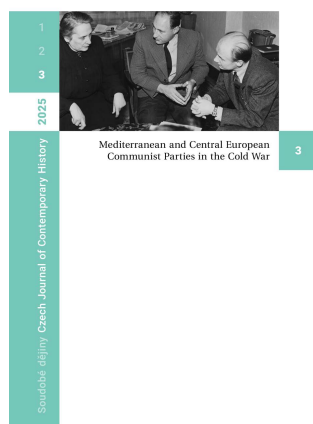


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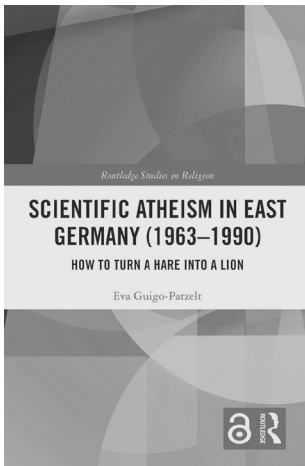
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Olof Klohr and the Rise and Fall of Scientific Atheism in East Germany

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GUIGO-PATZELT, Eva:

*Scientific Atheism in East Germany (1963–1990):
How to Turn a Hare into a Lion.*

Abingdon (UK), Routledge 2025, 256 pages,
ISBN 978-1-03-270096-0.

Eva Guigo-Patzelt is a German historian and Protestant theologian specializing in the history of religion, secularization, and scientific atheism in twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe.¹ Her book *Scientific Atheism in East Germany (1963–1990): How to Turn a Hare into a Lion*, based on her doctoral dissertation, offers a thorough historical reconstruction of the emergence and institutionalization of scientific atheism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), foregrounding the key changes and actors that shaped its relatively brief history from the post-war formation period to the “moment of 1989”.

Placed in a broader historiographical context, *Scientific Atheism in East Germany (1963–1990)* exemplifies a significant shift in scholarly approaches to the subject. While earlier literature – such as the works of Hans-Gerhard Koch²

¹ Guigo-Patzelt currently works as a pastor in the United Protestant Church of France in the Paris region.

² KOCH, Hans-Gerhard: *Abschaffung Gottes? Das Buch über den Atheismus: Der materialistische Atheismus als heutige Existenzform. Geschichte, Problematik, Widerlegung.* Stuttgart,

or Alfred Hoffmann³ – often treated scientific atheism primarily as an ideological instrument of a repressive regime, Guigo-Patzelt offers a far more nuanced and historically grounded interpretation. In this respect, her book builds on recent scholarship, including Viktoria Smolkin's research on Soviet atheism⁴ or my own work,⁵ which approach scientific atheism as a specific way of thinking, a form of scientific expertise, and a tool for state governance of society.

Guigo-Patzelt distinguishes her approach above all through her microhistorical perspective and meticulous archival research.⁶ While Smolkin conceptualizes Soviet atheism as part of a broader "atheist apparatus", and the author of this review foregrounds comparisons between Moscow, Brno, and Bratislava, Guigo-Patzelt reconstructs the specific trajectory of scientific atheism in East Germany – from its institutional inception through its phase of consolidation, to its reflexive redefinition in the 1980s. Her analysis also remains strongly transnational: she understands scientific atheism as an internationally entangled phenomenon while recognizing its national specificities in each country.

Compared to collective volumes such as *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe*,⁷ Guigo-Patzelt offers a more in-depth exploration of a single

Quell-Verlag 1961; IDEM: *Neue Erde ohne Himmel: Der Kampf des Atheismus gegen das Christentum in der „DDR“ – Modell einer weltweiten Auseinandersetzung*. Stuttgart, Quell-Verlag 1963.

³ HOFFMANN, Alfred: „Mit Gott einfach fertig“: *Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis des Atheismus im Marxismus-Leninismus der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*. Leipzig, St. Benno 2000.

⁴ SMOLKIN, Viktoria: *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*. Princeton, Princeton University Press 2018.

⁵ TESAŘ, Jan: *The History of Scientific Atheism: A Comparative Study of Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union (1954–1991)*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2019.

⁶ Guigo-Patzelt worked predominantly with several university archives, including the Archives of the Technical University of Dresden (*Archiv der Technischen Universität Dresden*), the Rostock University Archives (*Universitätsarchiv Rostock*), and the Leipzig University Archives (*Universitätsarchiv Leipzig*). Beyond university holdings, she made extensive use of the Federal Archives (*Bundesarchiv*), in particular the Foundation Archives of the Political Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR (*Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv*, SAPMO), as well as the Berlin Institute for Comparative State–Church Research (*Berliner Institut für vergleichende Staat–Kirche–Forschung*, BISKF). The BISKF holdings related to Olof Klohr proved to be a fundamental source of information. Special mention should also be made of private collections, which shed valuable light on personal details as well as on the organization of scientific atheism in the GDR, notably those of Wolfgang Kleinig, Manfred Düsing, and Jürgen Scholze.

⁷ BUBÍK, Tomáš – REMMEL, Atko – VÁCLAVÍK, David (eds.): *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Development of Secularity and Nonreligion*. London – New York, Routledge 2020.

national case, while consistently linking it to broader questions of secularization, ideological education, and scientific expertise. Her book thus bridges the gap between macrohistorical comparative studies and fine-grained case analysis.

One Man's Mission?

The chronological approach adopted by Guigo-Patzelt leads her to begin with an analysis of the period between the end of the Second World War and 1963, when the University of Jena established the first and only Department of Scientific Atheism (*Lehrstuhl für wissenschaftlichen Atheismus*). This period is presented as a story of institutional development intertwined with personal ambition and vision which was embodied above all in Olof Klohr,⁸ who became the first chair of the department and emerged as the leading figure of scientific atheism in the GDR right from its inception until the end of socialism. Klohr's capacity to form, shape, direct, and influence the field over several decades proved decisive.

However difficult it may be to overestimate Klohr's influence on the national landscape of scientific atheism, it is important to emphasize that the project also attracted other experts (even if their number was likely smaller than the community contributing to the discipline in neighbouring Czechoslovakia)⁹ and that there were significant institutional and ideological preconditions for the emergence of scientific atheism. The author makes clear that these were a combination of factors: the adoption of the Soviet model; the Central and Eastern European communist regime's increasing need to control the religious sphere; and parallel efforts to "scientify" ideological work. Within this framework, scientific atheism served as a tool of ideological control while gradually establishing itself as a legitimate academic field, largely through the activities of Klohr and a small circle of other actors.

⁸ Olof Klohr (1927–1994) studied social sciences in Leipzig, earning a doctorate in Halle with a dissertation on the biologist Ernst Haeckel, and a habilitation in Jena with a critique of Catholic philosophy and theology. In the 1950s and early 1960s, he taught religious sociology at several East German universities. Klohr was deeply involved in the multi-year discussions on the general reorganization of the social sciences at the University of Jena, which reached a particularly intense phase in 1967–1968. Among several competing and controversial reform proposals, a model that eliminated scientific atheism as a distinct discipline ultimately prevailed. Subsequently, Klohr was reassigned to teach Marxism-Leninism at the Engineering College for Seafaring in Warnemünde/Wustrow, where he remained until 1990.

⁹ Cf. TESAŘ, J.: *The History of Scientific Atheism*, pp. 177–185.

The author opens the book by tracing Olof Klohr's efforts to establish scientific atheism as an independent academic discipline with its own research program, methodology, and publishing agenda that could withstand international comparison within the Eastern Bloc. During the 1960s, Klohr grounded his work in the assumption that the modern natural sciences are inherently atheistic, as they operate with a materialistic interpretation of the world. This approach, however, proved limited: it was largely polemical, often reductive, and struggled to define the very concept of "atheism". As a result, at this stage scientific atheism defined itself primarily in negative terms (as opposition to religion), rather than as a positive, autonomous worldview. While Klohr's approach largely aligned with Soviet scientific atheism of the period, it differed markedly from atheist thinking in 1960s Czechoslovakia.¹⁰

During this period, a team coalesced around Klohr with the aim of conducting empirical studies of religiosity and secularization in the GDR. These studies had not only cognitive but also explicitly normative functions: they were intended to demonstrate the inevitability of religion's "withering away" and also to provide an empirical basis for a more effective policy of atheization. Once again, this development closely followed Soviet and Czechoslovak efforts to study religion using sociological methods (forming part of a broader trend across the Eastern Bloc in the 1960s, closely linked to the rehabilitation of sociology in the Soviet Union at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, when the discipline ceased to be regarded as a bourgeois pseudoscience and was reintegrated into the socialist academic landscape). As Eva Guigo-Patzelt demonstrates, Klohr was keenly aware that the GDR could not develop the discipline in isolation but depended on contacts with peers in other socialist countries. These transnational exchanges serve in the book as case studies that allow the author to highlight differences between individual countries – for instance, the greater openness of Czechoslovak researchers to dialogue with believers, or the stronger degree of institutional support found in the Soviet Union.

Transformation and Expansion against Indifference

The 1970s and 1980s are identified by Eva Guigo-Patzelt as a phase of "renewal, rise, and peak" of scientific atheism in East Germany. She examines how,

¹⁰ While a predominantly negative and oppositional definition of atheism dominated GDR discourse, Czechoslovak scholars experimented with defining it as a Marxist "philosophy of life" or as a form of Marxist humanism grounded in the principle of dialogue. No comparable understanding of scientific atheism existed in the Soviet Union. With the onset of Czechoslovak normalization, however, such approaches were branded as revisionist and formally condemned. (See TESAŘ, J.: *The History of Scientific Atheism*, pp. 203–212.)

following a period of institutional weakening at the end of the 1960s, scientific atheism successfully reestablished itself as a significant academic and ideological discipline. A decisive moment in this process of renewal was the creation of new research collectives, particularly – but not exclusively – around Olof Klohr, who, after being transferred to the Maritime Engineering School (*Ingenieurhochschule für Seefahrt*) in Warnemünde-Wustrow, managed to rebuild a robust research base by mobilizing his extensive network of contacts. The author maps in detail how scientific atheism expanded into other universities and research institutions during this phase and how it managed to gain new political and financial support. Central to this consolidation was the establishment of a nationwide Permanent Research Group on Scientific Atheism (*Ständige Arbeitsgruppe Wissenschaftlicher Atheismus*), which coordinated research, teaching, and popularization activities.

With the advent of the 1970s, a clear thematic transformation of scientific atheism becomes visible. During this decade, the focus shifted away from direct confrontation with religion toward questions of everyday life, value orientation, and worldview education. Scientific atheists increasingly turned their attention to phenomena such as religious indifference, secularized forms of spirituality, and so-called implicit atheism. Guigo-Patzelt convincingly demonstrates that this thematic reorientation was largely a response to the population's growing disinterest in both religious and atheist issues – a phenomenon that scientific atheists themselves called “indifference”. As part of this broader shift, the author analyses how scientific atheism sought to establish itself within the official educational curriculum, while also highlighting the obstacles and internal contradictions that accompanied this process. One of her key findings is that the dissemination of an atheist worldview proved far less smooth and effective than its proponents had envisioned.

Courses in scientific atheism were introduced across a wide range of educational institutions, from universities and technical colleges to vocational schools. Although these lectures were often formally mandatory, they frequently encountered low levels of student engagement, a shortage of qualified teachers, and a pervasive sense of “worldview fatigue” in practice. As a result, scientific atheism found itself in a paradoxical position: strongly supported at the ideological level from above, yet met with passivity and disinterest from below.

Crucially, Guigo-Patzelt emphasizes that these developments were not merely anonymous byproducts of the policy of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED). Rather, they depended heavily on the personal commitment and initiative of a small group of dedicated scientific atheists, among them (apart from Olof Klohr) Hans Lutter.¹¹ During the 1970s

¹¹ Hans Lutter (1928–2009) was a Marxist scholar whose career focused on atheist theory and the critique of religion in the GDR. From the 1960s onward, he worked in the field of scientific

and 1980s, Klohr emerged as the main coordinator of scientific atheism education within the framework of the so-called Marxist-Leninist basic studies. At the same time, he had to contend with persistent structural problems, including limited space in educational plans, resistance from some teachers and students, and a widespread tendency to reduce teaching to a formal ritual largely devoid of content. Consequently, the teaching of scientific atheism oscillated between ideological dogmatism and attempts at a more open, humanistic approach, often depending on the individual lecturer.

Beyond questions of education, the book also addresses the transformation of the relationship between scientific atheism and religion in East Germany during the 1970s. Guigo-Patzelt shows how scientific atheists gradually moved from a confrontational stance toward religion to a more pragmatic and, in some cases, cooperative approach. This shift reflected a broader change in the ideological and practical conception of atheization: from efforts aimed at the direct elimination of religion toward strategies of “management”, “monitoring”, and partial integration into the socialist project.

Scientific atheists, particularly those associated with Olof Klohr, increasingly acknowledged that religion could not simply be “removed”, but had to be treated as a historically conditioned and socially variable phenomenon. This approach was reflected in research agendas, teaching practices, and evolving relationships with church institutions.

Balancing Loyalty and Relevance

The final part of the book addresses the development of scientific atheism in East Germany during the 1980s, a period in which the discipline sought theoretical renewal and new forms of societal anchoring. In chapters 6–7, Guigo-Patzelt traces in detail how scientific atheists attempted to respond to growing religious plurality, broader cultural changes, and, above all, the pervasive worldview indifference that had become a defining feature of East German society by this time. The 1980s thus emerge as a reflective phase, in which scientific atheism struggled to redefine itself – no longer merely as a tool of ideological education, but as a discipline aspiring to offer a more nuanced understanding of modern humanity.

atheism and later in Marxist religious studies. In 1974, he founded a research group at the Güstrow College of Education (*Pädagogische Hochschule Güstrow*) that analysed Protestantism in East Germany. Even after rejecting the term “scientific atheism” as unscientific in 1988, he continued to publish and teach on atheism and the role of religion under socialism. In the post-GDR period, he served as editor of the *Berliner Dialog-Hefte*, using the series as a platform to promote secular and freethought perspectives.

The author advances the thesis that, in the 1980s, certain ideological frameworks began to loosen, giving rise to a more open and differentiated approach to religion. Scientific atheists began to reflect on the existence of diverse forms of irreligion, including agnosticism, religious indifference, and “implicit atheism”. Concurrently, efforts emerged to connect scientific atheism with humanistic values and with questions about the meaning of life, ethics, and interpersonal relationships. This shift manifested itself both in theoretical writings and in practical initiatives aimed at worldview education, cultural policy, and youth research.

The apex of this development, the author argues, consisted in attempts to establish dialogue with religious actors. Guigo-Patzelt highlights that, in some cases, genuine cooperation emerged between scientific atheists and representatives of the churches, for instance through the organization of discussion forums or joint research on the value orientations of the younger generation. These initiatives were frequently launched from below and reflected an effort to overcome entrenched ideological schemas. At the same time, they were severely constrained by structural conditions, including persistent distrust from the state authorities, the rigidity of the SED organs, and fears of the excessive autonomy of religious actors. Nevertheless, according to the author, they represented a significant shift from earlier confrontational logic and even certain subversiveness, as they constantly balanced openness with loyalty to the regime. At this stage, even the very concept of “scientific atheism” came under scrutiny. During the 1980s, proposals appeared to rename the discipline, for example, as the “Marxist-Leninist study of religion” (*marxistisch-leninistische Religionswissenschaft*), reflecting efforts to adopt a broader and less ideologically loaded definition. Terms such as “dialogue”, “openness”, and “cultural heritage” began to replace the earlier rhetoric of struggle, exposure, and unmasking. Yet Guigo-Patzelt cautions that this linguistic shift was not always accompanied by a real change in attitudes; in many cases, it amounted to strategic adaptation rather than profound transformation. As a result, scientific atheism in this phase vacillated between attempts at modernization and the inertia of entrenched ideological structures. Scientific atheists in the GDR, as the author maintains, increasingly recognized that their original mission – the atheization of society – was failing, and that new sources of relevance would have to be sought.

Broader Contexts

Scientific atheism in East Germany never attained the institutional strength achieved in the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia. As Guigo-Patzelt convincingly shows, it lacked a stable institutional base, its political support was inconsistent, and it often remained marginal and isolated within academic circles.

Nevertheless, it managed to establish a distinctive scholarly field that combined research, teaching, and ideological practice.

At the same time, Guigo-Patzelt carefully delineates the paradoxical success of the GDR's secularization policy and the role of scientific atheism within it. Although scientific atheism as a discipline disappeared with the collapse of the communist regime, its core objective – mass secularization – was largely realized. The author draws on empirical research indicating that only a minority of the former East German population identifies with religion, and shows that a form of “practical atheism of indifference” became the dominant mode of irreligiosity. Yet this outcome also marked the failure of scientific atheism as a project, since it had aimed not at indifference but at the cultivation of an active, ideologically grounded worldview. In this sense, the author argues, secularization occurred not because of, but rather despite, the efforts of Klohr and his colleagues.

The “moment of 1989” further illustrates that even during the collapse of the regime, scientific atheists remained at once loyal and critical. Some participated in public debates about the future of the relationship between the state/party ideology and religion, while others attempted to redefine their discipline as a “Marxist-Leninist study of religion”. The author convincingly demonstrates that scientific atheism was not merely a relic of the past, but that its representatives were capable of reflecting societal changes – even if their voices ultimately remained unheard under the new political conditions.

The book under review deserves attention in two main respects. First, the author takes into account the full complexity of the phenomenon under study and explicitly rejects simplistic dichotomies such as “science versus ideology” or “regime versus victim”. Instead, Guigo-Patzelt situates scientific atheism within the broader process of the “scientification of society”. From this perspective, scientific atheism appears as a discipline that aimed not only to interpret reality but also to actively shape it – through research, teaching, and propaganda. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of specific actors, their motivations, strategies, and internal contradictions. Second, her findings demonstrate that even within an ideologically charged discipline, empirically valuable insights could emerge, and that scientific atheists often engaged in intense internal debates about the purpose and methods of their work. It thus becomes clear that scientific atheism was far from a monolithic ideological enterprise but rather a dynamic field marked by diverse directions, ambitions, and conflicts.

In conclusion, *Scientific Atheism in East Germany* constitutes a substantial contribution to contemporary research on scientific atheism. Compared to existing literature, it stands out for its archival depth, analytical precision, and its ability to integrate the histories of ideology, science, and religion. At the same time, it opens up new avenues for further research, raising questions about the long-term cultural legacy of scientific atheism, its transformations after 1990, and the extent

to which its traces persist in contemporary forms of secularism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords:

German Democratic Republic (GDR); scientific atheism; communism; Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, SED); Eastern Bloc; secularization; Olof Klohr; *Lehrstuhl für wissenschaftlichen Atheismus*; ideology and religion

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