we get some indication that Gustavs Turs was well aware of the duplicitous nature of Soviet promises. Why he rarely challenged the Soviet authorities is more difficult to understand.

Jouko Talonen's study has certainly provided us with a clearer picture of the course taken by the Soviet Union in its task of transforming a historic state Church. But it has also prompted many questions. What might have happened had Turs followed the path of Kārlis Irbe? Would the Church have been martyred? All indications are that the last thing the Soviet authorities wanted was more martyrs. So perhaps a stronger figure would have preserved more of the Church's independence for future generations. And how did Irbe respond to the leadership of Turs once he was released in 1956 and allowed to serve in a parish? Was he a broken man and how did this affect the spirit of the Lutherans within Latvia? Questions like these lead us to hope that Talonen will continue to chronicle the history of postwar Lutheranism in Latvia. His exhaustive research and effective presentation of the complex nature of Latvia's Lutheran Church have given us an important document, not only of Latvian church history, but of church-state relations in the twentieth century.

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