Church–state relations have undergone a number of changes during the seven decades of the existence of the Soviet Union. In the 1920s the state was politically and financially weak and its edicts often ignored, but the 1930s saw the beginning of an era of systematic anti-religious persecution. There was some relaxation in the last decade of Stalin’s rule, but under Khrushchev, the pressure on the church was again stepped up. In the Brezhnev period this was moderated to a policy of slow strangulation, and Gorbachev’s leadership saw a thorough liberalisation and re-legitimation of religion. This book brings together fifteen of the West’s leading scholars of religion in the USSR, and provides the most comprehensive analysis of the subject yet undertaken. Bringing much hitherto unknown material to light, the authors discuss the policy apparatus, programmes of atheisation and socialisation, cults and sects, and the world of Christianity.
Religious policy in the Soviet Union
Religious policy
in the Soviet Union

EDITED BY
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Associate Professor of International Studies
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For Jack Dull, friend:
You helped to get me through
a difficult year
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Preface

This is a book about religious policy and policy makers in the USSR. Its purpose is to shed light on the thinking, goals, assumptions, methods, and instruments of policy. The essays collected herein embrace a wide range of subjects, covering both historical and contemporary themes. Several chapters examine the institutions and mechanics of Soviet religious policy, especially Otto Luchterhandt's chapter on the Council of Religious Affairs. Jane Ellis' chapter on Kharchev's revelations, and John Dunstan's chapter on education. Other chapters concentrate rather on policy decisions and actions, trying to account for changes and stabilities in the evolution of Soviet religious policy. These include Philip Walters' chapter, along with Larry Holmes' chapter on schools and religion in the period 1917-41, John Anderson's chapter on women and religious policy, and my own chapter on the Gorbachev era. Still other chapters focus on the perspectives and drives of the religious organisations themselves, such as Oxana Antic's chapter on modern cults, Jan Hebly's chapter on the Russian Orthodox Church and ecumenism, Myroslaw Tataryn's chapter on the re-emergence of the Greek-Rite Catholic Church in Ukraine, and Marjorie Balzer's chapter on religion in Yakutia. The contribution by Samuel Kliger and Paul de Vries takes a different road, drawing upon extensive interview data to examine values and normative attitudes among Soviet people. Finally, Anatolii Levitin-Krasnov's chapter on the Living Church re-examines some of the long-standing controversies surrounding this regime-backed schismatic movement. Taken collectively, these chapters cover a wide-ranging array of subjects, many of them hitherto neglected in the past.

It is by now a stock phrase to say that the questions raised in a particular field are as important as the answers. In practice, of course, some answers are more important than others, and some answers are more important than some questions. But, where the latter are con-
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cerned, those which are most useful are those which organise the material coherently and which take us closer to the inner spirit of the subject. Such questions would include: What were Gorbachev’s ultimate goals in his religious policy? How was Soviet religious policy related to policies in other spheres? Why were the Greek-Rite Catholics, suppressed for more than 40 years, granted legalisation in 1989? What do the structures and procedures of the Council for Religious Affairs tell us about Soviet religious policy? How did changes in Soviet sociological assessments of religion correlate with changes in Soviet religious policy?

It is fashionable nowadays to question whether communism has any future, and the ambiguous term ‘post-communism’ has come into vogue. For a while, the old leaders in some countries (e.g., the USSR, Bulgaria, Albania) held onto their positions even as the entire power structure was being transformed all around them. The tidal wave that overthrew communism achieved its first successes in what was then called the German Democratic Republic, as well as Poland, and Czechoslovakia. The transition to pluralism took longer in the other East European countries, as well as in the Soviet Union itself.

As dramatic as the changes are, however, Gorbachev’s reforms, and for that matter, his vision, did not spring *ex nihilo*; nor did they unfold in a void. The system in which his reforms worked was a system built on certain assumptions and which continued to reflect the residue of those assumptions, even where they were being abandoned. This was certainly the case until summer 1991; until then, neither the CPSU monopoly nor the nomenklatura system had been abandoned, corruption and the resistance of middle-level officials remained problems despite Gorbachev’s efforts to overcome them, and the notion that there should be an office for religious affairs in the first place seemed not to be questioned. The system bequeathed to Gorbachev set the agenda for reform, it conditioned the assumptions about what were the central issues, it set the limits to reform (though these limits have expanded steadily over time).

This book was launched at the end of 1986, when I was living in Washington DC, and when the direction of Gorbachev’s reforms in the religious sphere, not to mention how long he would survive in office, was not yet clear. The book was essentially complete only three years later, and was later revised and updated in late 1990 and early 1991. The 14 chapters assembled in this book therefore reflect reality as it was in December 1990 or January 1991. Three chapters were subsequently updated slightly, to reflect the post-coup changes and the fall of Gorbachev, but without the possibility of a substantial
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expansion of the text. The epilogue was added in January 1992 in order to take some account of the impact of the intervening changes.

I am deeply indebted to Margaret Brown for translating Otto Luchterhandt’s chapter from German and to George E. Rennar for translating Anatolii Levitin-Krasnov’s chapter from Russian. The data included in the appendix was originally collected for inclusion as a supplement to my own chapter (2), but, given its general utility, I have decided to place it in a separate appendix.

Sabrina Petra Ramet