

## Red Secularism

*Red Secularism* is the first substantive investigation into one of the key sources of radicalism in modern Germany, the subculture that arose at the intersection of secularism and socialism in the late nineteenth century. It explores the organizations that promoted their humanistic-monistic worldview through popular science and asks how this worldview shaped the biographies of ambitious self-educated workers and early feminists. Todd H. Weir shows how generations of secularist intellectuals staked out leading positions in the Social Democratic Party, but often lost them due to their penchant for dissent. Moving between local and national developments, this book examines the crucial role of red secularism in the political struggles over religion that rocked Germany and fed into the National Socialist dictatorship of 1933.

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# Red Secularism

*Socialism and Secularist Culture in Germany  
1890 to 1933*

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Todd H. Weir

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## Preface

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As a graduate student in Berlin in the 1990s, I lived in the Prenzlauer Berg district in a run-down apartment building inhabited largely by students, many recently arrived from the West, and elderly East Germans. One day, while taking out old newspapers, I looked into the recycling bin and my eye was caught by an assortment of selected works of Marx, Engels and Lenin, bound in red and blue imitation leather and with gold-tinted paper edges – the sort of books customarily given to party members in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) at official ceremonies. I imagined that a former state functionary had recently died and, in the process of cleaning out the apartment, his or her relatives had simply seen these as unread and worthless relics of a bygone age and thrown them out. I pulled out a few of these classics, as well as an imposing eight-volume set of the Communist Party’s official history of the German working-class movement, but I later never read them. I found a sole book that predated the founding of the German Democratic Republic in 1949. It was a bound volume of a year’s worth of *Proletarische Heimstunden* (Proletarian Home Hours), a journal published by the Community of Proletarian Freethinkers in the mid-1920s.

I had never heard of Proletarian Freethinkers, and I could not place them in my understanding of socialist history. Curious, I began to skim through the journal. Meant to edify and entertain workers, each issue featured short works by expressionist poets and working-class novelists, essays by Bolshevik cultural theorists associated with the Proletkult movement, and articles discussing Nietzsche, Einstein and Freud. Peppered throughout were older poems by the likes of the “romantic anarchist” John Mackay or the American transcendentalist Walt Whitman, popular scientific treatises, and rough expressionist woodcuts showing naked figures dancing in nature or the universe as a living unity. As one would expect from a Freethought journal, there were many articles criticizing religion.

At that time, I was writing a master’s dissertation on the forced collectivization of East German agriculture in the early 1950s and was getting tired of reading the rigid language of Marxism-Leninism in which state actors had



been compelled to write. The chance discovery of *Proletarische Heimstunden* revealed to me a new facet of the history of socialism, namely its relationship to religion. Looking back, I now see that the disposal of that private library a few years after reunification corresponded with a turning point in the history and the historiography of German socialism. The collapse of state socialism had abruptly shattered the Marxist verities – whether believed or enforced – that had sustained the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. It eliminated the contextual field which had drawn scholars on both sides of the wall to write and debate the history of socialism and the German working class, which between the 1960s and 1990s formed one of the preeminent fields of German social history. Within ten years of the disappearance of the GDR in 1990, this history had come to appear overstudied, if not irrelevant.

If interest in the history of the German working class and the socialist parties was riding the down-escalator of scholarly attention in the mid-1990s, religion was riding up. These cross-currents were related. Following the end of the Cold War, scholars began to look beyond ideologies and to religious commitments to understand political behavior. The “return of religion” in the form of domestic “culture wars” and new international conflicts opened up a terrain for scholarly thinking about religion and politics. We are now far enough into this historiographical paradigm that it may be time for a further turn, a turn back to the social and cultural history of German socialism, but one that views it from the perspective of religion and secularism.

In the course of writing this book, I have accumulated many debts that I am happy to acknowledge here. Around a decade ago, I entered into a fruitful exchange with Benjamin Ziemann, who has doggedly challenged me and defended the best in the social historical tradition that comes under some criticism in this book. Moritz Föllmer provided insightful commentary on two chapters, and I have benefited over the years from the collaboration of my fellow travellers in the history of Central European secularism: Tracie Matysik, Heléna Tóth, and Horst Groschopp. I thank Victoria Smolkin and Igor Polianski for conversations about Soviet secularism, and Anton Jansson for his careful reading of the draft. I developed some of the key interpretations of this study in collaborative workshops held at Queen’s University Belfast on “the Interwar Kulturkampf” in 2015 and at the British Academy on “apologetics and politics” in 2017. I am grateful to my co-conveners Hugh McLeod and Benjamin Ziemann and to the participants for that opportunity. I benefited greatly from the detailed feedback from the anonymous reader at Cambridge University Press and from the guidance of my editor Liz Friend-Smith, who has made preparing this book a pleasant journey.

Most of the research for this book was undertaken while I was working at Queen’s University Belfast, made possible by grants from the British Academy, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Leverhulme

Trust. I wrote the first draft chapters while a fellow at the Historisches Kolleg Munich in 2012 and largely completed the book in spring 2022, while I was a senior fellow at the University of Leipzig research center “Multiple Secularities.” I am grateful to the co-directors Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Christoph Kleine, as well as to the other Leipzig fellows for their critical questions and support. The introduction received helpful feedback from the scholars participating in the “Historicizing Secular Studies” project in 2021 organized by Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, Michelle C. Sanchez and Justin Reynolds. At the University of Groningen, I have enjoyed discussing chapters of this book with colleagues, in particular Kim Knibbe, Clemens Six and my doctoral students.

Portions of Chapters 7 and 9 have been previously published in *Central European History* and *Past & Present* respectively. I am thankful for the support of my partner Anna Salzano and my children, Sasha and Martin, and to my other great supporters, my parents and brother, Kristina, Tom and Brian Weir. It is to them that I dedicate this book.

## Abbreviations

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ADAV	Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein
AdsD	Archiv der sozialen Demokratie
ADW	Archiv des diakonischen Werkes, Berlin
AES	Secretary of State, Vatican
ASV	Vatican Secret Archive
Barch	Bundesarchiv, Berlin
BayHStA	Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv
BBAW	Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei
DFB	Deutscher Freidenkerbund
DGEK	Deutsche Gesellschaft für ethische Kultur
DMB	Deutscher Monistenbund
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei
EHH	Ernst-Haeckel-Haus
EZA	Evangelisches Zentralarchiv
FRC	Free Religious Congregation
GDR	German Democratic Republic
GpF	Gemeinschaft proletarischer Freidenker
GStA	Geheimes Staatsarchiv
GVV	Gesellschaft zur Verbreitung von Volksbildung
HVD	Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands
IISG	International Institute of Social History
ISK	Internationaler Sozialistischer Kampfbund
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
LAB	Landesarchiv Berlin
LABB	Landeskirchliches Archiv Berlin Brandenburg
MSPD	Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
RAG	Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft freigeistiger Verbände
SAPMO	Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR
SDAP	Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands

## List of Abbreviations

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SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
StaM	Staatsarchiv Munich
USPD	Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
VDAV	Verband Deutscher Arbeitervereine
VFF	Verein der Freidenker für Feuerbestattung
Vfff	Verband für Freidenkertum und Feuerbestattung
ZpF	Zentralverband proletarischer Freidenker