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Silent Voices: The Missing Historiography of Soviet Evangelicalism

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Introduction

The historiography of Soviet evangelicalism has suffered from both a lack of attention and a lack of detail-oriented, scholarly research. These failings are not surprising, considering the limitations exerted by the Cold War and the nature of the Soviet system. From the 1920s to the 1990s, the primary limitation to research of Soviet evangelicalism lay in the creation of and access to primary sources. Western researchers had few opportunities to pierce the Iron Curtain and gain a look at the experiences of Soviet evangelicals. Soviet believers had little freedom to present their experiences in an uncensored way. And, of course, the Soviet government had little interest in providing an objective portrayal of religion in the Soviet Union. This lack of primary sources, combined with the incautious use of government sources, marks the early works on Soviet religion. Indeed, the problem of sources was not entirely resolved until the 1980s and 1990s, when Gorbachev's liberalization measures allowed historians greater access to Soviet archives and eyewitnesses.

A secondary limitation to research on Soviet evangelicalism has been the apparent disinterest of historians in the topic. Until the 1970s, scholarly analysis of Soviet religion focused on a broad spectrum of religious groups, giving Soviet evangelicalism only a cursory examination. When evangelical-focused works began to emerge in the 1970s – 1980s, they were primarily written by amateur historians and reflected a lack of detail and documentation. Post-Soviet scholarly works have taken advantage of the new openness to produce unique and detailed descriptions of Soviet religion, but, like previous works, they have largely failed to examine the experiences of Soviet evangelicals.

The first two works focus on a broad analysis of Soviet historiography and the historiography of Soviet religion. These articles provide a framework for understanding the state of the field and reflect some of the concerns stated above, as well as some of the trends mentioned later in the paper. For example, Gregory Freeze points out that archival restrictions contributed to research gaps during the late Soviet period, reflecting some of the concerns stated above.[1] Similarly, N.G.O. Pereira's observation of a "cultural turn" in Soviet historiography of the 1960s – 1970s is partially reflected in some of the works released during the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods.[2]

Gregory Freeze's "Confessions in the Soviet Era" (*Russian History,* 2017) provides an excellent summary of Soviet religious historiography. Before the rise

[1]Gregory Freeze, "Confessions in the Soviet Era: Analytical Overview of Historiography," *Russian History* 44, no. 1 (2017), 4, 18.

[2]N.G.O. Pereira, "Post-Soviet North American Historiography of Russia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 53, no. 2/4 (June – Sept. – Dec. 2011), 516-518.

of the Soviet Union, the Orthodox Church served as the primary source of confessional scholarship.[3] With the increase of antireligious sentiment, Orthodox historical scholarship virtually ceased; although supplemented in part by foreign scholarship, these foreign-based confessional scholarships focused primarily on the prerevolutionary period due to a lack of access to Soviet sources.[4] The Orthodox Church was allowed to release confessional scholarship on a limited scale during World War II, but Khrushchev's antireligious campaign soon overturned this freedom.[5] Although Western scholars succeeded in producing some scholarship during this period, they were forced to rely primarily on *samizdat* and other materials available outside of the Soviet Union. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to a rapid growth in the number and quality of works dedicated to Soviet religious history.[6]

Although Freeze's work focuses primarily on the Orthodox Church, his insights into Soviet religious historiography prove useful for studying Soviet evangelicals. For example, he identifies a lack of scholarship on the Orthodox Church during the last decades of the Soviet Union, citing archival restrictions as one of the reasons for this research gap.[7] Although he does not directly state that this research gap extends to Soviet evangelical historiography, it is likely that there is a correlation between the two. On a broader scale, he identifies the need for an increased focus on individual believers, a less mono-confessional approach, and a transnational perspective.[8] Any of these suggestions could easily be incorporated into further research on Soviet evangelicals. Finally, Freeze's footnotes identify several scholars whose works may provide a deeper perspective on Soviet evangelical historiography.

N.G.O. Pereira's "Post-Soviet North American Historiography of Russia" (*Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 2011) provides an overview of North American historiography of the late Russian and Soviet periods. Pereira argues that debates in Soviet historiography have primarily focused on the Bolshevik Revolution, with two camps visible in the scholarship.[9] The earliest scholars of the Soviet Union, including Michael Karpovich, Martin Malia, and Richard Pipes, leaned towards the right in their views of the Bolshevik Revolution, viewing communism negatively.[10] Later generations of scholars leaned more toward the left, viewing

[3]Freeze, "Confessions in the Soviet Era," 2.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.
[6]Ibid., 3-5.
[7]Ibid., 4, 18.
[8]Ibid., 5, 24.
[9]Pereira, "Post-Soviet North American Historiography of Russia," 513-514.
[10]Ibid., 515-516.

the Bolshevik Revolution as a legitimate revolution.[11] The 1960s – 1970s also exhibited an increased interest in the culture and everyday lives of the Soviet people.[12]

Although Pereira's article focuses primarily on interpretations of the Bolshevik Revolution and the legitimacy of the Soviet state, it does provide some interesting insights about the state of the field in general. For example, he describes how the late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen a rise in scholarship focused on regional areas.[13] He also highlights the importance of the opening of the archives in the 1980s.[14]

Early works on Soviet religion offered broad analyses of the topic, mostly focusing on the state of the Orthodox Church. They were usually strongly anti-communist in their tone and provided a positive view of the progress of religion in the Soviet Union. These works suffered from a lack of substantial research and details, most likely caused by a lack of readily available sources. As with most of the works analyzed in this paper, they focused primarily on church-state relations, offering little insight into the everyday experiences of Soviet believers.

For example, N.S. Timasheff's *Religion in Soviet Russia, 1917-1942* (1942) explores Soviet antireligious policy from 1917-1942, highlighting the resistance of believers to these efforts. Chapter One serves as a foundation for the rest of the book, providing a summary of the history of Russian Christianity and Marxist thought regarding religion.[15] The early Soviet government launched three waves of antireligious activity in 1922, 1929, and 1937.[16] Timasheff argues that believers maintained a steady level of resistance to these efforts, ultimately prompting the Soviet government to adjust their policies.[17] A New Religious Policy reversed some of the worst abuses of the antireligious campaigns but failed to assure believers of true freedom of religion.[18] Timasheff closes his work with a brief analysis of the New Religious Policy and the reasons for its rise.[19]

Written over eighty years ago, Timasheff's work provides an interesting perspective on Soviet government-church relations during the early part of the 20th century. His reliance on government-issued statements and his emphasis on the Orthodox Church present a one-sided portrayal of religion in the Soviet Union. However, his use of government-issued sources does strengthen his

[11]Ibid., 514.
[12]Ibid., 516-518.
[13]Ibid., 518.
[14]Ibid., 516-519.
[15]Nicholas Timasheff, *Religion in Soviet Russia: 1917-1942* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), 1-20.
[16]Ibid., 21-57.
[17]Ibid., 58-111.
[18]Ibid., 112-142.
[19]Ibid., 143-164.

argument that religion maintained a strong presence in Russia even after two decades of antireligious campaigns. His explanation of Marxist thought regarding religion provides a useful philosophical framework for understanding Soviet antireligious actions. Finally, his analysis of the reasons behind the New Religious Policy raises interesting questions about the prevalence of Christianity in the early Soviet Union.

Serge Bolshakoff attempted to move beyond the Orthodox Church in examining Soviet religion. In *Russian Nonconformity: The Story of "Unofficial" Religion in Russia* (1950), he provides a succinct summary of the various "nonconformist" religious groups in Russia during the 18th – 20th centuries. These groups include off-shoots of the Orthodox Church, such as the Priestless and the Old Believers, as well as Roman Catholic and Protestant believers. Bolshakoff argues that Russian nonconformist groups were primarily "a protest against State intervention in the affairs of the Church."[20] This statement draws an obvious parallel between the Soviet state and various dissident religious groups during the Soviet period. He also suggests that nonconformists "may be thought of as a natural expression of Slavonic elements in Russian life."[21] Overall, Bolshakoff's portrayal of the state of Russian evangelicals is positive, citing the positive accounts given by Western visitors.[22]

Scholars are divided regarding the usefulness of Bolshakoff's work. Matthew Spinka spoke positively of the work in the March 1951 issue of *Church History,* although some of this praise may be primarily due to the lack of scholarship in the field at the time.[23] George Florovsky was much less positive, giving Bolshakoff's work a scathing review, accusing him of organizing his research "on a false pattern" and "not know[ing] the literature of his subject."[24] Despite these caveats, Bolshakoff's work is valuable due to its broad history of non-Orthodox religious groups in Russia.

The 1960s appeared to mark a rise in well-researched, detailed analyses of Soviet religion. These works were more scholarly in nature and are thus more useful for the modern researcher, but they still suffered from an apparent lack of interest in Soviet evangelicals. Despite this lack of attention, these works provide solid contextual information for analyzing the state of Soviet evangelicals during the 1920s – 1950s.

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[20]Serge Bolshakoff, *Russian Nonconformity: The Story of "Unofficial" Religion in Russia* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 17.

[21]Ibid., 18.

[22]Ibid., 121-129.

[23]Matthew Spinka, review of *Russian Nonconformity*, by Serge Bolshakoff, *Church History* 20, no. 1 (March 1951), 78.

[24]George Florovsky, review of *Russian Nonconformity*, by Serge Bolshakoff, *Journal of Religion* 30, no. 4 (Oct. 1951), 285.

One reviewer described Walter Kolarz's *Religion in the Soviet Union* (1962) as an "encyclopedia … rather than a comprehensive picture of the actual condition of religion" in the Soviet Union.[25] Whether or not this description is accurate, Kolarz provides a broad and detailed look at various Christian and non-Christian religious groups present in the Soviet Union during the 1950s – 1960s. His chapter on Evangelical Christians and Baptists provides an overview of the history of these groups in Russia and the Soviet Union and examines the state of these groups in the 1960s.[26]

Although Kolarz's work is not the most comprehensive look at Soviet evangelicals, his chapter on evangelicalism makes interesting observations that could lead to further research. For example, he sheds light on the growth of Soviet evangelicals during the early Soviet period, arguing that this growth was due to evangelical success in communal farms and working with youth.[27] He also presents a much more diverse evangelical community than other works have highlighted, stating that half of Evangelical Christian-Baptists in the Soviet Union came from non-Russian nationalities.[28] His geographical analysis of Soviet evangelical distribution, although limited to data from the 1940s – 1960s, is especially fascinating due to its uniqueness in Soviet evangelical studies.[29]

More of an analysis of the Soviet legal code than a historical commentary, Pauline B. Taylor's "Sectarians in Soviet Courts" (*The Russian Review*, 1965) provides extremely valuable information for understanding the legal process of antireligious proceedings. Taylor uses several specific trials to highlight the various measures that the Soviet government used against believers during the 1950s – 1960s. For example, she uses the trial of a group of Genuine Orthodox Christian Wanderers to discuss the charge of "damaging health and infringing rights," a charge closely related to the 1960 revision of the RSFSR Criminal Code.[30] Similarly, she uses the examples of Pentecostals and Baptists to discuss charges specifically related to the religious education of children.[31] She concludes by arguing that, under Soviet law, freedom of conscience refers to freedom from religion.[32]

Taylor's article is invaluable for understanding the legal basis for Soviet persecution of believers in the 1960s. Although far from comprehensive, the

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[25]Serge A. Zenkovsky, review of *Religion in the Soviet Union*, by Walter Kolarz, *Slavic Review* 22, no. 3 (Sept. 1963), 588-589.

[26]Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 283-321.

[27]Ibid., 289-298.

[28]Ibid., 306.

[29]Ibid., 306-312.

[30]Pauline B. Taylor, "Sectarians in Soviet Courts," *The Russian Review* 24, no. 3 (July 1965), 281-284.

[31]Ibid., 284-286.

[32]Ibid., 288.

article presents a succinct overview of several key charges that could be used against believers and the potential penalties for these charges. As with several of the works reviewed in this paper, her focus is broad and only slightly touches on evangelicals. Despite this, her article will hopefully prove helpful in analyzing religious court cases from the 1960s.

The 1970s – 1980s marked an increased interest in the plight of Soviet evangelicals, sparking a rise in scholarship focused specifically on the Baptist and Evangelical-Christians denominations. These works focused on very specific periods of Soviet evangelical history and were often written by people with personal interests in Soviet evangelicalism but little historical training. For example, Steve Durasoff was a professor of theology who had personally visited the Soviet Union and became troubled by the plight of Soviet believers. Similarly, one reviewer makes a point of stating that Hans Brandenburg was "not an historian."[33] Despite that, these works are valuable for the interest that they show in Soviet evangelicals, as well as some of the information that they contain.

Steve Durasoff's *The Russian Protestants: Evangelicals in the Soviet Union, 1944-1964* (1969) focuses on the cooperation between Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, and Mennonites in the Soviet Union. Beginning with a historical overview of these four groups, Durasoff continues by examining the merger of the four groups into the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists. He spends significant time examining the inclusion of Pentecostals into this group, as well as the controversies associated with this inclusion. He closes by examining evangelical interaction with the Soviet government and international Christian organizations.

Durasoff's work is interesting because it is one of the earliest works to focus on a specific aspect of Soviet evangelicalism. All the earlier works discussed in this paper have focused on a broad examination of religion in the Soviet Union. Durasoff focuses not only on evangelicals but also on a specific aspect of Soviet evangelicalism. This presents an interesting development in the historiography of Soviet evangelicalism. Despite this, Durasoff's work received heavy criticism during the years following its publication, with B. B. Szczesniak criticizing it for its lack of emphasis on other religious groups, its use of Soviet publications, and its lack of "critical perspective."[34]

Hans Brandenburg's *The Meek and the Mighty: The Emergence of the Evangelical Movement in Russia* (1977) focuses on early evangelical movements in the Russian Empire. Brandenburg begins his story very early in Russian

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[33]C. J. Read, review of *The Meek and the Mighty*, by Hans Brandenburg, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 29, no. 2 (April 1978), 254.

[34]B. B. Szczesniak, review of *The Russian Protestants*, by Steve Durasoff, *Slavic Review* 31, no. 3 (Sept. 1972), 698.

history, starting with the introduction of Orthodoxy to Russia in the 11th – 12th centuries. He spends almost a quarter of his work focusing on the rise of *stundism,* an early evangelical movement sparked by German immigrants.[35] The rest of the book examines the growth of other evangelical movements in St. Petersburg and Moscow, with a short analysis of evangelicals during the Soviet period.

Like Durasoff's work, *The Meek and the Mighty* displays a trend toward a focused study of specific periods in Soviet evangelical history. Brandenburg's emphasis on *stundism* and the emergence of evangelicalism in the Russian Empire may be useful in providing context for future studies of Soviet evangelicalism. However, as with Durasoff's work, Brandenburg receives heavy criticism for his handling of the subject. Charles A. Frazess of California State University criticized Brandenburg's lack of primary sources and prejudice against Russian Orthodoxy.[36] C. J. Read of the University of Warwick also cites a lack of sources and Brandenburg's treatment of Russian Orthodoxy in his criticism of the work.[37]

In *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (1981), Walter Sawatsky presents a detailed analysis of Soviet evangelicalism from 1945 – 1980. Although he provides a brief introduction to the history of Soviet evangelicalism in his opening chapter, Sawatsky primarily examines the Soviet evangelical church in the post-World War II period. The first half of his work provides a summary of major church events during the 1950s – 1960s, including the 1961 split of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists. The second half of his work provides very interesting information on various aspects of evangelical life during the 1960s – 1970s.

Sawatsky's work continues the trend of focusing specifically on Soviet evangelicalism, but the quality of his work is significantly higher than Durasoff and Brandenburg's works. Both *Church History* and *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* provided positive reviews of Sawatsky's work.[38] They praised his solid documentation and balanced analysis, with one reviewer claiming that his work was the "most extensive and well-documented general treatment of Soviet evangelicals yet available."[39] Sawatsky's chapters on rural evangelicalism,

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[35]Hans Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty: The Emergence of the Evangelical Movement in Russia* (London: Mowbrays, 1976), 46-98

[36]Charles A. Frazee, review of *The Meek and the Mighty*, by Hans Brandenburg, *Church History* 49, no. 4 (Dec. 1980), 489.

[37]C. J. Read, review of *The Meek and the Mighty*, by Hans Brandenburg, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 29, no. 2 (April 1978), 254.

[38]Stephen K. Batalden, review of *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II*, by Walter Sawatsky, *Church History* 52, no. 3 (Sept. 1983), 404-405; Jerry G. Pankhurst, review of *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II*, by Walter Sawatsky, *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 12, no. 3 (1983), 352-353.

[39]Pankhurst, review of *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II*, 352.

evangelical theology, and evangelical children and youth signal a move towards deeper analysis of Soviet evangelical daily life.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was matched by a collapse in the Iron Curtain that had restricted historians from examining the Soviet Union. The opening of the archives and the availability of Soviet citizens for interviews should have marked a rise in literature related to Soviet evangelicals. However, although some evangelical-focused research has been released, most works have focused on broad analyses of Soviet religion. Despite that deficiency, post-Soviet scholarship has presented unique perspectives on Soviet religion.

John Anderson's *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successors States* (1994) focuses on Soviet religious policy. The three main themes of his work are an overview of post-Stalinist religious policy, an analysis of the policy-making process, and an evaluation of potential continuity between the Soviet Union and its successor states, as understood in 1994.[40] Interestingly, he sees variation in the implementation of religious policy, arguing that there were occasional differences in central and regional implementation of policy.[41]

The policy-centered nature of Anderson's work makes it useful for understanding religious issues through the eyes of the Soviet government. It also provides legal and historical context for understanding religious persecution during the post-Stalinist period. However, both Robert F. Goeckel and Peter Konecny criticize Anderson for not examining the impact of religious policy or church reaction to state policy.[42] As with many of the authors in this study, Anderson focuses on a broad examination of religion in the Soviet Union.

Heather Coleman's *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (2005) sheds light on a fascinating period of Soviet evangelical history. In the early 20th century, Russian evangelicals experienced tremendous growth in their influence in the broader community, even as the Soviet Union was coming into existence.[43] They became active members of their communities, displaying a level of organization and activity that would disappear during the 1940s – 1950s.[44]

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[40]John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1-5.

[41]Robert F. Goeckel, review of *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*, by John Anderson, *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1996), 213-214.

[42]Goeckel, review of *Religion, State and Politics*; Peter Konecny, review of *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*, by John Anderson, *Canadian Journey of History / Annales Canadiennes d'Histoire*30, no. 2 (Aug. 1995), 356-358.

[43]Heather Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 1-3.

[44]Ibid., 3.

Interestingly, she likens this period of spiritual growth and societal transformation to the religious growth of the 1980s-1990s.[45]

Coleman's work is fascinating and presents a new perspective on Soviet religion. Although other scholars have referenced evangelical strength during the early 20th century, Coleman shows the true vibrancy of evangelical life during this period. Additionally, she presents a less state-focused analysis of Soviet religion, as pointed out by one reviewer. He commented that Coleman "has been able to move beyond the limits of describing church-state relations and the interaction between religious and political leaders."[46] Considering the more recent publication date of Coleman's work, it is possible that she represents a trend toward a more culture-focused look at Soviet evangelicals.

In *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (2015), Sonja Luehrmann provides a unique contribution to the historiography of Soviet religion. Rather than focusing on Soviet religion itself, Luehrmann examines religion-centered documents in Soviet archives. She argues that the nature and life of a document are important in evaluating how to interpret it.[47] (Kenworthy, 118) She also examines the relationship between oral histories and state archives, arguing that the two sources of information should be engaged with each other. (Kenworthy, 118)

Luehrmann's work is a fascinating and helpful tool for researchers hoping to use Soviet archives to examine Soviet religious history. Scott Kenworthy of Miami University points out that *Religion in Secular Archives* serves as an answer to the methodological problems associated with studying Soviet religion. In addition to guiding researchers, Luehrmann's work reflects both an increased interest in Soviet religion in the historical community and a more interdisciplinary approach to Soviet religious historiography.

Victoria Smolkin's *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (2018) claims the distinction of being the first complete history of Soviet atheism. She argues that "in order to understand why religion posed a problem for Soviet Communism, we need to shift our attention from religion to atheism."[48] She identifies four stages in Soviet attempts to "convert" its citizens to atheism:

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[45]Ibid., 1-2.

[46]Edward E. Roslof, review of *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929*, by Heather Coleman, *Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 1 (March 2008), 210-211.

[47]Scott M. Kenworthy, review of *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*, by Sonja Luehrmann, *Journal of Church & State* 59, no. 1 (Feb. 2017), 117-119.

[48]Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3.

militant atheism (1917 – 1953), "scientific atheism" (1950s – 1960s), spiritual atheism (1960s – 1990s), and the abandonment of atheism under Gorbachev.[49]

A work on atheism may seem an odd inclusion in a paper on the historiography of Soviet religion, but Smolkin's arguments make her work relevant to the study of Soviet religion. She validly reflects that an understanding of Soviet religion requires an understanding of Soviet atheism. Without understanding the stages of Soviet atheism or its antireligious attempts, historians will struggle to understand the experiences of Soviet believers. Although not specifically intended as a history of Soviet religion, Smolkin's work sheds important light on religion in the Soviet Union.

Although not a comprehensive examination of Soviet religious historiography, these works shed important light on the study of Soviet religious history during the past six decades. Most importantly, they highlight major research gaps in the study of Soviet evangelicalism. The historical community has failed to produce a well-researched general history of Soviet evangelicalism from 1917 – 1991. Additionally, there appear to be no major works specifically focused on evangelicals during the purges of the 1930s, World War II, or the Brezhnev and Gorbachev years. Finally, there have been no substantial works that examine the everyday life of evangelicals.

During the 1940s – 1990s, the historiography of Soviet evangelicalism suffered from a lack of Western attention and substantial research, but these failings are no longer excusable. The Cold War and the Iron Curtain are gone, removing Western historians' justifications for ignoring Soviet evangelicals. Indeed, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent cooling of U.S.-Russian relations have increased the urgency of examining the history of Soviet evangelicals before researchers are again banned from the archives. If Russian historians do not seize the opening in front of them, they may one day look back with regret at the missed opportunities to examine the fascinating world of Soviet believers.

[49]Liliya Berezhnaya, "Secularization and Lived Religiosity à la Russe," review of *Palomniki*, by Zh. V. Kormina, & *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, by Victoria Smolkin, *Kritika* 24, no. 1 (Winter, 2023), 221-30.

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