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The End of History: Radical Responses to the Soviet Collapse

by
Joseph Kellner

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
History
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:
Professor Yuri Slezkine, Chair
Professor Victoria Frede
Professor John Connelly
Professor Alexei Yurchak
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Abstract

The End of History: Radical Responses to the Soviet Collapse

by

Joseph Kellner

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Yuri Slezkine, Chair

This dissertation is the first cultural history of the dissolution of the USSR. It examines the spirited and highly visible search by many Soviets for meaning after the discrediting and disappearance of state ideological control.

Marxism-Leninism imagined history as an inexorable if halting ascent, lifting humanity into a luminous, just and rational future. But however vaguely that future was described, it bore no resemblance to the USSR in 1989. Instead, at the twilight of Soviet communism, a newly freed press revealed a darkening world of crime and corruption, and criminals and the corrupt were gaining handily from the newly freed markets. Widespread dislocation in the labor market, mass emigration and cascading crises of public health made the collapse a time of incomparable stress and disorientation. And amidst this material and moral crisis, Soviet streets flooded with prophets, proselytizers and mystics, each offering uncertain citizens new and often radical routes out of the abyss. In examining this milieu, the dissertation explores the ultimate fate of the Marxist-Leninist worldview, once its vision of the future was relegated to the past.

While that worldview framed humanity's linear progress as scientific fact, notions of history's shape are always a matter of interpretation and, indeed, of belief. Different conceptions of time and their implications are the major analytical thread binding my case studies together. The beliefs that my subjects adopted - beliefs esoteric or dogmatic, foreign or homespun, utopian or apocalyptic - led them to reimagine time in cycles, downward spirals, abrupt ends and new beginnings. Viewed together, the culture of the collapse reveals a dramatic fraying at the end of Soviet time and, in many respects, of a much longer European arc. It is not without cause that most survey courses of modern Europe end in the East in 1989. The Soviet collapse was the most momentous geopolitical event of the late 20th century, but a certain story of European modernity - of devolved political power, self-realization of the individual, scientific and industrial progress, and secularization - ends there as well. The USSR, having self-consciously adopted the mantle of that modernity, did produce distinctly modern people: urban, middle class, well-educated and unencumbered from youth by the opiate of religious faith. Yet it is precisely these people - my subjects - who then diverge from the

supposed modern path. Their stories raise important questions about rationalism, ideology, and longstanding notions of progress.

The dissertation is built on five case studies, each exploring a particular set of beliefs. Topics were selected both for their high visibility at the time and for their radical departure from Soviet life as it was known – they include a history of Soviet astrology, of the Soviet Hare Krishna movement, of the arrival of Mormonism, of the apocalyptic Vissarion sect, and of mathematician Anatolii Fomenko’s popular and imaginative “New Chronology” of world history which, based on ostensibly hard data, folds all historical epochs into the last thousand years. The chapters progress chronologically, and in doing so, trace the origins and flourishing of the spiritual world of the collapse.

The case studies are grounded in over sixty interviews, which I conducted in Moscow and among sect members in remote southern Siberia. These form the backbone of each chapter, with substantial buttressing from archival materials, Soviet media, and broad reading in the sociology of religion. Each case study also requires a firm grounding in the specific doctrines in question, and much research time has been dedicated to unrecorded conversation and deep reading of scriptures, books and pamphlets produced by the groups under study.

The conclusions of my project should draw interest in several discrete fields. First, it should draw the interest of religious scholars in multiple disciplines. The USSR was the most totalizing and long-lived experiment in altering the mindsets of a polity, and state atheism was a major pillar of its official ideology. In most respects, atheism failed to capture hearts and minds, but its impact was still profound, even as people adopted new and radically un-Soviet beliefs. Science and rationalism retain their cachet among most of my subjects, and each belief system I profile must reckon with the authority of modern science. Scholars interested in conversion and belief in the modern era, and in so-called "New Religious Movements" in particular, should find much to consider in my work.

Second, historians and sociologists interested in crises and societal upheavals, especially from social and cultural perspectives, will see parallels between my work and their own. In Russia, this moment has notable precursors at the end of the 19th century, and during the succession crisis of the early 17th, particularly as concerns esotericism and the occult. These are explored in my chapter on astrology. To an American reader, it might recall the Great Awakenings of the early republic or the 1960s, explored with Mormonism and the Hare Krishnas, respectively. And Vissarion’s sect, self-consciously modeled on the ministry of Jesus Christ, introduces an even grander historical perspective. Some of the most surprising insights of the project come from readings in remote historical epochs - indeed, the nexus of spiritual and political crises seems unrestrained by period and place.

Finally, studies of the collapse of the Soviet Union comprise a field unto themselves, with growing productivity in history, sociology, anthropology and political science. Political and economic histories of some quality have already been written, but the event - the most momentous geopolitical change of the late 20th century - is predictably complex. I hope that my project, above all, will contribute substantially to this collaborative work, as the first cultural history of the collapse and transition.

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“You’ll have the best dissertation, because nobody else will find people like these.”

Nikolai Nepomniashchii, former Editor-in-Chief, *Vokrug Sveta*

Of the hundreds of pages of this dissertation, these acknowledgments are the only words I can claim to have written alone. And they are worse for it - the reader will see here the persistent weaknesses that dog my work, which have otherwise been buffed out by the community that made this project a reality. Specifically, the acknowledgments are wordy at times; weak in argument; full of vague, unprovable and sentimental assertions, and most of all, grossly insufficient in recognizing my enormous scholarly and personal debts. I only apologize for the last - to those who read this section from beginning to end and do not find their own name, I ask that you return to this sentence, and accept my apologies and my thanks. For the rest, named below, no amount of polish could reveal the depth of my gratitude.

That isn’t entirely true - certain grant-giving institutions dictate precisely the gratitude I am to express, and I do so with perfect sincerity: Research for this dissertation was supported in part by a fellowship from IREX (International Research & Exchanges Board) with funds provided by the United States Department of State through the Title VIII Program. Neither of these organizations are responsible for the views expressed herein. The research and writing were also assisted by a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies. At the University of California, I have been privileged to work under the Berkeley Distinguished Graduate Fellowship, and to live and eat with extraordinarily generous support from the various grants, programs and prizes of Berkeley’s Institute for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies. Specifically, I would like to thank Ned Walker, Jeff Pennington, and Zach Kelly for their irreplaceable help and their service to our program generally. I am grateful for other funding and support from Phi Beta Kappa of Northern California, the Western Social Science Association, the FLAS program and the Centre for International Mobility in Helsinki.

I am indebted to the entire cast of brilliant and uncompromising archivists of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and to the librarians of the State Public Historical Library of Russia and of Moscow’s Lenin Library; to Stanford’s Hoover Institution, Columbia’s Bakhmeteff Archive (and Tanya Chebotarev in particular), and to the Church History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the church historian Matt Heiss; and to Liladhar Pense, whose

mastery of Berkeley's Slavics collection goes unrecognized by the university administration, but never by the researchers. I am similarly indebted to the interviewees that people this dissertation, for sharing their lives and their thoughts, for trusting somebody who did little to earn it, and for describing worlds to me that I could not see. My world is richer for the experience. In particular I am thankful to the Moscow Academy of Astrology, to Moscow's ISKCON center, to my generous hosts in the villages east of Minusinsk, and to the Mechanics-Mathematics department at Moscow State University. Berkeley's storied Russian History *Kruzhok*, in addition to making graduate student life livable and teaching me most everything I know of the field, substantially shaped a chapter of this dissertation, as did Paul Werth's young and wonderful Desert History Workshop.

Although they have better things to do than read this, I hope that my thanks will reach the engineers and visionaries at Zotero and at Literature and Latte, the company responsible for Scrivener. These applications are indispensable to scholars; those who decline to use them are fools and, worse yet, depriving the world of their best potential work. It is no overstatement to say this dissertation would be palpably worse without these tools.

Innumerable researchers and scholars and fellow graduates students have advised me, sent me sources, shared their insights, and otherwise acted selflessly to advance this project; I will nevertheless try to enumerate them here. At Berkeley (once or still) I'd like to thank Katherine Zubovich, Bathsheba Demuth, Brandon Schechter, Sohini Pillai, James Vernon, Robert Goldman, Ben Nathans, Marianne Bartholomew-Couts, and forever towering above the rest, Mabel Lee. Add to these Anna Tessmann, Zoe Knox, Catherine Wanner, John Anderson, Christine Evans, Massimo Mazzotti, Tatiana Nikol'skaia, Larisa Honey, Simon Huxtable, Miriam Dobson, Mark Mullins, Erica Baffeli, Yulia Mikhailova, Marat Shterin, Birgit Menzel, Asif Siddiqi, Mariia Akhmetova, Rasa Pranskevičūtė, Konstantin Sheiko, Ilya Yablokov, Boris Noordenbos, Roman Lunkin, Natalia Rostova, Adeeb Khalid, Anna Björklund, Ben Nathans, Galina Olmsted and Bob Avakian. Harriet Murav, Andy Jenks, and my anonymous readers at *Slavic Review* and *Kritika* refined my first chapter; Alexander Panchenko was absolutely essential to the fourth; and Michael Gordin took great personal and selfless interest in the fifth; all have made outsized contributions. John Connelly also requires special mention, for his service on my committee, his careful reading, and his humane and sincere approach to the noble work of teaching and advising. And although every contribution is invaluable, Victoria Smolkin's may be the most so - her scholarship, encouragement and uncompensated labor have influenced this dissertation profoundly.

Victoria, in fact, belongs to a peculiar set of people that accompany us through the academic world, and allow us to forget, from time to time, that we are at work. These are the scholars whose scholarly work, and contributions to my own, become entirely secondary to their mentorship and their friendship. I was fortunate to leave Bowdoin College with two such people by my side, Elena Monastireva-Ansdell and Page Herrlinger. And at Berkeley, by a stroke of fortune that has shaped seven years of my life, I can add both of my advisors, Yuri Slezkine and Victoria Frede. Although each of them deserve a paragraph to themselves, I thank them together, as they make our program a community, worth more than the sum of its members. Intellectually, Yuri and Victoria have contributed to every page of this dissertation, occasionally with formal citation, but far more often without. But it is their warmth and humanity, in a program and university and world that rarely

incentivize these, that win them the lasting esteem of generations of students like myself.

There has been yet another group of scholars, absolutely essential to my life in graduate school, about whose scholarship I care very little if at all. The women and men of the brohort, who entered the program with me or quite nearly, have reforged my mind and my spirit, colored my world, and buoyed me through every challenge these years have presented. It is no exaggeration to say that I would not have remained at Berkeley without them. To John Olmsted, Tim Wright, Danny Kelly, Ivana Mirkovic, Ari Edmundson, Brendan Shanahan, Sam Wetherell, Julia Wambach, Melissa Turoff, Trevor Jackson and especially Kerry Shannon, and to Drew Weber, Brandon McKane, Chris Casey, Erica Lee, Beki Cohen, Sarah Shanahan, Yoko, Otto, Hanko and Wild Bill, and for good measure, to H el ene Golay, Joanna Spoth and Andrew Bradford, I give my thanks and my love. Sam Wetherell stands out among these as the only person who has, without obligation, read every word below - but here too, his academic contributions are hardly the point. Simply assembling you all together in a paragraph warms my heart.

And to my family - my mom and Geoff, Da and Mia, Daniel and Annie and Taiga and Adelaide, Darcy and my (current) favorite cousin, Michael - with every year, it grows more humbling and more lovely to be near you. Whatever humanity and humility appear in the pages of this dissertation, they come from knowing you so intimately, and from being so intimately known. Our lives together have been complicated, but without that, I would have nothing to say about people at all. And what I have said, I think you'll see, reflects far, far more hope than despair.

And finally, to Katie, who is neither in my cohort nor yet in my family, but who could tell the difference? I said above that my interview subjects revealed to me worlds that I could not see. I'm not a person of faith, by upbringing more than by choice. I can say, though, that in the time we've been together, I have experienced something ineffable, and that every day I feel blessed. Although I strongly discourage you from reading it, this dissertation is dedicated to you.

Berkeley, CA

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“If a person understands his work as just chasing after a piece of bread and does not see beyond it the shining goal of his labor, does not acknowledge his obligation to the motherland, does not feel himself a part of the Soviet people, then he will feel his life to be empty, and this emptiness will lead him in one way or another to deformations. Maybe not straight to religion, but some kind of survivals will be resurrected inside him.”

- Mikhail Shakhnovich, Professor of Scientific Atheism at Leningrad State University,
to a 1971 assembly of the Leningrad Komsomol.

“Then she got into the lift, for the good reason that the door stood open; and was shot smoothly upwards. The very fabric of life now, she thought as she rose, is magic. In the eighteenth century we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices in America; I see men flying — but how it’s done I can’t even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns.”

- Virginia Woolf, from *Orlando: A Biography*

Introduction



Introduction

When Mikhail Gorbachev first appeared on Soviet television, citizens hung on his every word. And there were lots of them – by 1986, the more familiar *perestroika* and *glasnost*¹ were two among many new terms, plans and promises trumpeted by the young general secretary. But Gorbachev's reforms accelerated beyond his control, and his voice was increasingly drowned out by the crescendo of the country's collapse. The political system creaked under the weight of citizens' grievances, the economy knocked and sputtered from poor maintenance and faulty design, and nationalists began speaking out against Soviet domination, then shouting for independence, in a cacophony of native tongues. On the streets, chattering masses queued at newsstands from the moment they opened, seeking the latest revelations in the liberalized press; salespeople hawked jeans and cosmetics and other desirable imports on the gray market; protests and rallies gathered in the capitals of the national republics. And then, for five minutes in the spring of 1988, there was a moment of deep silence which, as much as anything else, came to define the memory of the era for millions of Soviet people: it was a nationally televised broadcast of a healing seance, and it presaged an extraordinary chapter in Soviet and Russian history.

Allan Chumak had been a sports journalist, though by his telling he had always had a propensity for magic. That would emerge later, though, when he became the subject of countless interviews. At this time he was just an unknown face, and his first appearance on television cut immediately to the point: seated at a small table in front of a featureless curtain, Chumak described the specific ailments he intended to heal in his viewers, and then went quiet. For the five minutes that followed, he gestured erratically with his hands, gently moved his lips, and projected healing energy through the television screen. And when Chumak returned the next week, his audience had grown. Within a few months, hundreds of thousands of letters would flood his apartment, the piles splashed with color from bouquets of flowers.¹ Crowds gathered outside his door, and he healed them too. At his peak he filled auditoriums, and in person and over the airwaves he imbued millions of jars of water with healing energy. Then a competitor emerged - Anatolii Kashpirovsky, a trained psychiatrist whose magical specialty was hypnosis, and whose shows were more spectacular. Unlike Chumak he performed before an audience, whose members he would manipulate and enchant and heal. Though neither claimed the gift of prophecy, their appearance foretold an explosion of radical new worldviews and their

¹ This and several other points are from Remnick, David. "The Magic Healer of Soviet TV." The Washington Post, September 4, 1989. The larger phenomenon, though, was described to me in dozens of ways by Russians recalling it from memory, and the earliest seances of Chumak and Kashpirovskii are available on YouTube.

charismatic promoters who, in the chaotic years that followed, would be the markers and carriers of a vast and unprecedented spiritual flourishing.²

In those years following Chumak's broadcast, official atheism came under siege by thousands of prophets, proselytizers, messiahs and mystics. The major traditional religions of the Russian Empire all experienced resurgence while New Age beliefs, often in curious synthesis with these older ones, spread from Moscow and Leningrad into the provinces. At least three different people claiming to be Christ reincarnate garnered thousands of followers each, and one led his urban flock into the Siberian wilderness. From abroad, American evangelicals competed with their Mormon fellow countrymen in a race to save souls. Science expanded into magical realms and history was rewritten, sometimes from scratch. This dissertation is a cultural history of the Soviet collapse and transition, centered on this flourishing of radically new worldviews.³ Specifically, it examines the constellation of ideas that animated the period and the milieu that embraced and spread them, as a window into the crisis at the end of the Soviet era.

Chumak's segment appeared on television six times before national health authorities forced him off the air, but popular support then ushered him back on, and he continued to hawk his curious craft. He and Anatolii Kashpirovskii appear only intermittently in the dissertation that follows, but they were icons, and for the historian of this period, important for two distinct reasons. The first was their medium - television and print had earned the esteem of the Soviet public by exposing corruption and speaking hard truths in the preceding era of *glasnost*.⁴ Then, the transition period from 1988-1992 saw

² To my knowledge, only one historian has written on the Chumak/Kashpirovskii phenomenon, though it is remembered universally in Russia. Geltzer, Anna. "Surrogate Epistemology: The Transition from Soviet to Russian Biomedicine." PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 2012. There is, however, an excellent anthropology of magic and healing in contemporary (really, 1990s) Russia, which has influenced this project as a whole - Lindquist, Galina. *Conjuring Hope: Magic and Healing in Contemporary Russia*. Epistemologies of Healing, v. 1. New York: Berghahn Books, 2006. Chapter 4 in particular raises Chumak as a major influencer, and describes a corpus of esoteric literature shared by the subjects of this dissertation. Holly DeNio Stephens's essay "The Occult in Russia Today," in Rosenthal, Bernice Glatzer. *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*. Cornell University Press, 1997, 357-378, has an excellent description of the various major currents of thought in this larger milieu.

³ The anthropology I mention above, Lindquist's *Conjuring Hope*, is the best scholarly attempt at analyzing this subject as a whole. For its view on late-Soviet urban society and the complex meanings embedded in sub- (but not necessarily counter-) cultures, Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. In-Formation Series. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, has been indispensable. The journalist Marc Bennetts has given attention to this topic in Bennetts, Marc. *Resurrections for Roubles: Adventures with Modern Russia's Psychics, Sects, and Sorcerers*. Stary K Publishing, 2014, but his analysis is quite thin. He has also written on Kashpirovskii, but more in the man's later (Putin-era) re-emergence. There is a substantial body of Russian-language (or Russian-researched and translated) analysis and empirical study of the phenomenon. Most of the best statistical sources circle, in one way or another, around the scholar of religion Sergei Filatov - these include Sergei Filatov and Dmitrii E. Furman, "Religiia i politika v massovom soznanii," *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia*, 1992, and a 1995 follow-up of the same title; Vorontsova, Liudmila, and Sergei Filatov. "The Changing Pattern of Religious Belief: Perestroika and Beyond." *Religion, State and Society* 22, no. 1 (1994); and Malashenko, Aleksei, and Sergei Filatov, eds. *Dvadtsat' let religioznoi svobody v rossii*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 2009. Another excellent and wide-ranging collection is Matti Kotiranta, ed., *Religious Transition in Russia* (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications: Aleksanteri Institute, 2000) (in translation). Holly DeNio Stephens, in Rosenthal's *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, 359, includes statistics on Eastern beliefs, UFOs, ESP, and astrology. For more culturally-oriented analysis, I am ever-impressed with Alexander Panchenko, in particular Panchenko, Alexander. "Dvadtsatyi vek: novoe religioznoe voobrazhenie." *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 17 (May 2012); and "New Religious Movements and the Study of Folklore: The Russian Case." *Folklore* 28 (2004): 111-28. Anderson, John. *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994 is an excellent overview of the period focused on the country's more traditional faiths.

⁴ Natalia Rostova, in her excellent web project *Rozhdenie Rossiiskikh SMI, Epokha Gorbacheva (1985-1991)*, has compiled a multimedia chronology, with highly detailed accounts and analysis, of major events of the Russian media's transformation

a rapid relaxation of state oversight. Thus there was widespread trust in media's many forms, paired with a free-for-all in its format and content, dependent only on the whims of hosts and producers.⁵ New and radical ideas were amplified and the population was gripped - those who would adopt new spiritual beliefs at this time did so, most of all, in response to exhortations in newspapers and magazines, and on the radio and television.⁶ But the healers were important for another reason, and that was the peculiar blend of cultural currents that converged in their shared work. They were modern mystics, magicians with scientific credentials (at least in Kashpirovskii's case), and healers to a population that was increasingly dislocated, disoriented, and unhealthy. They presaged the eclectic milieu of seekers that would soon flood onto Soviet, then Russian, streets.

Seen from the outside, this milieu appeared to many as yet more noise. The Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin counts himself among those on the outside - writing twenty-five years later, he recalled the period with a certain scornful distance:

Today [in 2015 -*author*], when crowds of people line up to prostrate themselves before a holy relic, or to bow before an icon of the Mother of God, I chase away the thought that a good half of them, in their day, charged jars of water at the instruction of the extrasense healer Chumak, and treated their kidneys, liver and pancreas at the exhortation of the extrasense healer Kashpirovskii. They stared at the television and charged themselves, with jars of water placed in a circle around them. That too had been a fashion once - stunning, ubiquitous, inexplicable.

Strolling down the Arbat in August of 1991, even I - a teenager, 16 years old - was surprised that my wholly enlightened country had sunk to such depths of... of what? You name it: of dissoluteness, of gall, of foolishness, of baseness, of openness, of sincerity.

I was asked to sign a petition to restore the monarchy; people walked by singing "Hare Krishna!," face-to-face with pagans holding gaudy pagan swastikas, and scurrying between them, people holding signs that read "Want to lose weight? Ask me how." Gamblers played a shell game; Adventists, Scientologists, Baptists, Antifascists, telepathists and eunuchs preached their faith; people in rags were saving Russia from Zionist conspiracy, sharply-dressed people in glasses were saving Russia from a massacre, the time of which they knew to the minute - a massacre, incidentally, being overseen by generals in the KGB, each of whom they could name; students called their country to arms, though they themselves had clearly never borne arms; others found salvation from all ills in ice water baths, and demonstrated it there on the street, leaving everything around them wet; still others, recreating the circulation of fluids in the body, drank things that I won't mention in respectable company, and tried to serve it to others; and still more drank anything in sight - and appeared the healthiest of all in this festival of life.⁷

To those on the inside, this festival of life looked quite different. Its currents, as it turns out, were intimately related, bound together by myriad intellectual and spiritual ties. These ties are complex and not a little mystifying, but that is very much the point - the motley believers that Prilepin recalls actually belonged to a sprawling but interwoven milieu, whose connections and coincidences emerge upon scrutiny. We can be sure, for instance, that the ice-bathers shared certain ideas with the Hare Krishnas,

at the end of the Soviet era. It can be found at <http://gorbymedia.com/>.

⁵ Yurchak, Alexei. "A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom." *Slavic Review* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 307-33, 312-13. In this instance, the performer and satirist Sergei Kurekhin proved, with substantial (and absurd) evidence, and on a show previously dedicated to serious analysis, that Vladimir Lenin had turned into a mushroom by the time of the October revolution.

⁶ Filatov, Sergei, and Dmitrii E. Furman. "Religiia i politika v massovom soznanii (1995 Follow-Up), *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 1995, 84, shows 39% of believers to have come to belief this way. The next category, at 31%, was art and literature, which of course overlaps with the former. Churches and scriptures were of secondary importance.

⁷ Prilepin, Zakhar. "Oglianut'sia i ne rasplakat'sia." *Svobodnaia pressa*, October 31, 2015. <http://svpressa.ru/society/article/135035/>, accessed 12 April 2018.

and some were quite possibly personal acquaintances. The connection might be drawn as follows: they were linked by a shared elevation of an ancient Golden Age, described in a shared literature. To begin with the ice-bathers: their ascetic guru was Porfiry Ivanov, who was among the most visible and influential neo-pagans in the Soviet period.⁸ Ice bathing was, to him, an ancient folk tradition. For him and his followers, ancient traditions of this type originated in a mythic and paradisiacal homeland for the Slavs in the Arctic Circle, the proof for which they find in several texts, which blur into the Hare Krishnas' own corpus. First there is the Book of Veles, a popular (and forged) manuscript of pre-Christian Slavs, which describes a northern paradise as part of an origins story.⁹ This one has no direct bearing on Hare Krishnas, and I found no evidence that they read it. But another is the collected works of nineteenth century occultist and theosopher Helena Blavatsky, who called a similar northern paradise Hyperborea, in an elaboration on ancient Greek speculations. Her work was read very broadly in the circles from which the larger milieu descended. And finally there is *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, a speculative history of early Aryans by the nineteenth-century Indian nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak, which posits a single Arctic origin for all Indo-Aryan peoples. Of these texts, the last two are highly likely to have reached would-be Hare Krishnas. Blavatsky was broadly read in the intellectual *krushchki* from which Krishna Consciousness sprang (virtually all of my interview subjects were familiar with her), and the *Arctic Home in the Vedas* exalts an ancient Vedic civilization in or near contemporary Russia. Though that theory is non-canonical for Hare Krishnas, it is almost entirely founded in the Vedic writings that the Hare Krishnas revere, and two of my subjects mused about its plausibility in conversation. The ice-bathers and the Hare Krishnas would have had much to discuss with one another, and no cause for discord.

These varied currents were also bound together by the participants themselves, most of whom drifted and sampled and collected insights from a host of sources. This quality of the milieu appears over and over in the recollections of its members, who describe a scene similar to Prilepin's above, but from the perspective of seeking within it. Take, for instance, one Tania, who quit her job as a radio engineer to become, like Chumak and Kashpirovskii, an "extrasense" healer, and then wandered in this milieu until she joined an apocalyptic sect, without ever rejecting the ideas she had accrued along the way. Tania's path to answers - which ended in a survivalist commune in Siberia by early 1993 - led through Prilepin's miserable and magical world, though in her telling the search was quite ordinary and perfectly reasonable:

[At that time] I couldn't shake that question, "what are we living for, why are we here?"... I began studying psychology, parapsychology, paranormal phenomena, Doctor (Raymond) Moody's "Life After Life" and so forth. I studied the Bhagavad-Gita, the Quran, [Carlos] Castaneda, Scientology, [Helena] Blavatsky, the Roerichs - it's the path of a seeker. When a person is seeking, they all seek along the same path.¹⁰

As Tania's list should make clear, they do *not* all seek along the same path - there were as many

⁸ On Ivanov, see Zabiiaiko, A. P., A. N. Krasnikov, and E. S. Elbakian, eds. *Religijovedenie: Entsiklopedicheskii slovarʹ*. Summa. Moscow: Akademicheskii proekt, 2006.

⁹ The Book of Veles was also promoted by Pavel Globa, a major astrologer of the period who appears in the first chapter - another thread that could be elaborated as this one has.

¹⁰ Moody's 1975 work "Life After Life," is an ostensibly data-driven typology and analysis of near-death experiences which, over the protests of many of his psychiatrist colleagues, suggests an existence beyond the body. His books are frequently cited by those in the late-Soviet cultic milieu. Carlos Castaneda, another favorite of this milieu, drew attention from mystics and criticism from colleagues for his hands-on anthropology among the Yaqui indians of northern Mexico. Husband and wife Nikolai and Elena Roerich, like Helene Blavatsky, had outsized influence on the seeking milieu.

paths as there are roads and alleyways in Moscow, and Tania and countless others wandered about that city through a network of signposts and waypoints. Seekers headed west and then east, they walked the ring-road from science to mysticism and back, they navigated narrow dogma and paused in the wide open squares, awed by the grandeur of the cosmos. What united them was seeking itself, the pursuit of some meaning in all the noise, when society at large could not provide it.

The seeking milieu is the protagonist of this history. In the early 1970s, the sociologist of religion Colin Campbell defined similar cultures as “cultic milieus” and argued that they should be studied collectively; this dissertation is indebted to his observations, which describe the Soviet case quite well¹¹. In both his and my case, the members of the milieu are truth-seekers by disposition, pursuing new and deeper insights into the world that appeared to be crumbling around them. Their worldviews were syncretic rather than dogmatic, and they were loathe to dismiss any idea out of hand. They had highly-developed communication networks, and a shared body of literature from which countless elaborations sprang. Above all, they were united by the search itself, more than anything they might have found. All of this is in keeping with such milieus in other times and places.

Campbell falls short, however, in one meaningful way. The milieus he described understood themselves to be deviant from society at large, but these Soviet seekers did not necessarily, and their boundaries blended quite smoothly into the masses around them. This is made plain by the crossover success of figures such as Chumak and Kashpirovskii, by the vague but well-engrained respect for Orthodox saints and icons that endured through the Soviet period, and by the pervasive superstitions that, to any honest observer, seem a permanent feature of Russian culture. Put differently, the seeking milieu, as examined in this dissertation, was a heightened expression of a much broader phenomenon, highly visible and (apparently) radical in its departure from Soviet norms, but in no way external to the extent that Zakhar Prilepin suggests above.

This is confirmed further by the sociological markers of the milieu, in that no single demonstrable quality distinguishes them from their neighbors. The milieu was drawn from the urban middle-class, most from the so-called “technical intelligentsia” - highly educated and specialized in some specific, usually scientific or engineering function of the Soviet economy. They were predominately young people but of working age, and while they were concentrated in Moscow and in Leningrad, they could be found in every major city, and spread even more widely after the collapse.¹² Their leaders and prominent figures were mostly men, but the rank-and-file split evenly among men and women, and some currents consisted mostly of women.¹³

¹¹ Campbell, Colin. “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization.” *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972): 119–36.

¹² Marat Shterin, “New Religious Movements in Russia in the 1990s,” in Kotiranta, Matti, ed. *Religious Transition in Russia*. Helsinki: Kikumora Publications : Aleksanteri Institute, 2000, 186-188.

¹³ Rosenthal, Bernice Glatzer. *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*. Cornell University Press, 1997, 15, demonstrates the preponderance of women in this milieu. In my own observations, the milieu did not differentiate itself from late Soviet society as a whole in terms of gender, either in its makeup or in its assumptions, but the ‘rank and file’ were indeed more women than men. Men were more likely to be in prominent and powerful positions, while women were assumed to be more innately spiritual and made up a majority of the followers. In astrology, for instance, students at the astrology academies were overwhelmingly female, but the teachers were majority men. Among Mormon converts women predominated, but due to strictly gendered access to prominent callings in the church, most written records concern men - the church conducted oral history interviews with early converts, for instance, and 25 of the 33 interviewees were men. Of the eight women, three participated alongside their husbands. In my interviews, I have a slight preponderance of men, for the simple reason that men and women both were more likely to refer me to other men, but I corrected for this tendency as much as possible.

Nor were the seekers ideologically deviant, at least not at first. Most continued to accept, in a broad sense, the ideals of communism, and vanishingly few had been active political dissidents.¹⁴ Most strikingly, given the outcome, the vast majority had grown up in non-believing households. Like many Soviets, their grandparents - usually a grandmother - carried elements of Orthodox spirituality into their lives from across the revolutionary divide. Yet the majority of seekers had, like their neighbors, been raised by atheist or agnostic parents.¹⁵ This last point is striking for the same reason that the phenomenon was striking to Prilepin. Soviet society was officially enlightened, and this milieu's sudden emergence was incomprehensible to those who assumed that this enlightenment was irreversible.

Origins

Not everybody shared this assumption, and the historical roots of this new phenomenon are quite clear upon inspection. The seeking milieu was seeded in small intellectual circles that had been pursuing radical alternatives to routinized socialism since the 1970s. These circles formed in the late Soviet vacuum of inspiration, and their ideas were a cultural response to the discrediting and disappearance of Marxism-Leninism as a totalizing worldview. This meant that they gravitated, in their ideals, towards a romanticized old world, seeking to recover truths that were lost in the iconoclasm and militant atheism of the October revolution, and in the wrenching changes of Soviet modernization. Yet these very changes, while they did destroy a traditional way of life and the structures of meaning that once oriented Russian people in their world, had not been empty of meaning themselves. Although ultimately the Soviet Union did not produce a "socialist way of life" that could guide and inspire individuals, it did effect dramatic and at times fantastical changes in lifestyles, in the landscape, and in the country's social and intellectual character. Soviet modernity was inextricable from the worldviews and ideas that the milieu fostered, and despite Zakhar Prilepin's incredulity, entirely apparent in their apotheosis at the time of the collapse. Thus the history of the milieu doesn't begin precisely with disillusion, but with its opposite, in the optimism and enthusiasm of the Soviet 1950s.

The period from the late 1950's to the early 1960's was the closest that the Soviet Union ever came to fostering a spirituality that might have rivaled the real thing. It was the last and most broadly recognized appearance of a unified Soviet worldview - of moral renewal, international brotherhood, scientific and technical progress, and defiant atheism, all bound to a sacred center - now not so much in Lenin and the party, but in the rocket, the satellite and the cosmonaut. It was the triumphs of the Soviets in space, paired with peace, hope and economic growth back on earth, that lent these socialist values a kind of transcendence. There seemed, for these few years at least, a correspondence between the postwar present and the space-bound future, an upward-sloping shape of time to which Soviet people could affix their lives. And all this appeared in the absence of institutionalized religion. This moment is examined in the chapter that follows this introduction, and its afterlives color the world of seekers that the dissertation takes as its object.

But by the late 1960s, the promise of the Soviet space age was dead. As material expectations went

¹⁴ This is derived from all of my interviews in aggregate, and is affirmed by a growing body of scholarship descended from Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.

¹⁵ Furman and Kaariainen, "Religiosity in Russia in the 1990s" in Kotiranta, Matti, ed. *Religious Transition in Russia*. Helsinki: Kikumora Publications : Aleksanteri Institute, 2000, 47.

unmet on the ground, particularly in contrast with the West, and as Cold War brinksmanship revealed the true and horrifying purpose of rocketry, the tenuous ties between heaven and earth dissipated like contrails. So too did the ties that bound Soviet ideology's various parts. Communalism, internationalism, and scientific rationalism remained as shared ideals, but without public faith in a leader or a future that united them, they became grounds for criticism or light mockery of the state, or at least, metrics with which to appraise it, and the state fared more or less poorly. Soviet cultural organs, meanwhile, continued to fight for atheism, and even with increasing earnestness and self-awareness.¹⁶ But they did so in the face of widespread indifference, especially among the youth - the state was defending a largely empty concept from a largely imagined foe.¹⁷

Finally, the ties that bound the country's intellectuals to the government and to socialism had dissolved as well. Where once their forebears occupied the Kremlin and ruled the country, the era of stagnation saw a new intelligentsia flee the center and regroup in their myriad kitchens, mostly in Moscow and Leningrad, where - though they could not have known it at the time - they set about building a post-Soviet culture.

The kitchen circle, or *kruzhok*, was the central site for Soviet people, possessed of Soviet values and Soviet resources, to pursue and elaborate un-Soviet ideas. Un-soviet, but not anti-Soviet - for although there were dissidents, and they too met around a bottle of vodka in their kitchens, active dissent was not at the heart of this period's intellectual culture.¹⁸ To the early seekers that concern us, the dissidents' truth was dogmatic and, in that way, not unlike the state's truth, and neither provided the flexibility of meaning that a genuine cultural movement requires.¹⁹ The same was true both for atheism and for Russian Orthodoxy, though the latter would seem apt for elaboration. Concerning atheism, to borrow from the best historian on the topic, it lacked a transcendent morality that could forgive individual weakness and connect one's life to something eternal.²⁰ It lacked positive beliefs and practices, and could never escape the trap of being defined primarily in opposition to something else. By the 1970s, it could hardly attract a sidelong glance from the writers and artists who were meant to carry socialism's torch.²¹ But paradoxically, this was a consequence of atheism's unquestionable success in other regards. It was because of earlier atheist triumphs that Russian Orthodoxy was also unfit to fill a spiritual vacuum, as it had been in large part expunged from the public consciousness, and deep knowledge of the tradition was now thin on the ground. Nearly all of these intellectuals had had atheist parents; literature was sparse and controlled; and the institution of the church was hobbled, reduced by the state to an object of tourism.

Still, Orthodoxy was the closest thing to a shared spiritual tradition and did have its place in this

¹⁶ Smolkin, Victoria. *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018, chapter 7.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Aron, Leon Rabinovich. *Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas, and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987-1991*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012 is a major work on the collapse and transition period, focused on (liberal-minded) dissent, but the title reveals a fundamentally different perspective than my own - treating the period as a "revolution" rather than an unraveling. It is safe to say that a vast majority of historians would question that term, though Aron's book does document a meaningful current in the larger process.

¹⁹ This parallelism comes clearest in Oushakine, S. Alex. "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat." *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (April 1, 2001): 191-214, and underlies Yurchak's conception of the period in *Everything Was Forever*. It is also a common talking point of members of the seeking milieu, who more generally treat politics as - to quote one interview subject - "a patina on the enormous body of reality."

²⁰ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, 195.

²¹ Ibid., 194.

milieu, and that place reveals much about their disposition. “Cultural preservation,” meaning the protection and improvement of churches and icons, became a hobby of sorts, and icons did begin to appear in intellectuals’ apartments, though more out of fashion than faith.²² The saints, traditions and rituals of Orthodox culture became objects of study and discussion, as did Judaism, Islam and Buddhism - together, the four “traditional faiths” that the state officially recognized. Thus the prevailing disposition can be described as reflective or backward-looking, and this was true of a much wider range of pursuits. Some *krushki* studied ancient languages, and indeed, Moscow linguists of this milieu developed a rigorous theory of an ur-language that antedated the Indo-European family.²³ Others explored nationalisms with varying degrees of mysticism, and still others sought lost civilizations, including Atlantis and Hyperborea, the former drawing from ancient Greek political thought, and the latter from Greek mythology (and then, as we saw above, merged with mythology of the ancient Slavs). History (in various non-Marxist guises), archeology, paleontology and ethnogenesis were explored and elaborated, like all else above, through surreptitious (though rarely illicit) networks of literature exchange.

For all the looking backwards, however, it was perfectly clear that going back was impossible. Like atheism, socialism too had both failed and succeeded. Though its vision for the future was dead and discredited, the revolution had succeeded in tearing the Russian Empire out of the past, and making of its subjects thoroughly modern people. And while these people, having crossed that great historical divide, found the other side wanting, their search was naturally inspired by the values with which they had grown up, and by the man-made wonders that make the modern world perfectly enchanting. Utopian internationalism may have been reduced, by that time, to window dressing for crude foreign policy realism, but Soviet journalists were still sending real-time dispatches from all over the globe, Moscow was still chattering in dozens of languages, scholars were routinely flying to India, and reciting Sanskrit poetry to their friends back home. Soviet science, in chasing the West, may have bypassed the average Soviet citizen, but nothing could tarnish the heritage of Sputnik and Gagarin, nobody could doubt the god-like authority of the physicist and the mathematician, and nowhere were education and intellect seen as a barrier to insight. Thus a powerful modern current flowed through the *krushki* as well, one that swirled and mixed imperfectly with older modes of thought. Hence the popularity of 19th century esotericism, which formed in a similar moment of backward-looking modernism, and which strove to reunite science, philosophy and faith following their unplanned parting of ways. A typical conversation in a *krushok* may have turned on unusual and extraordinary powers of the mind, which were perhaps under examination in Soviet labs, or perhaps known to yogis in India, or to the ancients, as hinted at in their mystical texts; it didn’t particularly matter so long as the idea was novel, and so long as it could be related to everything else in the world.

One last Soviet ideal, imperfectly realized and unappreciated at the time, fostered this community - the communal ethic that did, as it turned out, govern Soviet life. The USSR did achieve stability and equality for a time, even if the stability seemed numbing then, and the equality seemed an equality in poverty. The planned economy had mass-produced a middle-class lifestyle, contained in identical concrete housing blocks, sectioned into clear working and free hours, and funded generously enough to treat guests for a long evening, or at least assemble a table spread together. It was unthinkable then

²² Ibid., 200-203

²³ The so-called Nostratic hypothesis, which posits a theoretical ur-language group antedating and encompassing the Indo-European family, emerged entirely from scholarly circles in Moscow in the 1960s.

that the ideas under discussion would one day have a great impact, because they developed in a mood of dragging and limitless time, under the assumption that history hadn't quite ended, but in the Soviet Union had clearly stalled. And so people talked late into the night about things larger than politics, their kitchen windows glowing over the courtyards or over the trolley cables on the street, in cities ringed with factories from a receding epoch, under a sky with no God, but with plenty of stars and the occasional passing satellite.

Collapse

Those satellites, as we now know, would outlast the state that launched them, fixed in serene and regular orbit while everything on the ground came apart. While true that the Cold War ended without large-scale armed conflict, regional conflicts did destroy many former-Soviet lives, and the traumas endured by the larger Soviet population have few historical parallels outside of wartime. These were made all the more jarring by their suddenness - virtually no observer of any political station foresaw the crisis, and by no metric of economics, foreign policy, defense or internal affairs could the country have been called unstable as late as 1985.²⁴ Thus the problems that racked the lives of Soviet people in the years that followed cannot be arranged in neat causal sequence, as if they followed logically from the failure of a single weak link. All of this is to say that the description below, and the dissertation that follows, do not diagnose *why* the USSR collapsed, but instead examine *how*. The material and spiritual facets of the collapse are the last factors that shaped its culture, and are thus highly important, even if parsing and organizing the details obscures a fundamental chaos.²⁵

As seen by the Soviet citizen, the process began with Gorbachev's ascent to power in 1985, and the subsequent reforms to the economy and media on which he bet his legacy. The process began with hope, but drifted inexorably towards discontent and ended in despair - a decade of convulsions and crises that eroded the foundations on which Soviet people had built and planned their lives. It was in this context - liberal and participatory media, observing and responding to political catastrophe - that the ideas incubated in the kitchen *keruzhki* spilled down onto the streets. These ideas substantially shaped the culture of the collapse, even as the collapse shaped them in turn. What resulted was a flourishing of new worldviews that provided orientation for millions of Soviet people, while further disorienting millions more.

The processes of reform and collapse unfolded in mass media. Every policy measure and its unintended consequences were broadcast in real time, set to a drumbeat of exposés which, rather than

²⁴ Aron, *Roads to the Temple*, 16.

²⁵ There is a small but growing body of histories of the Soviet collapse that do attempt causal explanations. Not all are by historians. The first might be Remnick, David. *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, though Remnick is a journalist, and his causal explanations are somewhat vague, focused on structural problems stemming from Stalinism. Aron's *Roads to the Temple*, in emphasizing the country's stability, puts great weight on ideological fracturing and dissent. Suny, Ronald Grigor. *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993 attributes much to national discontent from below. More recently, Kotkin, Stephen. *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 argues for the planned economy's fundamental inferiority vis-a-vis capitalism, and for the fragility of the union structure on account of early nationalities policy, but unlike Suny he does not see national movements as central agents. Zubok, V. M. *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, while not formally a history of the collapse, suggests strongly that moral rot and its highlighting by intellectuals, particularly after 1968, contributes greatly to the state losing legitimacy.

informing citizens of things they didn't know, confirmed what was plainly obvious, and demonstrated the massive scale and systemic nature of the country's failings. This was by design - Gorbachev imagined a liberalized media as his ally against sclerotic and corrupt elements of the apparatus. But as television viewership and print consumption skyrocketed, an unintended feedback set in - trust in state media outlets grew alongside distrust in the state itself, with journalists' esteem pinned to their muckraking. This phenomenon crested in the extraordinary period 1989-1992, when media were not yet privatized but effectively ungoverned, and retained the trust and viewership of the preceding years. This, again, was a crucial and formative moment in post-Soviet culture, rich in spectacle and highly memorable to Russians today, initiated by the phenomenon of Chumak and Kashpirovskii. It also coincided with the beginning of Russia's biggest crisis since the war.

There was no financial crisis to speak of in the Soviet Union until 1988, though official assurances to this end were increasingly hard to trust - throughout the 1980s, a growing share of exchange had moved underground, and elites had long been spending foreign currency in restricted-access stores, essentially inhabiting a parallel economic reality. Then, from 1988 into the later 1990s, the economy at large would undergo contraction so severe as to dwarf the Great Depression in the United States.²⁶ Russia's GDP fell by 25% between 1991 and 1995.²⁷ The decline in production was unparalleled even in 20th century *Russian* history, including during the Revolution and the Great Patriotic War.²⁸ In effect, Russia underwent a rapid de-industrialization, shifting towards the extraction of resources, and of fossil fuels and metals in particular. These represented 25% of the economy in 1990 and more than 50% five years later.²⁹ These numbers are not wholly reliable, either - an estimated 50% of GDP, by the mid-1990s, was in the unofficial or shadow economy.³⁰

All of this happened in the context of rapid and conspicuously corrupt privatization of public assets, during which inequality skyrocketed and a third of all state property was transferred to just a few dozen oligarchs.³¹ This process began fairly gently under Gorbachev in 1988, with a limited conversion of state enterprises into private businesses that could deal with foreign actors without state mediation. Economic decline over the next three years, however, coupled with the ascent of Yeltsin and his team of "shock therapy" reformers, prompted more dramatic measures. By late 1991, major enterprises were being hastily converted into joint-stock companies, and their bureaucrat managers hastily converted into wealthy businessmen. The very day after the USSR was dissolved - on January 1, 1992 - price controls were lifted, in response to food shortages across the country. The next year saw the first major program of privatization, a voucher scheme in the years 1992-1994, which gives a sense of the transition's historic criminality. In the eighteen months that the vouchers were valid and circulating, their value never exceeded \$20, and there were approximately 150 million in total. Thus they were worth \$3 billion together, but represented one third of all assets in a country with an annual

²⁶ A bit more on the apparent stability before the crisis: from 1981-1985, GDP grew at 1.9 percent per year on average, and continued, if more erratically, in this ballpark through 1989. There was no notable budget deficit - less than 2% of GDP in 1985 - and though it reached 9% in 1989, most economists would not find this alarming. Inflation-adjusted wages rose steadily from 1985-1990, at over 7% on average. All of this from Aron, *Roads to the Temple*, 13.

²⁷ For comparison, this decline is roughly equivalent to that of the United States between 1929-1933. Russia would see another very sharp drop in the "Ruble crisis" of 1998.

²⁸ Piotr Dutkiewicz, Vladimir Kulind, and Richard Sakwa, eds. *A Social History of Post-Communist Russia*. Taylor and Francis, 2016, 41-42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

³¹ *Ibid.* On inequality, the Gini coefficient was 26% in 1986, 38% in 1995.

GDP around \$1 trillion.³² Poor citizens had no choice but to sell and then scrape; schemers, managers and insiders amassed fortunes. This had immense, destabilizing consequences for average people, both in the pathologies that accompany widespread poverty, and in the corruption and protection rackets that came to govern urban economies. Between 1988 and 1993, crime rates doubled.³³

The ultimate consequence of these wrenching changes - the true measure of the crisis - was a catastrophe of public health. Overall in Russia, mortality rates began to outpace birth rates in 1992, and there were around 1.3 million excess deaths between 1992 and 1995.³⁴ These trends were driven primarily by cardiovascular disease and so-called external causes of death - homicides, suicides and accidental poisonings. Each of these fell particularly hard on Russia's men, whose life expectancy plunged from 65 years to 59 between 1987 and 1993.³⁵ Such a drop has no historical precedent outside of war, epidemic or natural disaster.³⁶ In the 1990s, cardiovascular disease rates in general were twice as high as would be expected from income levels alone, and Russia's rate was in fact higher than that of any other population on earth.³⁷ But men suffered in particular, on account of stress-aggravated pathologies - these included long-term or heavy drug and alcohol abuse, poor nutrition, and anxiety from widespread dislocation in employment, none of which could be remedied in the crumbling public health system. Concerning external causes of death, Russia had the highest rates in the world by 1993.³⁸ Murder rates tripled in the space of just a few years - by the mid-1990s, the murder rate was thirty in 100,000, compared with just six in 1985.³⁹ Suicide rates nearly doubled between 1985 and 1995, from twenty-three out of 100,000 to forty-one.⁴⁰ Poisonings correlated with drug and alcohol abuse. In 1995, one study showed 70%-80% of Russian men ages 20-55 to drink regularly, with 5%-10% in all age groups drinking 100 grams of vodka or its equivalent daily.⁴¹ By 1995, the number of narcotics users in Russia was estimated at two million, with the vast majority under thirty years of age.⁴²

Though these statistics are dramatic, they still fail to approach the disorientation that defined this period for individual people, above and beyond its material hardship. In part, that disorientation can be understood by contrast - by the numbers above, Russia at this time was comparable in most ways

³² Ibid., 49.

³³ Dolgovoi, A.I. *Kriminologija: Uchebnik dlja VUZov*. 3rd ed. Moscow: NORMA, 2005, 162.

³⁴ Eberstadt, Nicholas, and Apoorva Shah. "Russia's Demographic Disaster." Special Report. American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, May 2009, 2-3. Excess mortality is the difference between the actual number of deaths in a given year and the estimated number of deaths for that year that would have taken place if constant age-specific mortality rate schedules from 1986 to 1987—the benchmark period—had prevailed instead.

³⁵ Shkolnikov, V.M., and France Meslé. "The Russian Epidemiological Crisis as Mirrored by Mortality Trends," table 4.1. Accessed March 19, 2017. http://www.rand.org/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF124/cf124.chap4.html, and Dutkiewicz et al., *A Social History of Post-communist Russia*, 46. To compare, life expectancy for men in the United States in 1993 was just over 72, and the United States is never a world leader in this metric. American data from From the National Center of Health Statistics, a department of the CDC. Available online, accessed 10 December 2013 at <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005148.html>

³⁶ Dutkiewicz et al., *A Social History of Post-communist Russia*, 46.

³⁷ Eberstadt and Shah, "Russia's Demographic Disaster," 4.

³⁸ Shkolnikov and Meslé, "The Russian Epidemiological Crisis."

³⁹ This compared with 6-8 in the United States at the same time, and only between one and two in Western Europe, Canada, China, Japan and Israel. Dutkiewicz et al., *A Social History of Post-communist Russia*, 44-45.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For women, the figures were 50%-60%. It should be noted that these numbers likely skew low, as the heaviest users were unlikely to participate in the study.

⁴² Kimberly C. Neuhauser, "The Market for Illegal Drugs in the Soviet Union in the Late 1980s" no. 23 in Berkeley-Duke Occasional Papers on the Second Economy in the USSR (January 1990), 28, and the Library of Congress country studies, 1996. Accessed 3 December 2013 at [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+ru0212\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+ru0212)).

to developing countries elsewhere. But developing from what? In the lifetimes of most adults - the generation born after the war - the country had led the world into space, won over twenty Nobel prizes, competed at the highest levels of international sport, and not five years ago, guaranteed free health care and education to a population of 300 million. Inequality had been low, as had crime relative to equivalent economies, and life expectancy had lagged only slightly behind Western peers.⁴³ To be sure, most of these accomplishments have complex histories and came with hidden costs, and the stability and dependability of the Soviet welfare state may very well have been illusory from the outset. But these caveats are purely academic - for the average person, history had robbed Soviet people of their dignity, and left them unequipped to live in the country in which they found themselves.

And what was that country? The new Russia had no governing philosophy and in many ways no government; it had no ideological underpinning or shared sense of its past or future; for a time it had no national anthem, and when the Soviet anthem was reinstated, for a time it had no words. The economy was chaotic, a torrent of unfamiliar words and concepts and confusing financial instruments, ostensibly guided by refined Western theory but in practice a free-for-all, rife with scams and phony numbers. Jews, young women, the highly educated and the well-connected were vanishing, crossing the once-imposing border with the West; new borders, once only lines on the Soviet map, were dividing families, or in other cases, witnessing massive flows of migrants in both directions. And the streets looked different, and not just for these new or missing people. Garish advertising was unknown to Soviet cities, and utterly unrestrained in those same cities in the Russian Federation - ubiquitous, often aggressive or crude, sometimes pornographic, and together, a blight on once-dignified (if drab) urban landscapes. Pornography, too, was a new presence, and alongside the prostitutes and gangsters and overt drinking and drug use, a hazard for morally-minded citizens and particularly for parents of children and teens. In a word there was a moral crisis, felt just as deeply as the privations of the economic downturn.

Finally, there was a spiritual crisis, in the sense that all of the above severed people from anything fixed or eternal. The long-term expectations and the deeply-held values of most Soviet people suddenly amounted to nothing, and had no bearing on their lives in a world without reference points. And here we must come down from our historical perch, and pause to truly appreciate that nobody knew what would become of this country, nor did they recognize any natural limit to its descent. The experience of the Soviet collapse was the experience of total disorientation.

The seeking milieu emerged and grew on account of the disorientation of the transition. By studying this culture, with attention to the particular solutions it offered to Soviet people, we can reveal both the external form and the internal dynamics of the Soviet Union's existential crisis.

Sources

The seeking milieu did not define itself or police its own boundaries, as the rejection of strict categories was its basic premise and wandering its ethos. From the perspective of a researcher, establishing empirical criteria for membership thus risks missing the point. Any individual's beliefs are necessarily idiosyncratic and fall in various places on any number of spectra - beliefs vary from marginal curiosities to totalizing philosophies; from self-conscious faith to self-defined hard science;

⁴³ Dutkiewicz et al., *A Social History of Post-communist Russia*, 43.

from Eastern to Western; from mainstream acceptability to radical world-rejection. What I have done is to select five highly visible (and today, highly memorable) currents, which radically diverge from what would have previously been considered conventional, and which might be called worldviews rather than methods (for instance, I have excluded mind-reading or “extrasense” healing for particular ailments). The chapters, in order, are a history of Soviet astrology, of the Soviet Hare Krishna movement, of the arrival of Mormonism, of the apocalyptic Vissarion sect, and of mathematician Anatolii Fomenko’s popular and imaginative “New Chronology” of world history which, based on ostensibly hard data, folds all historical epochs into the last thousand years. These studies are sufficiently disparate, but not so isolated that the participants and their ideas would seem alien to one another, and based on scholarship and popular accounts of this milieu, no major features of the larger phenomenon go unaddressed in my chapters. Each chapter highlights a particularly strong current or currents that animated much larger groupings of individuals and ideas.

The dissertation is built from over sixty interviews with members of the seeking milieu, which I conducted in Moscow and among members of a the Vissarion sect in the wilderness of southern Siberia. My interviews are substantially buttressed by archival materials and Soviet media, in addition to secondary literature in history, anthropology, and the sociology of religion.⁴⁴ Each case study also includes a deep analysis of the specific doctrines in question, and much research time has been dedicated to unrecorded conversation and careful reading of scriptures, books and pamphlets produced by the groups under study.

The chapters progress chronologically, and in doing so, trace the origins and flourishing of the spiritual world of the collapse. Each can be read and understood in isolation from the others, but major themes are introduced in each, and generally speaking, persist and become more explicit as the chapters progress thereafter.

Among the movements under study, astrology stands alone as a true mass phenomenon, which by the early 1990s was ubiquitous in the press and attracted high levels of public interest. Chapter 1 proceeds from the observation, based in my research, that many of the astrologers were highly educated in the natural sciences, especially in mathematics, physics and astronomy. It begins with a broader assessment of scientific culture in 20th century Russia and the USSR, and goes on to explore the fate of Soviet scientism as a worldview. Following a selection of astrologers from their youth in the Sputnik era into the late 1980s, I argue that both the form and the spiritual content of astrology bear striking resemblance to the ideals of the Soviet space age, which posited invisible ties between dazzling scientific accomplishments in space and the everyday. Astrology offered what the USSR failed to provide - answers to basic personal questions, a social good, and a spiritual orientation for the urban educated masses. It also smoothed the rupture of the collapse, by describing time as cyclical and crises as transient, though this chapter treats time only implicitly. This chapter, as well as the next, focuses heavily on the pre-reform Soviet roots of the larger milieu, from the late 1950s through the 1980s. The chapter include, in particular, a more detailed analysis of the kitchen *krushki*, and both the backward-looking and the thoroughly modern assumptions that early seekers brought to their pursuit.

⁴⁴ In Moscow, I collected materials from the files of the Council on Religious Affairs of the USSR (d. 6991) at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF); and made great use of the newspaper and magazine collections at the State Public Historical Library of Russia and at the Lenin Library in Moscow. At home in the States, I am indebted to Stanford’s Hoover Institution, Columbia’s Bakhmeteff Archive and the Church History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Astrology was part of a broader interest in esotericism, and the Hare Krishna movement grew out of a parallel fascination with traditions of the East. Here, too, Soviet educations - now in Eastern and Indian studies, fields promoted by the state from the 1950s - transformed quite readily into un-Soviet beliefs. Chapter 2 shows that in Krishna Consciousness, seekers were drawn to the venerable and undivided authority of the Indian vedas, which deny modern distinctions between science, religion and philosophy and, like astrology, claim eternal relevance to problems of daily life. The movement offered a nostalgic return to a deep, primordial past, untouched by the ruptures and corruptions of human rule. Nostalgia, of course, came to color a wide range of post-Soviet cultural currents, and the conclusion of this chapter speaks to the broader phenomenon. Finally, nostalgia implies a particular view of time itself, and this chapter introduces that thread of analysis, which recurs in every chapter thereafter.

Like the East, the West too was mythologized and idealized by a segment of the seeking milieu. The collapse saw an unprecedented encounter between these once-separate worlds, the face of which was, for most Russians, the tens of thousands of Western missionaries that flooded into Soviet cities after 1990.⁴⁵ These missionaries, with Mormons early and prominent among them, found outsized interest in their message. In chapter 3 I argue that Mormon missionaries, as living embodiment of both deeply-held faith and its tangible benefits (not just in ties to the West, but in physical and moral health and in charity), presented a sort of utopia in the present, itself the essence of Mormon practice worldwide. To build Zion in Russia, as the Mormons promised to do, was particularly appealing in contrast with Russian Orthodoxy, which many saw as morally compromised or fixated on suffering as prerequisite for salvation. The Mormon church merged the present with a beautiful eternity, with the resources to realize this promise. This chapter and the next introduce the tumultuous material and moral circumstances of the early 1990s and thus, introduce the Russian Federation and its nascent culture. Themes common to both chapters include Russia's place vis-a-vis the West and the world more generally, and the conviction common to many Russian spiritual movements that Russia should be the fount of a more universal salvation.

One of this era's most visible features were radical sects, each with its charismatic leader and promise of doomsday, to be followed by the union of heaven and earth. The Vissarion sect, which has established a functioning commune in the Siberian wilderness (where my interviews were conducted), was by far the most successful of these in terms of radical separation and an enduring, stable outcome. It has no equivalent either in the Soviet period or since. Chapter 4 explores the conditions of 1991, when the sect emerged, and how they might explain the sect's success. To this end, it focuses on the spiritual richness and diversity of the period (including all the currents above), the networks of seekers that promoted this, and the substantial charisma of Vissarion himself, who creates the movement's doctrine and builds a new world in constant collaboration with his followers. Like all apocalypses, Vissarion's is an erasure of history in pursuit of a clean slate and more perfect future. But it also bears the imprint of Orthodoxy and several distinctly Russian currents, and this chapter addresses a broader conception of Russia as a martyr for the world. This idea has a rich lineage, and took many forms following 1991.

The dissertation's themes - the search for new authorities, the relation of science and belief, the unique place of Russia in the world, and the various shapes of time - culminate in chapter 5, on the

⁴⁵ 1990 saw the passage of a broad law on freedom of conscience, which rescinded Soviet-era restrictions on religious practice and proselytizing.

iconoclastic mathematician Anatolii Fomenko. Fomenko gained notoriety (and a large following) in the 1990s by allegedly proving, on the basis of astronomical data, that recorded human history began a mere thousand years ago. He and his readers view “official” history as a series of cover-ups and reinventions by those in power - a claim not wholly without merit - but a careful reader may also find reasons to doubt his corrections. Ultimately, Fomenko’s ideas exist on the boundary of faith and reason, which is why they appear here at all, and they are analyzed here as a cultural phenomenon rather than on their scientific merits. To his readers, Fomenko has resolved the question of Russia’s place in the world, and the more personal question of what it means to be Russian. Concerning time, his theory discards the past with abandon to help orient readers in the present, and in this way is not only a part of the larger phenomenon I describe, but exemplary of its deepest function. This chapter differs in form from the rest, and most explicitly considers why time and its shape are so central to all of the believers that populate the dissertation as a whole.

Methods

The interplay of faith and reason, both in the worldview of an individual and in a broader culture, poses distinct obstacles to neat categorization by a historian. Though the methods I have employed are wholly within the bounds of the historical discipline, and my analysis is grounded as much as possible in reason, faith is an irreducible component of the history I tell, and requires of both the author and the reader a certain comfort with ambiguity.⁴⁶ This is not a weakness of the study, but rather a recognition that historical methods are inherently exoteric, while the study is premised on the existence of an inner dimension that will always be understood through the prism of personal experience. The ideas that motivate people, while irrefutably important to history, cannot be reduced to their textual expressions, nor can they be productively scrutinized in terms of truth and falsehood. Those questions are best answered by the reader’s own contemplation, which I neither discourage nor insist upon. Given the same evidence, some readers will see ticks of the human psyche and others will see self-deception or self-interest; some will be comfortable with mysteries while others readily accept signs and wonders. For the purposes of historical understanding, the most sensible position is that it doesn’t matter. The goal of my analysis is to take the vast diversity and proliferation of new ideas together as a marker of a societal crisis, to observe generally their forms and assumptions, and then situate these in a history we can speak about more confidently. Methodologically, the link between these levels of analysis - between idiosyncratic and often contradictory beliefs and the highly visible mass phenomenon of seeking - are oral history interviews, which make up the bulk of the dissertation’s primary source base.

Because interviews are the starting point for each chapter’s analysis, they merit specific attention here to both the method’s strengths and its weaknesses. On one hand, the interview is a powerful medium for observing lived experience and for understanding the motivations of historical actors, especially those who do not see themselves as such. Yet on the other, failings and biases of memory, self-conscious image-making, and the accumulated experience of elapsed time compel the historian to parse and probe and contemplate each phrase. Certain structures of the discipline must be discarded

⁴⁶ This understanding is greatly influenced by, and eloquently stated in, Hanegraaff, Wouter J. *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed. Guides for the Perplexed*. New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2013, 12.

entirely, at least in the early stages of analysis - for instance, the periodizations that historians project back onto the past have no bearing on human experience as it played out, and only limited bearing even on people's memories of "periods" gone by.⁴⁷

A historian of religion in the late Soviet Union would place great significance on major turning points in religious policy that had concrete consequences on the ground - for instance, Gorbachev's embrace of the Orthodox church at its 1988 millennial celebrations; the 1990 law on freedom of conscience, and the 1997 curtailment of that law in favor of the Orthodox church, which marked an end to Russia's brief life as a truly secular state.⁴⁸ But if an interviewer were to suggest such boundaries, few individuals would consider them important, and those who did should be suspected of trying to please the interviewer. In fact, errors in locating major boundaries and events, such as the election of Gorbachev or the putsch of 1991, were quite common in my interviews, as were the misplacement of memories in time, for instance, recalling bread lines where and when they were quite unlikely.

Other limitations require particular care from the historian to gain the reader's trust. The first is the question of subjects' self-selection: it is difficult to locate an "average" believer from a cultural movement already past, and quite easy to find the truest and most committed, who are confident in articulating their views and have retained them for a long time (in this case, twenty years or more). For this, I can only treat my subjects as "ideal types," and attempt to derive from them the common factors that likely moved their fellow believers, while recognizing that many more came and went from their circles. Another concern is a subject's political views. I conducted my interviews in 2014-2015, at the traumatic onset of the crisis in eastern Ukraine, when views on Russia's relationship to the West were undergoing a substantial polarization. In such a climate, few interviewees would admit to (or remember?) holding optimistic visions of the West during the collapse, even while interviews conducted in 1995 with Russian Mormons are suffused with such optimism. The same can be said generally of memories of Soviet life which, for many Russians, have aged quite well. Of course, the solution in this case is not to skirt the topic altogether, but to collect impressions as they are and then scrutinize them, especially in the absence of earlier sources with which to compare. The second chapter, on nostalgia and the Hare Krishna movement, addresses this question most thoroughly, by incorporating literature and reflections on nostalgia, and by examining language in fine detail to understand its power to reshape the past.

One final problem applies equally to politics as to beliefs of any kind, including those that lay at this project's core. It concerns the difficulty of locating the origins of belief, which would seem essential to the history I aim to tell. Nearly all of my subjects grew up agnostic, in the sense that they gave little thought to any world beyond the visible. That essential leap - from indifference to often fervent belief - is an important one, in that the process on a societal scale is what makes the period under study worth studying at all. This problem is clearest in Chapter 4, on the apocalyptic Vissarion sect, which emerged precisely in 1991, and whose members share a deep faith in the person of the leader and mystical beliefs about the cosmos quite foreign to Soviet culture. Yet when pressed on how

⁴⁷ Portelli, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991, 69.

⁴⁸ This last point is elaborated in Knox, Zoe. *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia After Communism*. London; New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005 - the 1997 law does mark a sharp departure and reaction against the phenomenon I describe, and in an informal way does bookend this history. The best summary of religious policy in this period is Anderson, John. *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

they came to accept these basic premises, the believers inevitably describe this process in the language of belief itself, as acceptance of spiritual truths that are ultimately self-evident, and untethered from cultural influences or material circumstances; that is, from history.⁴⁹ It is plainly evident, though, that conversions of this type proliferated at precisely the time of the collapse. How, then, to connect individual conversion stories to the material world, or identify chains of cause and effect?

I have approached this problem by asking not only about beliefs but about values, as a means to understand what practical meaning their beliefs had in their life. The discussion of values serves as a bridge. Connecting values to concrete tenets of belief is fairly straightforward, in that they can be observed and elaborated in careful reading of the doctrines and texts of the movement under study. And as the subjects describe the more mundane details of their lives, including the material changes in the late Soviet period that made an individual's values of pressing concern, we can see what adjustments their faith facilitated, and postulate why this or that belief had such meaning at that time. As for the beliefs themselves, I treat the particular currents and assumptions developed in the kitchen *krushki* as comprising an ether from which coherent sets of beliefs condensed, in response to human needs at that time. But methodologically, the connection between those needs and the specific doctrines cannot come directly from the believers themselves.

Oral history is a powerful tool, and its challenges are part and parcel of its illustrative potential, in that they stem from the incompleteness of human beings themselves. One of my subjects, in his closing comments on our interview, said it best: “that’s exactly how it happened, as I recall.” In my approach, I have tried to faithfully reconstruct the lives and motivations of my subjects, but in the awareness that they themselves can recall these only imperfectly. This finds further expression in the project’s theoretical orientation, in that this history raises profound and long-debated questions, but as a rule I have not been overzealous in categorizing or in placing my subjects in formal frameworks remote from human experience. In other words, I have not attempted a theory of religion or of culture generally, nor a causal explanation for the Soviet collapse,⁵⁰ nor an answer to the question of Russia’s place between East and West, but an attuned reader can expect contributions to all of the above. In this first iteration, I have also only rarely treated historical parallels, but the conclusion will open this line of inquiry, to be developed in the project’s next phase. There is, however, an analytical thread that runs through the entire project, which is inextricable from a particular theoretical debate. More than anything else, this project is about secularization as a framework for understanding our modern era,

⁴⁹ Conversion narratives are constructed after the fact, and are heavily influenced by those of other converts, who instruct a seeker what to look for. There is a substantial literature on the topic - this project was particularly influenced by Heirich, Max. “Change of Heart: A Test of Some Widely Held Theories About Religious Conversion.” *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 3 (November 1, 1977): 653–80; James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York, NY: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902 (esp. lectures IX and X); Lofland, John, and Norman Skonovd. “Conversion Motifs.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (December 1, 1981): 373–85; Rambo, Lewis R. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993; Stromberg, Peter G. *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative*. Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Wanner, Catherine. “Advocating New Moralities: Conversion to Evangelicalism in Ukraine.” *Religion, State and Society* 31, no. 3 (n.d.): 273–87; Whitehead, Harriet. *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect*. *Anthropology of Contemporary Issues*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987; as well as Catherine Wanner’s chapter “Missionaries and Pluralism: How the Law Changed the Religious Landscape in Ukraine” in Zaleska Onyshkevych, Larysa M. L., and Mariia Revakovich, eds. *Contemporary Ukraine on the Cultural Map of Europe*. Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. in cooperation with the Shevchenko Scientific Society, 2009.

⁵⁰ On causal theories of the collapse, see note 25 above.

and should contribute substantially to this framework's ongoing abandonment.

On Secularization

The idea that secularization is an inevitable and constituent part of modernity has taken many forms in many eras, but can be stated succinctly - by the later nineteenth century and through the mid-twentieth, it seemed to a wide range of observers that organized religion would decline in parallel with urbanization, scientific and industrial progress, and participatory politics, and that this pattern would ultimately be repeated by other civilizations following Europe's lead. The role of religion in education, politics and law was indeed being supplanted by the nation-state during this period; in the human mind, the fate of religiosity was less certain, but also less important. For Marx, the impending disappearance of religion was due to its function as "the sigh of an oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world" - it was a palliative for the working class that, after capitalism's replacement by a rational and democratic production regime, would be rendered unnecessary. Max Weber agreed with Marx that technological rationality was replacing religion, and indeed that religion served to legitimize relations of dominance. But he was less optimistic that dominance lay primarily in the economic system. Instead, he saw bureaucracy, with its rational standards and emphasis on efficiency, as a modern (and powerful) way of thinking that would disenchant the world, regardless of which class was in charge. In the social sciences - that is, in the scholarly discussion this dissertation joins - Weber's conception has endured longer, aided in part by the example of the Soviet Union, whose great secularizing project looked perfectly disenchanted, but more in the mode of bureaucracy than liberation.

That said, the Soviet Union never became the primary object of secularization debates. By the 1950s and 1960s, formal "secularization theory" came to prominence in Western Europe and (to a less extent) the United States, with its attention on those places in particular. This general model for the relationship of religion to modernity thus endured for almost a century, and encompassed most of Europe and North America at a minimum. In this more refined and formalized variant, more emphasis was placed on religion's relegation to the home and the mind, rather than its inevitable disappearance. That is to say, whether or not religiosity endured, secularization theorists believed its function was changing irreversibly.

At the same time, differences in secularization's form were observed along national lines, and this was ultimately the theory's undoing. By the 1970s, the British sociologist David Martin has articulated a strong rebuttal to any generalized theory by highlighting vastly different outcomes depending on the role of organized religion in a state.⁵¹ Where a single church was dominant in politics and a force for conservatism, secularism (really, anticlericalism) proved stronger in the long run, for instance in the case of France. But the United States has an inverted history, wherein the country was established in opposition to religious hegemony, and since that time, religious agitators have often been forces for reform, and have remained quite clearly relevant in public life. Thus the debate was reframed as being about power relations and institutional religion, rather than modes of thinking, and this mapped much more clearly onto the century of history that Marx and Weber had attempted to forecast. This theoretical reversal was further emboldened by the obvious political (that is, public) relevance of

⁵¹ Martin, David. *A General Theory of Secularization*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

religion by the 1980s, be it the rise of the Christian right in America, the Iranian revolution, or the prominence and influence of Pope John Paul II, especially inside the Eastern bloc. By the 1980s the theory was in retreat, decried as an illusion even by one of its erstwhile promoters.⁵²

David Martin's state-based conception has interesting implications for the Soviet case. At the time of the revolution, when the institution of the church was quite powerful and reactionary, secularization (in the sense of religion receding from the public sphere) advanced quite rapidly, and anticlericalism was a major motive force for social and political action - religion was a power structure that, in a modernizing country, stoked strong opposition. But concerning Soviet hearts and minds, the secularizing outcomes of Soviet modernization were checkered - in short, the government didn't take religion's internal and spiritual dimensions seriously until the 1970s, at which point it was too late. Without a credible social threat from religious institutions, the exhortations of atheist publishers and lecturers in this period mostly fell on deaf ears, even if the public was generally impressed by modern science and unfamiliar with any religious doctrine.

And that appears to have been the outcome of the whole endeavor - a citizenry without investment in dogma, be it Marxist-Leninist or Orthodox, but perfectly open to direct spiritual experience, and without concern for the boundaries between the scientific and the mystical, at times denying that such boundaries exist.⁵³ Scientific culture, like any broad cultural system, had a flexibility of meaning that was unrecognized by the nineteenth century positivists, and indeed lent itself to all manner of magical thinking. This was even more true in Russia, which has a peculiarly rich tradition of uniting science with the transcendent.⁵⁴ And more generally, few intellectuals perceived a contradiction between spiritual exploration and Soviet life - seeking was not dissent, but simply an expansion of worldviews, including in directions that atheist agitators might call "religious." But what it was called was irrelevant to the early seekers - they simply sought something meaningful, to which they could affix their lives. And at the time of the collapse, there was vast public interest in what they'd found.

Secularization theory, in short, was a faith about history, an unprovable postulation that located its believers in time and suggested its broader shape. It shared that with Marxism-Leninism, which also framed humanity's progress in the rigid language of scientific theory, and for that reason also fared poorly when its expectations didn't materialize. Notions of history's direction are always a matter of interpretation, and of belief. This is not to denigrate them - belief, as the secularization debate shows, is an enduring facet of human experience, both in pre-modern times when the world operated by divine mystery, and today, when it is so complex that direct knowledge of its operation is impossible. When the certainties of Soviet life eroded, this last point became clear to millions of people.

As I've shown, Soviet people became disoriented, lacking firm connection to anything stable or eternal. I argue here that the essential character of the crisis is a disorientation in time - that the shape and direction of time is the deepest assumption about the world that, during the crisis, finally gave

⁵² I am referring to Peter Berger, who in the 1960s argued that the plurality of worldviews that accompanies urbanization would necessarily render any dogma less plausible to the average person. In 1990, he said "the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today, with some exceptions, is as furiously religious as ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists, loosely labeled secularisation theory, is essentially mistaken."

⁵³ This insight belongs to Wanner, Catherine, ed. *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine*. Oxford University Press, 2013, 23.

⁵⁴ This is the premise of Banerjee, Anindita. *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012, and is much elaborated in the dissertation's first chapter.

way. This sort of orientation, ultimately, is what the seekers sought and found. My case studies are all bound together by this analytical thread - new conceptions of the shape of time, and their implications for individual lives. The beliefs that my subjects adopted - beliefs esoteric or ancient, foreign or homespun, utopian or apocalyptic - led them to reimagine time in cycles, downward spirals, abrupt ends and new beginnings. For many more, time went nowhere at all - a frenetic standstill, an abyss with no outlet but forbearance.⁵⁵ Viewed together, the culture of the collapse reveals a dramatic fraying at the end of Soviet time, and of the much longer European arc that Marx and Weber both suggested. That is the imagined arc of European modernity - of mass politics, self-realization of the individual, scientific and industrial progress, and secularization. The USSR, having self-consciously adopted the mantle of that modernity, did produce distinctly modern people: urban, middle class, well-educated and unencumbered from youth by the opiate of religious faith. But by the late 1980s, they were also unable to believe that history led anywhere in particular, and they diverged from the alleged modern path. Or more accurately, the path had tapered off imperceptibly under their feet, and by the time they realized it, there was no hope of finding the way back.

⁵⁵ This phrase, a frenetic standstill, comes from Rosa, Hartmut. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. Translated by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys. Reprint edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, which presents a jarring picture of the present moment. Rosa argues that the period in which past experience can forecast the future is forever shrinking in the modern era.

As Above, So Below



As Above, So Below

*“An idea must come first, a fantasy, a fairy tale.
These are followed by precise calculation.
And ultimately, the execution sits as a crown atop the idea.”*
Konstantin Tsiolkovskii

Astrologer Mikhail Borisovich Levin was among the last in the Soviet Union to hear of the August 1991 coup. As that committee of hard-liners clung desperately to the center in Moscow, Levin was thousands of miles away from the capital and several miles above it, hiking in the Pamir mountains of Uzbekistan with a small group of acolytes. As recalled by Tatiana Mitiaeva, by then the vice-rector of Levin’s astrological academy, the news reached them via a forester with a shortwave radio. The forester was nonplussed: “you’re up here relaxing, strolling around, and there’s been a coup in the country.” Although Levin had not foreseen the coup, he immediately located it on the astronomical tables he carried in his bag, and assured his companions that, within three days, it would collapse. And so it did. Such insight and foresight - the twin promises of astrology - suffuse the students’ recollections of the period, as well as those of Levin himself:

Everything was fairly clear at that point. I would put it this way: the beginning of the 1990s, from the cosmic perspective, was a point of great cultural rupture... it’s predictable. It’s a particular cycle. Practically the entire seventy-two years from revolution to dissolution could be calculated.¹

At this great cultural rupture, Levin found his cosmic perspective in high demand. Parallel to his respectable scientific career, he had pursued astrology in secret since the early 1970s, and now respectable Soviet people were asking him to make sense of their universe. “Suddenly,” he recalled, “everybody, in unison, began to call me and ask, ‘what will become of us?’... All of a sudden, this wave. Practically the whole country was frightened.”

Levin was not. Alongside the students he’d been training for over a decade and a handful of astrologer-peers, he was in the newspapers, on the radio and on the television, confidently sharing the

¹ Mikhail Levin, astrologer, interview with the author, December 2014 and October 2015. All biographical information is derived from interviews unless otherwise noted. I am particularly indebted to Mikhail Levin, Olga Galankina and Olga Brushlinskaia for sharing their lives and insights, and to their respective institutions, the Moscow Academy of Astrology and *Science and Religion*. The illustration on the title page is from the first edition of Konstantin Tsiolkovskii’s short story “Na lune,” printed in 1893 in the magazine *Vokrug sveta*.

insights of his science for the benefit of an eager public. Between media appearances, Levin was teaching at the academy he had founded - one of several competing schools in Moscow - where thousands of astrologers would train through the 1990s and to the present day.

One study of belief in Russia, conducted in 1990, showed 49% of respondents to believe that the stars influence their lives, including 32% of self-identifying atheists.² Another study, conducted a year later, found a majority of Russians with some belief in astrology (with far fewer believing in God), and what's more, found that this belief correlated to higher levels of education (though this trend reversed among those holding advanced degrees). Among college graduates, 57% believed.³ All this among people who, before 1989, had practically no exposure to the discipline, outside of those in underground groups like Levin's.

By 1992, syndicated astrology prognoses appeared on the major Soviet TV channels, and by 1993, syndicated horoscopes were run even in *Kommersant*, Russia's premier business newspaper.⁴ Less esteemed newspapers, that is, those with far greater readership, had been running astrology columns from the outset, when the press was liberalized in 1990.⁵ In addition to printed and televised horoscopes, professional astrologers offered private consultations, though not all professionals had been trained and certified at schools like Levin's. Those who had competed with a cottage industry of profit-seekers, at least some of whom read disaster in every natal chart and charged liberally for deliverance.⁶

This chapter will locate Soviet astrology's curious origins and explain its extraordinary visibility in that country's last years, during which it became shorthand for a much larger cultural transformation. On one hand, astrology's utility in a time of crisis is self-evident. The promises and plans on which Soviet people had built their lives had rapidly eroded, and astrology, claiming knowledge of both the present and the future, would naturally provide succor to some. To borrow from a longtime student of Levin's, astrology was a map and a compass for those who were disoriented.⁷ On the other hand, all variety of orientations were on offer. Yet astrology stands alone as a true mass phenomenon, ubiquitous in the press and attracting high levels of interest from broad segments of the population.⁸

² Irena Borowik, "Between Orthodoxy and Eclecticism: On the Religious Transformations of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine," *Social Compass* 49, no. 4 (December 1, 2002): 497–508, 499.

³ Sergei Filatov and Dmitrii E. Furman, "Religiia i Politika v Massovom Soznanii," *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia*, 1992, 6. On education, see Furman and Kaariainen, 35, in Matti Kotiranta, ed., *Religious Transition in Russia* (Helsinki: Kikumora Publications: Aleksanteri Institute, 2000). The findings on education are reiterated in B.V. Dubin, "Pravoslavie, Magiia i Ideologiia v Soznanii Rossiian (90-E Gody)," 361. Dubin's data suggest belief in astrology closer to 30%. In Furman's data, belief in telepathy outpaces that in astrology, though there is reason to believe that these beliefs have related origins (see note 8 for more).

⁴ On television syndication, this information from Irena Lesnevskaja, in an unpublished interview by Natalia Rostova. *Kommersant* ran horoscopes as early as 9 January 1993, but might have earlier. Their astrologer, Valerii Ledovskikh, emerged from the same *krugelki* as Levin, and was of a similar academic-scientific background.

⁵ Horoscopes were daily features in *Trud*, *Sem' dnei*, *Megapolis-Ekspres*, among others. "Tvoe zdorov'e", a pop-health and science newspaper, was a very early promoter of astrology, and Levin recalls its print runs quadrupling (from 2 to 8 million) during the astrology boom. While it is difficult to identify the first printed horoscopes (the process unfolded very rapidly), *Tvoe zdorov'e* is a strong candidate.

⁶ Tatiana Mitiaeva, Levin's acolyte and hiking companion, recalls a group from Leningrad that would charge clients to know their date of death, and then charge once more for advice on avoiding it. Tatiana Mitiaeva, astrologer, interview with the author, December 2014. Levin recalls students whose only investment in astrology was financial, but believes strongly that they were a slim minority.

⁷ Mitiaeva, interview with the author, December 2014.

⁸ Some might contend that "extrasense" healing and similar alternative medicine rivaled astrology in prominence, and with good cause. However, this type of healing more narrowly focuses on the relief of concrete ailments. Astrology, on the

What's more, its origins are obscure. There is no domestic tradition of note in Russia, either in the earlier Soviet or Tsarist periods, and no foreign or international groups were invested in its success.⁹When it did appear in media outlets across the country, it appeared as a supernova, sudden and brilliant, from a patch of sky long assumed to be empty.

One media outlet played an outsized role in astrology's public debut. Beginning in 1989, the magazine *Science and Religion*, once the official organ of "atheist enlightenment," gave astrology its first and most serious treatment in the press. After decades with only the occasional "debunking" articles, the editors began dedicating ample space to astrology's informed discussion and, in time, to horoscopes and prognoses printed without commentary. By the end of 1990, more columns discussed astrology than any other single topic. It was a remarkable transition for a magazine that, only a few years prior, had been the communist party's soap box for atheist and rationalist agitation (though the magazine was nuanced and sophisticated all along). Although some long-time readers bemoaned the magazine's apparent about-face, the public rewarded it with vastly increased readership and heightened engagement between readers and the editors. The magazine's shift from debunking astrology to its de facto promotion, without significant changes in leadership or editorial staff, provides an answer to the central question of this chapter: why did the country take to astrology so readily? In *Science and Religion's* pages, we first see a devolution of spiritual authority from editors to readers, and then a reader-led reconsideration of the purpose and meaning of science. Rather than rejecting Soviet positions on these questions, the settlement ultimately affirms them, and finds them unexpectedly amenable to astrology.

Like Levin's, the magazine's story begins earlier, in the space age, when it promoted science as the spiritual basis for a hopeful Soviet state. Told alongside Levin's biography, the magazine's history and transformation comprise this chapter's second thread. In Levin's life we will locate astrology's intellectual origins in the USSR, and in *Science and Religion*, its emergence into the mainstream.

The third and final thread is another biography. During the tumult of 1991, Olga Aleksandrovna Galankina - by then a student at Levin's academy - also oriented herself to the stars. Although new to astrology, this had been her longstanding instinct, instilled as a child spotting satellites at night in her grandmother's village, honed in her formal education in astronomy in the Soviet Union's premier university, and now, essential to her training at Levin's degree-granting school. Never politically-

other hand, is a more comprehensive worldview, a companion along the road rather than a rest stop. That said, if explored in depth, the theory behind extrasense healing shares much of astrology's esoteric foundation while relying on similar scientific authority, and thus some of this chapter's conclusions on the latter seem to apply readily to the former. Olga Galankina and several other astrologers I interviewed were, at one point or another, involved in so-called extrasensorica. See Anna Geltzer, "Surrogate Epistemology: the transition from Soviet to Russian biomedicine" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2012), chapter 4, for the collapse of Soviet biomedicine and its relation to "extrasensorica."

⁹ Russia, of course, does have an occult tradition, which has been the subject of several studies. These studies make clear, however, that astrology was not previously of central import. One notable exception is Ernest A. Zitser and Robert Collis, "On the Cusp: Astrology, Politics, and Life-Writing in Early Imperial Russia," *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 5 (December 1, 2015): 1619–52, which reveals astrology as "a significant and officially sanctioned aspect of early imperial Russian culture." This, however, is in the early eighteenth century, and strictly among elites. For the larger occult tradition, see Julia Mannherz, *Modern Occultism in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: NIU Press, 2012); Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemester, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, eds., *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*, Studies on Language and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe, v. 17 (München: Otto Sagner, 2012); Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1997); I. Iu. Vinnitsky, *Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism* (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009). On Esotericism in nineteenth century Europe, see chapter four of Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press, 2010).

minded, she recalls watching passively as the events of 1991 unfolded, attuned like most Russians to the immediate and concrete challenges in her life and, now, in the lives of her clients. The period's turmoil was of only passing importance, from an astrological perspective:

I understood that the system had run its course and that, sooner or later, there would be cardinal changes. And when they happened, in 1990-1991, yes it was painful, painful for practically the entire Russian people... but studying astrology, I knew that transits come and go, this period would pass. ... I understood that it was a nadir, that right now is the absolute worst moment, and soon will be an ascent, soon it will only get better.¹⁰

Galankina was largely unaware of astrology until 1987, and would have seemed an unlikely candidate to adopt it. In this way, her life story tacks closely to the trajectory of *Science and Religion*, and so it is no surprise that, by the time of the magazine's astrological turn, she was an avid reader. And it is from the perspective of the reader, ultimately, that we best understand the draw of astrology when it appeared. Galankina is not meant to stand in for Soviet society at large, but for its members who, following Soviet paths to the country's end, would navigate their way out by the stars.

On its surface, her life seemed a thoroughly Soviet one, as envisioned by the science-state in the spacefaring decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Though she absorbed elements of Orthodox spirituality via her grandmother, her deepest feelings were for the stars, in her youth already glittering with Soviet satellites and the occasional passing cosmonaut. In pursuit of this passion, she read widely in popular science and science fiction, forms elevated by a state that sought to inspire her. Though neither of her parents were of the intelligentsia, she dreamed of a place among the Soviet experts who were then shocking the world with their triumphs, and given the country's upward trajectory, she had no reason to doubt the possibility. More broadly, she felt that there was a link between science and human life, between the stars and her world, a correspondence that could provide meaning without recourse to "superstition" in the catch-all terms of Soviet criticism (including that of pre-reform *Science and Religion*). Yet when the state that nurtured these ideals proved incapable of realizing them, it was astrology that saw her through, the very "pseudoscience" and "mysticism" and "obscurantism" that Soviet people - especially educated ones like Galankina - were meant to abhor.¹¹ But to her, as to millions of her compatriots, astrology required no renunciation and no daring leap of faith; it simply made sense.

Although Mikhail Levin's intellectual world and its late-1980s embrace by *Science and Religion* constitute most of the chapter's text, its findings are in the deepest sense about Olga Galankina - child of the Soviet space age, trained scientist, self-described ordinary woman and, from 1990, professional astrologer.

Bodies in Motion, 1957-1987

Sputnik 1 was a small and humble apparatus, a polished sphere two feet in diameter, equipped only with a transmitter to broadcast its own existence. But as it streaked around the globe in the autumn of 1957, it threw a magnificent comet's tail of dazzled and dumbstruck human beings, hundreds of millions, whose past experience of the world could not accommodate this tiny new

¹⁰ Olga Galankina, astrologer, interview with the author, December 2014.

¹¹ See Michael D. Gordin, *The Pseudoscience Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), for an excellent dissection of terms such as these.

companion with its radio pulse. They could only look up in awe, and with fear or pride, depending on their geographic and political station. Guided by the steady hand of government, Western fears of Sputnik and its implications were channeled into resolve to catch and overtake the Soviets. In the USSR, pride in Sputnik became hope for the future.

What was the Soviet Union to hope for? In the broadest sense, the rising Sputnik generation hoped for the fruits of their parents' endless travails.¹² This was a hope that the communist party had kept alive through decades of setbacks, wrong turns and failures, through terror and war, and that the vision survived at all spoke to its singular beauty. After Stalin's death, the party's relaxing of censorship and public reconciliation with (most of) its victims pointed it towards the future, and robust economic growth suggested it knew the way.¹³ That growth, though relative to the total devastation of war and concentrated in industries of a bygone era, was the party's strongest suit, at least until the autumn of 1957.

The most pressing task facing the Soviet government in this period was to demonstrate a link between the people's economy and the daily life of the people.¹⁴ Such correspondence was communism's long-deferred promise, and Khrushchev's primary strategy towards fulfilling it was vast housing projects, heavy industrial production of a comfortable and predictable modern lifestyle.¹⁵ Heavy industrial production, though, could stir the passions of only a certain (and dying) breed of old Bolshevik.¹⁶ For the rest, economic growth was a means to an end, and when Khrushchev foretold communism's realization by 1980, he was describing more than material wellbeing. He was renewing a promise that the arcane math of economic planning would reveal a utopia, in which liberation from necessity allowed humanity to pursue a higher purpose, however vaguely conceived. How literally one believed varied widely, but at the very least, the suggestion was inoffensive, remote as it was from immediate concerns and preferable to the nightmarish pragmatism of the previous decades. And especially in light of those decades, the state faced even greater expectations. While Marxist economics fixated on the hands and the stomach, its essence - and Soviet practice - would need to elevate the spirit.¹⁷

It was no contradiction, then, that the liberal Thaw coincided with an intensified campaign against religion. The possibility of fulfilling now forty years of promises could not be squandered, and so long as religious "survivals" still clouded Soviet minds, the people might not know whom to thank for their new apartments. Although the state did not blanch at more heavy-handed tactics (usually legal hurdles for churches and career hurdles for church-goers), this ideological revival would take a softer

¹² The term "Sputnik Generation" is from Donald J. Raleigh, ed., *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives*, Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies (Bloomington ; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006). The book is a collection of oral histories, and like this paper, Raleigh shows the early space race to be a profound, if fleeting, inspiration to his subjects.

¹³ By some studies, over 70% of Soviet citizens at this time were satisfied with improving living standards, and a sense of optimism and confidence in the state and society were widespread - this from Raleigh, 16. That said, whatever the nature of these studies, it is safe to assume a spate of major methodological biases.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Between 1956 and 1965, 108 million Soviets moved from communal flats into private apartments.

¹⁶ See Richard Sites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), ch. 7, for the romance of heavy industry.

¹⁷ For the following section (and much else in this chapter and dissertation) I am indebted to Victoria Smolkin. Both her scholarship and her guidance have been indispensable. This particular perspective on the ideological challenges of the Thaw is best expressed in "The Ticket to the Soviet Soul: Science, Religion and the Spiritual Crisis of Late Soviet Atheism," *Russian Review* 73 (2014): 171-97.

and less antagonistic tone than its violent post-revolutionary precursors. The party would now appeal to the hearts and minds of the reading public.¹⁸

Thus was born *Science and Religion*, the state magazine of “atheist enlightenment,” which divided its pages between criticizing religious holdovers and inspiring with the feats and promises of rationalism, and astronomy and cosmonautics in particular.¹⁹ Though intended as a weapon in the fight against the state’s spiritual rivals, the magazine was fundamentally hopeful and positive in tone, a guide to the present and future wonders of Soviet power and Soviet science. The inside cover of the first issue, in September 1959, previewed Moscow’s Monument to the Conquerors of Space - a gleaming rocket, screaming towards the stars, perched atop its towering titanium exhaust plume.²⁰ The monument was completed five years later, in 1964. The poem inscribed at its base begins: “and thus rewarded are our toils...”²¹

Within these five years, *Science and Religion’s* circulation grew from 70,000 to 200,000, and its strictly science-themed counterpart *Science and Life* reached 750,000 (and the editors sought to boost it to one million).²² These numbers reflect a resonance between editors’ goals and readers’ demands, and actually belie much higher readership. Though precise numbers elude us, subscriptions often belonged to libraries, reading clubs, factories, or apartment blocks, to be shared by all members.²³

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ For a space-based perspective on state atheism and specifically *Science and Religion*, see Smolkin’s “Cosmic Enlightenment: Scientific Atheism and the Soviet Conquest of Space,” in James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi, eds., *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*, Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 159-194. Smolkin argues forcibly for space and cosmonautics as the tip of the spear in the fight against religion.

Asif A. Siddiqi is likely the foremost authority on the cultural origins of the Soviet space program, and has written and edited several excellent books and articles. His work warrants discussion here, as he specifically looks at the alleged occult roots of Soviet space travel, for instance in Asif A. Siddiqi, “Imagining the Cosmos: Utopians, Mystics, and the Popular Culture of Spaceflight in Revolutionary Russia,” *Osiris* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 260–88. Many other works draw the connection explicitly between cosmism, a mystical philosophical tradition endemic to Russia that seeks immortality by scientific means (among much else), and the visionaries like Konstantin Tsiolkovskii who gave rise to Russian rocketry and the space program. This argument, however tantalizing, is spurious in Siddiqi’s (and my) view. Though he acknowledges that so-called cosmism (a term coined only later, in the 1970s) was in the ether, Siddiqi argues that the more mystical elements were part of a much larger cultural moment that included a more rational technical utopianism, and generally, a turn-of-the-century enthusiasm for the domination of nature by man. The claim that the space program was essentially rooted in the occult - an argument favored by many astrologers - doesn’t hold up to scrutiny. That said, Cosmism is a fascinating intellectual current, largely unknown in the West. For more, see Michael Hagemester, “Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today,” in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 185-202 and “Totalitarian Utopia, the Occult, and technological modernity in Russia: The intellectual experience of Cosmism,” in Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemester, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, eds., *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*, Studies on Language and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe, v. 17 (München: Otto Sagner, 2012), 238-258.

For a compelling history of the space program’s roots, see Siddiqi’s *The Red Rockets’ Glare: Spaceflight and the Soviet Imagination, 1857-1957*, Cambridge Centennial of Flight (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). There, he shows a sort of science from below, in which hobbyists and dreamers develop a culture of flight and rocketry that spans the revolution, and only later (primarily after WWII) is absorbed into the state.

For a more strictly science-historical take, see Michael G. Smith, *Rockets and Revolution: A Cultural History of Early Spaceflight* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

²⁰ Smolkin, “Ticket to the Soviet Soul,” 174.

²¹ **И наши тем награждены усилья...**

²² *Ibid.*, 183 (footnote 46).

²³ Olga Brushlinskaia, executive secretary of *Science and Religion* during the reform era and editor-in-chief from 2007, interview with the author, April 2015. For an overview of the Soviet press at this time, and its vast readership, see Aleksandr Dement’ev, ed., *Ocherki istorii russkoi-sovetskoi zhurnalistiki* (Moscow: Akademia Nauk SSSR, Institut Mirovoi Literatury),

At the magazine's inception, scientific agitation in *Science and Religion* at times lapsed into ham-fisted debunking ("we've been to space, and there's no God")²⁴, but by the end of the 1960s it was promoting a coherent Soviet spirituality - awe before man's achievements, celebration of art and culture, and appeals to self-improvement as antidotes to "superstition" and other perceived spiritual crutches.²⁵ Within this, space and cosmonautics articles were not only the best evidence of their philosophy's promise, but also a means of drawing subscribers.²⁶ The magazine (and the newspapers, and the television) documented every launch, orbit, spacewalk, docking, and extraterrestrial landing, and cosmonauts themselves penned articles averring a fulfilling and atheistic worldview.²⁷ For those more literary-minded readers, *Science and Religion* published new science fiction and fantasy literature with similar themes.²⁸

We cannot say exactly what meaning these readers took from the era's literature. It is clear that the state's message was received, if not always borne in mind.²⁹ Historians have drawn attention to the anti-religious campaign's failure, and there can be no doubt about that - the editors of *Science and Religion* bemoaned it themselves, and certain chapters of this dissertation suggest Soviet spirituality's ultimate impotence before charisma and self-decried faith.³⁰ This chapter does not. Though Orthodoxy and Islam (the campaign's primary targets) were not uprooted, neither was Soviet spirituality a contradiction in terms.

To the masses, of course, Sputnik's meaning could only be symbolic, but this cannot diminish its importance. Khrushchev's socialism was idealistic, and here it had appropriated, to the people's benefit, a deep and enduring human fascination with the stars.³¹ The triumph of Sputnik served to

1971, tome 4 (1954-1965).

²⁴ Quotations of this type have been attributed to Gagarin and several other early cosmonauts, with varying accuracy, see Smolkin, "Cosmic Enlightenment," 166. Perhaps the most colorful expression of this sentiment is a famous propaganda poster, which depicts a smiling cosmonaut on a space walk above dark and crooked Orthodox crosses. The caption reads, simply, "THERE IS NO GOD." See Smolkin, "Ticket to the Soviet Soul," 191.

²⁵ See Sonja Luehrmann, "The Spirit of Late Socialism and the Value of Transformation: Brezhnevism through the Lens of Post-Soviet Religious Revival," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe*, n.d., 16-18, for an excellent and concise description of Soviet spirituality, as understood by magazines like *Science and Religion*.

²⁶ Smolkin, "Cosmic Enlightenment," 183.

²⁷ For cosmonaut contributions to the magazine, see German Titov, "Vstretil li ia boga?" *Nauka i religii*, no. 1 (January 1962): 10, and Konstantin Feoktistov, "Neskol'ko slov o bessmertii," *Nauka i religii*, no. 4 (1966). For a more general statement of the magazine's interpretation of the space race, see "Piat' let shturmu kosmosa," *Nauka i religii*, no. 10 (October 1962): 3-8. Thanks to Victoria Smolkin for these citations - all are from her "Cosmic Enlightenment" in Andrews and Siddiqi, *Into the Cosmos*.

²⁸ On science fiction and its peculiar ideological role, as well as its possible occult meanings, see Leonid Heller, "Away from the Globe. Occultism, Esotericism and Literature in Russia during the 1960s-1980s," and Matthias Schwartz, "Guests from Outer Space. Occult Aspects of Soviet Science Fiction," both in Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemeyer, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, eds., *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*, Studies on Language and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe, v. 17 (München: Otto Sagner, 2012).

²⁹ Statistics on belief, both before and after the collapse, are predictably contentious and contradictory, given the eclectic nature of belief in the period and the political meanings attached to atheism or its alternatives. One study showed 80% of young people in the 1980s to have grown up without any contact with religion (See Irena Borowik, "Between Orthodoxy and Eclecticism: On the Religious Transformations of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine," *Social Compass* 49, no. 4 (December 1, 2002): 498), but my own research points to higher levels of religiosity, if often in vague or passive forms. This itself might suggest that the beliefs covered in this dissertation are particularly attractive to those with some religious foundation, but my research can't speak to this in anything more than anecdote.

³⁰ Chapter four, on the Church of the Last Testament, will address these issues most directly.

³¹ A true materialist would see in Sputnik only its strategic (nuclear) implications, or at best, a waste of resources in already spare times. Both of the criticisms could and have been leveled at the American space program, but as in the Soviet case, only by zealots and wet blankets. The former criticism, of course, has some truth to it, and Khrushchev himself initially

link, however briefly, the USSR's scientific prowess with its spiritual promise, providing hard evidence of the nation's upward trajectory. And as the profiles below make clear, when this state pointed to the stars, many looked up. What they saw would not retain their attention forever. But after revolution and war, hunger and labor, repression and yet more war, Sputnik was a sight to behold.

A decade before Sputnik, Boris Levin - not yet Mikhail's father - came to Moscow to look for a woman he'd met before the war.³² In the intervening time, he had fought and nearly died at Stalingrad, a great departure both from the life he expected in youth and the one he had chosen in adulthood. Born in 1903 into a long line of rabbis, the young Boris was first on his father's and grandfather's path, before revolution and war diverted him. In order to make a living after the Russian Civil War, he and his brother were obligated to move from their village to the nearby city of Novozybkov, near the Russian border with Ukraine. There Boris learned the Russian language and received training in economics, which he would pursue for the rest of his life as a student, a researcher for the state and, after the war, a professor. By 1930 he had moved to Moscow, leaving only on short work-related trips around the country. On one such trip to Kharkov in 1940, surely one of his last before the war, he met and fell for a younger Jewish woman named Liuba.

Liubov Geseleva, not yet Mikhail's mother, was employed there with her sister in an aircraft factory, which was by then ramping up production in anticipation of the war. Originally from the small Ukrainian town of Lokhvitsia, Liubov's family had moved to Kharkov in 1928, where she was educated in engineering. As the Wehrmacht approached Ukraine in 1941, Liubov and her sister were ordered to evacuate, with the factory but without their family. Leveraging her elevated position in the factory's administration, Liubov's sister (later, Mikhail Levin's aunt) would save their family from near-certain murder by the Nazis, by refusing to evacuate without the family in tow. They were all resettled in Perm, where part of the factory - at first an open wooden frame on the steppe, machine tools powered by a generator - would contribute to the war effort until victory. In 1942 Liubov was transferred to Moscow, where another part of her factory, now designated "Factory No. 23," had been moved and was operating under strict secrecy.³³ After the war, though, Boris Levin had earned his doctorate, and was working as a senior researcher at an institute within the Soviet Ministry of the Aviation Industry. Thus secrecy proved no object, and he and Liubov were married shortly after their reunion.

Mikhail Levin was born in 1949 to these parents who, by that time, identified primarily as scientists. Though they would not conceal their Jewishness, they raised their son with neither religion nor politics, instead providing him the privileged life of the Soviet scientific caste. This privilege was not reflected in material conditions (Levin recalls those, in the 1950s, as "miserable," though his parents might have disagreed) but in his education, on which his family and the state placed great emphasis. He read from a young age, and at six - two years before Sputnik - he discovered astronomy. He arrived at it as any six-year-old might:

Somebody came up to me [at school] and said, "can you imagine," - here he named another kid, and said that *that*

believed the latter - he was skeptical of the satellite's utility, and the idea was only retroactively claimed by the party for propaganda purposes. See Siddiqi, *Red Rockets' Glare*, 356-362 for the delayed appreciation of Sputnik's significance.

³² All biographical information from Levin, interviews with the author, December 2014 and October 2015.

³³ After the war, Factory No. 23 would become the Khrunichev plant, famous by the 1960s for manufacturing rockets for the Soviet space and missile programs.

kid thinks the sun is small, the size of a plate. Well, I didn't show that I thought so too, right? I was also convinced that the sun was about that size... I decided to keep quiet, but was intrigued, the question itself interested me. I thought, "surely it isn't bigger?"

He endeavored to find out, and there found his calling.

I opened a book, read some, and unexpectedly... [it] grabbed me. I lost myself, in childhood, reading books on astronomy, I read fantastical stories about flights into space and was terribly taken with astronomy, it captivated me. I felt something exceptionally lofty in that science. It was breathtaking.

Still inspired in 2015, Levin may be projecting slightly onto his six-year-old self. Regardless, he had found his passion at the right time. The launch of Sputnik in 1957, in Levin's words, "evoked in us a fantastical enthusiasm, and a flurry of interest in astronomy." It was enthusiasm that the state was keen to harness. Astronomy clubs sprung up from local Pioneer organizations (the party's equivalent of Western scouting) and at thirteen, Levin eagerly joined, attending lectures on the history and practice of the science, working with telescopes, recording observations, traveling, and making friends with other children of the scientific elite.

Alongside these friends and in these clubs, the teenage Levin grew equally enchanted by mathematics, and chose to make that his career and astronomy his avocation. In the late 1960s, as he looked towards university, he believed in the world heralded by Sputnik and its successors, where science could satisfy both mind and spirit. In fact, these ideals would stay with him for life, but to preserve them would require a different life than the one being advertised. Embarking on the state's path, Levin found that he couldn't gaze upwards for long - there were obstacles in his way. Though his intellectual passions had always been dearer than his Jewish heritage, he found that the choice was not his to make.

All romantics at that time were in love with space and science. And so we [he and his pioneer compatriots] enrolled in mathematical schools and studied with great interest. Not only mathematical, all kinds. We got to the university, and suddenly, we began to understand that we were entering an era of state antisemitism. ... They replaced the rector at our university in 1972... and imprisoned the famous mathematician [Alexander] Esenin-Vol'pin, the son of [celebrated Soviet poet Sergei] Esenin.

Esenin-Vol'pin, a mathematician and early dissident, was actually arrested in 1968 (and then, not for the first time), which prompted a famous and public letter of protest from ninety-nine mathematicians, most in his (and Levin's) mathematical-mechanical department at Moscow State University (MGU).³⁴ He was also not Jewish, though the rector Levin mentions was.

Persecutions had started. They replaced the rector, they arrested the secretary of MGU's party committee... An active antisemitic struggle in the sciences. Just everywhere they were tightening the screws. It was at our university, it was practically everywhere. After university, we came to understand that, if you're a Jew, you've got nowhere to work.

In fact, Levin did find work in his chosen field after university, though he says such luck escaped his friends. Levin worked as a researcher in a computing lab, employing his skills in mathematics, but

³⁴ For Esenin-Vol'pin's political thought, see Benjamin Nathans, "The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksandr Vol'Pin and the Idea of Rights under 'Developed Socialism,'" *Slavic Review* 66, no. 4 (2007): 630–63. Esenin-Vol'pin, among other political accomplishments, organized the first public demonstration in the postwar era against the trial of Andrei Siniavsky and Yuli Daniel, which first introduced the term *glasnost* into the dissident lexicon. His contributions in general topology and ultrafinitism need no introduction.

reserving his passions for his life underground.

Olga Galankina was born in 1963. She grew up in the Moscow suburb of Vidnoe, and her parents were both workers in the broad Soviet definition - her father was a taxi driver, and her mother worked in the personnel department of a factory.³⁵ She describes her young self as introverted but driven, having spent the better part of her youth among the books at the library, reading widely in classical literature, history, and in particular, fantasy and science-fiction³⁶. In the summers she would travel to her grandmother's house in the countryside, trips that would prove formative for both her inner world and her career.

The literature and history that occupied her was seldom discussed with her parents, and she was raised with no strong positions in politics or in faith (linked in the USSR, as so often elsewhere). Within the home, her father was a "quiet believer," a nominal Orthodox Christian, whose overt practice was limited to an icon on the wall. Like many of her generation, Galankina's more substantial exposure to religion came from her grandmother, whose belief antedated the atheist state.³⁷ Early in the mornings during summers in the countryside, the young Olga would spy on her praying grandmother through a curtain, watching with quiet intrigue as the old woman crossed herself and muttered in meditation. The image stayed with her, although Galankina retained through her youth a "neutral relationship" to religion, aware but largely uninterested. She says that God was "a given" in her family, but neither a subject for conversation nor meditation.

In the summer of 1974, still in the countryside, something else inspired her:

...it was in August, a very clear night, and late that evening I walked outside, and I remember looking consciously, for the first time, at the sky. And I saw just the most phenomenal beauty, the vast and open sky, a tremendous number of stars. And I remember, it was this first internal realignment towards this idea, to the sky, to the stars, and from that moment I was captivated, you know, this pure and lofty internal feeling, of exaltation, of rapture, of flight. I wanted to know the what, the how and the why. And I began reading the literature of popular astronomy.

That literature would address the "what" and "how" of the cosmos, but also the more elusive "why" - it sustained her intellectual curiosity and her passion alike. Galankina describes her young interest in space as strictly "scientific," though her language is clearly emotional. And was this not the ideal of "scientific enlightenment" that *Science and Religion* and its counterparts celebrated - science with meaning? To Galankina, this correspondence was a given, and would remain so for life.

Soviet children like Galankina had a clear path to space. Children's books took them on fanciful voyages to space stations and lunar colonies, and when old enough to socialize with the neighbors, they could board rocketship jungle-gyms in the courtyards behind their homes.³⁸ Cosmonauts on posters proclaimed that fairy tales were coming true, and the believers collected pins, coins and insignias from the latest missions.³⁹ Space clubs, under the auspices of the Pioneer organizations, were

³⁵ All biographical information from Galankina's interview with the author, December 2014.

³⁶ Many of the individuals interviewed for this dissertation read widely in Soviet science-fiction. See note 28.

³⁷ Exposure to religiosity via grandparents, and in particular, grandmothers, is perhaps the single most widespread trait shared by all the subjects of my interviews for this dissertation. This is an intriguing statistic, but its meaning should not be overstated, as we have no statistics on the public at large to compare with. Religious babushki were not uncommon.

³⁸ John Sisson, a science librarian at UC Irvine, has assembled an outstanding collection of Soviet and American children's space literature at <http://dreamsofspace.blogspot.co.uk/>. Visit <http://calvertjournal.com/features/show/4656> for a photo essay on Soviet rocketship playgrounds.

³⁹ On the cultural place of cosmonauts as heroic Soviet everymen (and women), see Slava Gerovitch, "The Human inside a Propaganda Machine: The Public Image and Professional Identity of Soviet Cosmonauts" and Smolkin Rothrock's

commonplace. Like Galankina, many read ceaselessly about the stars, and about the scientists and cosmonauts that peopled the Soviet pantheon.⁴⁰ Back at school, math and science enjoyed prestige and state support, and a straight track led from excellence in grammar school to intensive college programs in math, physics, astronomy and engineering at Moscow's most esteemed universities and institutes. For those serious and talented enough to climb the ladder, the top of the Soviet scientific apparatus possessed authority that the party itself was loathe to dispute.⁴¹

As a child, Galankina read countless books about space, and in her telling, by the age of fifteen nothing else interested her. Her sole purpose was to enter a top-tier university program in astronomy. Her single-minded determination (which she would later attribute to "a strong Jupiter" in her natal chart) pointed her towards the physics department at MGU, and she focused all subsequent schoolwork on gaining admittance. In 1979, at age 16, she enrolled in correspondence courses in astronomy to bolster her chances, and would apply two years later.

By the early 1970s, promises that the Sputnik-state would eventually lift the masses had failed to materialize, and even the state's symbolic promissory notes - victories in the space race - were now rarely issued. Mikhail Levin had generally withdrawn his investment in official life:

All of those romantic goals, dreams of realizing oneself, finding some kind of self-expression in science. All of that, all those dreams were totally and decisively dashed before a completely deadening reality. And it wasn't just for Jews... for any more or less, let's say, active person, person with an active mind, who wasn't prepared to toe the party line, all of them perceived an absolute dead end, no air to breathe.⁴²

Certainly, some active minds might have disagreed, but Levin's recollection would be familiar to many of his social standing, the intelligentsia broadly defined.⁴³ He distilled the sentiment further, citing a poem in circulation at the time - a play on the nineteenth-century romantic poet Fiodr Tyutchev:

*Russia you can't understand with the mind,
Proton accelerators and bast shoes in one,
She is of a peculiar kind,
From her you can only turn tail and run.*⁴⁴

"Cosmic Enlightenment," both in James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi, eds., *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture*, Pitt Series in Russian and East European Studies (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 77-106 and 159-194.

⁴⁰ It was a particularly hopeful time for young girls, who were inspired by the flight of Valentina Tereshkova. See Roshanna P. Sylvester, "She Orbits Over the Sex Barrier: Soviet girls and the Tereshkova Moment," in James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi, eds., *Into the Cosmos*. Sylvester writes: "the girls who saw Tereshkova fly were part of a universe in which reality and promise converged, with vistas of opportunity available to them that were unique." Olga Galankina was born in 1963, the same year as Tereshkova's flight.

⁴¹ This, of course, was not always the case, with the Lysenko affair symbolic of much more. But by the end of the Stalinist period, physicists in Beria's nuclear weapons program were free from ideological strictures in their work. By the mid-1950s, Korolev and other leaders in Soviet rocket science were confident enough to press Khrushchev and argue for their pet projects, Sputnik itself the most prominent among them. See note 31. Sakharov might seem an enduring exception to this claim, but it wasn't his scientific authority that the party doubted.

⁴² Levin, interviews with the author, December 2014 and October 2015.

⁴³ The term "intelligentsia" can be said to have two different, and perhaps opposed, meanings. Levin was of the scientific-technical intelligentsia, essentially the "official" intelligentsia produced by the USSR's universities. Members of the cultural-artistic intelligentsia, who tended to be more rebellious in their posture, would not have seen people like Levin as necessarily of their caste. As Levin's story makes clear, however, these categories are fluid.

⁴⁴ Умом Россию не понять,
то синхрофазотрон, то лапоть.

Turning tail and running, in truth, was one of many options for the disenfranchised. It was the one that the mathematician Esenin-Volpin chose following his arrest. He fled to the United States in 1973 to continue his political and scientific work. A second option was to cast one's lot with the internal dissidents, at that time a largely symbolic struggle with decidedly material consequences, though one that would bear fruit sooner than even its proponents would imagine. In a curious echo of their nineteenth-century forebears, both of these camps hosted Westernizers and nationalists of various stripes. Levin chose a third path, internal emigration, in a form that eschewed both:

[Others] moved to create something for themselves, some other understanding of life, and interest in alternative worldviews emerged. Alternative to communism. Truly, the communist worldview, by that time, already induced nausea in a certain segment of the population. From there, understand, to go from Russian communism to Russian Orthodoxy was very difficult.⁴⁵ That is, it was easier to look towards India.

Here, Levin intended India as shorthand for the Soviet "cultic milieu," the community of seekers, mostly of the technical-scientific intelligentsia, that he would join in the 1970s, and from which he would emerge into the public eye in the late 1980s.⁴⁶ In time, this milieu would produce astrologers and Hare Krishnas, neopagans and Orthodox mystics, telepathic healers and magicians and UFO researchers, in short, the unlikely celebrities of the still-distant collapse.⁴⁷

At the center of their world (and not only theirs) was the kitchen *kruzhok*, informal gatherings of alternative-minded discontents, made possible by the vast housing projects of the state whose alternative they were seeking.⁴⁸ *Kruzhki* were not illegal, nor even officially discouraged, not least because the state was powerless to influence them.⁴⁹ This is not to say they were sanctioned. To borrow an aphorism recalled by Levin, in the Soviet Union, "what was permitted was forbidden all the same."⁵⁰ Levin's occult science (we will see how he arrives at astrology below) was something of an open secret at work, and did not impact his profession or social standing, provided he could handle some quiet snickering. "Many may have thought I was a bit off, or that it was a bit of foolishness," he concedes, but he was never excluded from the official scientific community, where he continued to work

У нее особенная статья,
отсюда можно только драпать.

⁴⁵ Levin sees atheism and Christianity as essentially of the same tradition, differing in their external form but sharing an exclusivity and absolute claim to truth. Many dissenters, of course, differed with him strongly on this point.

⁴⁶ This term comes from Colin Campbell, and is the best (though still imperfect) term for all the subjects of this dissertation together. Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972): 119–36.

⁴⁷ See chapter 4 of this dissertation.

⁴⁸ On the effects of housing policy on social life within the USSR, see Viktor Voronkov and Jan Wielgoh, "Soviet Russia," in Detlef Pollack and Jan Wielgohs, eds., *Dissent and Opposition in Communist Eastern Europe: Origins of Civil Society and Democratic Transition* (2004):95-118 and Victoria Semenova, "Equality in Poverty: The Symbolic Meaning of the *kommunalki* in the 1930s-1950s," in Daniel Bertaux, Paul Thompson, and Anna Rotkirch, eds., *On Living Through Soviet Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 66. Thanks to Benjamin Nathans for these references.

⁴⁹ The Hare Krishnas, once they emerged from this milieu as a defined group, are a major exception - they were actively persecuted by the state. See Chapter 2.

⁵⁰ Larisa Honey, "Pluralizing Practices in Soviet Moscow: Russian Alternative Practitioners Reclaim Individualism," chapter five in Kate Brown et al., *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964-1985* (Lexington Books, 2012). Honey shows Soviet women engaging in yoga, clairvoyant healing, alternative diets and other "New Age" health and wellbeing practices in the 1970s, and doing so semi-openly. It is something of a case study of Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), and as such, a rebuttal to those who might claim these practices are inherently oppositional or pursued in part for political ends.

productively in computing.

Neither was his new community seeking exclusion. Although the ideas within it were diverse and often remote from Soviet experience, their carriers saw themselves as deepening and broadening the intellectual world they lived in, rather than rejecting it.⁵¹ Regardless of which currents piqued their interest, nearly all members of this milieu maintained normal careers and a studied distance from political affairs, concerned as these are with the patina on the enormous body of reality.⁵² Though esotericism is not easily defined, this non-oppositional posture is among its hallmarks, derived as it is from the general rejection of defined disciplinary and intellectual categories.⁵³

This same quality produced a diverse cast of characters. Levin's recollections are quite typical:⁵⁴

[In] the first esoteric circle... we didn't have significant differentiation. There were Buddhists, there were parapsychologists, there were young Christians, some studied Agni-Yoga⁵⁵... and when you grasp another understanding of the world, beyond [Soviet] boundaries, we didn't concern ourselves with the nuances. ... Whether somebody was, say, a Hare Krishna, wasn't important. ... we all felt spiritually kindred, really, something like brothers and sisters.

Differentiation came only later. Specialization within amorphous *kruzhki*, followed by the emergence of hierarchical structure around a teacher, and then the late 1980s introduction of this structure to the eager public, describes the incubation of all the ideas that constitute this dissertation (excluding those imported from abroad).⁵⁶ Levin's discovery and development of astrology in this world, and his eventual formation of an astrological *kruzhok* in which he lectured to a growing circle of pupils, was quite ordinary, though he chose his discipline wisely.

Or perhaps, the discipline chose him. Though Levin says (perhaps predictably) that he was destined from birth to be an astrologer, his story points just as much to happenstance. He estimates that the number of people in his circles - that is, the Buddhists, parapsychologists, esotericists - totaled no more than a few hundred in Moscow; that they all knew one another; and that they shared and circulated the small body of literature they could obtain. In rare cases, associates were permitted abroad (usually within the Eastern Bloc), and would return with otherwise unobtainable texts. The Bulgarian spiritual community was of particular help, providing their Russian counterparts with an

⁵¹ By some definitions, this is an essential characteristic of the esoteric, "revelation within revelation," seeking within a system, and by no means antimodern or anti-scientific. This view is most associated with the work of Antoine Faivre, who uses a much-debated six-part definition of the esoteric. Wouter Hanegraaf, in his analysis, prefers a less rigid definition of the esoteric, something of a Potter Stewart "know it when I see it" approach. In his deeply insightful introduction to *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2013), he suggests that esotericism's "oppositional" reputation is grafted to it only in historical retrospect, by institutions interested in producing teleological history.

⁵² Along with memories of religious grandmothers, neutral indifference towards politics is nearly universal among the subjects of this dissertation. This, like the first, is not as potent a finding as it might seem, given the widespread popularity of neutral indifference in the population at large.

⁵³ I will not attempt to define esotericism, but direct the reader to note 51 above. I find Hanegraaf's open-ended approach most compelling, with its emphasis on seeking within a system for its deeper and more universal truths. Esotericism, as he understands it, is mix of science, philosophy, religion and art, borrowing elements of all while denying the primacy of any particular approach.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Maikov, a veteran of these *kruzhki* and teacher at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences, recalls "artists, architects, scientists, musicians, hippies," all reading about Suffism. Interview with the author, December 2014.

⁵⁵ Agni-yoga is the esoteric philosophy of the Roerichs, to be detailed in chapter 4.

⁵⁶ Indeed, many movements and worldviews did come from abroad, and Mormonism - assessed in chapter 3 - is but one illuminating example.

array of spiritual literature, including scattered literature on astrology.

Of the few hundred in Moscow sharing these materials, Levin was the one best qualified to interpret the more technical astrological texts - he had been studying since the age of six, after all. And so by 1973 he became the resident astrologer. This entailed attentive study, but that was not the primary challenge - to learn astrology, Levin had to locate it in a country that had relegated it to the dustbin of history. Maneuvering through Soviet strictures was a discipline unto itself, and one which united Levin with his fellow seekers as much as any philosophical kinship. Levin was highly qualified to study the stars, but the state did not make it easy.

The first method, hinted at above, was to exploit Soviet channels to the outside world. Levin and his ilk, connected as they were with the scientific and intellectual elite, implored their friends with international passports to import new literature. At first, Levin made broad requests, essentially for astrology in any form. But handed piles of popular horoscopes bereft of any theoretical or philosophical depth, he had to refine his instructions.⁵⁷ This was not as straightforward as it seemed - his couriers did not know where to look, but even more fundamentally, Levin did not know what was out there. For this he turned inward, to Soviet sources. Looking closer at his own country's libraries and media, he would find a surprising wealth of information, however hidden. As often in the Soviet Union, even what was forbidden was permitted all the same.

One major break was the discovery that censorship operated largely in Russian. The Lenin Library, the national library of the USSR, often relegated Russian astrological texts to the *spetskebran* (special, limited-access collections not listed in the catalog) but allowed public access to foreign-language translations of the same texts. Levin was not fluent in any other languages, but would endeavor to learn. He borrowed foreign astrological texts along with English, French and German dictionaries, translating line by line and, in time, learning the requisite grammar and vocabulary. The largest set of astrological and esoteric texts were in German, having been seized and brought to Moscow after the war.⁵⁸ These texts were largely of late-19th and early-20th century origin, classics of the esoteric revival of that period.⁵⁹

These texts were patchy, however, and the organized bulk of the world's astrological knowledge remained hidden, if not technically off-limits. Levin had friends in research institutes who could access the library's *spetskebran*, but the central problem remained - Levin didn't know where to direct them. In time, and with the benefit of his newly acquired competence in English, he located yet another crack in the edifice. Reasoning that the Lenin Library's collection, competitive as it was with the world's other national research libraries, would overlap significantly with the US Library of Congress, he searched in that catalog instead. With the American catalog as his guide, he then directed his accomplices with special access to seek titles invisible in the open Russian catalog, but which he could expect were in the stacks. In this way he located some canonical texts of 20th century astrology, which

⁵⁷ An older Russian friend has suggested to me that horoscopes did circulate to some degree in the pre-reform Soviet Union, but only as *samizdat*. She and her friends read them with great interest, making copies of their favorites.

⁵⁸ Much better documented is the plunder of scientific texts and research, particularly in the fields of physics and rocketry. See chapter six in Siddiqi's *Red Rockets Glare*. On Soviet seizure of German "cultural goods" (Kultur Güter), see Konstantin Akinsha, *Operation Beutekunst: die Verlagerung deutscher Kulturgüter in die Sowjetunion nach 1945* (Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 1995). Levin recalls stamps from German libraries inside the books. My thanks to Tim Wright for this reference.

⁵⁹ See note 9 for nineteenth-century esotericism.

he would copy and add to his growing library.⁶⁰ It is worth noting that this sort of detective work, common to the intellectual underground writ large, served a secondary purpose - the names signed on the circulation slips became a hidden directory of the disillusioned.

There was one additional source for Levin, which is symbolic of his whole method and much else in his world of hidden knowledge. Levin became adept at reading between the lines in the Soviet press. Newspapers and magazines like *Science and Religion* dedicated a certain amount of ink to debunking and criticizing the state's religious and spiritual competitors.⁶¹ As before, Levin uses India as shorthand for the hidden world:

There were people who traveled to India, worked there, and we got to know them. ... Individuals who traveled to the East on business or for their intellectual work... One acquaintance of mine worked in the Indian embassy there, or rather, the Russian embassy in India. They were little trickles of water, they came home and reported back to us. And at that, of course, they tried to push through Soviet prohibitions. Some magazines went there, like *Science and Religion*, without a doubt. They had access there.

Olga Brushlinskaia, who began her career at *Science and Religion* as an expert on Islam, but who became executive secretary in the late 1980s and eventually editor-in-chief, was long aware of the magazine's hidden function. In a 2009 interview, she described religious readers in the magazine's Soviet era taking scissors to its pages, collecting quotations from the scriptures.⁶² All writers were required to have education and expertise in their field, and had expanded access to materials towards this end - people like Levin, naturally, took note of this. Certainly, at least some of those writing were in on the joke, and on rare occasion flubbed the delivery. One extreme case from the 1960s, for instance, saw the editor-in-chief of *Science and Religion* stripped of his post. Vladimir Mezentsev, editor-in-chief from 1964-1968, got into "supernatural phenomena" like telepathy, and chose to publish texts of the Polish psychic and telepathist Wolf Messing outright. This, Brushlinskaia believes, helps explain his short tenure.⁶³ In another instance, MGU historian Valentina Pazilova, a secret adept of prerevolutionary cosmist and transhumanist Nikolai Fedorov from the early 1970s onward, published several thorough critiques of his ideas with the explicit intent of propagating them. She would become an editor at *Science and Religion* in the 1990s.⁶⁴

In a similar vein, Levin and his ilk read Soviet fiction, largely science fiction and fantasy, in which educated and well-read authors could better disguise both their inspirations and motivations.⁶⁵ Levin recalls the popular science and fantasy writer Yeremey Parnov in particular, who appeared to have unique access to Western occult and spiritual texts, and whose articles in *Izvestiia* and elsewhere were easily read for hidden meaning. One could speculate on Parnov's sources and intentions - Levin does

⁶⁰ Making photocopies was the only part of Levin's process that was forbidden outright.

⁶¹ Birgit Menzel's essay in Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemester, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, eds., *The New Age of Russia*, 153-155, has fascinating insights into the various hidden sources available, including which magazines and which departments at which schools had access to particular materials.

⁶² Mark Smirnov and Pavel Krug, "V Zashchitu Svobodomyслиia," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, October 27, 2009.

⁶³ Brushlinskaia, interview with the author, April 2015. In 1988, readers would demand a reprint of this same Messing piece; they had not forgotten.

⁶⁴ This from Menzel's essay in her "*New Age of Russia*," p. 55, footnote 12. On Russian cosmism, see note 19 above. The most substantial critique was "Kriticheskii analiz religiozno-filosofskogo ucheniia N. F. Fedorova," in an MGU series on atheism, published by the university in 1985.

⁶⁵ See note 28 above. In researching for this project, I interviewed several UFO-logists and experts on Atlantis (a very popular object of study in Russia, relatively speaking); these people in particular were immersed in science fiction culture in their youth and young adulthood.

- but in practice these were irrelevant.⁶⁶ Regardless of intent, a careful reader found much there of value.

Levin and his esoteric *kruxbki* thrived on such sources, and the state would never patch the holes through which they trickled out. But it would still be some time before the barriers fell entirely, and the astrological underground would develop much further before it came to the surface. Until then, Levin would take from the Soviet ether what he needed to make his life meaningful, with dim regard for the country's political and ideological trappings. Still, he was living within the system - for over a decade after he and astrology found one another, the state's collapse remained unthinkable, and Levin's spiritual and intellectual pursuits were an end in themselves.

In 1979, Olga Galankina was still in school, taking additional correspondence courses to buttress her application to MGU's astronomy program.⁶⁷ 1980 came and went without the realization of communism. This failure surprised only the graying vanguard, and in fact it garnered little mention in Galankina's recollections. The state and party had little to do with the stars (despite their best efforts), and so Galankina, it seems, paid only passing attention. In 1981, she applied to the program in astrophysics. She had followed her passion from her grandmother's village to the gates of the USSR's premier institution of higher learning, though her first attempt would end in rejection.

The rejection was only a temporary setback (she blames it on "a couple of missing commas"). After this disappointment, Galankina found work in a computing lab - clerical work dealing with punchcards - and on the side studied further in math and physics to better her chances the next time around. In 1982 she applied again, this time successfully, and she began her formal study of astrophysics the following term. For five years she lived a student's life, gaining expertise in her field and eventually specializing in globular clusters, dense groupings of stars that orbit close to galactic centers. Nearing the end of her studies, she would also take a course in astronomy's history, during which (to the professor's likely chagrin) she would become enchanted by its mystical origins. By then it was 1987, and her life was diverging from the society around her. Or perhaps it was the other way around: the Soviet path she followed had ended in disappointment for too many others.

Mikhail Levin had spent the 1970s developing his networks and his expertise, and in 1979 he began teaching and drawing acolytes.⁶⁸ As with his discovery of astrology, one could argue that teaching found him. In 1979, he was asked to read a course of lectures on astrology by one of several mystical groups within Moscow. The course was a success, both by consensus of the group and to Levin, who discovered there a latent passion for pedagogy. Word spread, and he developed and taught a second course, gradually accruing students for whom astrology was a major or even primary interest. In this way, by his telling, he became the city's first teacher of astrology.

Through word of mouth, circulating in the *kruxbki* he frequented and the larger network in which they were situated, those who knew the occult came to know Levin. He taught in apartments across Moscow, lectures now rather than discussions, still with no sense of the discipline's coming potential. By 1983, Tatiana Mitiaeva - Levin's hiking companion at the time of the coup - had joined his circle, on the advice of two women already involved. By 1990, many in the circle would be the academy's first teachers, and Mitiaeva would be the vice-rector.⁶⁹ But again, even the astrologers do not claim to

⁶⁶ Levin is certain that such access could only be granted by the KGB, and suspects that Parnov was either encouraged to write in order to placate the curious masses, or outsmarted the KGB in order to do the opposite.

⁶⁷ Galankina, interview with the author, December 2014.

⁶⁸ Levin, interviews with the author, December 2014 and October 2015.

⁶⁹ Mitiaeva, it should be noted, arrived at astrology in by a familiar path. As a child she was enthralled with flight,

have foreseen such a thing. Assuming the stability of the regime, teaching astrology in this way put Levin at some risk. Though unlikely to be caught, he was now liable to be punished on account of the group's increasing formality. Should it have continued on this course much longer, his operation may have approached a dangerous critical mass. But this was just about when Gorbachev came to power, and with him, liberalizing reforms.

Galankina's course on the history of astronomy was in 1987, her last year of study.⁷⁰ For the lectures, she had to travel far from the main campus of the university to the stately Krasnopresnenskaia Observatory, seated atop a hill on the Moscow River's left bank. The observatory was built in 1831, a vestige from an era when Moscow's light did not yet obscure the stars. The professor was Felix Tsitsin, born in 1931 and named by his patriotic father after Felix Dzerzhinskii, founder of the Soviet secret police.⁷¹ Tsitsin was a distinguished astrophysicist and had dedicated his life to teaching at the university, and had been there nearly forty years when he appeared, bespectacled blue eyes and a thick gray mustache, before Galankina. Intelligent, curious and given to mischief, Tsitsin opened one class with a curiosity - he had been digging in the special collections of the state library, and had located a popular astrology book of pre-Soviet origin (one wonders if Levin's name was on the circulation slip). As row after row of students glanced inside its tattered binding, he called their attention to the "pseudoscience and obscurantism" that once sullied their field. Galankina saw something very different:

When it fell into my hands, I opened it, and it literally shook me, just shook me. I had this feeling that, wow, that we can learn something, we can make predictions; that there are objective laws, that there is something in the cosmos, that the stars don't simply shine - that we needn't only study their luminosity, the spectra that they radiate, and so forth - but that behind them there is meaning, that they act upon people.

To fully explain Galankina's revelation is beyond the historian's ken. Were there not objective laws in her universe before? Did the stars not already have meaning, and had they not acted upon her since the age of eleven? What is clear is that astrology settled quite naturally atop the existing structures of her mind, which had never incorporated admonitions against it. She had been reading selectively like Levin, though without his explicit intent. It would soon be clear just how many people had been doing the same, but not yet.

In 1987, Olga Galankina finished her studies as eagerly as she had started them. Felix Tsitsin, the professor who accidentally (and if he had known, regrettably) turned her on to astrology, remained in her highest esteem, despite the intent of his lesson. She soon married and adopted the life of a self-described "normal woman," that is, a homemaker, never working in her field, but not on account of astrology. Astronomy and its ancient forebear continued in parallel, if they could be separated now at all, and much of her time was spent, as before, reading in the popular scientific press. Above all others, by 1989 she remembers reading the wildly popular *Science and Religion*. Though a wide array of its subject matter interested her, she would naturally turn first to the astrology columns.

What is Astrology?

cosmonauts and the space race, and in university, sought a career related to aerial photography. By the 1980s she found her life spiritually lacking, and was involved in other occult *kruzhki* before joining Levin.

⁷⁰ Galankina, interview with the author, December 2014.

⁷¹ Tsitsin's biography from <http://www.astronet.ru/db/msg/1206129>.

What is astrology, as cultivated and taught by Levin, and as eagerly adopted by the Soviet public? The theory underlying the discipline is historically rich, technically complex and endlessly contentious, compiled as it is from accumulated centuries (indeed, millennia) of arcane literature.⁷² Common to any school, though, are two basic premises. The first, present in most esoteric thought, posits deep and enduring correspondence between the planes, invisible ties linking the temporal with the spiritual and, here, the earthly with the celestial. Thus “as above, so below,” a credo dating from at least the second century A.D. and repeated by astrologers since.⁷³ The planets and stars are emissaries from this higher plane, observable manifestations of laws otherwise obscure to humanity.⁷⁴ The second premise, derived from the first, is that the moment and location of one’s birth - that is, the arrangement of planets and stars at that moment and location - describe the life to come. This is not a description of ineluctable fate, a concept that troubles astrologers and historians alike. Again, in the words of Levin’s acolyte Tatiana Mitiaeva, astrologers understand the natal chart as a map of limits and possibilities, on which the informed can plot their course.⁷⁵ In the view of astrologers, both the production and the interpretation of the chart are scientific endeavors, intellectual tasks based in study and expertise. As a rule, these processes are devoid of rituals or mystical flourish, and in its technical aspects lies its potency. Its truth is verifiable. “When somebody delves into the technical side of astrology” explains Levin, “...they begin to see its effectiveness. This, of course, is why it’s significantly more compelling than something we might take on faith.”⁷⁶

The above describes astrology as practiced by Levin and the students of his academy, and others who produced astrological features for the media or took clients at this time. Indeed, the bulk of a professional astrologer’s work was in private consultations, in which they could help individuals resolve life’s problems large and small. For this, the astrologer would delve deeply into the client’s natal chart and its implications. Equally important was astrology as seen by the casual Soviet consumer, which hardly differs from the forms familiar in the West. Horoscopes by birth sign, descriptions of the coming weeks and months, and tips for everyday life - in relationships, careers, spiritual development - competed with the more nuanced products of the experts.

Those who expressed “belief in astrology” (again, at least by one measure a majority of Russians in 1992) necessarily fall somewhere on a spectrum, from viewing life in astrological terms to pausing to reflect on their daily horoscope.⁷⁷ The question of where is less important than it seems. Astrologer, student, client and casual consumer all share a core premise: that the heavenly bodies, interpreted by

⁷² *Tetrabiblos*, a second-century AD tract on astrology by Claudius Ptolemy, is widely considered the foundational text of Western astrology, and its revival during the Renaissance assured its influence on astrological practice since then. Ptolemy’s *Almagest* has a similar status for modern astronomy, though a minority of scholars suspect that the text was an early and egregious intellectual hoax. This debate, believe it or not, features in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, on Anatolii Fomenko.

⁷³ Or so they choose to believe - the origins, coherence and stability of the tradition are of course debated. Most likely, this phrase has been in circulation since the beginning of the early modern period. It originates from the *Hermetica*, a collection of ancient wisdom texts compiled in the second century and attributed to the semi-divine Hermes Trismegistus. Like *Tetrabiblos*, these texts were revived in the Renaissance and played a major role in the development of modern esotericism.

⁷⁴ In Olga Galankina’s words: “Those planets that we work with - they are simply physical manifestations of those high laws and principles that operate in our physical world. That is, in the astral plane, there are certain laws that affect our plane, and some of these laws are so fundamental that they have their own body in our physical world.”

⁷⁵ Tatiana Mitiaeva, interview with the author, December 2014.

⁷⁶ Levin, interview with the author, December 2014 and October 2015.

⁷⁷ See note 6.

the right experts, have meaning for us here on earth.

Conjunction, 1987-1991

In 1986, after shuffling the cadres to secure his influence, Mikhail Gorbachev introduced a new party program, replacing the 1961 version full of Khrushchev's soaring promises.⁷⁸ No longer claiming to know the future, the party was to focus on reforming socialism, which was stalling in the present. Knowing the future might have served it better. Within two months, the government's halting and unprincipled response to the explosion at Chernobyl undermined Gorbachev's efforts towards transparency (*glasnost'*), and soon he was forced to pursue a more public and desperate course, pressed on all sides by those rivals who remained in power. In 1987, Gorbachev sought an external jolt to the party by means of a liberalized media, replacing the old guard with reformers in powerful positions atop print, radio and television outlets. From this point on, news of the country's troubles reached the public and the politburo simultaneously.

If Khrushchev's promise was to link the historic project of communism to the daily lives of its builders, the late 1980s saw it fulfilled - as readers of the liberalized press glimpsed the deep dysfunction of their country, it corresponded with the everyday. In 1986, when long-censored poets first appeared and long-sidelined dissidents were entering the public discussion, some wondered aloud when the state might clarify the murky fates of their own, less notable relatives.⁷⁹ In February of 1987, when the press first exposed the widespread manipulation of economic statistics, it surprised nobody that official numbers were more obscurantism than science.⁸⁰ By June the connection was made explicit by economist Nikolai Shmelev, writing in the same journal about IOUs issued to workers, factories producing useless goods, and the reality of unemployment, long denied by the government.⁸¹ This was all good journalism, but hardly news. That summer, the television program *600 Seconds* focused its lens on crime and scandal, drawing record-breaking viewership, intriguing many but again surprising few.⁸² It would be a year before the first articles described organized crime, though the language of black markets and protection rackets had already entered the lexicon.⁸³ By the end of 1988, a critical assessment of *glasnost'* by journalist Aleksandr Bovin centered on the Afghanistan war and its neglected victims and veterans, at once the most hidden and most visible disgrace of that decade.⁸⁴ Hidden and visible - this had long been the Soviet *modus operandi*, obvious problems

⁷⁸ The XXVII party congress, the first with Gorbachev at the party's head, was in February of 1986. Though focused on the present, it did include on its agenda projections for the year 2000.

⁷⁹ For the following summary of reform-era media I am indebted to Natalia Rostova, and her excellent web project *Rozhdenie Rossiiskikh SMI, Epokha Gorbacheva (1985-1991)*. Rostova has compiled a multimedia chronology, with highly detailed accounts and analysis, of major events of the Russian media's transformation at the end of the Soviet era. It can be found at <http://gorbymedia.com/>. All citations below were found on her site, unless otherwise specified. April of 1986 saw the poet Nikolai Gumilev's work rescued from obscurity in the journal *Ogoniok*. By December of that year, Andrei Sakharov was recalled from exile and entered the public sphere.

⁸⁰ Vasilii Seliunin and Gregorii Khanin, "Lukavaia Tsifra," *Novyi mir*, February 1987.

⁸¹ Nikolai Shmelev, "Avansy i dolgi," *Novyi mir*, June 1987.

⁸² *600 Seconds* first aired on 6 June 1987.

⁸³ Yuri Shchekochikhin, "Lev Prygnul," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 20 July 1988.

⁸⁴ Aleksandr Bovin, "Glasnost' Napolovinu," *Argumenty i fakti*, No. 51, 1988. This event was of particular note, because Bovin's writing on the subject had been egregiously censored. This article was in fact a letter to the editor, in which he included all the previously censored fragments, and *Argumenty i fakti* printed it in full. This, as with all the above, is from Natalia Rostova's site, <http://gorbymedia.com/>.

overlooked by state and citizenry alike to preserve a stunted normality. This was the settlement reached by most, when true correspondence between Soviet ideals and Soviet life proved illusory. But even this balancing act had come to an end. With state and citizens each bearing the other's substantial weight, the state was now losing its footing.

As with other publications now encouraged to liberalize and reform, the editors of *Science and Religion*, in collaboration with their increasingly assertive readers, began a wholesale and public reappraisal of atheist ideology. Already by 1987, the magazine had become a major forum on the country's spiritual direction. Subscriptions to the magazine spiked as curious readers watched its spiritual evolution and, in time, took an increasingly active role in guiding it. By the end of 1990 the magazine had slipped its collar entirely, eliminating the goal of "atheist enlightenment" from its inside cover to the satisfaction of its engaged and ever-growing audience.⁸⁵

It should be noted that, while the magazine changed its content dramatically in the late 1980s, it had already long been nuanced and self-reflective, and quite sensitive towards those who did not share its worldview.⁸⁶ Its ethos was essentially a scholarly one, driven more by curiosity than ideological zeal. The magazine's soft line likely resulted from its dual mandate: it was meant as a handbook of instructions and materials for atheist propagandists and lecturers, but also a medium for the state to appeal directly to the hearts and minds of religious holdouts.⁸⁷ While the reform era saw the magazine's mandate change, its disposition remained the same.

Similarly stable throughout the period were the magazine's personnel and internal structure. The editor-in-chief (V.F. Pravorotov, at the post from July 1985-May of 2007) retained ultimate authority over content decisions, though he actively sought input from writers, editors, outside experts and the reader base (as we will see below).⁸⁸ According to two of his close associates, Pravorotov's own political and spiritual views were never clear and were not a major factor in the magazine's change.⁸⁹ It was primarily reader demand, in the context of loosened ideological controls, that guided it in new directions.⁹⁰ Pravorotov, a sociologist by training, sought to capture the public mood rather than shape it.⁹¹

⁸⁵ *Nauka i religija*, v. 1, 1991.

⁸⁶ Olga Brushlinskaia recalls a few instances wherein a writer would be sent to investigate a case of religious extremism, and come back sympathetic to the believers. As Victoria Smolkin has shown, the magazine could never be accused of hard-headedness, at least not since its early days.

⁸⁷ Smolkin, "Ticket to the Soviet Soul," 179-180.

⁸⁸ Some editors and writers did leave during Pravorotov's early tenure, but their differences with him were personal rather than ideological - the magazine remained an open-minded and tolerant place as before. The conclusion will likely include more on Pravorotov himself, a complicated and fascinating figure in his own right. Suffice to say here that he ran a tight ship, and those who worked under him describe him with alternating admiration and fear.

⁸⁹ The two editors I interviewed came to this same conclusion from different directions. Olga Brushlinskaia felt that Pravorotov was a quiet believer, based on his Cossack ancestry more than his own words. Eduard Gevorkian, who we will encounter below, attributed it to Pravorotov's "party-mindedness," that he was a liberal simply because the party told him to be a liberal, and liberalism in that moment meant spirituality.

⁹⁰ From the February, 1988 issue - the editors responding to reader letters: "Ties to the reader are our ties to life. They aid in our shared work - *perestroika*, expansion of consciousness, the growth of trust and goodwill. We implore you to participate in this work with your letters. We await them."

⁹¹ Pravorotov did feel a certain responsibility to the public in spiritual matters, in that he would not promote groups or views he felt might be harmful. He was discriminating in his coverage of mystical trends in medicine, for instance, and refused to cover Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese group that later perpetrated the 1995 sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway. The group offered the magazine money and had a very strong following in Russia, second only to Japan itself. This according to the science editor at the time, Eduard Gevorkian, speaking with the author, April 2015.

Reforms to the magazine's content map neatly onto rapid growth in readership. In 1987, over 60% of the magazine's articles were still dedicated to promoting atheism, Marxism and patriotism along communist party lines, while the vast majority of other articles covered either the politics of reform or the nation's traditional faiths (mostly Orthodoxy and Islam).⁹² Less than 10% covered Eastern or esoteric traditions - the stuff of Levin's *krusybki* - and astrology appeared only once every few years, in the form of a forceful (though always well-informed) debunking.⁹³ By the time of the magazine's privatization in 1992, the Eastern and esoteric accounted for over 40% - without question the biggest theme in the magazine.⁹⁴ The intervening period saw circulation rise from around 200,000 to 700,000 issues printed per month, but again, this only hints at a vastly higher readership, on account of shared subscriptions in clubs, libraries, factories, offices and apartment blocks.⁹⁵ Incentives to share were no doubt strengthened by inflation and dwindling purchasing power.⁹⁶

In the later phase, readers new and old learned yoga and meditative breathing and the cultural traditions that spawned them, read the classics of the Western New Age, contemplated the calendars and chronologies of the Hindus and the Mayans, and continually pushed the editors for more. In February of 1988, for instance, readers requested a reprint of the 1960s piece by psychic and telepathist Wolf Messing recalled above, and by this time the editors obliged without fear of consequences. But among these diverse currents, astrology reigned supreme.⁹⁷ By 1991 there were often multiple astrology articles in a given issue, the culmination of open and collaborative soul-searching between editors and readers. The magazine's evolving treatment of astrology, detailed below, stands in for its larger transformation.

Mirroring *glasnost*' itself, the process unfolded as a chain of increasingly foundational questions, here turning on the meaning of science - its role in society, the precise location of its boundaries, and crucially, on whose authority these questions could be answered. It was in answering these questions that the magazine became astrology's unlikely midwife. The readers, fed up with officialdom and no longer willing to read between the lines, demanded a heightened clarity and honesty from editors, whose sympathies they enjoyed from the outset. The editors, enamored as ever with science but unable to define it to the readers' satisfaction, willingly devolved their authority, acceding to the readers'

⁹² All of these figures are my own, based on a survey of the magazine's contents between 1983 and 1993. I classified each article by topic, and organized these into larger categories - "official atheism," for instance, included methodological pieces for lecturers, philosophical articles, histories of rationalism, or hard science articles (among others). These data are available upon request to any interested scholar who wants to be spared the effort.

⁹³ For a general pre-reform debunking of the occult, see *Nauka i religija*, v. 4, 1984, 54. For astrology specifically, see v. 1, 1986, 56. "Eastern and esoteric," in my statistics, included articles on yoga and meditation, Buddhism, Hinduism and the Hare Krishnas; numerology, auras, ESP, and astrology.

⁹⁴ Soviet themes, as one would imagine, were essentially eliminated, though essays in defense of atheism still appeared. Traditional faiths, now covered with far greater sympathy, were the next largest topic in the reinvented magazine, and UFOs and other "anomalous phenomena" gradually gained ground.

⁹⁵ The former number is Brushlinskaia's estimate, the magazine only began printing these figures in 1988. By the middle of 1990 it plateaus at 700,000.

⁹⁶ These factors eventually forced a precipitous drop in subscriptions in 1992, when the state ceased to subsidize the magazine and prices jumped. For this story, see the dissertation's conclusion, due fall of 2035. Another major factor in this drop (from 652,000 issues printed to 120,000 in the span of a few months) was the loss of the non-Russian Soviet republics and their readers.

⁹⁷ Among Eastern/esoteric topics (see note 93 for definition), around 20% were dedicated to astrology and related topics (astrological calendars, for instance) until 1988. After that, the number rises steadily to about 60% in 1992, which was 20% of the magazine's content overall. These numbers are approximations, of course, but do paint a coherent picture. See note 92 for my method.

demands for content and stepping into the background. In this way astrology won the day, though informed criticism - much of it recalling the magazine's pre-reform period - never disappeared entirely from *Science and Religion's* pages.

As a point of contrast, the magazine's last pre-reform column on astrology ran in January of 1986. The article's content demonstrates a core continuity with what would follow. It is erudite and engaging, evincing neither arrogance of the enlightened nor hostility towards the misguided, and dense with information - precisely the sort of critical article that Levin might have sought out. All that said, the agenda is clear from the opening gambit, in which the etymology of "astrology" - study of the stars - is contrasted with its supposed reality, "guessing" by the stars, a superstition, albeit one of the most durable. Much of the article's derision is directed Westward, where a technological society without spiritual purpose finds itself in an ironic cul-de-sac, using computers to buttress their ancient superstitions. What's more, this ancient knowledge can be unlocked and put into one's personal service for just 500 francs. But from this initial barrage (ending in various accounts of astrology's empirical weakness), the authors transition to the discipline's history and development, employing eloquent ancient textbooks, medieval anecdotes and modern examples of its application. In the process, readers tour several houses of the Zodiac, and learn of their correspondence to various aspects of our lives on earth. Returning to argument, the author mentions with incredulity (and with yet-unrealized irony) an American "Institute of Mystical Science", before finally deferring to Shakespeare. From the first act of *King Lear*:

We make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence, and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting-on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star!⁹⁸

On astrology's scientific merits, then, their position was as before - the heavenly bodies can be interpreted, we remain the experts, and your goatish disposition is your own fault.

In the months that followed, Mikhail Gorbachev would initiate his first reforms within the party and, following decidedly mixed results, would begin to liberalize the press.

September of 1987 marked a significant break for the magazine, if an unintended one. The issue was dedicated to mysticism and the occult; a melting candle burned on that month's cover, wax dripping over its ornate bronze holder and towards a pile of tarot cards, all framed by a spiraling wheel of the zodiac. Inside, topics ranging from mysticism (broadly defined) to telepathic healing, Atlantis and Agni-yoga were covered in depth, though the official line had not changed: alternative beliefs of this type were declared interesting but ultimately unscientific, usually based either in self-deception or misattribution.⁹⁹ The break that this represented became clear only later, in the March issue of 1988, when the unusual volume of reader mail on the "mysticism" issue prompted a response from editors.

A freestanding article, compiled mostly from readers' letters with minimal editorial input, could be seen as beginning the magazine's "occult turn," as well as a shift in the relationship between the magazine and its readers. Readers thank the editors for entertaining mystical ideas, press them for further exploration, and air their own views and definitions of the phenomena in question. At the

⁹⁸ Edmund, in Act 1, scene 2. The Russian translation used by the magazine is actually quite reckless, but at least retains the scorn of the original.

⁹⁹ On Agni-yoga, again, see Chapter 4.

article's conclusion, the editors feel no need to reassert themselves: "Readers, asking us about much, do not limit themselves to the passive acceptance of facts and information; they seek to participate in the search for answers."

Reader letters generally became a more significant presence in the magazine around this time, as the editors took on a role of tour guide rather than teacher in spiritual matters. The following exchange, printed in February of 1988, captures the magazine's mood. An anonymous reader writes, "I want to decide for myself, verify for myself, in my own life. This seems the only way for a person can determine what they will call truth." The editors assure the reader that "in this, we are your allies. The truth comes from labor of the heart and mind. Do not take it on faith, but weigh it on the precise scales of science and practice."¹⁰⁰

Letters like these increasingly guided content decisions, and were arriving to the editorial offices in record numbers.¹⁰¹ No fewer than thirty arrived each day, often more, doubling over the course of 1987.¹⁰² Every letter was read. Each morning during this period, the editor-in-chief would read a selection of letters, and he insisted that other editors do the same. When this no longer sufficed, the magazine established a "letters department," two new employees tasked entirely with reading and responding to letters, and communicating the readers' desires upward. This kind of engagement was encouraged by the politics of *glasnost* generally and by the magazine specifically, which continued to print many and even issued mass-surveys to the readership on their satisfaction and hopes for the magazine's direction.¹⁰³

By 1989 the magazine's mission was not to propagandize, but to educate the public on its options among worldviews; in the words of editor-in-chief Pravotorov, the "and" in *Science and Religion* would no longer connote opposition, and the distinction itself would be opened to interpretation.¹⁰⁴ At the beginning of that year, a flurry of readers (including forty in a single petition) demanded the unabridged works of the nineteenth-century esotericist and theosophist Helena Blavatsky, and the editors printed them without commentary.¹⁰⁵ On the essence of Blavatsky's philosophy - dense, syncretic and contemptuous of neat categorization - this chapter will also not comment, other than to note its visibility during the period.¹⁰⁶ Blavatsky's adamant disavowal of epistemic boundaries is what matters most - *Science and Religion* now seemed averse to drawing intellectual boundaries, trusting the reader instead to draw them where they please. This new outlook was on display when the magazine finally turned its attention back to astrology.

The first serious treatment of astrology in years, an expansive piece in two parts by philosopher and writer Yuri Bondarenko, came in February and March of 1989.¹⁰⁷ It was titled "Astrology: for and

¹⁰⁰ This from *Nauka i religija*, v. 2, 1988, 19. From the same issue: "We respect the readers, and are certain in their capacity to compare the perspective of science and religion and make the correct conclusions."

¹⁰¹ This description of reader mail from Brushlinskaia, interview with the author, April 2015.

¹⁰² *Nauka i religija*, v. 2, 1988, 19.

¹⁰³ Unfortunately, the surveys do not survive - they were lost when the magazine moved offices in the 1990s.

¹⁰⁴ This phrase belongs to Pravotorov himself. Aleksandr Petrov, "Ot Feierbakha Do Apostola Pavla," *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, June 6, 2004.

¹⁰⁵ *Nauka i religija*, v. 1, 1989, 42.

¹⁰⁶ This is not wholly true - I will comment here in the footnotes. Blavatsky and the Roerichs, to whom I will return in chapter 4, appear in the recollections and libraries of a broad range of seekers from this time, and are familiar to nearly all of the characters that people this dissertation. Roerich's philosophy is easier distilled than Blavatsky's, but both share an essential rejection of Enlightenment delineation - like the esoteric tradition writ large, they appeal to a primordial wisdom that informed our better ancestors long before science, religion and philosophy were imprisoned in separate cells.

¹⁰⁷ *Nauka i religija*, v. 2-3, 1989. Bondarenko earned a doctorate in philosophy and has written on topics related to mysticism

against,” with the first installment addressing astrology’s deep history, and the second, its twentieth-century resurgence (or perhaps, reinvention). Its form is an intellectual history of the discipline, peopled with a vast array of historical luminaries from ancient Mesopotamia through the Early Modern period in Europe, and with bibliographic citations for readers who sought more. The central premise is to explore why today, when “we can put a man on the moon, do many still see the key to their fate in the stars, just as people living thousands of years ago. Is only human gullibility to blame? Or is astrology... finally becoming a science?”¹⁰⁸

The article is of exceptional eloquence and insight, eschewing the pre-reform reflex to place modern astrology in either in the gullible West or the mystical East.¹⁰⁹ Instead, it dedicates a long opening to a sympathetic portrait of early man, even early modern man, and the vicissitudes of fate that dominated his life, as a means of explaining the deep allure of the stars’ regularity. “Rigid and at times almost insurmountable were the walls dividing professional groups, classes and estates,” the writer sympathizes. “The son of a helot, even one possessed of the courage of ten lions, could never aspire to the martial glory of a Spartan.” One’s fate was not one’s own to decide. The author then explores astrology’s ancient origins, its medieval controversies, its Renaissance-era fusion with Christianity, and its divergence with post-Enlightenment rationality, focusing more on theological than scientific critiques. The magazine had ceased to deny astrology’s intellectual legitimacy.

A continuation followed the next month, an equally substantial analysis, this time comparing astrology with the “hard science” of the twentieth century, described in distinctly un-Soviet terms.¹¹⁰ In an era when nuclear weapons, pollution and overpopulation “hang over heads like a sword of Damocles,” in which “apocalyptic views of the future are deepened by the fruitless emptiness of the present,” when “a rushed handshake and a cursory smile replace human interaction, and the computer, taking on the dimensions of a god, determines your future,” can anybody doubt the appeal of astrology? What in today’s world offers such a connection to the cosmos, and assurance of its ultimate logicity? To be fair, the author is here playing devil’s advocate, as he does later in presenting scientific evidence of the influence of solar and lunar cycles on the human body. His point is not to endorse astrology. Still, without doubting modern science’s veracity, the atheist magazine had grown agnostic on its merits. The author acknowledges astrology’s historical and intellectual depth as well as its satisfaction of spiritual needs, high praise from a magazine that always sought to provide both. The author’s ultimate conclusion, while again not an endorsement, is sympathetic to the reader’s spiritual plight and understands astrology’s potential to remedy it. The essay ends as it began, with early man, hapless victim of fate, and his need for astrology. The essential difference, the author contends, is that in a bygone era, “the chains that bound you to your social station were entirely unlike those of the present day.” A Soviet reader in 1989 could be forgiven for reading that sentence twice.

Five months would pass before the next astrology feature, but when it arrived, readers found a direct astrological text rather than an analysis - an excerpt from American astrologer Linda Goodman’s *Star Signs*, specifically her chapter on the sign of Virgo.¹¹¹ It was an original printing, the first translation

and the occult, though a more detailed biography eludes me. His most popular work appears to be an expansion of this article.

¹⁰⁸ Here, Bondarenko cites Daniel Cohen, *The Magic Art of Foreseeing the Future*, (Dodd Mead, 1973). The book is a historical survey of this eternal human preoccupation.

¹⁰⁹ *Nauka i religija*, v. 2, 1989, 59.

¹¹⁰ *Nauka i religija*, v. 3, 1989, 27.

¹¹¹ Linda Goodman, *Star Signs: The secret codes of the universe* (St. Martin’s Press, 1987). *Science and Religion’s* printing is *Nauka*

to appear in Russian. This first installment (another would follow for each of the twelve zodiac signs, spread over an entire year) came with three separate commentaries. The first and most substantial is skeptical (ironically titled “let the stars look favorably upon us”) but deferential (“the reader is almost always right”). The second is by a homegrown Soviet astrologer - an explanation of ancient “cosmobiology” and the effects of cosmic rhythms on our lives, along with a lunar chart for planning purposes. The third comes at the end of Goodman’s piece, explains that more installments were to come, and adds famous Russian Virgos to Goodman’s list of Western ones. These commentaries, even more than Goodman’s text itself, demonstrate the magazine’s shift - deference to the reader, reluctance to define science, and a refusal to restrict access to ideas, even ones the editors find dubious. By May of 1990, chapters of *Star Signs* began appearing with no commentary at all.

From that moment on, *Science and Religion* would be a reliable source for those serious about astrology.¹¹² In its pages, readers would find excerpts from sympathetic books appraising its scientific validity; articles on its relation to health and the human body; explorations of various Eastern astrological traditions; cyclical, astrology-tinged theories of history; roundtables with scientists and astrologers; and by 1992, a long-term rubric called “school of astrology,” which taught methods and terminology.¹¹³ All this accompanied more traditional prognoses and horoscopes.

In an era of vanishing credulity towards the state, readers of *Science and Religion* demanded direct access to the information previously interpreted for them. Already sympathetic to their readers’ spiritual needs, the editors of the magazine obliged. Without ever abandoning its longstanding esteem for science, the magazine had deferred to the reader to define it. Accordingly, skepticism of astrology would persist, but it would no longer be presented as authoritative.¹¹⁴

In the wider culture, astrology of course had its critics, and surely a substantial segment of the population paid it no notice at all. In the magazine, the doubts and criticisms of certain readers found a sympathetic ear among certain editors.¹¹⁵ Eduard Gevorkian, computer specialist, sci-fi novelist and chief scientific editor during this period, recalls the shift to astrology with regret:

Unfortunately, I also had a hand in it. When they dug up Linda Goodman, began publishing her book... folks lapped it up, that is, the public demanded it. We published many articles debunking astrology. We printed interesting astrological articles alongside debunking commentary. And all the same, people demanded it: “No,

i religiiia, v. 8, 1989, 40. *Star Signs* is something of a handbook, teaching the intricacies of astrology and related occult sciences so that readers might apply them in their own lives.

¹¹² Some readers demanded still more, and one (apparently inattentive) reader accused the magazine of an intentional blackout. In December of 1990, this reader writes: “Esteemed comrades! Everywhere you look these days, you see the advice of astrologers. They used to be labeled conmen, but what are they now? If astrology is a con, then say so, and if it’s a science, then let’s throw our economists out by their collars, and fill the Supreme Soviet with astrologers. Why is your magazine silent on astrology?” A. Bitman, *Saratov*.” The editors, so amused by the letter as to print it, then give a partial bibliography of their astrology printings of the previous few years.

¹¹³ For scientific validity, see *Nauka i religiiia*, v. 6, 1990, 57. For health (the writings of Raphael), many installments beginning 1990, v.8, 34. For Eastern calendars, 1990, v. 12, 52. For cyclical history, see first installment in 1991, v. 1, and chapter 5 of this dissertation. For a roundtable, see note 114. The “school of astrology” opens in 1992, v. 1.

¹¹⁴ This ethos is best represented in *Nauka i religiiia*, 1991, v. 10, 10 - a roundtable of scientists and astrologers of various stripes making their case. It features, among others, Mikhail Levin.

¹¹⁵ In January of 1988, V. Trofimov writes the magazine from Svetlogorsk: “Recently (especially in the last year) the quality of your magazine has declined sharply. To the great regret of your readers, more and more unreadable articles are appearing, in which a bare minimum of information is hidden behind a mass of meaningless claptrap. ... If the magazine continues to decline like this, I fear you will lose your subscribers.” The editors respond: “Thank you, Comrade Trofimov, for your concern about our subscribers. There are some among them displeased with the magazine. But letters like yours, in truth, are extremely rare.”

give it to us! How are we to live? How?” Lunar astrology for agriculture? Unfortunately, on this we caved to public demand.

Still, the “we” of this story is left undefined. The magazine’s executive secretary at the time, responsible for layout decisions and second only to the editor-in-chief Pravotorov, expressed no such regrets when pressed, and Pravotorov himself clearly sided with the public, given the magazine’s trajectory. Those who resisted astrology remained at the magazine as well, and the debate continued in private and in print. But criticism was intermittent, and astrology would remain a permanent fixture.¹¹⁶ What’s more, when faced with financial crisis and looming privatization, the magazine would even run advertisements for astrologers and astrological schools. The first such advertisement, in May of 1991, was for the Moscow Academy of Astrology. It was titled “For Future Astrologers”:

Many readers have asked, “where can I get an education and literature on astrology? Classes at the Academy of Astrology began in November of last year in Moscow, taught by famous astrologers M. Levin (rector of the academy), F. Velichko, V. Weisberg and others.

We have stopped accepting students for this academic year, but don’t despair! The Academy of Astrology is beginning correspondence courses. To register, send a letter to...¹¹⁷

Avid reader that she was, Olga Galankina would have seen this advertisement in *Science and Religion*, but likely paid it little notice - in May of 1991 she was already enrolled in Levin’s academy. At any rate it was nothing unusual to see Levin in print, as he was already something of a media fixture, giving interviews and prognoses in newspapers, on the radio and on television, and promoting his nascent school all the while.¹¹⁸ Levin recalls a close and mutually beneficial relationship with the press in the period, in which they could vastly boost readership or viewership via horoscopes, and he could introduce his discipline to the public.¹¹⁹ The form this took was often simplified, popularized beyond the limits of what Levin considered responsible practice, but this was a compromise he made willingly, in the hopes of drawing the public to his science.¹²⁰ Alongside this promotional work, Levin helped to organize national (and in a few years, international) astrology conferences, convinced as he was that

¹¹⁶ In addition, *Science and Religion* would help to propel certain astrologers to fame. In late 1989, when astrology was newly but rapidly emerging, the magazine published a three-part astrological analysis of Stalin’s natal chart by Pavel Globa, perhaps the only astrologer to surpass Levin in name-recognition in the 1990s. Gevorkian, the regretful science editor, takes credit (of a sort) for launching the careers of three others. “We searched around for the passably sane astrologers,” he recalls. “And Zaraev, Levin, Grigorii Kvasha all got their start with us.” Aleksandr Zaraev would found a competitor school to Levin’s in 1990 (with a decidedly statistical-mathematical bent), and Grigorii Kvasha, a chemist by training (at MGU no less), would publish on the astrology of marriage. Most of the astrologers published in these early years would make successful careers of their work. Still, Gevorkian should take heart - although *Science and Religion* was the first and most thorough in its treatment of astrology, the trend quickly took on a life of its own, and the magazine did not truly launch those careers.

¹¹⁷ *Nauka i religia*, 1991, v. 5, 41. See note 122 for detail on the school’s founding.

¹¹⁸ Levin, interviews with the author, December 2014 and October 2015.

¹¹⁹ Tatiana Mitiaeva remembers a sudden spike in demand for astrological expertise across the media landscape: “You know, this all happened at the conjunction of Uranus and Neptune in Capricorn. When those two planets aligned, astrology gained some status... invitations came in from journalists, from television, to do prognoses for people. They ordered a range of articles from Mikhail Levin and other astrologers. ... This powerful wave had risen up.” Levin, reflecting on the same phenomenon: “...Suddenly, unexpectedly, journalists, one after another after another, ran to us with questions, invited us to publish, to appear on the radio and television... Journalists were tasked with increasing readership, and our task was to introduce astrology as widely as possible.”

¹²⁰ In Levin’s words: “The majority (of journalists) produced material that was strictly entertainment, fairly primitive material. But at that time we thought, ‘what the hell,’ we forgave the journalists their shortcomings just for the sake of popularizing astrology.”

a science cannot develop its full potential in a vacuum.¹²¹ But above all this, his academy remained his primary goal and passion. It opened its doors in November of 1990.¹²²

The academy was an immediate success, “something fantastical” in Levin’s words, hence the need for correspondence classes. On the first day of registration, Levin and his teachers were overwhelmed with would-be students. Vice-rector Tatiana Mitiaeva, who kept the books that day and has ever since, placed the number at 2000, only 850 of whom could be accommodated. The students - among them Olga Galankina - would be taught by Levin himself and by teachers drawn from his once-underground *kruzhok*. They would learn what Levin had learned, but unfiltered by Soviet strictures - a hard science to describe present and future, of demonstrable and inspiring correspondence between the stars and their lives. Levin’s school, the largest of many cropping up in Russia’s major cities, leaned more statistical than mystical in its approach, scientific means to serve human ends. Levin himself ensured that students were not instructed in “philosophical and religious conceptions,” only in astrology.

The vast majority of the academy’s first instructors (80% by Levin’s count) came to the school with higher educations in the sciences, and most continued their official scientific work in parallel careers (“although,” adds Levin, “there’s no money in scientific work.”) At the academy they’d find much familiar. The program was a set course of lectures, assignments and exams, three years in all, before the conferral of a degree. Their discipline is one of graphs and charts, of dates, times and angles, of arcane symbols learned through rote memorization. The technical language of the textbooks and class discussions would be familiar to astronomers, but not to the untrained public. Once in class, students would make and test hypotheses, with their peers and teachers assessing the results. Yet the goals of these experiments would be distinctly personal, for instance employing their science to choose a time for a medical procedure, or to adjust one’s relationship to their parents.¹²³ It is in this realm that astrological theory is tested.

In interviews, alumni of the early years rest astrology’s spiritual edifice on its objective and verifiable foundation.¹²⁴ Tatiana Mitiaeva came to astrology out of an interest in people, impressed by

¹²¹ Levin was party to two conferences in 1990, the first internal (in Lithuania) and the second international, featuring speakers from outside the Eastern Bloc as well as audience members from the public. They were funded by a wealthy businessman who either had adopted astrology, sought to profit from it, or both. The keynote speaker was Vlai’ Kaznacheev, who appears briefly at this essays conclusion - he was a doctor and academic of the Soviet Academy of Medical Sciences who became a major proponent of occult sciences. The conference panels featured a wide range of speakers from within the *kruzhki* networks.

¹²² Levin had long sought to establish a formal school, but help came from an unexpected place - somebody within the Higher Party School, once the KPSS’s primary institution for training party cadres and future leaders, sought in its last moments of relevance to make money off the astrology boom. An official within the school recruited several emerging celebrity astrologers - Levin, Felix Velichko, and Vitalii Weisberg - and all four together began advertising the first class, scheduled for 12 November 1990. In the process of advertising, however, Levin was interviewed in *Moskovskie Novosti*, one of the city’s premier papers, and word of the scheme reached conservative holdouts in the party apparatus. This was enough for Levin to lose his quasi-official endorsement and the space he was promised. In a last minute scramble, he was able to secure lecture halls in the Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloys, delaying the school’s official convocation by forty minutes (a not insignificant time, in astrological terms). But students were undeterred by the change of venue, and soon after, the other founders unanimously elected Levin as rector of the Moscow Academy of Astrology. From the academy’s official history, <http://www.astro-academia.ru/AKADEM/story.htm>. The students filled three lecture halls at the institute, and only in 1997 did the Academy begin renting its own permanent space.

¹²³ These examples are from Levin: “they [the students] simply see that we have methods, that students can bring their own issues to class. For example, if somebody has a sick child, if somebody has some complications in their relationship with their parents... we take them on, help them choose a time for an operation, help them find an approach to the child, help illuminate their relationship with their parents, and so forth.”

¹²⁴ Of those first-generation astrologers I interviewed from Levin’s academy, all but one had a degree in science or

its ability “to understand people, their character, their motivations, their fates, their behaviors...” and ultimately focused her studies on the astrology of child-rearing. Asked to explain astrology’s deep draw during the collapse, Mitiaeva stresses its scientific rigor, as compared to “extrasense” healing and other more mystical trends that had caught the nation’s attention.¹²⁵

It turns on scientific facts, on the concrete movement of the planets and their influence. And that can be affirmed scientifically... What is an extrasense? He looks at you, says something, a diagnosis or something about a past life. But how does one prove that? ... only astrology can be verified. If you study it yourself, you can verify that it is what it seems.

Aleksei Kalinin arrived at Levin’s academy from more mystical circles, and from extrasense healing in particular. Although he had some success in developing that skill, “extrasense healing, it’s a bit of magic, it’s all relative. So when [the astrological schools] opened, everybody went, I went.” Kalinin had intuition but sought theoretical depth, and found it in astrology. In addition to enrolling in Levin’s school, he also signed up for Alexander Zaraev’s, a competitor to Levin, whose astrology has a distinctly mathematical-statistical bent. Zaraev emerged from the same Moscow *kruzhki* as Levin.¹²⁶ After earning his degree, Kalinin began teaching astrology for Levin.

Olga Galankina, in describing astrology, moves seamlessly between its scientific means and its personal ends:

“[astrology] is a science... it’s something that, if you study well, if you work hard, if you try, then you can calculate these things. ... it helps one understand the world. Sure, it helps you understand cause and effect, that is, when somebody ends up in a difficult situation, some sort of loss, they can ask why it happened. And astrology helps understand these things. But it’s a science all the same.

To her, this correspondence is self-evident; she had known it all her life. As a child, awestruck by the vast open sky and the tremendous number of stars, she sought to learn “the what, the how, and the why,” that is, to make intellectual sense of the rapture that the night sky inspired in her. What’s more, having achieved that goal through her studies, her awe was undiminished so many decades later:

The same planets that are now in the sky, they’re moving around the chart, and they’re in some configuration. And you see this same planet, which is in your natal chart - that is, it was there in the sky fifty years ago - and now, another planet is passing it, and you see a configuration that is clearly described by those same coordinates. And you understand, truly, how regular the world is, how beautifully everything is arranged.

Conclusion

Saturn and Neptune come into conjunction every thirty-six years, and did so again in 1989. That cycle is proof positive for Soviet and Russian astrologers, and for obvious reasons. 1881, 1917, 1953, 1989 - the ticking of celestial clockwork. Experts take for granted the outsized influence of the stars on Russia’s recent past, though they differ in their interpretations. This chapter has offered but one.

When the young Olga Galankina put down her science magazines and looked up at the night sky,

engineering. Their areas of expertise include materials science, optical engineering, hydraulics engineering, math and physics.

¹²⁵ Revisit note 8 for more on the place of extrasense healing.

¹²⁶ This from Vladimir Maikov, teacher at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences and member of Levin’s 1980s *kruzhok*, interview with the author, December 2014.

what did she see? She saw a cosmos both orderly and beautiful, inspiring to her intellect and her spirit. She knew the universe could be understood, and that its hidden laws were being mastered by Soviet experts whose ranks she might some day join. She also believed she knew her future, if only in outline - that a stable and improving society would permit her to direct her life towards this purpose. To her, this future was never something so mundane as a career; it was a purpose in life, self-realization through science. These ideas were ubiquitous in the culture of her youth, bright stars in the Soviet firmament, about which Galankina had drawn a constellation of her own design. This constellation would serve to orient her throughout her life.

In his youth, Mikhail Levin oriented himself in much the same way. Born into the scientific caste, he had every reason to believe that his path was clear, only to find it obstructed by irrational prejudice. Because he took the promise of the Sputnik state quite literally, his disillusion was all the more intolerable, though he never abandoned that state's ideals. He simply set out to realize them on his own. He developed his discipline in spite of the state, but nonetheless it came to bear the stamp of his childhood.

Most others of Levin's and Galankina's generation surely looked to the stars at one point, but most of these only in passing, and by adulthood they were focused on the earthbound realities of late Soviet life. This entailed a kind of compromise, in which they would overlook the obvious shortcomings of the science-state in favor of its apparent regularity and, within that, its satisfaction of basic spiritual needs. Only when the state could no longer guarantee a staid normality did the readers of *Science and Religion*, and countless more, seek larger meaning, and at that moment they took to astrology's familiar form. As any astrologer would attest, this story is cyclical.

In the disorientation of the collapse, when these Soviet people could look up from more pressing matters, what did they see? On television and in the newspapers and magazines, they saw an objective science of the stars with personal implications, calculating the future for their benefit; in short, the same fixed and bright stars of their youth, but outlined now by the hands of their astrologer peers. It should not surprise us that many recognized something like a constellation, and from that, found some direction in the dark. A rule-governed universe requires no leap of faith.

Of course, not everybody oriented themselves in this way, and the previous era's experts in particular insisted that some essential truth had been lost in the interim. Arguments over the legitimacy of astrology continued in the pages of *Science and Religion*, the editors having recused themselves with the issue unresolved. In a collection of essays published in December of 1990, for instance, Soviet philosopher of science Boris Pruzhinin penned an article titled "Stars don't lie - people make mistakes."¹²⁷ It followed a defense of astrology by Vlail' Kaznacheev, a doctor and member of the Soviet Academy of Medical Sciences who had publicly embraced the occult.¹²⁸ Pruzhinin's piece was measured and respectful, but ultimately cast doubt on the new discipline's validity. Although he saw much familiar in astrology's "highly mathematized constructions, bearing all the external markers of

¹²⁷ *Nauka i religija*, 1991, v. 12, 34.

¹²⁸ As a final point of reflection, Kaznacheev's turn, and this chapter generally, evoke debates over the thesis of Paul Forman, who argued in 1971 that quantum mechanics emerged in post-WWI Germany precisely because of the chaos of the time and intellectuals' hostility towards determinism and materialism. Kaznacheev and his ilk would agree that the marginal status of astrology is more cultural than methodological, and in 1990, Kaznacheev seems hopeful that that culture was changing. For a discussion of the Forman thesis and its fates, see Cathryn Carson, Helmuth Trischler, and Alexei Kojevnikov, *Weimar Culture and Quantum Mechanics: Selected Papers by Paul Forman and Contemporary Perspectives on the Forman Thesis* (World Scientific, 2011).

rational knowledge,” he ultimately concluded that, in the hands of the astrologer, “the rational form of astrology’s ideas becomes nothing more than a way to influence the client.” In other words, astrology’s statistical means are necessarily subordinate to its ends - guiding the behavior of irrational human beings. This is all true, of course. People across the Soviet Union were being sold a paradoxical idea, which at once claimed to reflect objective reality and to serve human needs. On the other hand, why should we assume they didn’t know this, and choose to read their horoscope all the same? There is nothing new under the sun.

Let Communism Live Forever



Let Communism Live Forever

*“Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and
vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality,
has no such simple effect upon the mind of man.*

The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time.”

Virginia Woolf, from *Orlando*

At the Hare Krishnas’ center in Moscow, the pacing of life is quite disjoint from the world outside. To begin with, my interviews routinely began later there, and ran longer, than scheduled - my days were long, with ample time to chat informally and take notes on my surroundings. Those notes record a deep patience inside, exceptional among my experiences interviewing and, generally, my experience of life in Russia or at home. One day, for example, I happened upon one of my subjects in the cafeteria as he sat down with a hot meal. Upon seeing me, he approached and we spoke for thirty minutes, on topics remote from my work, while his lunch cooled on another table. I was far more distracted by it than he was.

When Soviet devotees - as members of the Hare Krishna movement call themselves - were still operating underground and under threat, this is the life they sought to build. It is a life untroubled by the clock. In the temple, they wake before dawn to chant and pray, and wash and eat by the prescriptions of the Vedas. When not engaged in formal ritual or listening to lectures, they speak softly and slowly and without fear of long silences, as they consider frivolous speech, speech not in service of Lord Krishna, to be counterproductive. The quietude is broken regularly by the effervescent song and dance for which the movement is known, but most chanting of the mantra is a personal and contemplative practice, which occupies a substantial portion of the devotee’s day. The Hare Krishnas believe that time passed in this way afflicts the body but not the soul, and yields no additional karma to further mire oneself in the material world. It is a means to step aside of history.

As (formerly) Soviet devotees established this temple in the 1990s, history was washing away the gains of the Soviet period and speeding towards some unknown future. In a collection of conversion stories compiled in 2006, this contrast between temple life and the world outside is stark. As with astrology, conversions made before the collapse most often turned on spiritual restlessness and philosophical exploration. Such things might have seemed like a great luxury in the USSR’s low-born reincarnation, when devotees came to Krishna from more concrete trauma and privation. Their

testimonies read like the yellow journalism that flooded Russian newsstands at the time - many begin with chronic illness, depression, broken families, drug abuse, attempted suicide or criminal violence, only to resolve in the pages of the Bhagavad Gita or in the shade of Lord Krishna's lotus feet.¹

This chapter is a history of the Soviet Hare Krishna movement, and a study of how Krishna Conscious ideology reshaped the devotees' world.² It describes how a movement so apparently remote from Soviet culture took root and grew, and how its worldview - and particularly its view of time - addressed the problems of Soviet and post-Soviet life.

Concerning the history of the Hare Krishna movement in the USSR, we will see that it was fostered in the 1970s by the same educated, urban milieu as Soviet astrology, and as with astrology, its perceived legitimacy can be attributed to values already circulating in Soviet culture. Because the seekers of the *kruzhki* were primed to accept the Hare Krishna movement's authority, its basic tenets spread easily through their well-established networks. For those seekers who entered the devotional life, it was the Hare Krishnas' view of time that resonated most deeply with them. This new outlook also justified a range of practices that saw the devotees diverge quite radically from Soviet social life, which would in turn serve as a basis for severe persecution by the state. In the 1990s, after the persecutions subsided, the movement expanded from some hundreds to tens of thousands, all propagating literature, establishing local centers, and organizing public mass spectacles.³ To this day, the Hare Krishnas remains a visible, if more muted, feature of post-Soviet urban life.

The appeal that the movement held for intellectuals in the 1970s resonated, in the 1990s, with a much broader segment of Russian society. What appealed was the movement's deep sense of nostalgia: in their philosophy and practice, Hare Krishnas seek the emotional recovery of a distant and sacred past, lost to memory but preserved in the Hindu vedas.⁴ That past, and the long decline

¹ *Kak ia prishel v soznanie Krishny: Sbornik pisem i istorii*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: OOO "Uran," 2011) is a collection of conversion testimonies of Russian Hare Krishnas, numbering in the low hundreds and organized roughly chronologically.

² I'd like to express my gratitude to the ISKCON center of Moscow for hosting and helping to facilitate my research, and to those devotees who shared with me their lives and insights. The photograph on the title page is of Swami Prabhupada, during his only visit to the USSR in 1971. In this chapter I will, on occasion, adopt popular usage and refer to members of the movement as Hare Krishnas. They themselves do not use the term and most often refer to themselves simply as "devotees," but neither is the term offensive. It refers to the famed mantra central to their spiritual practice. In Russian, devotees are most often called кришнаиты, Krishna-ites, a term that devotees there do use.

Concerning transliteration from Sanskrit, I have opted to use anglicized forms, without diacritics, for more common names and terms. Prabhupada's name, for instance, is more accurately rendered A.C. Bhaktivedānta Svāmī Prabhupāda, and Krishna ought to be Kṛṣṇa, but readers will find my usage more familiar. I use formal transliteration from the Sanskrit for my subjects' spiritual names and other, less-common terms. Male spiritual names are appended with Dāsa, "servant" of Krishna, but can be dropped colloquially - here, I drop Dāsa after my first use of any given name. I want to sincerely thank Sohini Pillai for her help in this.

³ Simon, Stephanie. "Krishnas Find Fertile Ground In Russia." *Chicago Tribune*, March 8, 1992. Accessed 20 November 2017 at http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1992-03-08/news/9201220040_1_hare-krishna-krishna-mantra-krishna-consciousness.

⁴ This chapter, particularly in its second half, draws from a range of viewpoints on nostalgia as a disposition or worldview. These include Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979), which explores nostalgia as a stable personal and collective identity (with conservative tendencies); Constantine Sedikides et al., "Nostalgia: Past, Present and Future," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17, no. 5 (2008), 304-307, which examines nostalgia's positive role in mood and affect, especially among the aging, from a psychological scientific perspective; Kimberly K. Smith, "Mere Nostalgia: Notes on a Progressive Paratheory," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2000): 505-27, which links nostalgia with industrial modernity; Janelle L. Wilson, "'Remember When...': A Consideration of the Concept of Nostalgia," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 56, no. 3 (1999): 296-304, which connects nostalgia to love, so central in the Hare Krishna lexicon; and Ralph Harper, *Nostalgia: an Existential Exploration of Longing and Fulfillment in the Modern Age* (Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1966), which has the loveliest descriptions of the feeling

since, made sense of the Soviet world in the present. Nostalgia of this type, it should be mentioned, came to color a wide range of post-Soviet worldviews, of which the Hare Krishnas are just a particularly vibrant example. Nostalgia, of course, features prominently in broader discussions of contemporary Russian attitudes.

In this chapter's second half, the powerful workings of nostalgia become visible in the lives and recollections of the devotees, and in the life of one devotee in particular. That devotee, who was named Tatiana but now goes by the spiritual name Tuṅgavidyāsakhi, lived a life not unlike that of the astrologer Olga Galankina - she appears as a model Soviet woman, as imagined in official culture.⁵ And as with the astrologers, a restrictive life in the Soviet middle class set her seeking deeper meaning, which by 1989 she had located in Krishna Consciousness (as the Hare Krishnas call their philosophy). A close reading of our interviews reveals how a nostalgic worldview can change a convert's perception both of her own past and of historical time itself.

Time moves without regard for our particular views on it, but the larger course that we imagine it to follow carries with it immense personal and social implications. With the discrediting and disappearance of forward-looking Marxism-Leninism - a process spanning many decades - many Soviet people grew doubtful of the future, and uncertain of the past. Soviet time frayed at the end. As Krishna Consciousness is concerned, it proved attractive because it offered a return to a timeless time - a respite from history itself, which by the 1980s had lost its luster. Each subsequent chapter will examine other conceptions of time, which likewise offered solutions to the crisis of the Soviet collapse - in that, this chapter introduces the dissertation's central theme.

Looking for Krishna

In the most immediate sense, the Soviet Hare Krishna movement began in 1971. This is when A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the movement's founder, appeared in Moscow, and met with leading Soviet orientalist Grigorii Kotovskii.⁶ Some mystery and much mythology surround that meeting, which will be detailed later. During that same trip, the guru inspired a single Soviet devotee named Anatolii Piniav. Beginning that summer, Piniav (who was given the spiritual name Ananda Śānti Dāsa) began proselytizing with Prabhupada's formal backing. He would go on to play a role in the Hare Krishnas' major public breakthrough in 1979, serving as an interpreter at the Moscow

itself: "[Nostalgia] combines bitterness and sweetness, the lost and the found, the far and the near, the new and the familiar, absence and presence. The past which is over and gone, from which we have been or are being removed, by some magic becomes present again for a short while. But its realness seems even more familiar, because renewed, than it ever was, more enchanting and more lovely" (120).

⁵ Having explained my rules of transliteration, I will here introduce an exception. Because Tatiana went by Tuṅgavidyāsakhi when we met, but was describing a world in which she was Tatiana, I have chosen to use Tatiana's Russian name throughout the text for ease of reading and understanding. The only exception to this exception is when I explicitly discuss her spiritual name.

⁶ I use the term "orientalist" here, and throughout the paper, with reason. Orientalism as an academic discipline, both in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, retained its prestige and good name where Western equivalents did not (I elaborate this point below). Edward Said's famous thesis seems to hold up rather poorly in the Russian case. See Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann, eds., *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), and David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 10-11 in particular for the term itself.

International Book Fair. His work, and the work of devotees he inspired, explains how the Hare Krishna movement spread in the Soviet Union.

Yet the Hare Krishnas themselves would describe their history differently. As George Harrison wrote, and devotees have repeated since, “everybody is looking for Krishna. Some don’t realize that they are, but they are.”⁷ Soviet people - like all people - already had the germ of Krishna Consciousness inside them. Beginning in 1971, Swami Prabhupada and Piniayev simply stimulated it to grow:

Like a master chef who, by a single grain of rice, can tell that an entire dish is ready, so by Piniayev’s enthusiasm for the teachings of Krishna could he, Prabhupada, understand that millions of other Russians were likewise ready.⁸

In this the devotees are correct, though perhaps not in the way they imagine. Many Russians (really, Soviets) were indeed ready for Krishna Consciousness. Piniayev and his ilk were able to draw dozens, then hundreds of Soviets into Krishna Consciousness, because many educated Soviets were already primed to respect the movement’s authority, to propagate its texts in their networks, and ultimately, to accept its interpretation of the world. Specifically, both the intellectual and popular culture of the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s elevated ancient thought and eastern cultures, and thus lent Krishna Consciousness a certain respectability, which became reverence among a certain set of the intelligentsia. These intellectuals, embedded in the seeking milieu and in the network of *kruszhki* detailed in the previous chapter, had a ready audience for their newfound ideas. And as the testimonies of converts and my own interviews reveal, Krishna consciousness provided for these people a deeply coherent critique of their society, so compelling that they would - and did - risk their safety to explore it. That critique is a nostalgic view of the past, rooted in a golden age with a single and absolute truth, degraded almost beyond recognition in the present.

The Ancient and Eastern in Soviet culture

The Hare Krishna movement first emerged and thrived in the United States in the 1960s, not despite but because of its anti-Western and anti-modernist critique. As in the West, its appeal in the Soviet Union was no doubt aided by its intellectual depth and its remoteness from everyday experience, as well as its skepticism towards modernization and progress. Yet in the USSR, other factors encouraged the movement’s growth, factors that stemmed directly or indirectly from the state itself. Beginning in the late 1950s, the Soviet state elevated ancient thought and Eastern cultures both unwittingly and by design. Specifically, the USSR took a geopolitical interest - and made corresponding investments - in the East and in India in particular. This guaranteed access and lightened restrictions on scholarship and cultural exchange with India. This dovetailed with a state support back home for studying things ancient and Eastern. Soviet orientalism - *vostokovedenie*, academic study of the East - had long been highly-developed as a discipline, and gained particular prestige and support due to its geopolitical value.⁹ What’s more, a relatively loose rein for scholarship in these topics attracted many intellectuals. All these factors together culminated in public interest in Indian topics, abundant and high-quality academic and popular publishing, and a widespread fashion for yoga.

⁷ This from the foreword to *Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead*, a publication that George Harrison himself sponsored.

⁸ K. Liubarskii, “Marks Protiv Krishny,” *Strana I Mir*, no. 11 (Munich, 1985), 23-24. This quotation appears to be a paraphrasing of Swami Prabhupada.

⁹ Birgit Menzel’s essay in Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemester, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, eds. *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*. München: Otto Sagner, 2012, 155. On orientalism, see note 4 above.

Concerning geopolitics, the USSR at this time sought to draw developing, decolonized countries into the socialist camp, and Soviet orientalism was part of a larger cultural outreach.¹⁰ Academic collaboration, bilateral cultural commissions and language exchanges were a primary means of demonstrating Soviet goodwill, as was Moscow's People's Friendship University for foreign students (established in 1960). These substantial efforts lent support to a certain Soviet rhetoric vis-a-vis the West. The Soviet Union's multiethnic character, bolstered by the official elevation of non-Russian languages and cultures within its borders, stood in stark contrast to the increasingly visible disgraces of European colonialism and the racial strife that tarred America's global image. This contrast, as well as the strident anti-imperialism in Marxist theory and in Leninism in particular, all lent credence to the USSR's universalist claims (even if each point could be argued on its merits).

All of the above made an impression on the newly-independent India, and although Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was deeply committed to non-alignment, he was also a socialist and certainly had no principled objection to productive Soviet-Indian relations. The relationship of the two countries' leaderships may have been lopsided - over-eager Soviet courtship met with careful Indian calculation - but it was friendly all the same, beginning with mutual state visits in 1955 and growing closer after the Sino-Indian war in 1962 (when the Sino-Soviet split compelled the Soviets to take sides).¹¹ Through the period under study here - the 1960s and 1970s - democratic and English-speaking India was a friend to the USSR, and the educated public was not just permitted but encouraged to explore Indian culture.

¹⁰ We should specify, the the non-Chinese socialist camp.

¹¹ On the conflict, see Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 144-145. The state visit, featuring Khrushchev riding an elephant, is from Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967*, Cold War International History Project Series (Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2009), 31.



“Hindi-Russi Bhai Bhai” (in Hindi), or “The Indians and the Russians are brothers,” was an official slogan of Indo-Soviet friendship from 1955 onward.

Soviet investment in India meant reliable state support for cultural exchange. Alongside military aid and industrial development initiatives (including a \$375 million credit agreement in 1959), the Soviet government invested around \$10 million per year in joint cultural programs with the Republic of India from the 1960s onward.¹² This guaranteed exceptional access in that country for Soviet academics and journalists. And the most likely path to India - indeed, often a strict prerequisite - was formal training and a degree from the USSR’s institutes of orientalism.¹³

Soviet orientalism thrived in several prestigious institutes and had an outsized presence in the

¹² On development, see Luthi, 143, and on military aid, see Radchenko, 29. On cultural programs, Peter J. S. Duncan, *The Soviet Union and India*, Chatham House Papers (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1989), 97.

¹³ This from Olga Brushlinskaia, editorial secretary of *Science and Religion*. She herself learned Arabic at one of these institutes, and such training was required at the magazine to write on Arab topics.

public mind.¹⁴ Its strength was in part inherited from the Russian Empire, and the field's Soviet iteration was, in personnel and institutions, a continuation of the tsarist one.¹⁵ Across both regimes, Russian and Soviet orientalism stood out for its depth and reach, as well as its (relative) divergence from the colonialist and racialist assumptions that, in the West, have given "orientalism" a bad name.¹⁶ In the Soviet period, the field's connections abroad and its emphasis on language learning lent it prestige in educated circles.¹⁷ Concerning the "Oriental" objects of study, the Soviet field conceived of itself as explicitly emancipatory (though the outcomes were, and are, predictably contested).¹⁸ This type of scholarship, naturally, was broadcast abroad and otherwise given the state's eager support.

Possessed of unique resources, academics and other intellectuals also had unusual political freedom to look backward and Eastward in their work.¹⁹ This was the consequence of the nearsightedness of Soviet censorship - the closer an academic work came to the present day, and the closer to Russia or the West, the more discriminating was the censor's pen. In fields more removed from the immediate concerns of Marxism-Leninism, the censor lacked both the will and the wherewithal to impose intellectual strictures. Not unlike the Hare Krishnas, the Soviet state saw the European present in all its miserable complexity, but presumed the distant past, as the East, to be largely static and benign.²⁰

¹⁴ The early imperative of incorporating the non-Russian Soviet republics prompted great investment in ethnography, language study, and a general celebration, in official fora, of the USSR's southern and eastern peoples. In rhetoric and institutions, this legacy translated easily to the imperatives of the Cold War, when the country sought allies in the Far East and the Muslim world. Interest in and goodwill towards the East was a stable element of official culture, if not always borne out in policy or attitudes.

¹⁵ From the early 19th century (1804), Kazan University was the Imperial center for studying the East, and remained so, though after 1854 it was eclipsed by Saint Petersburg University's Faculty of Oriental Languages. By the end of the 19th century the Russian Academy of Sciences and various discipline-specific scholarly societies had oriental divisions, which were increasingly in communication with their Western peers. Sergei Oldenburg, a celebrated Orientalist of the late imperial period, was permanent secretary of the Russian Academy of Sciences from 1904-1929 and a personal acquaintance of Lenin. After some trial and tribulation, he was put in charge of the Soviet Institute of orientalism in 1929, which was then combined with the tsarist-era Asian Museum, which Oldenburg had run since 1916. The institute was moved to Moscow, but a Leningrad branch persisted. See David Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye, "The Imperial Roots of Soviet orientalism," in Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann, eds., *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), and on Orenburg, see Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 189-197. In the Soviet period, there were prestigious Institutes for the Study of Eastern Religion and Philosophy in both Moscow and Leningrad (in that city, Indology and Egyptology were of particular renown), as well as Moscow's Institute of Asian and African Countries. Menzel in Menzel et al., 155.

¹⁶ The introduction to Schimmelpenninck van der Oye's "Russian orientalism" stresses Russia's own place between East and West, and how this cultural proximity greatly complicates Said's thesis on orientalism - essentially, Russian and Soviet orientalism show the field to be far from monolithic in its assumptions and goals. Menzel in Menzel et al., 155., elaborates on the strength and prestige of Soviet orientalism. Part II of Kemper and Conermann collects essays on Soviet orientalism's manifestation in the national republics themselves, and their legacy in the post-Soviet countries they became.

¹⁷ Kemper and Conermann, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., see for instance the essay by Vladimir Bobrovnikov, 66, "the contribution of Oriental scholarship to the Soviet anti-Islamic discourse."

¹⁹ It is worth noting here that ancient and eastern cannot always be paired - the *krushki* had other currents, authoritative for their perceived antiquity, but distinctly Western or Slavic. This includes astrology of certain types, but also, pre-Christian Slavic spirituality (and later, neo-paganism), nationalisms of more mystical stripes (including Eurasianism), and broad interest in "lost civilizations," including Atlantis and Hyperborea, which today remain popular topics of study and speculation (including by formal para-academic organizations).

²⁰ And to the Soviets and the Hare Krishnas, of course, we should add the British, whose imperial ideology often turned on India's eternal and unchanging qualities - whether that be an eternal religion with corresponding legal and moral culture, or eternal despotism. Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, New Cambridge History of India ; III, 4 (Cambridge

Scholars saw in this an opportunity, and not only in orientalism itself. Soviet historians of the modern era, for instance, were bound by a certain orthodoxy, and (at least in their introductions) had to frame all their work in the Marxist-Leninist idiom. Yet their colleagues in the ancient and medieval periods excelled, producing pathbreaking work in medieval cultures for instance, and deciphering birchbark manuscripts and their vernacular dialects.²¹ In linguistics, the so-called Nostratic hypothesis, which posits a theoretical ur-language group antedating and encompassing the Indo-European family, emerged entirely from scholarly circles in Moscow in the 1960s. In anthropology, the orientalist Lev Gumilev gained international prominence, though not without international controversy, for his heterodox theories of ancient ethnogenesis, which largely took Chinese, Turkic and Middle Eastern groups as its sources.²² As with physics and other hard sciences, strides in these fields were made possible, and perhaps even accelerated, by the ideological strictures (and related unattractiveness) of other fields.²³ Experimentation and controversy were tolerated or, at the very least, drew less scrutiny from above.

Historian David Beecher, in his study of the University of Tartu in Soviet Estonia, produced something of a case study of this phenomenon. Political influence varied widely between departments there as everywhere, and the academic and spiritual culture followed. In 1982, in Tartu's department of law, communist party members comprised over 85% of the faculty, and in history, that figure was between 60-70%.²⁴ Yet in the philological departments, that number was under 30%.²⁵ Students there studied cultures they'd likely never visit and languages they'd likely never speak, including Arabic, Sanskrit, Tibetan and Japanese. But they did so with great latitude to explore. And not surprisingly, outside of formal study, a striking number of students and faculty became fascinated with Eastern currents, and Buddhism in particular.²⁶

Most who followed this path would have done so privately, but some set about popularizing their passion. In one instance, Andrei Teren'tev - an Indologist who worked in the Eastern section of a major Leningrad museum - exploited his access to rare artifacts and documents and, by the 1980s, became an influential promoter of Buddhism.²⁷ Much earlier, already in the late 1950s, Boris Smirnov - another indologist, from the Academy of Sciences in Turkmenistan - translated the *Bhagavad Gita* and the much larger *Mahabharata*, and included his own commentaries which described classical yoga and its philosophy in detail.²⁸ He was to be followed by several other orientalists who would make their names popularizing yoga.

[England]; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, part II also describes conceptions of traditionalism and barbarism attributed to the Indians by the British in the later 19th century.

²¹ Aron Gurevich stood out for his anthropological approach in categorizing medieval cultures; work in birchbark manuscripts by Valentin Yanin and Andrei Zalizniak incorporated diverse methods and yielded an entire field of study. The two contributed greatly to the Nostratic school, described below.

²² See Mark Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016) for Gumilev's thought, its origins, and its legacy.

²³ See chapter 5 for the relationship between Soviet ideological control and progress in the hard sciences.

²⁴ These numbers are from a commemorative 3-volume history of the University produced for its 350th anniversary, and printed in Estonian. A one-volume condensation was also published in English and Russian.

²⁵ As a point of reference, Beecher notes that at no time did more than 10% of the general population join the party.

²⁶ Striking to the researcher - in speaking with me, he noted distinct esoteric and Eastern trends in his milieu, without my prompting. From the orientalist at Tartu, the Buddhologist Linnart Mäll emerged as the most influential, and in the 1990s would go on to substantially organize the Buddhist community of Estonia.

²⁷ Menzel in Menzel et al., 156.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 154.

In the popular culture, enthusiasm for Indian culture gave rise to a pronounced yoga fad. In 1960, the famed yogi Indra Devi met publicly with leaders at the Kremlin; the first yoga school opened in 1963; yogis consulted with cosmonauts at their training center throughout that decade.²⁹ Also in the 1960s, at least two prominent orientalist scholars began to promote yoga for health and spiritual wellbeing in the Soviet popular press.³⁰ Vasilii Brodov, an indologist and professor of philosophy at Moscow State University (MGU), and Anatolii Zubkov, a linguist specializing in Hindi and educated at Moscow's Institute of Oriental Studies, were both by the mid-1960s publishing books, giving lectures, and teaching yoga to interested Soviet citizens. Brodov published a major article on yoga in *Science and Religion* in 1962, at the height of that magazine's space-race prominence, and Zubkov, in 1967, wrote a four-part series in the national monthly magazine *Rural Youth (Sel'skaia molodezh')*; both pieces attracted unusual volumes of reader mail (and were only two of many more).³¹ Their promotion of yoga focused on its asceticism, health benefits and cultural richness, all in line with the state's own stated values. In 1970, the two scholars collaborated on a documentary film called "Indian Yogis - Who Are They?"; a joint venture between studios in Bombay and Kiev, which proved a national sensation.³² The film explored thousands of years of yoga's history, tied its ancient philosophy to its contemporary practice, and put yoga's health claims - as well as some spectacular feats of strength by yogis - to testing in Soviet scientific laboratories. And this is just to speak of Soviet culture - of course, news and music of the Beatles and George Harrison circulated too, along with all manner of hippie iconography and *samizdat* translations of Western counterculture. And from all this together, yoga groups proliferated in Soviet cities, though rarely openly.³³

More generally, the peculiar place of India and Orientalism translated to access for the masses, via books, scholarly journals and newsmagazines, to a rich and curious world outside. The Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, for instance, translated and published in the 1960s selections from the *Puranas* (the non-scriptural corpus of ancient Sanskrit literature) and from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahābhārata*, the twin ancient Hindu epics.³⁴ The latter was printed in its entirety, and in more than one edition. A Soviet edition of *Manusmṛiti*, an ancient legal text, complete with Sanskrit commentaries, sold out across Moscow within a month. Older texts on Buddhism, Hinduism,

²⁹ "Byla li ioga v SSSR?", *Chastnyi korrespondent*, 8 November 2016, accessed 21 November 2017 at <http://www.chaskor.ru/article/byla-li-ioga-v-sssr-41111>.

³⁰ The Hare Krishnas themselves, in fact, made use of this yoga fad in their petitions and protests to the Soviet government during the persecutions of the 1980s - see note 100 below.

³¹ Menzel in Menzel et al., 167-168, describes this generally and introduces Brodov and Zubkov. For a profile of Brodov, see <http://www.vedanta.ru/library/brodov/vasily-brodov-Russian-philosopher-and-yoga-practitioner.php> and see <http://korrespondent.net/ukraine/events/1408429-korrespondent-strana-v-asane-kak-zhilos-jogam-v-sovetskom-soyuze-arhiv> for some on Zubkov (and a good general history of yoga in the USSR). Both accessed 6 January 2017.

³² The film is available in full, online, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0L4Gcu5U62A>, accessed January 6 2017.

³³ The Soviet yoga fad had a close parallel in socialist Romania (and likely elsewhere). See Irina Costache, "The Biography of a Scandal: Experimenting with Yoga during Romanian Late Socialism," in Furst, Juliane, and Josie McLellan, eds. *Dropping out of Socialism: The Creation of Alternative Spheres in the Soviet Bloc*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017. The Romanian case shares much with the Soviet - formation among intelligentsia in the 1960s, formalization in the 1970s, a crackdown in the 1980s (though far less extreme); overlap of other currents including Krishna Consciousness, extra sense healing and mystic nationalisms; and connections to Orientalism. Different, though, was the Romanian government's attempt to silo yoga and meditation in psychology departments, and the prominence - in official and unofficial forms - of transcendental meditation in particular.

³⁴ This is all recorded in *Spiritual Communism*, a pamphlet published by the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, but devotees have actually posted the complete transcript to the internet, unabridged. Accessed 16 November 2017 at https://vanisource.org/wiki/710622_-_Conversation_-_Moscow.

yoga philosophy and practice were available in Soviet libraries, too, due to the value placed on Soviet-Indian friendship.³⁵

The seeking milieu

For those who wanted to explore further, there was a network in place to do so. That network, the intellectual *kruzhki* and their cooperative relationships with one another, was already highly developed by the the 1970s. It requires no new introduction. Recall the astrologer Mikhail Levin's words from the previous chapter:

[In] the first esoteric circle... we didn't have significant differentiation. It was Buddhists, it was parapsychologists, it was young Christians, some studied Agni Yoga³⁶... and when you grasp another understanding of the world, beyond [Soviet] boundaries, we didn't concern ourselves with the nuances. ... Who was, say, a Hare Krishna, was not important. ... we all felt spiritually kindred, really, something like brothers and sisters.

One of my interview subjects, Sergei Zuev, was an aeronautical engineer with friends "interested in the East." He and they began seeking in the 1970s, and he would formally join the Hare Krishnas in 1980. In describing his own milieu, he echoes Levin:

Studying at the institute [Moscow's Institute of Aviation], I had begun a process of spiritual seeking. I began attending ... gatherings of intelligentsia which were popular at the time, where they showed films, or discussed this or that topic that did not fit within the materialist worldview - for instance, about extrasensory healers, paranormal abilities... I joined yoga circles. I was interested in different religions... and at that time, it was such that there were no contradictions between beliefs. We met Orthodox Christians and Muslims, all that was in one apartment, so to speak... the same side of the barricade.³⁷

Krishna Consciousness, like astrology, was fostered by the seeking milieu of middle-class, university-educated urban Soviets. What united these seekers was seeking itself, rather than any dogma or practice - of the ten Hare Krishnas I interviewed, for instance, none doubted astrology's veracity, though the two traditions overlap in only the most tangential ways.³⁸ Alongside Hare Krishnas and astrologers, Levin mentions *Agni Yoga*,³⁹ Buddhism, protestant Christianity, parapsychology. Zuev remembers Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, extrasensory healing and the paranormal. Other early Hare Krishna converts added to these classical philosophy, Confucianism, Kabbalah, karate, Carlos Castaneda, the Beatles and psychedelic drugs.⁴⁰ To reconcile all of these currents intellectually is impossible, even if one includes the last. What they share is that they are deviant from the Soviet norm

³⁵ It is worth noting here that ancient and eastern cannot always be paired - the *kruzhki* had other currents, authoritative for their perceived antiquity, but distinctly Western or Slavic. This includes astrology of certain types, but also, pre-Christian Slavic spirituality (and later, neo-paganism), nationalisms of more mystical stripes (including Eurasianism), and broad interest in "lost civilizations," including Atlantis and Hyperborea, which today remain popular topics of study and speculation (including by formal para-academic organizations).

³⁶ Agni-yoga is the esoteric philosophy of the Roerichs, and is detailed in chapter 4.

³⁷ Sergei Zuev (spiritual name Radha Damodar dasa), interview with the author, February 2015.

³⁸ The general feeling among my subjects is that astrology is real, but its efficacy is limited to the material world rather than the spiritual one. That said, there are astrologers internal to the group. I interviewed one Patita Pavana, a Hare Krishna who in Moscow runs a school of "Bengali astrology, palmistry and numerology," at the suggestion of several devotees at the temple.

³⁹ Chapter 4, "Those Who Know History," explores Agni Yoga in depth. It is Russia's strongest indigenous esoteric tradition.

⁴⁰ *Kak ia prishel v soznanie Krishny: Sbornik pisem i istorii, passim.*

(though usually not anti-Soviet) and, for that reason, hold out the possibility of new truths.⁴¹

Pursuing such truths required ingenuity, though the methods employed by would-be Hare Krishnas to obtain materials again require no new introduction. They do not differ fundamentally from Levin's pursuit of astrological texts. But the peculiar status of India, as well as the larger cultural predilection for things ancient and Eastern, did much to ease the burden, and skewed *krushki* reading lists in those directions. Recall from the first chapter, when Levin used "India" as shorthand for his *krushok's* spiritual wellspring. He elaborated on the invaluable intellectual ties to that country:

There were people who traveled to India, worked there, and we got to know them. ... Individuals who traveled to the East on business or for their intellectual work. ... One acquaintance of mine worked in the Indian embassy there, or rather, the Russian embassy in India. They were little trickles of water, they came home and reported back to us. And at that, of course, they tried to push through Soviet prohibitions. Some magazines went there, like *Science and Religion*, without a doubt. They had access there. People were trying, in the 1970s, to escape the confines of Western ideologies.

Popular magazines like *Science and Religion* required that their journalists have formal educations in their respective arenas and, as noted above, the path from academic orientalism to journalism was quite clear-cut.⁴² The output of these magazines was widely available, and widely read within the *krushki*. Again, the Hindu Vedas and epics were most often publicly available in Russian translation (though sometimes off the shelves). Less officially, it appears that the Indian embassy in Moscow was a conduit of spiritual literature, at least in the case of Anatolii Pinaev, the country's first Krishna Conscious devotee. Other sources, hidden from Soviet authorities, will remain likewise hidden from historians. But generally speaking, there were relatively few barriers to obtaining either analyses or direct translations of Eastern spiritual literature. In this way, the Soviet state shaped its own disillusioned intelligentsia, and for some, helped steer them towards Krishna.

The Soviet Hare Krishna Movement

For Krishna's part - at least, for Krishna as represented by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada - Soviet orientalism likewise steered him towards the Soviet Union. Prabhupada was aware of the seriousness with which the Soviets were studying his tradition, and warm relations between India and the USSR seemed to present an opening for him, which he probed via diplomatic channels. He requested to meet with a leading Soviet orientalist scholar, and it was this meeting - one marked by confusion and some mild deception - that brought Krishna Consciousness to the USSR.

To begin, professor Grigorii Kotovskii did not want to meet with Prabhupada, and he said so explicitly when the latter announced his interest. The request was relayed to Kotovskii by the Soviet consulate in Calcutta in June of 1971.⁴³ The professor thought the meeting unwise for political reasons - his only knowledge of the Hare Krishnas came via whispers and rumors of cultish brainwashing, perhaps with CIA support, as part of a larger scheme to fragment socialist society. And although

⁴¹ This conception of a seeking milieu, adapted from Colin Campbell's "cultic milieu," applies without variation across all chapters of this study.

⁴² Olga Brushlinskaia, now editor-in-chief of *Science and Religion*, began as an editor in the magazine's Middle East division. The position required that she formally studied the region and spoke Arabic.

⁴³ Kotovskii recorded this story in writing, available at http://vedic-culture.in.ua/old/vaisnav/_1/k1.html, and retold it in a filmed interview, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oHHH02Ahj4> (both accessed 01/05/2017).

Kotovskii was not inclined to believe this, he was aware that people above him did, and so acted to avoid a dust-up with the authorities. Without a formal invitation Swami Prabhupada could not obtain a visa to enter the USSR, so in denying the invitation, Kotovskii assumed he had settled the matter.

In truth, the professor would have been curious to talk, as he had never met a religious figure of such stature, and because he shared Swami Prabhupada's passion for Indian culture and history. Kotovskii was an orientalist (*vostokoved*) and historian of some international renown, who had published hundreds of articles on modern Indian history and founded the Indo-Soviet Commission for Cooperation in Social Sciences, a significant (and enduring) forum for scholarly exchange.⁴⁴ At the time the embassy contacted him, he was also chair of the Indian and South Asian department at the Soviet Institute of Oriental Studies. He was in his office there, in fact, when the Indian embassy called him again, to tell him that Swami Prabhupada had arrived in Moscow and was prepared for their meeting.

Kotovskii was perplexed. When recalling this episode in the 1990s, in fact, he still could not explain how the guru got into the country.⁴⁵ But given that Prabhupada had now traveled a great distance, Kotovskii's hesitance on political grounds gave way to his sense of hospitality, not to mention his intellectual curiosity. He agreed to meet Swami Prabhupada, but on the condition that their conversation not be recorded.

Kotovskii proposed a day when few students were present, and the guru agreed. On that day, the professor watched from his office window as a dozen young men wrapped in saffron robes, heads shaven, followed an older Indian man in similar dress through his institute's wrought-iron gate.⁴⁶ As Kotovskii recalls, all eyes in the building were trained on the retinue as they filed into his office. The young men (all Americans and western Europeans, not Indians or Soviets) stood aside, and only Kotovskii and Swami Prabhupada spoke.⁴⁷ In the course of their conversation, Kotovskii described the prestige of Soviet Indian studies and the vast array of ancient Hindu texts that his institute was translating and selling, and the equally vast demand from the reading public. Ancient thought, he explained, was in vogue in the Soviet Union. This pleased Swami Prabhupada. The guru then expounded a theory of caste, class and history, applying the tenets of his faith to contemporary life and to socialism in particular. Kotovskii listened intently, impressed with Swami Prabhupada's grasp of Sanskrit and of the Hindu scriptures. He was skeptical, however, of Swami Prabhupada's historical interpretation, insisting that class was a modern phenomenon, and that the structures of Indian culture were not eternal in the way the guru suggested. He failed to convince his guest.⁴⁸

These details, incidentally, come from a surreptitious recording of their conversation, which after transcription was translated into multiple languages and distributed to Swami Prabhupada's followers around the world. Kotovskii learned of this only several years later, when a colleague returned from research in India with a Russian-language copy of the transcript in hand, presented as a booklet and

⁴⁴ The Indo-Soviet commission was a state-funded body that organized symposia, exchanges of scholars and joint publications between universities in the two countries. It lives on as the Indo-Russian Joint Commission for Cooperation in Social Sciences.

⁴⁵ The most plausible theory is that Swami Prabhupada obtained a transit visa, valid for only a few days, after the initial request for a more proper visa was denied.

⁴⁶ These are Kotovskii's recollections - the Hare Krishnas record closer to six disciples.

⁴⁷ There were brief exceptions, when unnamed guests speak in the transcript, but few of these survived into the official version.

⁴⁸ The question of caste, and its reality or unreality, seems itself eternal. See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), for an overview spanning four centuries.

now bearing the title “Spiritual Communism.” Again, he was perplexed. “I just froze,” he recalled later. “Nobody had known about this conversation.” But within a few months, the KGB knew, and came to Kotovskii to discuss the matter, once more with a copy of “Spiritual Communism” in hand.

The KGB viewed the movement as subversive, but legal repressions would not begin until several years later, in the early 1980s. Kotovskii thus perceived no personal danger and retold his story in full, adding only that, in his view, the Hare Krishnas represented a legitimate Hindu tradition and posed no threat to the Soviet order. With that, the agents left, and the professor heard nothing more on the subject.

The first disciple

“Spiritual Communism” is an important document for Soviet and Russian Hare Krishnas, and suggests, among other things, that Soviet and Vedic cultures coincide in certain, often striking ways. Kotovskii’s and Prabhupada’s dialogue is explored in greater depth below, in an explication of Krishna Conscious doctrine. But at the time - in 1971 - Prabhupada made a far more important contact than Grigorii Kotovskii, though it was not on his official agenda. It was during this visit - only a few days in all - that Prabhupada met Anatolii Pinaev, the disciple who would spread his word in the Soviet world.

It is not clear how the 23-year-old Pinaev met Swami Prabhupada during the latter’s visit. Official histories and a 1988 interview with Pinaev himself claim that they met on the street, and that Prabhupada invited him to chat in his hotel room.⁴⁹ This is vaguely plausible, for the reasons of Soviet (and in particular, Muscovite) culture described above, but depends on an extraordinary coincidence. Other Hare Krishna-authored histories attribute to Pinaev a pre-existing passion for Bengali Vaishnavism, which would at least explain why Pinaev might have approached Prabhupada. But far more likely, Pinaev’s meeting was pre-arranged. One interview subject told me that Pinaev was friends with the son of an Indian diplomat, who himself had been instrumental in Swami Prabhupada’s visit. This would explain both the pre-existing spiritual interest and the meeting itself. In this more likely formulation, the story of random chance appears designed to protect the chain of contacts that ultimately introduced Krishna to the USSR. From the beginning, the threat of persecution loomed over the devotees.

In spite of this, Pinaev proselytized through the 1970s in the networks described above. From the summer of 1971, he circulated in yoga groups, lectured in apartment *kruzhki*, taught the Hare Krishna mantra to all comers, and guided more serious pupils into the devotional life. Both philosophy and practice will be elaborated below, but in brief, “devotional life” entailed not just the study of texts, but a rather demanding (and ostentatious) set of practices, too: abstention from gambling, intoxicants, meat-eating, and non-procreative sex; frequent chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra, at times with others and with ritual accompaniment (if not a proper shrine); and the propagation of the mantra and the larger corpus of literature to other seekers. Male Soviet devotees most often did not shave their heads, and neither the men nor the women publicly wore the robes popularly associated with the group, as these would have been intolerable risks. Still, Krishna Conscious philosophy is inseparable from its practice, and spreading it in the Soviet 1970s was not just painstaking but risky work.

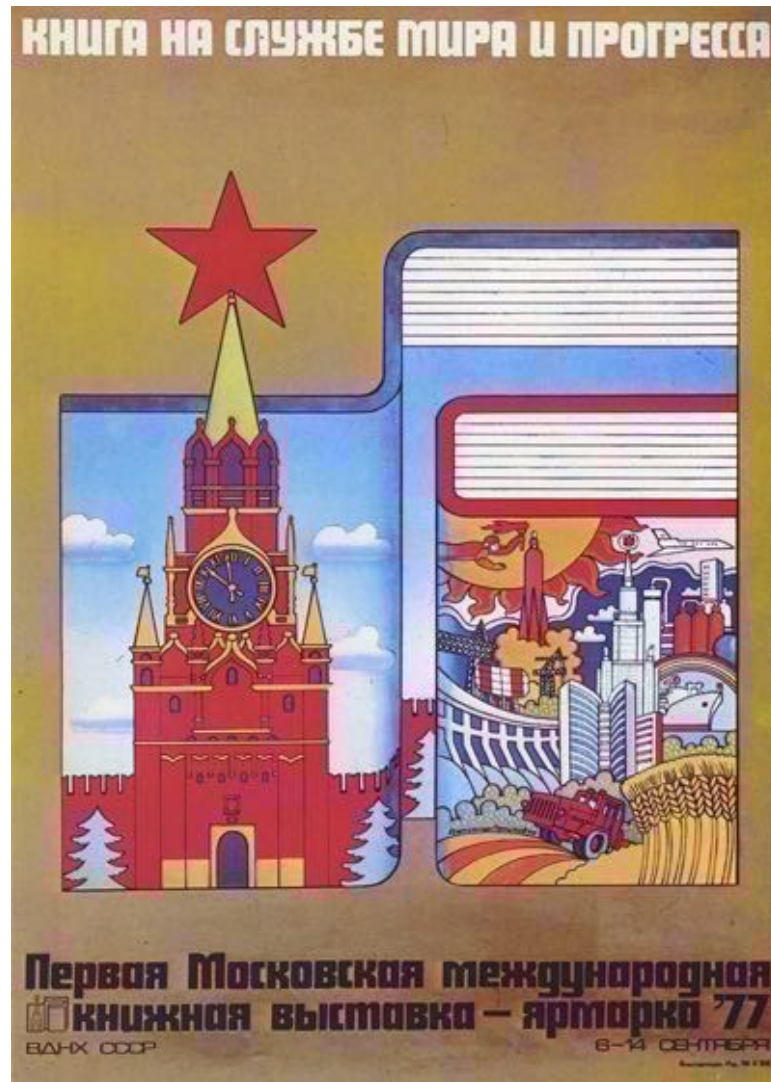
On his small scale, Pinaev was able to stay under official radar. This would change in 1977, in

⁴⁹ See http://www.vasudeva.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1529:ananta-shanti-das-uchenik-shrily-prabhupady-pervyj-sovetskij-predannyj-ostavil-telo&catid=13&Itemid=186, accessed 8 January 2017

both senses - the Hare Krishnas would have a major public breakthrough, but shortly after, would face a major and public backlash.

Public debut

Beginning in 1977 and recurring every two years thereafter, the Moscow International Book Fair was a showcase both for Soviet publishing and for Soviet internationalism. The fair resulted from the 1975 Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (which produced the Helsinki Accords), part of a broad attempt to bridge Europe's Cold War divide and settle disputes unresolved since World War Two. The fair's specific purpose was to shore up the USSR's intellectual and internationalist credentials, all under the slogan "The book in the service of peace and progress." It was the largest book fair in the USSR, and inside, Muscovites and visitors could browse the booths of Soviet publishers and of foreign delegations, whether they were Cold War allies or opponents.

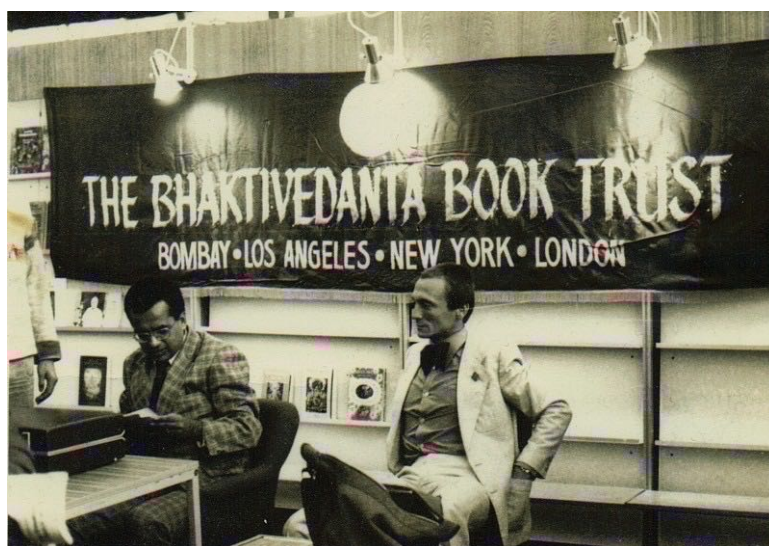


Poster for the Moscow International Book Fair, at the VDNKh Exhibition Center, 1977.



Booths at the Moscow International Book Fair, 1977.

At the time, it was unclear which category applied to the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (BBT), the Hare Krishnas' publishing arm. Though Swami Prabhupada and his texts are Indian, the Soviet government largely considered his movement to be Western and thus, under normal circumstances, unwelcome. There is truth to both, as seen on the banner at their kiosk:



The BBT at the Moscow International Book Fair, 1977. On the left is Gopal Krishna Goswami, Prabhupada's first Indian disciple, and on the right, Prithu-Putra Swami, a prominent French devotee.

In any case, and in the spirit of the Helsinki Accords, the fair was the first public appearance by Hare Krishnas in the USSR. Both in triumphalist internal histories and in regretful analyses by Soviet media, the book fair brought Krishna Consciousness to the Soviet public, in 1977 and again in 1979.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For triumphalist takes, the internet houses many, but a more formal one is Piskarev, Vladimir. *Dvizhenie soznaniia Krishny v SSSR. Ocherki istorii 1971-1989 godov*. Moscow: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2017.

The latter appearance is given top billing in assigning credit, or blame, for the Hare Krishnas's subsequent growth. At their kiosk in 1979 was Gopal Krishna Goswami, a major figure in the movement and in its expansion into Russia, and Anatolii Piniayev, who interpreted between English and Russian. According to their own accounts, the two burned incense, sang and chanted, and handed out Indian sweets at the event, when not walking guests through the literature.⁵¹ Afterwards, the BBT presenters donated that literature - Swami Prabhupada's own translations and commentaries on Hindu spiritual literature - to the Lenin Library, the national library of the USSR, from which *kruzhki* seekers promptly borrowed them.⁵² For Prabhupada's more minor works (he was quite prolific), access was more limited but not impossible. It is likely that Anatolii Piniayev, via his connections to the Indian embassy, obtained additional texts there, which were then reproduced in *samizdat* and likewise distributed in the *kruzhki* networks.⁵³ These sources were, to borrow Mikhail Levin's term, yet more "trickles of water" for the seeking milieu.

A movement forms

Those trickles pooled in the yoga groups and the *kruzhki* networks, two chambers of the same underground reservoir.⁵⁴ We can now draw a coherent picture of the larger system: the Soviet state fostered a broad interest in things ancient and Eastern among its educated citizens, both intentionally (through far-sighted diplomacy) and unwittingly (by near-sighted censors). The seeking milieu, possessed of these interests and the materials necessary to elaborate them, pursued them beyond the narrow intentions of official culture. Through their networks, this budding subculture was able to spread, and to reach yet more seekers.

This network is well-illustrated in a large volume of conversion stories published after the collapse. The first convert in the collection, for instance, was a child of the scientific elite who found Krishna via friends from a yoga group. The second was herself an orientalist, converted by a friend who studied Sanskrit at the institute. The next joined an esoteric *kruzhok* at Moscow State University. The next heard the mantra in a spiritually-minded *kruzhok*. Among those devotees in the collection who *did* come to Krishna via yoga, most recall reciting the mantra as their first spiritual experience.⁵⁵ Anatolii Piniayev is known to have circulated in yoga groups, spreading not only the mantra but the dietary and moral guidelines of his guru. The minority who did not find the faith through these channels are vague as to how they did - they say only that they heard the mantra, or found the Bhagavad Gita, or met a Hare Krishna on the street - but in these cases, they are at most one step removed from the same system.

The accounts of my interview subjects depict still more variants on this path. One subject was

in natural Soviet newspapers, during the persecutions of the 1980s, similarly cited this event, but in a decidedly different tone. These sources are detailed below, under the heading "Persecution of the Hare Krishnas."

⁵¹ This from http://www.vasudeva.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2766:bbt-na-knizhnykh-vystavkakh-v-sssr-1977-79-gg&catid=45:propoved&Itemid=469, accessed 6 January 2017

⁵² Sergei Zuev, who above mirrored Mikhail Levin's description of the eclectic *kruzhki*, recalls borrowing these books in particular.

⁵³ This information was conveyed to me informally by devotees, and would be difficult to corroborate - Piniayev's precise connections to the movement were intentionally obscured.

⁵⁴ *Nauka i Religia*, v. 10, 1990, 26 cites yoga circles and new age *kruzhki*, both composed of highly educated urban types, as the major vectors.

⁵⁵ *Kak ia prishel v soznanie Krishny: Sbornik pisem i istorii, passim*. Of early converts, see conversion narratives beginning on pages 63, 70, 75, 108, 133.

philosophically-minded and bought a copy of the *Mahabharata* published by Kotovskii's institute, and from there, found much to read about Hinduism in both academic and popular media. Another had a close friend at that same institute who studied Hinduism, another friend who studied Buddhism and a third who learned Farsi and eventually adopted Sufism. Through these people and their sources, the would-be devotees took to study, and eventually found, in the Vedic corpus, a great store of meaning.

So far, we have not delved into what Hare Krishnas actually believe or what their practice entails, but much the same can be said for the seekers and converts that made this history. Doctrinal rigor could only come late in the process. The allure of the East, and of un-Soviet ideas generally, and the formation of social networks and the gathering of materials, all of this led a long way towards Krishna before the details of Krishna Consciousness demanded elaboration. Devotional practice would hold further appeal, in its ritual cleansing and promise of liberation. But it was in this same process - the serious study of Vaishnavism, and the adoption of its core tenets and practices - that the seekers' world diverged irreversibly from the Soviet one.

Doctrine

Understanding the core tenets of Vaishnavism, for them as for us, is not simple - the Vedic corpus is vast and complex, and often remote from the basic premises of Western (including Russian) thought. But these things too, the intellectual challenge and distance of the texts, proved alluring to would-be converts.⁵⁶ Ultimately, the essence of the tradition - and in particular, the Krishna Conscious view of time and its shape - resonated with hundreds, then thousands of Soviet people. It explained to them their world and its direction, and proved so compelling as to endure, and even harden, when that world turned violently against them.

As Professor Kotovskii assured the KGB, Krishna Consciousness does represent a legitimate Hindu tradition - specifically Bengali Vaishnavism, a devotional movement most associated with the sixteenth-century spiritual teacher Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. What sets the Hare Krishnas apart is not their doctrine per se, but their impulse to proselytize in non-Hindu lands, which is certainly a more recent (and in some quarters, controversial) innovation.⁵⁷ Krishna Consciousness, as a formal movement, began in the late 1960s in New York City. Nevertheless, it shares Hinduism's central telos, and its practice is indisputably rooted in ancient tradition.

The ultimate aim of Krishna Conscious practice is liberation from *samsara*, the karma-driven cycle of bodily death and rebirth. To attain this, devotees find instruction in the Bhagavad Gita, the most celebrated scripture in the *Mahabharata*, one of two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India.⁵⁸ Specifically,

⁵⁶ Each subject I interviewed, without exception, hailed the tradition's vast scope, a topic we will return to in the conclusion.

⁵⁷ More recent, but not unique. The proliferation of Bengali Vaishnavism in non-Hindu lands is exceptional, and curious given the tradition's remoteness and complexity. At the same time, there have been several Hindu-derived movements in the West since the 19th century, the most prominent being the Vedanta Society (under Swami Vivekananda) in early 20th century America, the Self Realization Fellowship (of Paramahansa Yogananda) in the 1920s, and the international Transcendental Meditation movements of the 1960s-1970s (Mahirishi). My thanks to Robert Goldman for this and other substantial contributions to this chapter.

⁵⁸ The *Gita* centers on a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and Lord Krishna, incarnated as Arjuna's charioteer. At its heart, it outlines three systems of *yoga* (in Sanskrit, "yoga" refers to a wide array of disciplines and means simply a "link" or "connection," it describes many different paths to liberation), which cumulatively explain how to live in service of Krishna without retreating from your obligations in the material world. In this, it is a rebuttal to the historical threats of

the Gita teaches three complementary forms of *yoga* (a general term here meaning “discipline” or “practice,” rather than the familiar system of physical exercises). First, one must learn material reality’s true nature, which is to say, its illusory nature. The pursuit of this knowledge is called *jnana-yoga*.⁵⁹ It teaches that, while we seek to master material, all our outcomes are necessarily ephemeral, and in our vain attempts to grasp at them, material in fact masters us. But ascetic renunciation of the world does us no better - true renunciation is impossible, so long as the soul dwells in the body, which dwells in the material world.⁶⁰ Thus, second, we must continue to fulfill our obligations (*dharma*) without grasping for material gain, and in this way extract ourselves from karma’s entangling web.⁶¹ This is *karma-yoga*. In habit, a devotee must eliminate activity geared towards sensory reward, following four “regulative principles:” prohibitions on gambling, intoxicants, meat-eating and non-procreative sex.⁶² In the home, they should observe strict gender roles - the wife’s *dharma* consists largely in humble service to the husband, just as the husband humbly serves Krishna. Finally, the perfection of *karma-yoga* leads inexorably to *bhakti-yoga*, the most direct path to liberation. *Bhakti* is devotional service, the dedication of all life’s actions and thoughts to the benefit of Krishna. To live in his temple and follow his prescriptions, with his interests in one’s heart and, centrally, with his mantra on one’s lips, will mean to die for the last time and return to Lord Krishna’s eternal abode.⁶³

That reunion, in their view, restores humanity’s original and natural state, whose description is preserved in the pages of the Hindu scriptures (and, for the Hare Krishnas, in the *Bhagavad-Gita* in particular). Today this golden age has been largely forgotten, buried as it were in the accumulated sediments of linear historical time.⁶⁴ The aim of Krishna Consciousness, then, is an “eternal return” to a mythic past.⁶⁵

Buddhism and Jainism, which, at the risk of oversimplifying, expounded different forms of contemplative flight.

The Gita found a place on the shelves of countless nineteenth century-intellectuals in the West, including Tolstoy and Konstantin Tsiolkovskii, as well as the shelves of countless subjects in the chapters of this dissertation. This, of course, is not to speak of its tremendous importance to Indian culture.

⁵⁹ *Jnana* is in fact a cognate of the Russian *Znanie*, knowledge.

⁶⁰ “Soul” is an imperfect translation of the *jiva*. Conceptions of the *jiva* vary greatly across Hinduism, but in any case it is not an individualized soul in the Christian sense. As conceived by the Hare Krishnas, it is rather an eternal part of Krishna himself, identical in all bodies, and destined to return to unity. If Krishna is the sun, hanging over a landscape dotted with puddles and ponds, the *jivas* are the sun’s myriad reflections.

⁶¹ This particular innovation - that we must remain in the world and fulfill our duties - is, historically, a response to the twin threats of Jainism and Buddhism. See note 58 above.

⁶² These regulations are centrally important to the group, and surprisingly conservative to those who might associate Hare Krishnas with hippies. It warrants mention that these are not strict laws, and there is no conception of sin - if one strays, this is okay, as rebirth is the norm, and even if reborn in a lower standing, the path to Krishna remains the same and the instructions remain clear.

⁶³ The famous Hare Krishna mantra has a literal meaning, but it is not important to know or understand. What matters is that, when taught by a guru, the mantra is nondifferent from Krishna himself, and in repeating it (ideally, 16 rounds of 108 chants, or 1728 times per day), the devotee retains Krishna in his or her heart. Concerning Krishna’s eternal abode, Hare Krishnas term this the “return to Godhead” which, among other uses, is the title of their internal magazine.

⁶⁴ William Deadwyler, “Patterns in ISKCON’s historical self-perception”, in David G. Bromley and Larry D. Shinn, eds., *Krishna Consciousness in the West* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), 64.

⁶⁵ My summary of doctrine, here and below, draws on many sources; the ultimate interpretation is my own. By far the most important source for understanding the basic tenets of the faith is A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda’s commentaries on the Bhagavad-Gita, published as *Bhagavad-Gītā as It Is*. I used 2nd ed., rev. and enl (Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1989). Elise Bjorkan, ed., *International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Cults and New Religions* (New York: Garland Pub, 1990) contains a teaching and study guide to the above and is perhaps more accessible than the original, without compromising thoroughness. Other essays there include “The Hare Krishna Movement is Authorized,” which is a good overview of the concept of *parampara* and the group’s claims to legitimacy, and “An introduction to

The primordial culture to which Hare Krishnas aspire, in their view, brooked no ignorance or conflict and was once unchallenged everywhere on earth. Back then, there was simply no alternative imaginable. Making this point to Professor Kotovskii, Swami Prabhupada used linguistic evidence, asserting that Sanskrit itself draws no distinctions between Hindus and other people:

This word Hindu is not a Sanskrit word. It was given by the Mohammedans. You know that there is a river, Indus, which in Sanskrit is called Sindhu. ... Instead of Sindhu, they made it Hindu.⁶⁶ So Hindu is a term which is not found in the Sanskrit dictionary.

Swami Prabhupada is correct, both in fact (the word “Hindu” is of Persian or Urdu origin) and in his larger point, that ancient Hindus did not self-consciously practice a particular faith called “Hinduism.” What we call Hinduism, or what Hare Krishnas might call “the Vedic way of life,” their ancient forebears would have simply called “life” - it was the only reality available, a tradition containing every aspect of existence. Swami Prabhupada pursues this logic further - perhaps too far - in ascribing this past to all human beings:

This culture, Krishna Consciousness, was always existent. Consider any religion--Christian, Muhammadan, Jewish. They are at most two to three thousand years old. But you cannot trace out the beginning of this Vedic scripture. It is therefore called *sanatana*, eternal. This culture is for the whole human society. It is not a religious faith. ... There is no need of tracing history; it is naturally existing from the day of creation.⁶⁷

Implied in Swami Prabhupada’s explanation is the shape of Hare Krishna time. If one believes in progress - as Marxists do, for instance, but many spiritualists too⁶⁸ - time is our ally, guiding our ascent towards some idealized future. For Swami Prabhupada, as for a broad array of conservative or nostalgic ideologies, history points downward from an idealized (and most often unified) past. Time is thus our undoing, “the destroyer of the worlds” as Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which forces degradation upon the material world.⁶⁹

Yet there remains, and will always remain, a firm connection to that distant past, in the corpus of Hindu scriptures. Illuminating this path is the role of the Brahmins, the caste of priest-academics, who are tasked with the perfect transmission of scriptural knowledge down through the generations. It is on this transmission - called *parampara*, or disciplic succession - that Swami Prabhupada’s spiritual

Krishna Consciousness” which describes the major features of practice. Deadwyler in Bromley, 55-67 in particular, is the best analysis of Hare Krishna conceptions of time (the essay is written from an academic perspective but by a former member; the others above are published by the Hare Krishnas themselves). Some elements, surely, cannot be easily attributed at all, as they derive from conversations in temples in Moscow and in Berkeley. Generally throughout this chapter, and certainly here, I must credit the work of Mircea Eliade - best known in Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*. 2nd pbk. ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005 - whose concepts of the sacred and profane, of the “eternal return” from historical time to a mythic past, and the consequent “abolition of time” seem essentially flawless in the case of Krishna Consciousness. It is no coincidence, for instance, that he cites Brahmanic texts when elaborating on the ritual abolition of time.

⁶⁶ “Spiritual Communism” was published informally as a pamphlet, but the text can be easily found in full online.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ The Russian esoteric tradition, which is examined more thoroughly in the fourth chapter, “Those Who Know History,” has a tiered and progressive view of time

⁶⁹ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 16-17. “Destroyer of the worlds” is from *Bhagavad-Gita* 11:32, Swami Prabhupada’s translation. The key word, *kala*, is varying translated as “time” and “death,” two concepts with close symbolic meaning. Phrased as “death,” this line was made famous, in the West at least, by Robert Oppenheimer, who allegedly muttered it to himself while watching the Trinity nuclear test.

authority rests, and in turn, the authority of the entire Hare Krishna movement.⁷⁰ Although the movement emerged in the chaotic noise of the American 1960s, Hare Krishnas conceive of their doctrine as the clear and faithful echo of the universal spiritual culture present at man's creation. As the tradition has it, Swami Prabhupada neither added nor subtracted from the interpretations of his own guru, Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī, born 1874, who likewise echoed Gaurakiśora Dāsa Bābājī, born 1838, whose knowledge came - by thirty discrete steps of this kind - from Krishna himself.⁷¹ And Krishna is without beginning or end. If time is the accumulation of sediment atop the original spiritual culture, *Parampara* is a chain, fixed at the bedrock, and held tight at the surface by the followers of Swami Prabhupada.

This worldview, importantly, operates on two very different scales: eternal time as experienced by Krishna, and the profane, linear time of our own lives. On the cosmic scale, our current era is the low point of a cycle spanning millions of years, the beginning of the last of four epochs before it all repeats. In the first epoch humans were godlike, powerful and long-lived, free of want, possessed of perfect memory and united in belief under the Vedas. It has been a long slide since then. But tragic as this may be, it can only be a spiritual abstraction for devotees.⁷² On a very different scale, degradation is visible and concrete in the course of a single, fleeting modern life. When once we had stable families, now gender roles are confused and children grow distant from their parents. When once society had a moral consensus, now it is racked with vice. When once there was spirituality in public life, we are now left with atheist government or worse. Even the weather has taken a bad turn - this, too, is degradation, a process innate in time itself. On either scale, Hare Krishnas contend that the pursuit of sense gratification has, by now, nearly eclipsed the true nature of reality - our essential oneness with creation, with Krishna. The Vedas are the only remaining window on this sublime truth. When devotees wash and eat and prepare their shrine as prescribed in the scriptures, or listen in the temple to episodes from Krishna's life; when they wake early to chant the Hare Krishna mantra in quiet contemplation, or later chant in effervescent unison with others; when they diverge from the norms of the society in which they find themselves, they do all this in self-conscious union with the ancients, for whom living this way was ostensibly the only life they knew. The essence of Hare Krishna practice is a sustained, collective nostalgia - the emotional recovery of a distant and perfect past, nearly but never totally forgotten.⁷³

The Appeal of Krishna Consciousness

Among early converts, the movement's ancient pedigree proved its strongest claim to authority. In my interviews, it becomes clear how broad the implications of this are, and how profoundly this ancient authority can refashion one's view on the world. In that way, we can understand why Hare Krishnas ultimately took the risks that they did - essentially, they felt they had no choice. By the time of the persecutions in the 1980s, those persecuted did not feel they had diverged from their world,

⁷⁰ This tenet is repeated often, but elaborated slightly by Deadwyler in Bromley, 57, and parampara is elaborated in the essay "The Hare Krishna Movement is Authorized" in Bjorkan (see note 65 for these)

⁷¹ A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda, ed. *Bhaganad-Gītā as It Is: With the Original Sanskrit Text, Roman Transliteration, English Equivalents, Translation, and Elaborate Purports*. Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1989, 31.

⁷² Deadwyler in Bromley, 63-64 describes the four yugas and situates them in the broader (broadest) picture of time.

⁷³ See note 2 above, on the literature and interpretations of nostalgia.

but rather, that the Soviet world had diverged from them.

One of my subjects, who goes by the spiritual name Kṛṣṇānanda Dāsa, had worked as a researcher at the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and began seeking sometime in the early 1980s. His closest friend took the path of Russian Orthodoxy, which he followed briefly but abandoned. Other friends were already looking East, and he says he felt “drawn to that ethos” instead, especially after reading about Hinduism and Buddhism on his friends’ recommendations. Several of these friends were trained orientalist. Then, reading on Hindu scriptures in Soviet scholarly literature, he was struck by the Vedas’ antiquity:

Soviet Indologists... with whom I was acquainted, one of whom worked in the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences, I went to all of their scientific conferences, and I heard all of them. And then I even read their published work. And even in published sources, I encountered this phrase, that the Vedas, the corpus of Vedic literature, originates in undateable antiquity. Imagine that! Essentially undateable antiquity. That is, they conceded that, even on the basis of scientific methods, it’s exceptionally ancient, indeed the most ancient tradition. That influenced my decision, my choice, because to me it meant that it’s not all a con [as official sources claimed of the Hare Krishnas -*author*]. ... the Vedic tradition is ... a path in life, which has been trod for millennia... And what’s more, there are living models, right in front of us, that we can see and understand.⁷⁴

This is a compelling (if not technically flawless) statement of the authority of *parampara*, the disciplic succession so central to Hare Krishnas’ faith. The faith is both ancient and current - it is a chain extending into the modern era, and each link is a guru, perfectly true to the one before him. The anchor is deeper than we moderns, for all our cleverness, can locate.⁷⁵ This last point, to Kṛṣṇānanda, is definitive proof of the tradition’s truth. If we don’t know how old it is, it falls outside the grasp of our rational minds; it is transcendent.

Another convert, Mendeleev, began his spiritual search in the 1980s, but was frustrated by an excess of options:⁷⁶

I could only draw conclusions on the basis of historical documents, on some sort of data, something well-established. And because so much of the evidence was contradictory, I adopted the authority of those who follow the most ancient scriptures in the world, the Vedic literature.

His language is more concise than the first excerpt, and equally scientific - his search drew from documents, data and evidence. Kṛṣṇānanda above him was convinced primarily by scientific dating, or rather, its limits before the Vedas. Mendeleev seems to take it more on faith. In both cases, they chose the tradition for its ancientness. They present this choice as rational, but ascribing value to things ancient is in truth a disposition towards history, and one foreign to Marxism-Leninism.⁷⁷

Ananda Govinda Dāsa, who converted around 1987 at the tail end of the group’s persecution, also recalls the faith’s undateable antiquity as its strongest claim. But he gets closer to why, specifically, ancientness should equate to truth.

⁷⁴ Kṛṣṇānanda Dāsa, interview with the author, February 2015.

⁷⁵ Certain moderns dispute this. Robert Goldman, for instance, places the Bhagavad Gita in the historical context of the later first millennium BC, and in particular, of the perceived threats of Buddhism and Jainism. The doctrine of *karma-yoga*, in this telling, provides a path of spiritual progress without recourse to ascetic withdrawal, a way to live in the material world without accruing karma. By separating your actions from their outcomes, you are at once a spiritual, inward renunciate, and a socially useful actor.

⁷⁶ Mendeleev is a pseudonym, which he himself selected for our interview. His education and career were in chemistry.

⁷⁷ “Primitive communism,” of course, has its place in Marxist eschatology, but was not of particular concern to Lenin or in Soviet discourse.

I didn't want to attach myself to some concrete religion or other... I understood that there is one God, but many paths to him. ...I figured, the more ancient the tradition, the closer to the source, to creation, the better. ... I felt that, as time passes, somehow intuitively, I felt that everything is transformed by time, and all these new formations that arise, they are only derivatives of what was there earlier. ... There must be [truth] in antiquity. I didn't come to this easily. I just saw and appraised how, let's say, certain principles, standards of living, morality, it all gets dumbed down. It all becomes more pragmatic, somehow more trivialized, and so to me, to understand the essence - and my goal was to understand the essence, the root of all of it. That is, if I want to understand the truth in its entirety, then I needed to seek the root, as close to the source as possible. And so I studied. I read the Mahabharata.⁷⁸

What he presents as intuitive is, again, a very particular view of time's shape, accepted by Hare Krishnas and implied in a range of backward-looking ideologies.⁷⁹ It presumes not only that the past was better, but further, that all we see today stems from a single root. Like the others, he affirms that the more ancient a belief system, the better. But elaborating the Krishna Conscious worldview he adopted (and clearly, the new worldview is projected backwards onto his younger self here), the specific reason for this is that time and degradation are one and the same; the passage of time means the undoing of a once-perfect and united culture.⁸⁰ "Principles, standards of living, morality" have been declining, and diverging, ever since. Ancient truth, in this rendition, becomes *primordial* truth, undifferentiated, all-encompassing. This is nostalgia on a cosmic scale - human experience, traced backwards in time, approaches perfection.

Ananda Govinda contrasts Krishna Consciousness, somewhat dismissively, with the narrow (read: recent) notion of religion. Because theirs is the primordial truth, devotees see it as transcending doctrinal divisions, and even more broadly, the entire modern epistemological division of religion, philosophy, and science. Ananda Govinda applies this logic to national divisions, too:

[Krishna Consciousness] stands on a universal principle. Nobody thinks of it as an Indian religion, nor an American one, nothing of the sort. Not at all. The essential quality is this uniting general principle. We consider that this principle holds for all people absolutely, of any nationality, and I would even say, of any religious confession. In it there is a force that motivates people, motivates the people here, because here [in this temple - author] they feel that oneness. They don't seek to partition people by national markers, nor by religious ones. We don't look askance at people of different confessions.

Sergei Zuev, who above echoed the astrologer Levin in describing the eclecticism of the *keruzhki*, also describes this universalism as a selling point - like the *keruzhki* themselves, Krishna Consciousness is a universal foundation for enlightenment, rather than a single path:

It isn't some religion among many, it's a platform, generally, of the world's spirituality, that's what the Vedas are. The Vedas are a universal platform for understanding it all. The Vedas are knowledge. And that includes knowledge of religion.

In the ancient past, before time had eroded humanity's spiritual foundation, there was a single body of knowledge applicable to all questions spiritual and material. As another subject told me,

⁷⁸ The Sanskrit epic which contains the *Bhagavad Gita*.

⁷⁹ See note 35 above for the most popular of these in Soviet *keruzhki*.

⁸⁰ In the preface to *Sri Caitanya-caritamrita*, a commemorative tract about the early sixteenth-century founder of Bengali Vaishnavism, Prabupada warns that "being engrossed in the material body, the conditioned soul increases the pages of history by all kinds of material activities. The teachings of Lord Caitanya can help human society stop such unnecessary and temporary activities." This is a concise summary of the group's attitude towards history itself - it's unnecessary and leads nowhere good.

paraphrasing scripture to lament the present, “if there are many truths, it means there are none.”⁸¹ Krishna Consciousness is undivided truth, legitimated by ancient scripture (though also, by the charismatic authority of Swami Prabhupada and it would seem, by Soviet culture). By the time the state turned on the devotees, this truth was largely unshakeable.

Persecution of the Soviet Hare Krishnas

The Hare Krishnas truly could deny, with strong scriptural foundation, any political intentions or hostility to the Soviet state. In the archives, their letters of protest do just that.⁸² But the absolute authority of the vedas necessarily superseded the (narrow, recent) prescriptions of Soviet law. Devotees had entered into an inherently dangerous arrangement in which they adopted habits of daily life that were certain to draw attention to themselves, while engaging in illegal activity that provided a basis for their persecution. To take but one example, their dietary regulations - not just the prescriptions against intoxicants and meat, but also against such Russian staples as onions, garlic and mushrooms, combined with highly elaborated rules for preparation and serving - ensured that they would stand out in social or work settings, or alternatively, that they would primarily eat amongst themselves.⁸³ Further, if asked about their diet, a devotee would feel compelled by the movement’s teachings not to lie, but instead to defend and promote the Vedic way of life. This, in turn, could be construed by authorities as violating laws on religious practice.⁸⁴

The specific practices, though, are incidental, even if certain of them did provide a pretext for arrest. In the description above, one could easily substitute for diet the required chanting and ritual practice, which occupies much of a devotee’s time, and would both single them out and violate laws on work in the official economy. In the final analysis, all of the faith’s imperatives together necessarily meant secretive and strongly cohesive groupings of citizens, never a welcome phenomenon to the Soviet state, made all the more suspicious by the apparent foreignness and fanaticism that marked their outward behavior. Article 227 of the criminal code of the RSFSR, the section most commonly invoked by prosecutors during the persecution, was deliberately vague - the state was ultimately unconcerned with this or that particular practice.⁸⁵ So too were the devotees - they could choose, for instance, not to shave their heads, or to continue using their Russian names in public. But they could not camouflage themselves entirely. Devotional practice on the whole, whether it be proselytizing, or grooming and dress, or food preparation and diet, or prayer and chanting and dance, all of it was part

⁸¹ She is perhaps referring to Bhagavad Gita 18:22, which suggests that knowledge of a fragmentary kind, mistakenly seen as all-encompassing, is a state of nescience, ignorance or darkness.

⁸² That foundation, generally speaking, is a broad rejection of the material world, on the principle that goal-oriented action in the material world gives the illusion of mastery while material inevitably masters us. This is very much true of political action, which necessarily misses this broader point by struggling for concrete and often fleeting benefit. For petitions and denials from the Hare Krishnas, see GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, 4063 and 4423 - collections of letters from Hare Krishnas to the Soviet Council on Religious Affairs.

⁸³ This from the 1970 edition of the Krishna Conscious Handbook, published by ISKCON for devotees and potential converts, and widely available online. Specifically, see the subheading “Rules for the Kitchen.”

⁸⁴ The most common conviction was under article 227 of the criminal code of the RSFSR, a broad statute intended to restrict any unsupervised religious activity. The statute prohibits “the infringement of the individual and the rights of citizens under appearance of performing religious rituals.” Sergei Zuev,, one of the devotees cited intermittently above, joined the movement in 1980, and was imprisoned under this statute between 1983 and 1985.

⁸⁵ See note above.

and parcel of devotion itself. The best they could do was to compensate by frequently relocating, and sweeping their own ranks for moles. Although their lifestyle represented to them a restored unity, it would always seem a splinter to those outside.

Although imprisonment was grossly out of proportion to any “crimes” committed, it was not unforeseeable. Nor was it inexplicable, even from a Krishna Conscious perspective. Cruel, atheistic government and bodily suffering are inherent in the degraded modern world, and devotional service - even if it exacerbates these very ills - is the only path backward. This was the trap in which the Hare Krishnas found themselves.

Fittingly, when the crackdown did come, it was detached from any particular action of the part of devotees. Though the law had always been clear enough, enforcement was ultimately a political decision, and while the devotees might have understood their misfortune in their own cosmic frame, the impetus for persecution was distinctly earthbound and local to the Soviet 1980s.⁸⁶

Causes

By the beginning of that decade, the Soviet government was facing twin pressures of resurgent religiosity abroad and a wayward intelligentsia. An aggressive anti-religious campaign came in response, pursued against “sectarians” (*sektanty*), an epithet that had previously been applied to Baptists and Evangelicals who receded from social and economic life.⁸⁷ But in the 1980s, the campaign included the scrupulous persecution of some Russian Orthodox, Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslims too, and Hare Krishnas, who appear to have been targeted with particular zeal.⁸⁸

Concerning perceived threats from abroad, the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which coincided with a larger religious mobilization around the human rights movement, were bringing greater international attention to freedom of conscience (or the lack thereof) in the USSR.⁸⁹ At the same time, the religious

⁸⁶ Though some religious practice was permissible in the late USSR, Hare Krishnas were denied the possibility of worshipping in the official framework. John Anderson, “The Hare Krishna Movements in the USSR,” *Religion in Communist Lands* 14, no. 3 (1986): 317.

⁸⁷ Religious persecution, at least in its overt and officially celebrated form, had subsided in the USSR after the downfall of Nikita Khrushchev in 1964. His efforts to renew socialist enthusiasm and participation were paired with atheist agitation, of a scale unseen since the 1920’s. *Science and Religion*, founded in 1959, was part and parcel of this effort.

⁸⁸ John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 135. This list is in descending order of number of arrests. As Hare Krishnas likely numbered only in the hundreds or low thousands, the proportion that saw legal persecution is strikingly high, somewhere in the realm of 5-10% of all devotees.

It should be noted that the Soviet government did have some legitimate reason to suspect that the sect was dangerous. One accusation often leveled in the media and the trials was that Hare Krishnas broke up families, and in truth, the movement’s early incarnation did encourage a severing of family ties if those families were not thoroughly Krishna Conscious (this emphasis diminished after Srila Prabhupada’s death in 1977). See a lecture on 21 October 1974, titled “The Ropes of Affection” for a broad overview of the guru’s attitudes towards family. He considers the family unit *maya*, material illusion, and an impediment to realizing one’s spiritual purpose on Earth. From a guru whose words are presumed to echo directly from Krishna, this proved to be a very consequential scriptural interpretation for many children and spouses of devotees.

Far worse, though related, were widespread instances of physical and sexual abuse of children at the movement’s ashrams in the United States and in India, which were ongoing in the 1980s. See Laurie Goodstein, “Hare Krishna Movement Details Past Abuse at Its Boarding Schools,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/09/us/hare-krishna-movement-details-past-abuse-at-its-boarding-schools.html>, accessed 8 January 2017. Although this abuse was not prescribed in doctrine, it was facilitated by serious structural problems in the international organization, and the leadership failed to respond adequately when evidence of routine abuse did emerge. All of that said, there was and still is no evidence of child abuse of any kind in the Soviet movement.

⁸⁹ Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (PUP, 2018), 217.

right in America had become a potent political force, the Iranian revolution in 1979 signaled a resurgent Islam, and the 1978 election of a Polish pope seemed to advance the ideological threat into the socialist bloc. This international climate goes some way to explain why Krishna Consciousness seemed a particular threat, and why the accusations against the group often painted them as lackeys of the CIA.⁹⁰

It seems that this idea was not simply a pretext, but a genuinely held belief in many quarters of the government. Recall, for instance, the KGB agents who interviewed Grigorii Kotovskii - they raised the question of CIA ties with him. In a national weekly paper in 1983, a particularly florid attack on the Hare Krishnas listed foreign subservience first among their moral failings.⁹¹ In 1987, a television program aired across the Ukrainian SSR purported to prove the group's CIA connections.⁹² *Science and Religion*, in a retrospective article after liberalization, seems to confirm that the Soviet Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) considered CIA infiltration via Krishna Consciousness to be a real possibility.⁹³ And finally, a large proportion of petitions and complaints by Hare Krishnas in the CRA archive defend against precisely such accusations, as so much of the rhetoric directed at them - and the formal criminal charges - involved aiding foreign saboteurs.⁹⁴

Political disillusionment among educated citizens, of which spiritualist *keruzhki* were but one manifestation, was equally troubling to the defenders of Soviet ideology. The state feared that it was losing those citizens meant to carry its torch. In the two decades preceding the persecutions, atheism as a worldview could hardly attract a sidelong glance from the cultural elites - those scholars, writers, and artists who, in the state's view, were meant to be the vanguard of Soviet ideology. Instead, icons had been appearing in their homes, churches and shrines were becoming their pilgrimage sites, and they struggled terribly to defend godless humanism intellectually, even if they ostensibly still adhered to it.⁹⁵ In the academy, scholars of atheism were using their field as cover to explore religion.⁹⁶ The

⁹⁰ In addition to the Soviet sources below, this view was also the impression of Western media. See Serge Schmemmann, "Soviet Says Hare Krishna Cloaks Hide C.I.A. Daggers," *The New York Times*, July 31, 1983, sec. World, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/07/31/world/soviet-says-hare-krishna-cloaks-hide-cia-daggers.html>, accessed 10 January 2017.

⁹¹ V. Kassis and L. Kolosov, "Prikryvaia's Tvetushchim Lotosom," *Nedel'ia*, No. 22, 1983, 10. *Nedel'ia* was a weekly insert within the newspaper *Izvestiia*. Titled "Under the Canopy of a Flowering Lotus," the article opens with the "disgusting" spectacle of a Moscow doctor, washing the feet of the American guru Roberta Campagnola, more commonly known as Hare Kesa Swami. At the end, Campagnola is identified as "a longtime agent of the CIA, specializing in ideological diversions," and an agent of foreign anticommunist sabotage. These claims are baseless.

⁹² GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, 3-6, is a complaint from a Hare Krishna who was invited on that program. The devotee claims that the program was presented as a forum, but unfolded as a show trial and humiliation. Many other devotees wrote the CRA to claim the same.

⁹³ *Nauka i religii*, v. 10, 1990, 31. In that article, an interview with Evgenii Chernetsov, the CRA official formerly in charge of monitoring sects, he says "that argument was long considered among the most serious," but adds that they found no proof.

⁹⁴ This too is a collective impression from GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, 4063 and 4423 - collections of petitions from Hare Krishnas to the Soviet Council on Religious Affairs. Concerning formal criminal charges, the *Nedel'ia* article cited 3 notes above quotes the prosecutor: "[The Hare Krishnas] are actively propagandizing, distributing materials and attracting new members to what is an international organization. Under the guise of religious ritual, Hindu and Indian religion and philosophy, they are in fact causing pathological damage to the psyches of [names several victims]."

⁹⁵ Smolkin, 194. Smolkin highlights the writer Vladimir Tendriakov, himself a rare outspoken atheist among the intelligentsia, and his own struggle to present a defense of atheism as a worldview. He came under harsh criticism from ideological organs for a story deemed too ambivalent on the issue.

⁹⁶ Luehrmann, Sonja. *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*. New York City: Oxford University Press, 2015, ch. 3.

technical intelligentsia increasingly took their cues from these disenchanting thinkers, for whom the Bhagavad Gita - alongside Russia's traditional religions, to be sure - presented a whole constellation of un-Soviet and thus enticing ideas.

A 1982 article in the national daily newspaper *Sotsialisticheskaia industriia* (*Socialist Industry*) reveals this concern, both from the choice of venue - a daily geared towards educated technical workers - and from the content, which drifts between light chiding and thinly-veiled threats.⁹⁷ The article tells the (largely true) story of the engineer-turned-yogi Evgenii Tretiakov, who infected his educated social network in the city of Krasnoyarsk. Tretiakov attended the 1979 Moscow International Book Fair and there met Anatolii Pinaev, the first Soviet devotee. The article decries "adults, many with higher technical educations, [beginning] to copy down the mantra," and later lists with incredulity the titles, educations and, most ominously, the names of local engineers and specialists under his spell, who now chant incessantly and look in the mirror for their auras. A workmanlike description of doctrine follows, with its essence as sloth and social welfarism, and its inevitable outcome as the violation of Soviet law. Tretiakov was among the first Hare Krishnas to be arrested in the USSR, in December of 1981, and he served over a year in prison on charges of parasitism.⁹⁸

It was no matter that the Hare Krishna threat was at least partly the state's own creation. The state would admit this tacitly, and the devotees themselves would make this point in streams of petitions and letters of protest, but to no avail.⁹⁹ The state had sought to cultivate a population that was both worldly and ideologically pure, and ancient Indian culture, no matter how carefully it was pursued, could only aggravate the tension between these two aims. Take, for instance, yoga. While yoga was explored in public fora and boosted by academics and print media, it was also feared by the authorities, which suspected (with some justification) that yoga instructors might be Hare Krishnas in disguise. The depth and antiquity of yoga's philosophy might foster a respect for Soviet ally India, but that philosophy, because of its depth and antiquity, could not be purged of its spirituality or even mysticism. Its asceticism seemed a rebuttal to materialism in the Western sense, but Marxist materialism was hardly more compatible. In more concrete matters, the practice of yoga might promote health and wellbeing, but also implies independent and private groupings of citizens, forging a lifestyle alien to Soviet culture (really, to Soviet authorities). Once again, from the outside, practitioners came to look like "sectarians." A national paper summarized it this way in 1982, explaining how the yoga and related Hare Krishna threat crept into the USSR:

Various diets and fasting for health are fashionable today, and yoga advocates for vegetarianism. We [the Soviet government -author] are fighting drunkenness and smoking, and yoga forbids both alcohol and nicotine. We condemn crass materialism, and yoga promotes asceticism and the rejects the pursuit of sensory pleasures. This allowed [Hare Krishnas] to build a bridge: after all, the philosophy of the yogis in no way contradicts Marxist philosophy.¹⁰⁰

This last phrase was meant ironically, but implies that this had not always been so clear - neither to the seekers, nor apparently to the state. The quotation suggests that, on some level, officials realized

⁹⁷ A. Motsov and S. Sadoshenko, "Tog s golubymy glazami," *Sotsialisticheskaia industriia*, January 24, 1982.

⁹⁸ Anderson, 316. Tretiakov may have served more than just this year - his original sentence was 1-1.5 years, but many devotees were imprisoned repeatedly.

⁹⁹ In one instance, GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, 64-66, a devotee cites several Soviet press articles on health benefits of yoga, including in *Science and Religion*. Other letters in this collection make similar claims.

¹⁰⁰ A. Motsov and S. Sadoshenko, "Tog s golubymy glazami," *Sotsialisticheskaia industriia*, January 24, 1982.

that Krishna Consciousness emerged from within Soviet culture rather than as some external plot. Still, yoga faced a backlash in the press by the end of the 1970s, and would be banned outright in 1980.¹⁰¹ The first arrests of Hare Krishnas would follow in 1981.

Consequences

At its worst, the persecution was a self-propelling witch-hunt, fed mutually by the Soviet media, the police and intelligence agencies, and the medical establishment in the form of punitive psychiatric treatment. Authorities encouraged Hare Krishnas to register their organization, but upon receiving the requests, raided the petitioners' homes.¹⁰² Letters demanding the release of prisoners, and letters of protest generally, were likewise answered with raids on the writers, the dismantling of altars, the seizure of their religious materials, pressure to inform on one another, and often, further rounds of arrests and convictions, usually on charges of "infringing upon the rights of citizens," a broad term for religious agitation from article 227 of the criminal code of the RSFSR.¹⁰³ And as the repressions spread, a circular logic took hold, particularly in the media - the firing of Hare Krishnas from their chosen careers proved their parasitism and disdain for honest work; the privations of imprisoned devotees' relatives became evidence of neglect within Hare Krishna families (as did their vegetarianism).¹⁰⁴ Registration was denied on the grounds that many Hare Krishnas were in prison - the persecution itself was evidence of the group's criminality.¹⁰⁵ The number of Hare Krishnas in psych wards was held up as evidence of the trauma Krishna Consciousness could visit upon pristine Soviet minds.

Psychological trauma, in fact, was the danger most often imputed to Krishna Consciousness during the persecution. The earliest articles accused the group of driving its members to madness, and as late as May 1988, only months before the group was officially legalized, central broadcasting in Moscow aired a feature on Hare Krishnas which accused them of engendering schizophrenia and other mental illnesses in victims. Those devotees ensnared in the crackdown were just as often committed as they were imprisoned, if that distinction can be made at all. Anatolii Piniayev, the first Soviet Hare Krishna, saw both sides of the repression apparatus. He was first detained in Riga in September of 1980, and committed to a psych ward for a brief term.¹⁰⁶ Like others committed for "schizophrenia" in the final decades of the Soviet period - these included religious believers, hippies and other social deviants - he was forcibly administered the antipsychotic drug haloperidol, which can cause convulsions and other severe muscular disorders.¹⁰⁷ In September of 1981 he was committed once more, then for five months, and for the following several years, repeatedly arrested on criminal

¹⁰¹ Menzel in Menzel et al., 166-168, shows sports ministers and health officials condemning yoga and ascribing various health/ideological dangers to it, including epilepsy and Indian idealism.

¹⁰² See John Anderson, "The Hare Krishna Movement in the USSR," *Religion in Communist Lands* 14, no. 3 (1986): 317. That article is a more comprehensive history of the persecutions.

¹⁰³ See, for example, 1. William J. Eaton, "Moscow Police Break Up Hare Krishna Gathering," *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 1987, http://articles.latimes.com/1987-08-30/news/mn-4991_1_hare-krishna, accessed 10 January 2017; GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, 35 (on raids and seizures).

¹⁰⁴ Anderson, 317 describes the arrests of letter-writers and petitioners, but the larger picture comes from grievances in the archives (see, for instance, GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, letters beginning pp. 31, 45, 77).

¹⁰⁵ GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, letter to Gorbachev beginning p. 35.

¹⁰⁶ K. Liubarskii, "Marks Protiv Krishny," *Strana I Mir*, no. 11 (Munich, 1985), 23-24.

¹⁰⁷ Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, *Soviet Abuse of Psychiatry for Political Purposes: A Helsinki Watch Report Update* (New York, NY: The Committee, 1988). On hippies specifically, see Fürst, Juliane. "Liberating Madness – Punishing Insanity: Soviet Hippies and the Politics of Crazy." *Journal of Contemporary History*, November 20, 2017, 1–29.

charges relating to religious activity or forced into chemical “treatment” for mental illness.

Among likely hundreds of committed devotees in the country, between 40-70 devotees¹⁰⁸ were prosecuted between 1981-1988, primarily in Russia, Armenia and the Baltic republics, with three dying in prison or labor camps, including the infant child of one female devotee. Many more were harassed, either by the state or by members of the public (devotees spoke, at the time, of a “pogrom atmosphere”),¹⁰⁹ or had their property seized. Practitioners of yoga or other Eastern currents also faced repressions, usually in the form of forced psychiatric treatment.¹¹⁰

An international outcry accompanied the campaign against Hare Krishnas and other believers, and inside the USSR, Hare Krishnas themselves wrote to the media and the government, initiated hunger strikes, and at least in one case, threatened self-immolation.¹¹¹ All of these protests, at home and abroad, were cast in the language of human rights and freedom of conscience, good citizenship, and the pursuit of a cohesive, tolerant Soviet society.¹¹² This language was shared by Mikhail Gorbachev and his reformers in power, but the timeline of the repressions does not reflect well on him, or suggest any success towards these lofty goals. The last Hare Krishna prisoners were released only in December of 1988 - well over three years into Gorbachev’s rule, and no closer to any kind of unity.¹¹³ The persecutions let up only with the final and total splintering of the USSR itself.

After the persecutions

The persecution spanned much of the 1980s, and although it was central to the Hare Krishnas’ Soviet experience, it seems to fall strangely outside their Soviet history. The campaign came and went with little result but the misery of some hundreds of people. It did not eradicate the movement, nor did it raise its profile, at least not internally (several foreign groups, and not just foreign Hare Krishnas, did take up their cause).¹¹⁴ Although it was accompanied by an aggressive media campaign, Hare

¹⁰⁸ Numbers hard to come by - A Keston Center report in 1986 claimed 34 known (Anderson, 317), *Strana i mir*, an emigre publication in Germany, named 30 (see note 8 above); Hare Krishnas themselves estimated 68 at that time, and the persecutions only ended in 1988, so this is a rough estimate. A more recent Hare Krishna-authored history lists 55 specific individuals, but allows for others that remain unknown - see Piskarev, Vladimir. *Dvizhenie soznaniiia krishny v S.S.S.R. Oberki istorii 1971-1989 godov*. Moscow: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2017. Piskarev condensed all names into a list, which I can make available upon request.

¹⁰⁹ GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, letters beginning pp. 3 and 7.

¹¹⁰ Juliane Furst records the hippie-mystic Vladimir Wiedemann being committed for this reason, and one of my subjects, Akhladini Radkhika, had a friend committed for practicing yoga.

¹¹¹ On hunger strikes, GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, letters beginning 31, 62, 73 (some of these may refer to the same hunger strike). On self-immolation, GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, d. 3685, letter beginning p. 82.

¹¹² GARF, f. 6991, op. 6, dd. 3685 + 4063, *passim*. The letters appeal to “laws of humanity and the state,” citizenship and civic activities among members, “respect and support for Soviet laws,” the absence of dissidents among them, and at least twice, patriotic service in the Soviet army.

¹¹³ Anderson, “*Religion, State and Politics*,” 164.

¹¹⁴ These included Amnesty International, the Keston Institute, and Resistance International - “Dear Mr. Gorbachev, Let Our Friends Go!” *Back to Godhead*, 1 November 1987, Accessed January 20, 2016. <http://backtogohead.in/dear-mr-gorbachev-let-our-friends-go/>.

inaturalVigils were routinely held outside US-Soviet summits - see Lelyveld, Joseph, “The Summit: A reporter’s notebook,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 1985, sec. World. <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/18/world/the-summit-a-reporter-s-notebook-14-words-from-reagan.html>; “The Iceland Summit: Outside the main event; Iceland protests from Jews to Hare Krishna,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 1986, sec. World. <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/12/world/iceland-summit-outside-main-event-iceland-protests-jews-hare-krishna.html>; Gillette, Robert, “Reagan Meets 96 Soviet Dissidents,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1988. http://articles.latimes.com/1988-05-31/news/mn-3526_1_soviet-union.

Krishnas only became widely visible after it passed, with the lifting of Soviet restrictions on religious practice.¹¹⁵ Broadly speaking, there's little reason to believe that today's movement would be different, had there been no persecution at all.

Even more remarkable is that it seems to have left little mark on devotees self-conception, whether or not they or those close to them had been imprisoned or harassed. In my interviews, none of my subjects seemed to consider the persecution overly important, including two devotees who were themselves imprisoned. It was tragic, of course, and brutal and unwarranted - but all were more inclined to speak of the big picture, in which the movement was eventually liberated and then grew, and Krishna Consciousness gradually (re-)claimed Soviet, then Russian, souls. The persecution, then, is perhaps one low point in a long history of decline, but that history is now being turned back by the devotees, and they place their lives in that larger, more hopeful narrative.

Certainly, there are other explanations for its apparent irrelevance in devotees' recollections. Considerable time has elapsed since these events, and life since the collapse has had its own challenges for the devotees, to say the least. The topic may be uncomfortable to talk about, particularly with a relative stranger. But I believe the answer lies more than anything in the worldview that they have adopted, which necessarily reflects well on the past. In this chapter's conclusion, we will even glimpse a certain fondness for the Soviet era among some devotees, if not a longing to return. And in the next section - a profile of one particular believer - we can see how dramatically Krishna Consciousness can reform and recolor the past.

A Krishna Conscious Life

Tatiana's late-Soviet life should seem familiar to the reader.¹¹⁶ She was born and raised in Moscow, had a relatively joyous childhood in the Khrushchev era, pursued a medical education, married in 1970, and by the 1980s, worked as an anesthesiologist. None of the above satisfied her much, and in her spare time, she read whatever vaguely spiritual literature was in circulation, including by subscription to the popular magazines *Science and Religion*, *Science and Life*, and *Ogoniok*.¹¹⁷ She was not a member of any formal *krushki* - they tended to be male affairs, among other reasons - but she had, at times, flirted with Eastern culture. In particular, she attended the Moscow International Book Fair and met the Hare Krishnas there, though she did not leave with any literature. And she recalls reading widely about yoga in the popular press, and seeing the Bombay-Kiev joint production described above, "Indian Yogis: Who Are They?" She even briefly joined a yoga group at this time, but it did not fundamentally change her worldview - she only remembers that they changed venue frequently, and that the instructor was often glancing towards the door. After dropping yoga, her life carried on as before. Having found Krishna in 1989, she now attributes the 1970s yoga fad to "a certain spirit of *bhakti-yoga*" - devotional service to Krishna - that was "already hovering over Moscow." This, of course, is a revision made in

¹¹⁵ *Nauka i Religii*, v. 10, 1990, 25, in atoning for past sins, listed some of the slanderous articles in a footnote, identifying *Nedel'ia* 1983 no. 22; *Trud* 19 February 1983; *Smena* 1985 no. 1, 2. Television programs "exposing" the group were just as common, though appear mostly in complaints sent by Hare Krishnas to the government (see notes 109-112 above).

¹¹⁶ All quotations and biographical information are derived from Tatiana Vorobiova (spiritual name Tuṅavidyāsakhi), interview with the author, February and March 2015.

¹¹⁷ Tatiana lists these, though she erroneously recalls a title "Science and Knowledge" ("Nauka i znaniia"). She most likely meant *Science and Life* (*Nauka i zhizn'*) which, like *Science and Religion*, were published by *Obshchestvo Znania*, a para-academic organization that published and organized lectures. *Znaniia* means 'knowledge.'

retrospect; at the time, she knew nothing of Vaishnavism. By myriad revisions of this type, Tatiana has recast her life.

Family history

Tatiana's memory is particularly sharp, and so she was able to provide an expansive overview of her life, that of her parents and grandparents, and of the historical circumstances in which they all lived. But this history is substantially shaped by a conversion that came only in 1989. By the time I met her in 2015, she had abandoned many of the values of her Soviet life, but without hostility to the USSR, and indeed, with considerable nostalgia for that era. This apparent paradox is resolved when we see her entire life story, as Tatiana does, through the saffron-colored lens of Krishna Consciousness.

The previous chapter of this dissertation began with Sputnik streaking around the planet, dazzling millions of people and pulling behind it two superpowers in a race to conquer the cosmos. Tatiana was ten years old at the time, at home in Moscow. Four years later she would celebrate Yuri Gagarin's flight in a cheering throng on Red Square. Her memory of the event is typical, almost:

That event shook the world, of course. I was a student then, in ninth grade I believe. They even let us out of our physics classes, it was our third or fourth class I remember. And we walked out onto Red Square... it was an achievement, there was a certain pride in the state at such a success, to triumph over Earth's pull and break free into space. It was splashed across the headlines. I know, reading Prabhupada Lilamrta,¹¹⁸ that Swami Prabhupada saw they'd launched a satellite, and asked, 'what for?' Swami Prabhupada passed judgment on such things. He said that mankind didn't need it...

Reflecting on these events in 2014, Tuṅgavidyāsakhi - as Tatiana was by then called - was perhaps revisiting them for the first time since her 1989 conversion. We cannot say for certain how she felt in 1961, but some views are clearly of more recent provenance. She continued:

Tatiana: There was an aphorism in the Soviet period, that "science is the engine of progress." In a sense there is truth to that, but oftentimes progress drives us very far from God, technical scientific progress drives us away from God... we launch a man into space, but did we have to? What do you think?

Author: Oh, I think so. That's a personal opinion.

Tatiana: I think not, and certainly, not a woman. Sure, she [cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova -*author*] won glory, she won laurels, all of that. But what for, in the end? ... I felt bad for her. I felt a sort of pity for her, a woman all alone, so far away, torn away, not sure if she'll come back or not.

At the time of Tereshkova's flight, Tatiana did not believe in God, and the notion that Tereshkova was 'torn away,' or that a woman's proper place is on *terra firma*, is certainly not of Soviet provenance (and neither she nor her parents were anti-Soviet). Thus her critique of progress is new; her life through a Krishna Consciousness lens.

When Tatiana looks back on her life, that lens blurs with distance from the present. That is not to say that her memory fails - in fact her recall of dates and details was exceptional among dozens of similar interviews - but that, with distance, Russian and Soviet life grows softer in its outlines, and more difficult to distinguish from life as described in the Hindu scriptures. Nostalgia makes pure and pious the lives of her parents and grandparents. Of course, Tatiana's admiration for them is likely a constant of her life, and the conservative values she ascribes to them are in many instances quite Soviet. But they are recast in the language and chronology of Krishna Consciousness, as a degradation

¹¹⁸ A hagiography of Swami Prabhupada, published by ISKCON's internal press.

from a (more or less) Vedic way of life towards the hedonism of the Soviet collapse and aftermath. Here, she speaks generally about the shape of the past century:

[In the Soviet period] there was more piety (*blagochestie*). Although God was outlawed - you know we couldn't go to church - but in that period it went without saying, Russia carried on those principles, there were still people alive from that era, people alive who lived under the tsars. My grandmother was from that century, and they lived piously, they believed, they had pious principles. And that piety helped keep people from such crude, sinful activity.... People were more open then, not so much guided by their base, lower senses, that is, there was a feeling of duty, people had a greater sense of responsibility. In today's life, just as we keep moving through time, these pious qualities are falling away.

The language of “piety,” for instance, does not belong to the Soviet lexicon, but here is used on loan from the scriptures. The same is true of the “lower senses,” a term of Swami Prabhupada's to distinguish between our base and lofty natures. More generally, the distinction between Soviet and pre-Soviet Russia is lost here, or at least smoothed some, in contrasting both with the “crude, sinful activity” of the post-Soviet era. Time, in a Krishna Conscious worldview, runs untrammled through historical periods and political regimes, degrading our culture without regard for our superficial tinkering. In Tatiana's words, “as we keep moving through time, these pious qualities fall away” - this is a statement of a universal principle, rather than a political critique.

In discussing her parents and grandparents, still other elements of Krishna Consciousness seem retrofitted to their lives. Her grandparents, for instance, seem to live in a Russian Orthodox time before time, sustained through the generational transmission of spiritual culture, or through *parampara* as the Hare Krishnas would have it:

My grandmother was born the same year as Prabhupada, almost the same year, in 1897. And my grandfather in 1896, the same as Prabhupada. And at that time ... Orthodoxy was the state religion, and at that time the people were believers... my grandmother very much believed, she was raised to believe, because in Holy Rus, Orthodoxy was transmitted from generation to generation, it was a traditional religion. People followed it and lived by all the principles of that Orthodox culture.

A historian would search in vain for a unified “people” at that time, or for shared principles across imperial Russian society. But historical memory need not overlap with the personal, and here, the personal is subsumed in a larger, nostalgic picture of a mythic age.

To be sure, Tatiana's grandmother very much believed - it was she who baptized the infant Tatiana, regaled her with bible stories in childhood, and took her to church in contravention of the norms of the Soviet 1950s. It is not without cause that Tatiana sees, in her grandmother, a link in a spiritual chain. Her parents, though, knew nothing but the Soviet era, during which progress, to use Tatiana's words, drove them away from God.

Her father, in fact, left his parents as a youth - a severing of ties idealized in the official culture of the time - and he lived and died an atheist.¹¹⁹ He was born two years before the revolution, her mother two years after. The two met in Mongolia in 1938, where he was serving the Communist state as an engineer, performing chemical analyses on newfound oil in that country. Tatiana's mother was

¹¹⁹ The cult of Pavlik Morozov is the best-known instance of the Soviet state turning sons against fathers. The young Morozov, according to official lore (including portrayals in media and art), informed on his father, a Bolshevik, for forging documents and selling them to enemies of the Soviet state during the first collectivization drive (the early 1930s). The father was sentenced to a labor camp and then executed; Pavlik's relatives then murdered the boy in retribution. In the trial of his murderers, letters flooded in from across the Soviet Union urging the judge to show no mercy towards the boy's killers.

traveling there with the Communist Youth League (*Komsomol*) and there they met, fell in love, married, and remained throughout the war. Their first child, a son, was born in Mongolia's oilfields in 1942, and Tatiana was born in Moscow in 1946.

As with her grandparents, she describes her parents with reverence and with love, and gratitude for the model they provided her. Although her parents would never hear of Krishna Consciousness, its faint echo seems to resound in them:

There was a lot of work then, because that Mongolian oil they had discovered supplied the front in Europe and the front with the Japanese, that oil was mostly used in the Far East.¹²⁰ I consider his contribution very substantial, because my mother said he worked day and night, for weeks on end. He was devoted (*predan*) to his work... My mother would tell me how she would bring him lunch when it was 60 degrees below zero. The winters are very severe in Mongolia, and she brought him lunch, holding it to her body under a sheepskin coat to keep it warm.

This is the ideal of a Krishna Conscious family, selfless and hierarchical - the husband is devoted to his calling in the world (*dharmā*), and the wife devoted to hers - namely, serving her husband. Tatiana continues:

[My father] fulfilled his duty (*dog*) and his assignments 100%, even 150-200%, he gave himself over to work and fulfilled his obligation; he was not a political man. As I said, he was highly valued at work and several times was invited to join the party, but declined out of humility... he devoted himself to his work, and he knew that the rear was defended, that his home was always in order; my mother kept the house and did not work. ... he was a man of duty. [Politics] was unimportant to him, he would have done the exact same under any political regime, I am convinced.

In this telling, her father does not seek the status and prestige associated with party membership, and in fact rejects it when offered - he pointedly severs his labor from its outcomes and rewards. This is perhaps the central tenet of Krishna Conscious practice.¹²¹ Even more broadly, he regards political regimes as immaterial, superficial structures outside of his duty in the world (*dharmā*). In addition, both excerpts elevate her mother's homemaking as part and parcel of her father's obligations. This contrasts sharply with Soviet rhetoric of women's liberation, and seems to garner Tatiana's admiration. She continues:

My mother was primarily a homemaker, though she had an education, she was an economist by education. But insofar as she had three children, she gave herself fully to her children and husband, she served (*sluzhila*) her husband, bore his burdens and the burdens of the children.

The strict division of gender roles colors much of Tatiana's worldview (recall her pity for the cosmonaut Tereshkova, "a woman, all alone"), and the degradation of the family that she perceives results from gender confusion. Changes in these (eternal) structures emerge as the clearest evidence of decline between her grandparents' era and her own.

I came to understand this when I began studying Swami Prabhupada's books... in my past life before Krishna Consciousness I was a normal woman, I too competed with men, I had, you could say, a man's profession. I was an anesthesiologist in the emergency room, it's a profession not meant for women, and I too had that competitive spirit vis-à-vis men. That competitive spirit is in the West and has started to spread to countries of the East and

¹²⁰ The Japanese front was not opened until 1945, but the Red Army was training in preparation long before then.

¹²¹ In the *Gita* this is *karma yoga*, perhaps the central doctrinal innovation of the text. As elaborated in the section titled "doctrine," *karma-yoga* teaches that one must continue to perform their duties in the world (*dharmā*), to live their lives, but rather than striving for worldly gains, must learn to detach their actions from their outcomes, and thus break the karmic chain. For the historical context that made *Karma-yoga* necessary, see note 75 above.

even to India, where the woman was the keeper of spirituality, at the center of the home, never worked. ... There are women who stand out, but they are rare, those who have a man's mentality. And they can be outstanding scientists, they can accomplish a lot... [but] the majority of women need to be protected, to be under a man's wing.

Here, her own life clashes sharply with her conservative ideal. If traditional values persisted in her parents' generation, her own generation - indeed, her own life - seems an affront to that lost spiritual culture, ascribed above to a bygone age and to India.

Tatiana's own biography is an emphatically Soviet one. In our interview, she described her early life with elaborate detail and undisguised fondness, though with the mild condescension of newfound wisdom. Her pre-conversion life saw a prestigious medical career as an anesthesiologist in one of Moscow's premier children's hospitals.¹²² Her education, scientific work and career, however, receive scant attention in her recollections, and generally, her adulthood comes under fairly harsh judgment. Her childhood is spared this, although, to borrow her phrasing, she clearly had a "man's mentality." In truth it was a Soviet mentality.

To be honest, I had a lot of different interests, different activities, and I very much loved sports in my youth. ... I did horseback riding, and swimming and diving. So I was drawn to what I'd call extreme sports. ... one of my later hobbies was SCUBA diving. My friends suggested it, and like always I approached it with enormous curiosity. ... it was a Soviet childhood. I have a very active nature, I could not go without some sort of activity... Even my relatives made fun of me, that I sample everything, and so many extreme things, and I would joke back, 'no, I haven't yet tried it all, I've not been parachuting, and I haven't learned to drive a car.'

Alongside sport, she eagerly cultivated a "Soviet spirituality," as described in the previous chapter or as promoted in the magazine *Science and Religion* (to which, again, she had a subscription) - high culture for the middle class in place of traditional faith. Here again, hers seems a Soviet childhood *par excellence*:

I very much loved to read, and I loved the theater just as much, very much loved ballet and went to performances at the Bolshoi Theater and the Stanislavskii theater...¹²³ I will say, just between us, that in childhood I even dreamed of becoming a ballerina. ... my mother said that you have to learn ballet from a very young age, and [my parents] didn't let me, I don't know why...

She now reflects back on her youth joyfully, but not without embarrassment - notice "to be honest," before admitting to her many hobbies, or "just between us," before her ambition to dance ballet. Still, based on her own self-description, it is hard to imagine her pitying the cosmonaut Tereshkova at the time of the latter's historic flight. This only becomes necessary when life is reordered by Krishna Consciousness. In this new configuration, her family history begins in an idyllic and distant past which echoed into her own life, and the 1960s seemed compromised by man's hubris.

Tatiana, of course, is aware that her conversion changed her thinking and influences her interpretation of her own life. Late in our interview, she too invokes George Harrison: "Everybody is looking for Krishna. Some don't realize that they are, but they are."

Finding Krishna

Tatiana caught only the briefest glimpse of the Hare Krishna underground, for some minutes at

¹²² The G.N. Speransky's City Children's Hospital No. 9.

¹²³ Shorthand for the Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Academic Music Theatre.

the Moscow book fair and perhaps in the veiled hints of her yoga teacher. Those events were at the end of the 1970s. Throughout the 1980s, she still did not realize she was looking for Krishna, or that Soviet authorities were doing so with great efficiency and callousness. She did, however, share with the *kruzhki* a deep sense of society's decline.

As I said, everything is coming apart in our era, families are coming apart, and my family just became a statistic. After my husband and I got divorced [in 1988 -*author*], the Lord took me under his watch, I simply made a vow to myself that I would care for my elderly parents and my son, and needed no personal life anymore, because I was so disillusioned with all of it. ... Our time, this period of human life, this epoch is... an epoch of wars and of strife, a cosmic epoch under cosmic influence, in which people do not unify or consolidate but divide, it is an epoch inclined towards division. Everything is breaking up, families are breaking up, children are leaving their parents...

As a description of Russia in the 1980s - though perhaps not the world as a whole - Tatiana's interpretation above is perfectly apt. The traditional family was indeed breaking down; burdensome single motherhood had become normalized by a culture that exalted mothers but demanded little of fathers.¹²⁴ National divisions within the USSR were beginning to fissure. From 1985, Soviet politics would become increasingly fractious until dissolution. And in this epoch of rupture, like Tatiana, citizens would grow "disillusioned with all of it." To be sure, her framing derives from Krishna Consciousness which, at the time, she had still not adopted. She speaks of the "cosmic" epoch, and elsewhere, describes her marriage as "karmic," a settling of long-forgotten debts. These are elaborations added in retrospect, but she would not deny this, and they certainly do not undercut an essentially correct depiction of the era. At least from the late 1960s onward, Soviet time was degradation. And just when the country as that process neared its end, the Hare Krishnas were rehabilitated and Tatiana happened upon them.

The last imprisoned Hare Krishnas were freed in December of 1988, and the movement was legalized the following May. That same month, some seeking friends of Tatiana would invite her to a ceremony in a crowded apartment, and within weeks she would stop eating meat, begin chanting the Hare Krishna mantra. Her first act of devotion was to compile *samizdat* copies of the Bhagavad Gita in her apartment, for distribution and sale on the street (which was now legal).¹²⁵ In August of 1989, the first organization in Moscow was officially registered, which would permit the devotees to obtain a permanent space for this sort of work.

In 1990, the state дума would pass a sweeping Law on Freedom of Religious Conscience, and the Soviet Union would become, for the first time, a truly secular state - it would not take sides in religious matters. Hare Krishnas quickly gained visibility in Moscow. Following official recognition, devotees began staging elaborate festivities each Sunday on the Arbat, Moscow's most famous walking street and culture district. They sold hundreds of thousands of books, introduced tens of thousands of seekers to their teachings, and received thousands of inquiries daily at their new offices.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ On the culture of single motherhood, see Jennifer Utrata, *Women without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia*, 1st Edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015). Utrata shows that a combination of male misconduct and housing shortages led to early marriage and higher divorce rates, while state support for single mothers diminished steadily from high postwar levels. Only after 1968 were men held responsible in law for children born out of wedlock, but even that law's outcomes were predictably mixed.

¹²⁵ Tatiana described receiving printed pages from fellow devotees in Armenia, then collating them in an apartment workshop before sending them off to be bound elsewhere in Moscow and then sold on the street.

¹²⁶ Simon, "Krishnas Find Fertile Ground In Russia." The article says "millions" of books, but this figure must come from the Hare Krishnas themselves, and stretches credulity.

This began in 1990; the state dissolved at the end of 1991. In 1992, Tatiana quit her job as an anesthesiologist, in order to take care of her ailing parents and to serve Krishna full-time otherwise. She was initiated in 1993, and took the name Tuṅgavidyāsakhi, which means “of elevated knowledge” in Sanskrit. This was her preferred name at the time of our interview, in the spring of 2015. That interview took place in the Hare Krishnas’ permanent center in Moscow, where she now spends much of her time.

Conclusion

Tatiana’s conversion, coinciding with liberalization in the religious sphere and the public rehabilitation of Krishna Consciousness, would suggest an upward trajectory in her life and in that of her new community. Yet in our interview, as we will see below, Tatiana was decidedly backward-looking - even the later Soviet period was polished with nostalgic feeling, while the post-Soviet world came under her harshest judgment. Of course, this is a sentiment shared by millions of former-Soviet people, on most of whom Krishna Consciousness had no impact at all.¹²⁷ But for Tatiana, this view of the world is elaborated, justified and made firm by her devotion, even while the past she romanticizes visited such brutality on her fellow devotees. This apparent paradox resolves itself, though, if we understand faith in more concrete terms, as a solution to concrete problems. After all, like all faiths, Krishna Consciousness is meant to guide devotees in this life and explain this world, even if its telos lies far beyond either. In depicting a distant golden age, the Vedas are meant to explain the present.

On my first day at the center, my first interview was with Kṛṣṇānanda dasa, the man who claimed above that the Vedas originated in “undateable antiquity.” He joined the movement in the 1980s while it was still underground, and by the time of our interview was a scriptural authority among Moscow’s devotees. Questions about doctrine sustained our conversation far more easily than those about his life, and we discussed the question above - the explanatory power of Vedic cosmology.

His answer, in brief, turned on the notion of degradation. But in his words, he moves seamlessly, perhaps unconsciously, between degradation in a broad, cosmic sense, and degradation in miniature, over a single Soviet (then Russian) lifetime. He ultimately emphasized the latter:

It all corresponds with the Vedic philosophy of history. That philosophy is built on cycles, you see, on these repeating elements. These are called *yugas*, or epochs. These are the small cycles, four of them... and they move in the direction of steady degradation. And we live in the most degraded *yuga*, the most degraded, in which the degradation afflicts everything, even nature itself. You saw what kind of weather we have - we’ve never had that sort of thing in Moscow before, never. Lightning on the first of February.

As I walked from the metro to the center that morning, on the first of February, there had been rain and a single peal of thunder, which turned the heads of dozens of pedestrians in unison. Kṛṣṇānanda had interpreted it as a particularly obvious sign of degradation, clearly over the course of his single human life in Moscow. But moments later, he clarified that even the “small” cycles to which he alluded last hundreds of thousands of years.

¹²⁷ A consistent majority of Russians have regretted the collapse of the USSR since 1991, with only the briefest exception in 2012. “Raspad SSSR: Prichiny i nostalg’giia,” data from the Levada Center, 12 May 2016, accessed 19 November 2017 at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/12/05/raspad-sssr-prichiny-i-nostalgiya/>

In the movement's official chronology, we are currently at the very beginning of *kali-yuga*, that most degraded stage, and in nearly all interviews this comprised a central feature of my interlocutor's worldview. In a separate interview, a more recent convert elaborated this new era's most salient features:

There has been life on earth for a very long time. There used to be very highly developed civilizations, called Vedic or Aryan civilizations, but in keeping with the laws of development, the planet entered a new era 5000 years ago, an era called *Kali-yuga*, or the age of iron [lit. age of discord -*author*]. That is foretold in the Puranas ... It is foretold there that people will grow shorter, live shorter lives, that they will value only wealth, that will be the central value. All other values will gradually erode, until there are real horrors. Before then, people will begin eating meat, then one another towards the end; men will grow long hair and that will be considered beautiful; women will take on masculine qualities, the roles of men, doing men's work; atheist rulers will come to power and there will be wars and grief. All of that is foretold in the Puranas.

Here too, the devotee conflates mythic and mundane time. He speaks at once about a grand spiritual epoch - *kali-yuga* is to last 432,000 years, according to doctrine - and quite clearly about Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. The mythic golden age, before humanity set about splintering and before Hinduism needed a name, becomes a critique of the immediate present, in which atheists govern, women take men's work, degraded people eat meat and, more recently - only in the last decades - wealth emerged as humanity's central value.

Let communism live forever

In this way, the Vedas offered one interpretation of the post-Soviet world. In times of crisis, many such interpretations compete for the public's sympathies.¹²⁸ This dissertation is a survey of solutions to the profound problems of the collapse; of inspirations that Soviet people found against a backdrop of uninspiring history. Specifically, these solutions take degradation - an assumption shared broadly by my subjects, not to speak of Soviet people generally - and place it in grander frame of time, attaching mundane (and presently difficult) human lives to something eternal. For instance, in the first chapter, time was treated only implicitly, but the astrologers' connection to the planets and stars implied a world governed by their cycles. Recall Olga Galankina, who experienced the sublime in observing a conjunction of planets in 1989, aligned precisely as they were in her youth. Degradation, in that perspective, is made transient, as she and Mikhail Levin both stated in different ways. Following this chapter, we will see the Mormons deny the reality of degradation by stubbornly celebrating the present, and the sect of Vissarion treat it as prelude to an apocalypse and glorious renewal. Anatolii Fomenko, with his "New Chronology," suggests to his readers that what appears as degradation is but minor turbulence, in a nevertheless steady ascent.

And to the Hare Krishnas, degradation is reversible by a contemplative gaze backward, and the ritual reproduction of life as it was eons ago. Nostalgia for the life and times of Lord Krishna might seem remote from the "problems of the collapse," taking as they were such a severe, material form. Yet Krishna Consciousness offered a solution, and not only in the immediate sense that quiescence and ritual withdrawal might relieve suffering. It is not even so much that the persecutions come to look like material illusion, though that belief surely provided assurance to many. Rather, it is the

¹²⁸ A consistent majority of Russians have regretted the collapse of the USSR since 1991, with only the briefest exception in 2012. "Raspad SSSR: Prichiny i nostalg'giia," data from the Levada Center, 12 May 2016, accessed 19 November 2017 at <http://www.levada.ru/2016/12/05/raspad-sssr-prichiny-i-nostalg'iya/>

nostalgic view of time itself, on the cosmic scale and in their own lives, that allows devotees to choose a better past.

Thus we return to Tatiana, who seems to have made precisely this choice:

Even though, yes, spirituality was repressed to some degree, even though belief in God was subject to persecution - communism was this militant atheism, but people were pious, and piety is a step towards spirituality. People were pious, they related kindly to one another, they left their front doors open, there was no theft, no vandalism like today. There was no malice, no aggression, and now so many people are aggressive.

Tatiana had lived a textbook Soviet life, but by the time I met her, she spoke of that life somewhat sheepishly. She once found meaning in science, and sport, and art and high culture, she once embraced women's liberation in the Western mode, but all that was a bit of modern silliness. Still, on a deeper level, the smoothing action of nostalgia has lent the Soviet period a certain shine, and indeed a spiritual legitimacy. She continued:

We simply lived life, and Swami Prabhupada always preached that spirituality is plain living and high thinking. ... in the former [sic] Soviet Union it was easy to realize that goal, because we didn't have so many ways to gratify the senses - supermarkets, restaurants, casinos, the advertising industry, the glorification of sex, violence, alcohol and narcotics ... our spiritual teachers traveled the world and at that time, they could compare life in the West with our own country, where people were clean, and not debased by the industries of pleasure and consumption. They were more inclined towards spiritual self-knowledge. This is why, in that context, one of our spiritual teachers once said 'let communism live forever.'

Let communism live forever. Of course, this does not refer to the mundane communism of article 227, of raids and arrests and forced psychiatric treatment, but rather to a spiritual communism, a time when people lived longer and healthier and free of want, and were united in memory and in belief. Although the two overlap in historical time and place, only one matters in the grand scheme, at least to the devotees. And the choice to separate the two was made all the more urgent, and all the more legitimate, by history as it really was.

That They Might Have Joy

That They Might Have Joy

*“And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.”*

T.S. Eliot

In the summer of 1992, Vladimir Lenin got some new and unwanted neighbors. Across the street from St. Petersburg’s Smolny Institute – Lenin’s headquarters during the October Revolution and his residence for several months thereafter – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had rented its first permanent space in the city.¹ One Sunday that summer, surprised churchgoers arrived to find that Lenin indeed lived – the red Soviet flag was once again flying above his bronze statue and the Institute’s columned façade. Fortunately for the Mormons, this restoration was short-lived.² By the next Sunday, the Russian tricolor was back in its rightful place. Over the course of several weeks, though, the red flag kept reappearing. A cadre of Soviet loyalists, stubborn and patriotic, managed to

¹ Akimov, Alexei Vasilevich, Oral History, Interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, Moscow, Russia, May 1995. The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT. OH 1288, 11. Henceforth, these interviews will be designated simply as “Moyle Program” with other essential information on the subject, date, location and call number.

This paper is based on interviews from the James Moyle Oral History program, in which historians from Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were dispatched across the world to record the experiences of new converts. Matt Heiss, one such historian and archivist, learned Russian in 1994 and traveled to the former Soviet Union the next year to conduct these interviews. Each interview contains a basic profile of the convert’s life, including age, date of birth, date of baptism, native city and country, education and occupation, and explores themes of church life, conversion, faith, and doctrine, as well as topics in politics and history. Of the thirty, ten are in English and twenty are in Russian. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Moscow and St. Petersburg, with several more in Kiev, three in Utah and one each in Lithuania and Latvia. I am indebted to Mr. Heiss both for conducting the interviews, and for his enthusiastic support during my research in Utah. A little more on the origins and motivations for the program are detailed below; see note 20 below.

² In this paper, the terms Mormon, LDS, and Saints will be used interchangeably to describe the Church and its members. “Mormon” is something of a misnomer for Latter-day Saints, originally used by outsiders but now adopted and embraced by members. The term refers to the prophet Mormon, whom Church doctrine credits with redacting, narrating and ultimately engraving the Book of Mormon onto golden tablets, which were revealed to Joseph Smith some 1500 years later in western New York. The full name of the church is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

replace the Russian flag three or four more times before yielding to the tide of history. The tricolor has remained there ever since, though so has the statue of Lenin.

Alexei Akimov, one of the Russian Mormons who worshipped across from Smolny, recounted the story of the changing flag to an LDS church historian in 1995. Over what sort of country did those two flags fly? In 1992, Russia was adrift in the chaos of the post-Soviet transition. The free market had upstanding citizens bartering for scarce and smuggled goods, only to go home and watch newly minted billionaires bid for mammoth tusks on TV.³ Shortages of necessities stood in contrast to a glut of alcohol, tobacco and pornography. In response to this material and moral upheaval, proselytizers yelled over one another about doomsday and the Last Judgment, while nationalists of various stripes set out in search of scapegoats. Both the past and the future were murky, while the present was painfully clear. Those like Akimov, just trying to get by, could not escape economic hardship, nor ignore the decline of culture and propriety. This chapter introduces the tumultuous moral and material circumstances of the early 1990s, which had dramatic effect on the world of seekers, and which underlie each chapter to come. The Mormon converts, like the followers of Vissarion, Anatolii Fomenko, and the vast majority of their fellow citizens, were reckoning with loss.

Akimov's biography is not uncommon for the first cohort of post-Soviet Mormons, nor for the seeking milieu as a whole. He was born in Vyborg on the Finnish border in 1955, two years after Stalin's death, to a father who worked on the railroad. His family was transferred to Leningrad nine years later, where he would remain through the time of his interview.⁴ From a young age, Akimov claimed to have sought out foreign news and to have considered himself an "internal émigré," disengaged from the regime but by no means a dissident. He was educated in engineering at a Leningrad polytechnic, earning his place in the USSR's large and immobile middle class. As the country lurched towards dissolution in the late 1980s, though, middle class Soviet biographies like Akimov's began to diverge from one another. In the curious mix of economic contraction and liberalization, Akimov was laid off but found work as a private taxi driver, and in his personal life, he began thinking seriously about God. Like many others, he first looked to Russian Orthodoxy, but also flirted with the Baptists, other evangelical Christians, and a secret, then-illegal group of Hare Krishnas.

On a trip to Denmark in 1990, he met LDS missionaries, who promised to send him a Russian-language Book of Mormon. Three months later he received notice of a package in his name, being held across the city in a special facility for foreign mail. Following a cursory interview with the KGB, he became one of few Soviet citizens ever to lay eyes upon the restored gospel.⁵ But he only laid eyes upon it – by his own admission, he brought it home and promptly forgot about it. Another three months later, he happened to pick up three Mormon missionaries in his cab, some of the first to enter the country. It emerged, to the missionaries' great surprise, that Akimov owned the book, and he agreed to attend a church meeting. Soon after this first meeting, Alexei Akimov was a Mormon, building Zion across from the Smolny Institute and under its changing flag.

³ Getmanenko, Valerii Pavlovich and Natalia Ivanovna. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1267, 20.

⁴ Citizens of Leningrad voted to change the city's name back to St. Petersburg in June of 1991, showing little concern for historians who might prefer to use a single name. In this paper, I have attempted to use whichever name was current in the particular instance I describe. I have done the same with "Soviets" and "Russians," using these terms respectively on either side of December, 1991. Over 90% of the interviewees lived the majority of their lives in what is now the Russian Federation, and I use the term as a political, rather than ethnic, designation.

⁵ The Latter-day Saints consider themselves Christian primitivists, a restoration of the apostolic early church. See section "Zion" below.

Zion, in the Mormon conception, is a unified society of the righteous, worthy of heaven but possible here on earth. Just as the Hare Krishnas seek bliss in the distant past, Mormons seek to build it in the present - Zion is the solution that Mormonism offered to the problem of the Soviet collapse. Concretely, Zion is a promise of earthly perfection and joy in this life, with much of the Church's practice geared towards its realization. Below we will see how the missionaries provided living models, and how their church provided a refuge from Russia's most vexing challenges: moral degeneracy, political and economic uncertainty, and a sense of international isolation. We will also see the appeal of Zion as contrasted with Russian Orthodoxy, or at least, with Orthodoxy as perceived by the converts. There too, the urgency of material crisis bolstered Zion's appeal.

The emphasis on joy in this life is a distinctive quality of the Mormon faith, stemming from the Mormons' idiosyncratic celebration of the Fall of Man: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy."⁶ While accepting that the Fall separated mankind from God, the Church hails it as a necessary step towards redemption – only having learned good from evil can the descendants of Adam and Eve exercise agency, choose righteousness, repent for sin, experience joy, and ultimately reunite with their Heavenly Father.⁷ Life as a Mormon thus entails a blurring of the boundary between heaven and earth, and between the present and a more favorable eternity. Inspired by this promise, these particular seekers began building Zion where they stood, convinced that earthly utopia was not buried in socialism's collapse.

That Vast Empire of Russia

In October of 1843, thirteen years after his Church's founding, Joseph Smith, Jr. instructed disciple George J. Adams "to introduce the fullness of the Gospel to the people of that vast empire" of Russia.⁸ At this time, the Church was based in Nauvoo, Illinois, its last temporary home on its exodus from New York. Smith was assassinated in 1846, and shortly thereafter, the Saints (as all members of the Church are designated) would begin their journey to the Utah Territory. Only a century later would the Church be secure enough to begin proselytizing worldwide, but by then, Russia had changed beyond recognition. The prophet's call would be fulfilled more than 150 years after it was issued, in the waning days of the Soviet Union.

LDS missionaries do not choose their mission, but rather are called to it by a committee of church elders. Until 1990, no Mormon missionary had ever been called to serve in Russia. But alongside the rest of the world, the Church watched with great interest as the Soviet bloc began to crumble, preparing as it could to realize Joseph Smith's vision. In 1987, Russell M. Nelson, an apostle of the Church (one of twelve leaders directly under the prophet) met with the chairman of the Soviet Council

⁶ 2 Nephi 2:25. This verse, incidentally, forms the basis for many mainstream Christian polemics against the Latter-day Saints.

⁷ This contrasts with virtually all mainstream Christian interpretations of the Fall. These cannot be elaborated in a footnote, but in brief, they range from seeing the Fall as a heritable corruption (original sin in Catholicism and many protestant denominations) to seeing it as not strictly heritable, but lending mankind a tendency towards sin (in Eastern Orthodoxy). Every denomination has its nuance, but most agree that the Fall introduced us to corruption, ignorance, suffering, and death. The Mormons accept this as well, but tend to see these problems as the price of admission.

⁸ *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902-1932), 5:417, as cited in Heiss, M. K., Reeves, B. D. *Russia and the Church: Chronological Excerpts from Source Documents*, Unpublished raw data, Church History Department, Salt Lake City, Utah. 2011. No representative from the early LDS Church ever made it to Russia. A more thorough history of these events can be found in Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel*, 3-5.

on Religious Affairs – a meeting unthinkable only two years before – in order to clarify the requirements for official registration.⁹ In December of 1988, Nelson hosted the Soviet ambassador to the United States at Brigham Young University and at the Church’s semiannual conference in Salt Lake City. That same month, following the catastrophic Spitak Earthquake in Armenia, the Church donated \$100,000 to relief efforts and helped establish a joint American-Armenian concrete company to assist in the recovery.¹⁰ Efforts such as these fanned rumors and speculation within the church.¹¹ All the while, missionaries in surrounding nations – particularly in Finland and Austria – sought out Soviet travelers as they vacationed or conducted business in the near abroad, teaching them and, with some luck, conducting baptisms.¹²

The Church had never attempted to slip under the Iron Curtain, but when the curtain was drawn, bright-eyed young Mormons with ties and clipboards were there at the ready. By the winter of 1989-1990, missionaries serving in Helsinki were permitted to visit Soviet believers within Soviet borders, but these were still few – by one count, five Saints in Leningrad, a dozen in Tallinn, and only one in all of Moscow.¹³ By the end of January 1990, however, the believers in Tallinn had organized the first branch (a self-governed local community), and dramatic changes in Soviet religious policy were on the horizon. In May of that year, the Soviet government passed the sweeping Law on Freedom of Religious Conscience, which guaranteed the right to propagate religious views and granted legal personhood to religious organizations (though without removing their registration requirements).¹⁴ This law followed years of liberalization from below, of the type described in previous chapters - increasing public discussion of religion and spirituality in nominally state-controlled media, combined with widespread proselytizing by foreign and domestic groups.¹⁵ In this sense, the law codified what had already developed organically with the discrediting and disappearance of state ideological control.¹⁶ Even so, the law had concrete consequences. That very month, the Church established the so-called Finland Helsinki East mission, based in Finland but operating in the Baltic States and Russia’s

⁹ Sergei Antonenko, *Mormony v Rossii: Put’ Dlinoi v Stoletie* (Moscow: OOO “Rodina,” 2007), 204. Konstantin Kharchev was chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs from 1984-1989. Antonenko describes his leadership as paradoxical – he was a lifelong Communist and evidently a committed one, but was also instrumental (and quite visible) in the party’s liberalization of the religious sphere. Registration required a petition signed by twenty members in a single administrative district. Antonenko’s book, to my knowledge, the only major monograph on the Mormons in Russia written by a non-LDS scholar, and is an essential resource for any study of the topic. See also John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ch. 5 for a good discussion of the CRA and registration requirements.

¹⁰ This effort was spearheaded by John Huntsman, Sr., prominent businessman, philanthropist, and father of John Huntsman, Jr. The younger Huntsman was governor of Utah from 2005-2009, ambassador to China from 2009-2011, and a candidate for President in 2012. See Antonenko, 205.

¹¹ Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel*, 52.

¹² One of these converts was reached on a trip to Italy, see Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel*, 47. By my count, fewer than ten Soviet citizens were baptized abroad in this manner, but they themselves recruited others within the USSR. My count may also be inadequate, as there is no single, reliable source in which to base it.

¹³ See Antonenko, 208-210, for a concise summary of the Church’s growth in this period.

¹⁴ Anderson, 160.

¹⁵ The journal *Nauka i Religia* (Science and Religion), once a means to promote scientific atheism, became a major forum for religious discussion during this period, and Antonenko, 217 analyzes an article in that journal specifically about Mormons. *Nauka i Religia* was not the only state outlet to take on these issues. Anderson, 152 describes a debate on the relation between morality and religion in *Komsomolskaia Pravda* of all places.

¹⁶ Anderson, 179 agrees that the new law, while important and hotly debated, was ultimately rendered less important by liberalization that had already happened regardless of the legal regime.

northeastern cities (Vyborg, Leningrad and Moscow).¹⁷

Its sixteen missionaries would serve now 62 members in Leningrad, 41 in Tallinn, 12 in Vyborg, and a pair in Moscow, while proselytizing on Soviet land for the first time.¹⁸ By September 1990 the Church was officially recognized in Leningrad, and by October, Moscow had full-time resident missionaries. By March of the next year, the Moscow branch had a native Russian president, and within two more years there would be fifteen branches in the city, arranged along the major metro lines. In mid-1991 the Church would claim 300 members, 600 by early 1992, and nearly 2000 by the beginning of 1993.¹⁹ By July of 1993, Moscow's Latter-day Saints, now with their own mission, would send their 140 missionaries to Saratov, Nizhnyi-Novgorod, Samara and Voronezh, and would claim a citywide membership of 750. Other major cities would see comparable growth, with the largest population in St. Petersburg. And in 1995, the Church dispatched an archivist and historian to conduct interviews with the earliest and most prominent (former) Soviet converts - this chapter is based on those interviews.²⁰ When they were conducted, there were already eight independent missions operating on former Soviet land, and a total of 2500 Saints in "that vast empire" of Russia.²¹

The converts interviewed in 1995 have much in common, no doubt through a combination of self-selection and the numbing regularity of late Soviet urban life.²² Like Alexei Akimov, nearly 80% were born in the postwar baby boom, roughly from 1945-1965. They were middle-class, urban, educated, and some had been in the Komsomol (Communist Youth League, the youth auxiliary of the CPSU), though few if any became party members.²³ Most appeared detached from national politics, skeptical of economic panaceas and, more than my other subjects, inclined towards the West. At least half, for instance, had some competence in a Western language, and many sought out Western media. 25 of the 33 interviewees were men, though a significant majority of total converts were women – the disparity is likely a consequence of Mormonism's strictly gendered access to prominent callings in the

¹⁷ Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel*, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ "Russia profile," the Cumorah Project, accessed 25 November 2013, http://cumorah.com/index.php?target=missiology_articles&story_id=212#_ftn19. The 2500 figure is estimated from a table on the same site, averaging the growth rate from 1994 and 1996 and applying this rate to the Church's membership in 1994 (1900 members).

²⁰ About fifty years earlier, and coinciding with a turn towards international proselytizing, the Mormon Church accelerated efforts to record and catalog its own growth (the Church's international turn is detailed below). In 1947, prominent Church member and Utah politician James Moyle created the James Moyle Genealogical and Historical Foundation, initially to document his own family's pioneer history. The Foundation's mission expanded over time, and in 1976, it donated funds to the Church's Historical Department to establish the James Moyle Oral History Program, a worldwide effort to record the experiences of new Church leaders and the international rank-and-file. Church archivist and historian Matt Heiss was dispatched, in 1995, to interview former Soviet believers under the aegis of the Moyle Program.

irnatural

This brief history is from an introduction included in every Moyle Program interview. Awareness of one's genealogy is a core value and favorite hobby among Mormons for several reasons. One is the centrality of family in the doctrine and practices of the Church, and the cachet associated with tracing one's family to the Church's original pioneers. Another reason may be the very structure of the Book of Mormon, which is said to be the records of a single clan, passed down through generations and spanning hundreds of years on either side of the life of Jesus Christ. Ancestry.com, now the world's largest genealogy service, was founded by Mormons and is based in Provo, Utah.

²¹ Antonenko, 210. By the time of this writing in 2013, the Church claims 21,000 adherents in the Russian Federation. It maintains an online database of worldwide membership statistics through its official news service at <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/>.

²² There were thirty interviews, three of which featured a husband and wife.

²³ Because Heiss did not explicitly ask about this, figures on Komsomol and party membership are anecdotal, but by my count, at least five were in the Komsomol while none to my knowledge joined the party.

Church. Of the eight women interviewed, three participated alongside their husbands. Before finding the Latter-day Saints, the converts collectively mingled with Russian Orthodoxy (both the official church and the church in exile), evangelical Christianity of various stripes, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Buddhists, Hare Krishnas and different beliefs we might call New Age, including astrology, ESP and reincarnation. This list should by now be familiar - it is the world of seekers, of which the Mormons were a visible but relatively minor part.²⁴

The vast majority of early Mormon converts were baptized in a pool in a Russian banya, more for lack of facilities than for cultural preference. Baptisms were usually conducted within six months of first contact with missionaries. Prior to this contact, few knew anything about Mormonism, and those who did were grossly misinformed.²⁵ Many knew the sinister and criminal Mormonism from Arthur Conan-Doyle's *Study in Scarlet* (written in 1887), others knew a radical polygamous Mormonism from whispers and conventional wisdom, still more were vaguely aware of a backwards, isolated Mormonism in the American West – maybe hyper-capitalist, maybe oppressive of women, maybe Christian – from Soviet encyclopedias. A Russian scholar of religion located official Soviet sources that implicate Mormons in American imperialism and CIA spying, but unlike with the Hare Krishnas, such claims do not seem to have entered the public consciousness.²⁶ On the whole, the Church was a non-entity – in many cases an advantage, at least over Orthodoxy.²⁷

Converts and Missionaries

The reasons why these Russians became Latter-day Saints are varied and complex, and revealing them is the primary goal of this chapter. But one factor is paramount in explaining why the Church initially caught their attention, and it indicates much about the needs and anxieties of the period. The majority of converts were first drawn to the missionaries not for any spiritual claim they made, but for the simple reason that they were good kids.

LDS missionaries adhere to a strict code of dress and grooming, as their physical appearance is an early and integral part of their message. Between their polished shoes and closely cropped hair, men are to wear ironed suits and ties in conservative colors and shave clean each day. Women are allowed more color and variety, but long skirts or dresses must project modesty and nothing can be worn that “distracts from the message.”²⁸ The vast majority of missionaries are between the ages of 18 and 22, and their age is itself an advertisement for the Church. The ambassadors of the Church are to be youthful, calm, confident, knowledgeable, driven, optimistic, moral, trustworthy, clean-cut, worldly and fluent in the local tongue; all these qualities are held out as both the products and the promise of faith. For Vasilii Osipenko, it was just “the way they related to us,” something “in their eyes even.”²⁹ He converted in 1992, with his parents' support after they too were wowed by the missionaries. Irina

²⁴ For a good summary of the liberalization of Soviet religious policy in this period, see Anderson, Ch 6.

²⁵ At least seven of the thirty-three had never heard the word ‘Mormon,’ and as many knew Mormons only from Conan-Doyle. As many remembered various broad stereotypes or vague conceptions, but none had anything beyond a cursory familiarity.

²⁶ Antonenko, 199.

²⁷ The place of Orthodoxy in this story is explored below; see section “Zion and the Orthodox Church”

²⁸ “Dress and Grooming for Missionaries,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints official website, accessed 2 December 2013, <https://www.lds.org/callings/missionary/dress-grooming>.

²⁹ Osipenko, Vasilii Leonidovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1275, 3.

Chipkus, a convert and aeronautical engineer from Leningrad, described “these enormous, tall young people... the first time we were drawn to the missionaries... we felt like there was some kind of protection. That just standing next to them, you felt calm and well.” Irina Lyudogovskaia, a former Komsomol leader and activist in Soviet women’s organizations, met missionaries who had moved in next door to her. “I will tell you absolutely sincerely that I was impressed by personalities, first,” she insisted, “not by what was discussed, but by the personalities of the missionaries.” She went on to describe their brilliance, and importantly for her, their perceived “family values.” All of the interviewees testified that, before their conversion, Mormon missionaries struck them favorably at the personal and emotional level. This feeling was attributed by interviewees to the missionaries’ faith, a notion encouraged by the faithful. And why were these particular qualities so appealing? The answer reveals much about the state of Russia in this period.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, it fell particularly hard on its youth. From the later era of Gorbachev’s reforms through most of the 1990s, chronic and growing youth unemployment forced many of Russia’s young onto the streets.³⁰ There, they could pick from any number of poisons, with alcohol, tobacco, narcotics, pornography and petty crime among the most tempting. Film and other artistic production took on increasingly dark hues, reflecting the real hopelessness and, often, the violence of post-Soviet urban life. Skinheads and other radical political movements thrived, pitting new recruits against new scapegoats, while apocalyptic sects imbued the chaos with cosmic significance (as examined in the next chapter). In describing the bleak landscape for young Russians, Moscow district president and early convert Sergei Martinov conflated these last two threats:

[The young] still have little attachment to this life.... Maybe they’ll follow Che Guevara, or maybe Jesus Christ, I don’t know whom they’ll follow. But they’re ready to sacrifice their lives. And in that moment people arrive from these terrible religions like the “Great White Brotherhood” in Russia or Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, and they say “yes, walk away from it all, leave your family, you’ll find a new one. There you’ll have your great leader, who’ll tell you to die for him, and you can die. Or maybe you’ll become such a leader, who will say to others, “Go, die for me.” It’s fascism.³¹

To adults who not long ago “knew whom to follow,” this state of the culture – and especially the young – was deeply disturbing. Irina Lyudogovskaia, as noted above, had risen through the ranks of the Komsomol, where even hard work and study were not enough to pass muster. In better times, good *komsomoltsy* joined drama groups and took excursions to museums, and most importantly, “lived correctly” - this meant militating against “hooliganish-type activities such as drinking, smoking, dancing or religious observance.”³² Such were the ideals of Mormon missionaries, give or take one. Russia needed kids like these. It is difficult to overstate the contrast that these Mormon missionaries

³⁰ “Millennium Development Goals Indicators,” accessed 9 December 2013, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/SeriesDetail.aspx?srid=597>. The UN estimated 13% youth unemployment in 1992, rising to nearly 27% by 1998.

³¹ Martinov, Sergei Petrovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1269, 9. The Great White Brotherhood and Aum Shinrikyo were two of many apocalyptic millenarian sects that arose during this period, though Aum Shinrikyo was unusual in its Japanese origins. Still, it garnered a substantial following in Russia (second only to its following in Japan), and along with other sects of this type, it caused great alarm among the public and in the press. Martinov later refers to two youths he knew who joined (or were kidnapped by) the Great White Brotherhood and drugged, and who returned psychologically traumatized. See page 43 below for more on such sects and the anticult movement initiated by the Orthodox Church.

³² Anne E. Gorsuch “Soviet Youth and the Politics of Popular Culture during NEP,” *Social History* 17, no. 2 (May 1, 1992): 189–201, 191.

represented, or their appeal to the anxious adults, many of them young parents, who looked to them for help. It is no surprise that the missionaries had the personal impact that they did - just as the Church intended, they appeared as ambassadors of Zion in post-Soviet Babylon.

Zion

In the Mormon tradition, Zion is not an abstraction.³³ It is an ideal, to be sure, but has existed before and will again. The concept is introduced in the Pearl of Great Price, one of four books in the Mormon scriptural canon: “And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them.”³⁴ In the scriptures, Noah’s great grandfather Enoch founds an earthly city populated by the descendants of Adam, and so righteous that it is ultimately raised into heaven. Based on this hopeful example, Mormons do not clearly demarcate the boundaries of the Heavenly Kingdom, and hold out the possibility of Zion to all believers in this world as well as the next. According to LDS doctrine, this only became possible in recent (non-biblical, latter) days, when the prophet Joseph Smith restored the apostolic early church in upstate New York in the 1820s. From the restoration onwards, the Saints have sought to emulate the City of Enoch, to rebuild Zion on Earth, so that the faithful might once again ascend to heaven. The Doctrine and Covenants, another book in the canon, prescribes towards this end a latter-day “United Order,” a communal allotment of property to “every man according to his family, according to his circumstances and his wants and needs,” to be determined by the priesthood of the Church.³⁵ The City of Enoch and the United Order are two visions of the same place, towards which Mormons, in modified form, still strive.

In no uncertain terms, scripture calls upon Mormons to establish the Order as “an everlasting order... for the salvation of men until I come,” words that were from the beginning interpreted literally.³⁶ In 1831, Joseph Smith attempted to build the United Order in Missouri, and upon its failure and following the Mormon exodus to Utah, Brigham Young organized several other, marginally more successful communes.³⁷ Though the mainstream church eventually abandoned these projects, the collectivism of the nineteenth century caused no small discomfort for church leadership during the Cold War.³⁸ Although the United Order is no longer interpreted as a blueprint (except by select

³³ Zion has several distinct meanings to Mormons, and is at once an historical place, a destination, a lifestyle, and a state of mind. A good resource on Mormon eschatology and soteriology is Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

³⁴ Moses 7:18. The Book of Moses is composed largely of Joseph Smith’s revision (or as the Church would have it, revised translation) of the Book of Genesis. It is found in the Pearl of Great Price, one of the four major scriptures in the Mormon canon alongside the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Bible.

³⁵ Doctrine and Covenants 51:3. The Doctrine and Covenants is a collection of revelations on various topics, dictated primarily by the prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., and published in 1835 (after Smith’s movement had already taken shape and migrated to Ohio). The book will be henceforth be abbreviated “D&C.”

³⁶ D&C 104:1

³⁷ Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005). The history of these projects is a complex one, and falls outside the scope of this paper. Multiple attempts were made at building Zion during the Church’s long exodus from New York (most notably in Nauvoo, IL and in Independence, MO) and upon its arrival to Utah, and all were hampered by some combination of persecution by outsiders, rifts within the membership and leadership, and financial troubles

³⁸ Antonenko, 193.

fundamentalist groups), utopian society on earth was and remains a central aim of the Church.³⁹ ⁴⁰In place of a centralized communalist order, the Church now locates the City of Enoch anywhere where Saints gather.

The early Mormons, not unlike Lenin's Bolsheviks holed up in the Smolny institute, had both a universal vision and a siege mentality. Gathering the Saints together to build Zion, first in Nauvoo, Illinois, then in the desert by the Great Salt Lake, was the Church's central mission. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, with the Church's persecution largely behind it and its homeland secure, the conception of Zion shifted from a single destination to a global ideal. Mormons around the world were to build Zion where they stood.⁴¹ By replicating Utah's New Jerusalem in branches worldwide, all Saints were promised access to Zion, if only they would build it and believe in it.

By 1991, the LDS Church was a massive and disciplined worldwide organization, expanding with particular vigor into the newly opened Eastern Bloc. In a speech in January 1991 – the same month Alexei Akimov was baptized – Church President Ezra Taft Benson described Zion as a massive tent, staked to the ground in countries and cities worldwide.⁴² In common usage, a “stake of Zion” is a local administrative division of the Church.⁴³ The stakes, he continued, are meant to serve four purposes: first, to “unify and perfect the members” who live in a particular geographic area and “[extend] to them the Church programs, the ordinances, and gospel instruction.” Second, “the members of the stakes are to be models, or standards, of righteousness.” Third, reflecting perhaps the Church's history of persecution, “stakes are to be a defense” – if the covenants are kept, the stake “become[s] a protection from error, evil, or calamity.” And finally, “the stakes are a refuge from the storm to be poured out over earth.” In this rendition, one can see both Mormonism's staid conservatism and its utopian and millenarian bent.

Zion was a world quite unlike Russia in 1991. “Models of righteousness” were distinctly lacking at that time, but the new Russian stakes promised clean living and an antidote to obscenity. The extension of the Church's programs – its highly developed charity apparatus and systems of mutual

³⁹ Regarding the Church's discomfort with the legacy of the United Order, counselors to the First Presidency J. Reuben Clark and David McKay (who himself became President in 1951) publicly clarified the Church's stance on private property, free will, and other God-given rights threatened by communism in 1942. See James R. Clark, “Message of the First Presidency,” *Liabona*, Volume 6, 148-163, April 6, 1942. Accessed 2 December 2013. <http://emp.byui.edu/marrottr/War%20FirstPres%20Apr1942.htm>. This would become a pattern throughout the Cold War, with a succession of prophets insisting that private property was always central to the United Order, and that although believers were to release their property to God, He promised to allot it back, to be kept under one's own private “stewardship.” This satisfied the Mormons more than their opponents. For a later instance, see Ezra Taft Benson, “A Witness and a Warning,” *Ensign*, November 1979.

⁴⁰ Antonenko, 10-11 also describes building Zion on Earth as central to Mormon ideology, and in his telling, a largely successful endeavor.

⁴¹ This shift is usually identified with the presidency of David O. McKay, who led the Church from 1951 to his death in 1970. As President and in various leadership roles beforehand, he stressed missionary work and coined the oft-repeated slogan “every member a missionary.” The first stakes outside the United States were established during his presidency. From “David O. McKay, 9th President of the Church,” accessed 7 December 2013, <http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/presidents/controllers/potcController.jsp?leader=9&topic=facts>.

⁴² Ezra Taft Benson, “Strengthen Thy Stakes!” First Presidency Message to the stakes of the Church, January 1991. <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1991/01/strengthen-thy-stakes>. The ecclesiastical title of the President of the Church is “Prophet, Seer and Revelator,” but for the purposes of this paper I will use simply President or Prophet. See the following note for explanation of the speech's title.

⁴³ This metaphor is drawn from the Old Testament, Isaiah 54:2 – “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.”

assistance and support for members – was desperately needed, and for many sealed their faith. The vaunted status of the stakes themselves offered a global community and sense of brotherhood with Mormons beyond Russia’s borders, at a time when fellow countrymen had ceased to be comrades. And finally, to not only provide protection on the day of the deluge, but to defend, unify and perfect the members in the present, was a promise that few others (including the Russian Orthodox Church) were making.

For each of these reasons, the ideal of Zion was the motive force of Mormonism’s post-Soviet expansion. It is at once a goal and a promise, a self-propelling mixture of faith and incentive that helps explain the Church’s phenomenal growth.⁴⁴

Models of Righteousness

According to Church tradition, Joseph Smith was troubled by the use of tobacco among the early Saints during meetings, and inquired of God what could be done. In Kirtland, Ohio in 1833, the prophet shared the resulting revelation, which came to be known as the Word of Wisdom.⁴⁵ It begins:

A Word of Wisdom, for the benefit of the council of high priests, assembled in Kirtland, and the church, and also the saints in Zion ...
Given for a principle with promise, adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints, who are or can be called saints.⁴⁶

The Word of Wisdom promises Mormons intellectual and moral, if not literary, clarity - what follows this verse is the famed health code of the Latter-day Saints, which renounces alcohol, tobacco, tea and coffee.⁴⁷ “A principle with promise” might well encapsulate the entire missionary apparatus, with the Word of Wisdom as the principle and the missionaries as the promise. To adopt their faith is to adopt their lifestyle and vice versa. In the persons of the missionaries, the Church provided a model and a plan for rejecting the rapidly degrading values of urban Russian society. One early convert, Mikhail Roze stated the problem quite clearly:

“[Before *glasnost*] we had our own system of values. There were some defined rules, moral rules, rules of conduct and so forth. With the arrival of Gorbachev, with the onset of *glasnost*, that system was destroyed and nothing new replaced it. People were at a crossroads, and it was particularly hard for the elderly and the young. ... It was very difficult to explain to a child what’s good and what’s bad. You say one thing, and they go out on the street,

⁴⁴ The Church grew from an original six members in 1830 to one million by 1947. From 1947, as the Church began to emphasize international expansion and missionary work, membership grew to two million in 1963, and to over 15 million by 2012, with sustained growth above the rate of global population increase in every decade. See “Growth of the Church,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed 2 December 2013, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/topic/church-growth>.

⁴⁵ The Church’s online scriptures include plain-speech summaries as well as historical context. Accessed 10 December 2013, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/89.5-21?lang=eng>

⁴⁶ D&C 89:1 and 89:3-4

⁴⁷ All conversions entail some element of renunciation, whether it be as a test of faith or a public display. See Harriet Whitehead, *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect*, Anthropology of Contemporary Issues, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). The first half is a theoretical treatment of renunciation as a uniting theme of all conversions, and the second half uses the Church of Scientology as a case study. See also John Lofland and Norman Skonovd. “Conversion Motifs.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (December 1, 1981): 373–385, for one typology of conversions.

and all around them they see the opposite."⁴⁸

He then added, "at this moment, people turned to God." Roze was baptized a Mormon with his wife in mid-November 1991, roughly a month before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He made the comments above in 1995, and for those four years it was indeed rough "out on the street." Between 1992 and 1993, male life expectancy in Russia fell by three years (from 62 to 59), almost entirely due to mortality among the young and middle-aged.⁴⁹ For comparison, American males in 1993 could have expected to live just over 72 years.⁵⁰ This change in Russia was unprecedented anywhere in the world in peacetime.⁵¹ In 1995 (the year Roze was interviewed), one study showed 70%-80% of Russian men ages 20-55 and 50%-60% of women ages 20-50 to drink regularly, with 5%-10% in all age groups drinking 100 grams of vodka (or its equivalent) daily. A Gallup poll in the United States, while not asking exactly the same questions, showed that in 1996 only 54% of Americans had had a drink within the last week, and that 73% were drinking wine or beer rather than hard liquor.⁵² It is worth noting that the Russian numbers probably skew low, as the heaviest drinkers were unlikely to participate.⁵³ Trends were similar regarding drugs – the abuse of narcotics rose steadily from the Gorbachev era into the 1990s, wreaking particular havoc on the youth. In 1988, 80% of drug addicts registered as such by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) were under the age of 30.⁵⁴ A survey taken in Moscow that year showed that 6% of all students between the ages of 14 and 16 had tried narcotics, and from 1988 drug use increased steadily through the 1990s. By 1995, the number of drug users in Russia was estimated at two million, with 90% of addicts going untreated.⁵⁵ This is compared to 50,000 registered drug users in 1975.⁵⁶ These disturbing trends, not only visible "out on the street" but relentlessly broadcast by a newly liberalized and shamelessly sensationalist news media, could not but bolster the image of a Mormon missionary. Like Christ among the lepers, the missionaries offered not a cure, but a promise – faith would make them well.⁵⁷ And for many of those who did convert, the rejection of

⁴⁸ Roze, Mikhail Viktorovich and Marina Nikolaevna. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1281, 5-6.

⁴⁹ The causes and statistics are elaborated in full in this dissertation's introduction, but in brief, it is a combination of cardiovascular disease brought on by anxiety, and so-called external causes of death, including homicide, suicide and accidental poisoning.

⁵⁰ This figure is from the National Center of Health Statistics, a department of the CDC. Available online, accessed 10 December 2013 at <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0005148.html>

⁵¹ Leon, D., Chenet, L., Shkolnikov, V.M. *et al.* "Huge Variation in Russian Mortality Rates 1984-1994: Artifact, Alcohol or What?" *Lancet* 350: 383-388 (1997), cited in Martin McKee, "Alcohol in Russia," *Alcohol and Alcoholism* 34, no. 6 (November 1, 1999): 824-829, 824.

⁵² Frank Newport, "U.S. Drinking Rate Edges Up Slightly to 25-year High," *Gallup*, 30 July 2010, accessed 10 December 2013 at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/141656/Drinking-Rate-Edges-Slightly-Year-High.aspx>. The historical data can be found at the bottom of the page, linked to at http://www.gallup.com/poll/File/141671/Alcohol_July_30_2010.pdf

⁵³ Zohoori, N. "Monitoring Health Conditions in the Russian Federation: The Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey, 1992-95. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, cited in McKee, 828.

⁵⁴ Kimberly C. Neuhauser, "The Market for Illegal Drugs in the Soviet Union in the Late 1980s" no. Paper #23. Berkeley-Duke Occasional Papers on the Second Economy in the USSR (January 1990), 28.

⁵⁵ Data from the Library of Congress country studies, 1996. Accessed 3 December 2013 at [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+ru0212\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+ru0212)).

⁵⁶ These figures are very hard to locate and even harder to confirm, and 50,000 registered users leaves open the question of how many kept it to themselves. Still, drug use was almost wholly invisible when it did exist in the Soviet Union, and the collapse opened routes for the drug trade that had been under strict control during the Soviet era (mostly from Afghanistan, the Central Asian republics and through the Caucasus). The 50,000 figure comes from Min'kovskii, G., *et al.*, *Narkotizm: profilaktika i strategii bor'by*, *Aktualnye Voprosy Bor'by s Prestupnost'yu v Rossii i za Rubezhom*, issue 2, Moscow, 1999.

⁵⁷ Luke 17:11-19.

alcohol, tobacco and tea would be both their most difficult struggle, and the most visible marker of that faith.

The Word of Wisdom promises divine protection in return for clean living. The faithful are to eat meat only sparingly, avoid tobacco, and, as even many converts bemoaned, reject both “strong” and “hot” drinks.⁵⁸ Adherence to the Word of Wisdom is a prerequisite for missionary service and other callings in the Church, for baptism (though this rule seems flexible in the documents), and for access to the temples (as distinct from the churches, which anybody can attend). Most consequentially, the scriptures promise strict adherents “that the destroying angel shall pass by them, as the children of Israel, and not slay them.”

In Russia at this time, the destroying angel took many forms, but rejecting “strong” drink was often the first and most difficult leap for Soviet (then Russian) converts. Not surprisingly, the Church recognized the link between the soul and the liver, even targeting and converting the founder of Moscow’s Alcoholics Anonymous before there was an official mission in the city.⁵⁹ Two of the members interviewed in 1995 found the Church through AA, and they are presumably not unique. The Church also had its difficulties, of course - several members attribute poor retention rates among men primarily to alcohol, and the shame associated with failing to stay clean.⁶⁰

Of all the men interviewed, a slim majority cited quitting alcohol and tobacco as the most difficult change to accept. Common among these converts is a sense that drinking is a mark of “normal” Russian men. Yuri Terebenin, possibly the first Soviet citizen (and certainly the first Leningrader) to be baptized a Mormon, recalled leading “a regular life,” drinking and smoking like “a normal Russian man” during his first discussions with missionaries.⁶¹ In a slight breach of protocol, it appears that the missionaries confirmed him, in English, and only upon later translation by his wife did he learn that he was challenged to quit drinking and smoking. He did in time, and he and his wife served as the anchor family for the Church’s expansion in St. Petersburg. Boris Mokhov, an early convert (1991) and eventual president of a district (comprising many distinct branches), also reflected on alcohol as his biggest obstacle to faith. He recalled:

Of course, like a lot of Russian men, in my previous life, before the Church, I drank liquor. And it’s a tradition – birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, meeting friends or acquaintances... you drink wine, champagne, cognac, vodka, beer, everything... I had a habit of relaxing with the help of alcohol.... I thought, how could I get by without

⁵⁸ The Word of Wisdom is D&C 89:5-21. It is worth noting that tobacco is tolerated, but only as medicine for sick cattle, and then only when used “with judgment and skill.” Prominent Mormons who led the expansion into the USSR all cite the Word of Wisdom as a significant obstacle for the region, for instance in Howard Biddulph, *The Morning Breaks: Stories of Conversion and Faith in the Former Soviet Union*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1996), ch. 11. Biddulph was the first president of the Ukraine Kiev mission.

⁵⁹ Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel*, 46. Mormons working in the US embassy converted Galina Goncharova in 1989.

⁶⁰ Chipkus, Vladislav Anatolevich and Irina Nikolaevna. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1277, 21. Interviewees posited several other theories – that women are more concerned with family, that women are inherently closer to God or, maybe most plausibly, that men during this period were forced to work seven days a week, either at their jobs or in the gardens at their dachas, and thus could not observe the Sabbath or go to church services. Assessing the veracity of these claims falls outside the scope of this paper, but alcohol is cited more frequently than other causes. Statistics are also speculative or anecdotal, but one member in Moscow, Yuri Soushilin, estimated that in 1995, only 20-30% of churchgoers in his branch were men. See Soushilin, Yuri Alexandrovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1264, 9.

⁶¹ Terebenin, Yuri Stanislavovich and Liudmila Semionovna. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1268, page beginning with “yes, Neuenschwander.”

it?⁶²

Strong drink, though always a feature of Russian life, had inundated late Soviet society and seemed to be drowning the new Russia. The Word of Wisdom was a life raft, and perhaps Mormonism's single strongest claim to truth - if faith could yield sobriety, one would be foolish not to believe.

If abandoning "strong" drinks took faith, at least the rewards were readily visible. The same could not be said for "hot" ones. Because tea posed no obvious threat to moral or physical health, its rejection was a trying ordeal for new believers. It is difficult to overstate the ritual and social importance of tea in Russian society – suffice it to say that, for new Mormons, it seems evenly matched against direct revelation from God. In his first encounter with Mormons, Anatolii Sitonin offered tea to visiting missionaries, who dutifully refused (but, wisely, did not immediately explain why). This struck him as bizarre, and probably not a little impolite.⁶³ Nearly all converts, when asked about the challenges they faced, mention tea. Some admitted to lapses while others seemed to succeed, but then only on faith. Andrei Lokshin, a later convert and translator for the Church, was one of the latter – he seemed to consider the prohibition on tea something of a sacred mystery:

The Word of Wisdom... honestly, even now I can't convince myself that tea is harmful. I take it on faith, but on reason, not so much. All the Chinese that live well into old age, they drink tea by the liter, and look great at that.⁶⁴

Though this would appear to be light criticism - to renounce tea on faith, but question the reason - it is in fact no such thing. In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Alma the Younger speaks on the nature of faith:

Yea, there are many who do say: If thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe.
Now I ask, is this faith? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for if a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he knoweth it.⁶⁵

In other words, to explicitly demonstrate the dangers of tea would be too easy - the leap of faith is itself the point.

This, of course, is an ideal. In practice, especially as concerns alcohol, converts are given the next best thing to a "surety" – the sober and bright-eyed missionaries as living models. The missionaries, for their part, do not shy from this line of argument. The ready conflation of faith, works and lifestyle is central to Mormon proselytizing and practice, and it is this quality that so resonated with those who both sought faith and needed good works. If only one has faith as the missionaries do, then Zion can be built on earth; then it will stand as testament to the truth of their faith.

Protection from Evil, Error or Calamity

This same logic, applied above to the individual, also extends to the local Mormon community - faith and good works come hand in hand. To believe as a Mormon is to act as one, and the community promises self-governance and economic self-sufficiency for the faithful. By fulfilling this promise in

⁶² Mokhov, Boris Nikolaevich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1268, 6.

⁶³ Sitonin, Anatolii L'vovich. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1279, 5.

⁶⁴ Lokshin, Andrei Aleksandrovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1271, 4.

⁶⁵ Alma 32:17-18

Russia, largely through members' own initiative, the stakes were strengthened and the community reoriented towards itself.

The relationship between faith and works is a central ambiguity of Christian thought, but Mormonism's position is clear. A centrally important verse reads: "For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do."⁶⁶ Ezra Taft Benson, who led the Church during the expansion into Russia, clarified this last phrase in a 1988 article in *Liahona*, the Church's official international magazine. "After all we can do" entails

...living [God's] commandments ... loving our fellow men and praying for those who regard us as their adversary. It means clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and giving 'succor [to] those who stand in need of our succor.'⁶⁷

Caring for one's community is a prerequisite to salvation. This precept in itself is not unique of course, but the Mormons distinguish themselves by the seriousness with which they take charity and building supportive networks. While the Church emphasizes faith as paramount to material well-being, it also promotes the idea that the two go hand-in-hand, and ushers its resources to ensure that this is the case. While this mechanism is an effective tool for recruitment, it should not be interpreted as a cynical grab for converts. Rather, the Church's care for its own is ingrained deep in its doctrine, following logically from the near-total conflation of faith and works. Building Zion is part and parcel of believing in it.

Within the stakes, this creates a sense of independence from government and of economic self-sufficiency. It fosters in local Mormon communities an apolitical and communalist ethic, which held particular appeal for Russian converts in the early 1990s. At that time, a chaotic national politics and cold economic reason gave little succor to those who stood in need.

In the interviews, this tendency seems clearest when national politics were at their most chaotic - during the August, 1991 coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. Interviewees were asked to recall their reactions to the coup, but attribute little meaning to it, at least in retrospect. Viachislav Efimov, the first Russian to be called as a mission president for the Latter-day Saints, said he took it "absolutely calmly." He was already a Mormon at the time.

...we don't get mixed up in politics... It's in the revelations of Joseph Smith, when he spoke of the politics of the country. I read that [at the time of the coup], and I remembered all the political variations we've had in our country. So we don't need to think about it, probably. We accept what is, and we always pray that the Lord will bestow reason on the politicians of Russia. Just that.⁶⁸

Dmitri Marchenko would not convert until 1993, and during the events of August 1991 stood with defiant citizens outside the Supreme Soviet, the flashpoint of the coup. But political activism would fade from his life rather quickly, and the views he expressed in 1995 would likely surprise the man who personally watched Boris Yeltsin climb atop a tank and address the people.⁶⁹ To him, the Church had supplanted politics and economics as the central force for change in the world:

⁶⁶ 2 Nephi 25:23. 2 Nephi is the second book in the Book of Mormon.

⁶⁷ Ezra Taft Benson, "Redemption through Jesus Christ after All We Can Do," *Liahona*, December 1988. <https://www.lds.org/liahona/1988/12/redemption-through-jesus-christ-after-all-we-can-do?lang=eng>. The last line, about giving succor, is a reference to another scripture in the Book of Mormon, Mosiah 4:16.

⁶⁸ Efimov, Viachislav Ivanovich and Galina Petrovna. South Jordan, Utah, June 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1355, 13.

⁶⁹ Interestingly, Biddulph, ch. 8 describes an officer of the Soviet army who refused to fire on the crowds that day in August, and later joined the Latter-day Saints and became a bishop.

I have hope. It appeared when I was baptized. And of course, that hope is the gospel. . . . In it we learn that yes, there really will be God's kingdom on earth. . . . Only when people understand that neither economics nor politics change anything . . . so long as people don't come to Christ, nothing will change. Nothing will change, because you cannot do good with evil designs in your heart. But I see how the Church changes people. So I have hope.⁷⁰

The Latter-day Saints have always been on the periphery of formal politics, whether by doctrine or by circumstance.⁷¹ Although Joseph Smith did run for President (and seemed to advocate a strong federal government), that episode stands as a deviation from the United Order ideal of self-governance and economic self-sufficiency that influences the Church to this day.⁷² The Church more often sees itself as existing on the margins, with political and economic independence among its highest (and decidedly utopian) ideals. From this perspective, Efimov's indifference to and Marchenko's skepticism of political and economic solutions reflects a renunciation of the historical moment in which they converted, while suggesting Mormonism's particular appeal within it. This should recall the Hare Krishnas of the last chapter, and their particular route out of history - in both cases, politics and economics came to appear as superficial, precisely as more lives became more exposed to their vicissitudes.

In the six years between the Church's entry into Russia and the 1995 interviews, turmoil was the norm. Politics and economics were bound together and spiraling downward. Some of the converts bemoaned self-interested politicians, while others granted them good intentions, but not tangible accomplishments.⁷³ Ultimately the question was irrelevant - the local stake of Zion, to borrow from Ezra Taft Benson, offered protection whether it be "from error, evil or calamity."⁷⁴

Conversion brings with it the benefits of communities and networks, and indeed, these are quite often a primary draw.⁷⁵ In the Mormon case, converts frequently refer to the Church as an extended family (the preferred metaphor of the Church and its members), composed of different people but united under God, offering protection and support for members.⁷⁶ But more than simple moral support or social ties, the Church strives for material self-sufficiency and a certain redistribution of

⁷⁰ Marchenko, Dmitri Vladislavovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1261, 16.

⁷¹ Antonenko, 10 describes the Church as always somewhat out of line with American society, stemming from the pioneer days.

⁷² Bushman, 515.

⁷³ For a less sympathetic take on Yeltsin and company, see Marchenko, Dmitri Vladislavovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1261, 15. Another convert, Sergei Martinov, grants the good intentions of politicians, but accepts that they can't be standard-bearers for everybody and inevitably fall short of Christ's example. Martinov, Sergei Petrovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1269, 11.

⁷⁴ Taft Benson, "Strengthen Thy Stakes!"

⁷⁵ The most complete (and insightful) treatment of the role of supportive communities in post-Soviet conversions is in Catherine Wanner, "Advocating New Moralities: Conversion to Evangelicalism in Ukraine," *Religion, State and Society* 31, no. 3 (n.d.): 273-87. Wanner shows that new communities in which believers can relate to one another - and which can provide tangible support - are particularly attractive. She focuses on evangelical communities in Ukraine, and stresses the social and material benefits of membership. See also Mark D. Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, eds. *Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies*, (Washington, D.C.: Bloomington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Indiana University Press, 2008). This is a collection of papers from a 2006 conference on religion in post-Soviet space, and community is arguably the pervasive theme through many of the essays. Antonenko makes a similar (if less developed) case specifically for the Mormons, see Antonenko, 219.

⁷⁶ See Akhrameev, Alexander Viktorovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1266, 5. Akhrameev says "before entering the Church, I was in an entirely different circle. . . . Now, we're all such different people, but in one family." He also insists that politics is seldom discussed inside the branch (6). Several others refer to the Church as being a single, large family.

resources (though far less radical than under the United Order). This does not come without considerable sacrifice from members. Tithing is expected of all, but in excess of this, missions are to be self-funded by the missionaries (in other words, by their home communities), and church callings – most jobs within the Church, outside the most prominent or centrally important – are performed on a volunteer basis. As evidenced in Marchenko’s quotation above, such sacrifice by these early Russian Mormons was accompanied by a shift in values. At a time when self-interest reigned, Mormonism at once offered liberation from and satisfaction of material needs. This curious balancing act comes across in statements by members, who emphasize faith over tangible gains, while assuring themselves (and the interviewer) that one follows the other. Anatolii Sitonin, who became a district president within a year of converting, seemed to pity those seeking material gain:

A lot of people come to the Church, in the hope that the Church will help them all the time. In a material sense, Americans, dollars... banking on that. But those who come with such thoughts, it’s tough for them. Yes, it’s written in the Book of Mormon that we are all together, ought to help one another, but what’s the very first kind of help? It’s to support the spirit! Support a person on that narrow and difficult path.

But immediately after, he suggested that faith promises material security:

Life has gotten a bit harder [in 1995]. A bit harder. These problems of daily life, of work, when people weigh going and making some money against working in the Church, of course they more often choose money. Some choose this, because they need to feed their family. But again, this means a deficit of faith. ... In the Book of Mormon it’s clearly stated: if you turn, with faith, to our heavenly Father, he will always help.⁷⁷

He does go on to state clearly that God will not give you money. But to recall the scripture cited above, eternal salvation comes “after all we can do.” The redistribution of Church funds, within communities or across local or international borders, falls under this mandate. Though the Church does not disclose its finances, it certainly had and has a robust revenue stream.⁷⁸ In Russia, there was much that it could do.

The Church’s central mechanism for charity and support for members is the Relief Society, a women’s auxiliary within the Church’s administrative structure. Galina Goncharova, the first convert to the Church in Moscow and a former Komsomol leader, cites child care, mutual aid, mutual education, and the raising of women’s consciousness as the central functions of the organization.⁷⁹ Most of the women interviewed were active in the Relief Society, and unsurprisingly, the Society provided an invaluable service for many of the Church’s members in the early 1990s. It cooked and delivered meals, provided clothing for children, and hosted dinners for members, often combining these with lessons in the gospel. In sum, the Church filled many roles previously expected of the national and city government. Goncharova’s description is a telling one:

Another big help is that the Relief Society can be called to give any help to people who need it, even material help. We really do have the capacity to help people materially. That’s also very important, although maybe, that

⁷⁷ Sitonin, Anatolii L’vovich. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1279, 14.

⁷⁸ In 1997, Time Magazine sparked a small scandal by valuing the Church’s assets around \$30 billion; see David Van Biema, “Kingdom Come,” *Time Magazine*, August 4, 1997. The President of the Church called these figures “grossly exaggerated” in a response in the Church magazine *Ensign*, Hinckley, Gordon B., “Latter-Day Saints in Very Deed,” *Ensign*, November 1997.

⁷⁹ Sitonin, Anatolii L’vovich. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1279, 5. These functions, of course, might remind her of her Komsomol days.

isn't the most important question in our lives, as we all know.⁸⁰

Irina Maximova, baptized in 1990, was also a Komsomol activist and taught Marxist-Leninist ideology in her pre-Mormon life. She located a precursor to the Relief Society in the Red Cross during the Russian Civil War, but placed more emphasis on the intangible.

To start, the word “relief” (translated as *miloserdie*, “mercy”) for us has associations with the “sisters of mercy” from the Civil War. ... when Russian women went to the front and helped wounded soldiers. ... There is no war now. We don't really need to pull soldiers from the front and help them. ... [now] they aren't wounded, but he has, let's say, spiritual trauma.⁸¹

She went on to describe the moral and spiritual support that the Society aims to provide, alongside (but more important than) material help. Indeed, most descriptions of the society fall somewhere on a spectrum from stressing tangible, material benefits to faith as liberation from such concerns. Certainly, the society (and the Church generally) serves both functions, and members draw little distinction between them.⁸² Convert Vladimir Batianov, another veteran of the Komsomol, explained it as an inversion of Marxist-Leninist logic:

We were atheists, they taught us constantly, throughout our whole childhood, that there is no God, that consciousness follows material well-being. ... and it turns out, it's just the opposite. What people knew for centuries, for millennia they believed, that was the real truth.⁸³

The real truth is somewhere in between. Consciousness and material wellbeing proved mutually reinforcing, and for the converts, this seemingly delicate balance was in actuality a firm anchor for their new community.

To Unify the Members

From these small but firm stakes, holding down the furthest corners of their Church's expanding tent, the Russian Mormons found respite from yet another ill of their era – a pervasive sense of international isolation. Once inside, they found that Zion had no borders.

In a scripture near to the hearts of missionaries, the Saints are ordered from on high to “go forth among all nations,” declaiming the gospel to all who will listen:

Wherefore, for this cause I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on high; And from thence, whosoever I will shall go forth among all nations, and it shall be told them what they shall do; for I have a great work laid up in store, for Israel shall be saved... and no power shall stay my hand.⁸⁴

Such a call is hardly unique to Mormonism, but that peculiar reference to the Ohio River points to a uniquely Mormon paradox: how does the Church reconcile its universal ambitions (and successes)

⁸⁰ Goncharova, Galina Ivanovna. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1260, 15-18.

⁸¹ Maximova, Irina Yur'evna. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1285, 16-17.

⁸² It is worth noting that several of those interviewed were employed by the Church, most commonly as translators, but also in coordinating shipments from Europe and other administrative tasks. It is unclear from the interviews if administrators were paid, but several former missionaries have affirmed to the author that translators likely were.

⁸³ Batianov, Vladimir Fedorovich. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1283, 15.

⁸⁴ D&C 38:32-33.

with history and scriptures that are so distinctly, even quintessentially, American? Joseph Smith located the Garden of Eden in Jackson County, Missouri; the Book of Mormon centers on Christ's appearance to the Native Americans; the pioneers' exodus from New York to various New Jerusalems in Illinois, Missouri and Utah is the Church's defining historical memory.⁸⁵ But the missionary apparatus is the Church's most visible presence in the world, and Zion, as shown above, is no longer imagined as a city on the Great Salt Lake. For its part, the Church does not perceive a contradiction between the centrality of America and its global ambitions – in brief, the Mormons see Christ's visit to the New World as affirming his global mandate. This dual character proved to be another exceptional boon to the Church in Russia – that it is at once international and American was of great importance to many converts.⁸⁶

A sense of international isolation and perceptions of the West as a Promised Land were ubiquitous features of late Soviet urban life.⁸⁷ The Soviet Union's collapse did not wholly undo these profound feelings of aloneness and yearning. Travel remained restricted, now often by Western countries, and more importantly, by a great gap in incomes and economies that effectively thwarted the great mixing that many Soviets had hoped for. While rosy images of the West would certainly darken over the course of the 1990s, the United States and its allies in Europe remained a beacon of hope for many Russians in the early post-Soviet years. And as ever, the ideals of a worldwide Zion went hand-in-hand with the tangible benefits of Western ties.

This other “principle with promise” was best demonstrated during a food shortage in the winter of 1991-1992, an event that members of the Church in St. Petersburg recalled as dramatic affirmation their faith. The collective memories of St. Petersburg Mormons draw a bleak if not frightful picture of that winter. Images of empty shelves and lines outside of grocery stores stood out to most; one recalled American missionaries saving ration cards as mementos in their personal diaries; financial hardship seemed to be the norm or close to it.⁸⁸ An acute shortage of food and clothing struck the city, and even those with money found nothing to spend it on.⁸⁹ Several were sure to note that people were not truly starving – a historical awareness local to that city – but need and even desperation hung over every account. Alexei Akimov, the man who observed the changing flag at the Smolny Institute, described the atmosphere:

⁸⁵ Both Joseph Smith and his successor Brigham Young believed the original Garden of Eden to be in Jackson County, though the whole world was paradisiacal before the Fall. This particular question was discussed in detail in “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, January 1994, <http://www.lds.org/ensign/1994/01/i-have-a-question>, in the section titled “What do we know about the location of the Garden of Eden?” Note that *Ensign* is the official magazine of the Church, but the column is written by a professor of Church history from BYU, rather than by an ecclesiastical authority. Jesus's visit to the Native Americans shortly after his resurrection is the central event of the Book of Mormon. The Church points in particular to John 10:16, in which Jesus speaks of tending to “other sheep I have, not of this fold” as scriptural (New Testament) evidence of this visit.

⁸⁶ Antonenko, 219. Antonenko found that connections with the West were of primary importance to converts. He also describes the tension between a patriotic upbringing and universal religions like Mormonism, but concludes that Russian Mormons showed great enthusiasm for a new, international identity.

⁸⁷ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, In-Formation Series. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), Ch 5.

⁸⁸ See Akimov, Alexei Vasilevich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1288,10 and Roze, Mikhail Viktorovich and Marina Nikolaevna. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1281 for employment figures, wages and empty shelves. See Maximova, Irina Yur'evna. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1285, 13 for missionaries saving ration cards.

⁸⁹ See Roze (cited in note above),11-12.

At the time [help] was absolutely necessary, because the stores were almost empty. It's true. I vividly remember being in a market where there was only one or two jars of preserves on the shelf. ... that was it, nothing more. There was no bread, no milk, no meat, nothing. Empty shelves.

He then lamented an estimated 20%-30% unemployment among church members at that time, massive declines in real wages and government employment figures wholly detached from reality.⁹⁰

In this moment of political and economic weakness, the Church proved its strength. Massive shipments of clothing and food began arriving to Petersburg churches, along with hand-written letters of support from the German Saints who organized the effort. The timely and substantial aid had a powerful effect on believers, and three years later all recalled a sense of spiritual affirmation. Mikhail Roze, an engineer in optics who had recently lost his job at the time, was inspired by the shipment. "Most importantly," he explained, "[church members] felt that they weren't alone, that in a difficult moment our brethren from Germany or from other countries try to help." His wife Marina added, "it was a very powerful spiritual moment. People understand that they aren't alone, that they won't be thrown to the wolves, just on the material level." The link between faith and material well-being proved firm in a most dramatic way, and another important link – between the faithful and their brethren abroad – was forged.

Those who found Mormonism were, as a rule, already inclined towards the West, and none seemed to identify strongly with Russia as a country or Russians as a nation. While ethnic nationalism, often entangled with the Orthodox Church (to be discussed below), became a powerful political force in these years, no convert took such positions in interviews. Virtually all of them welcomed Mormon internationalism as a new facet of their identity. The German aid shipment was for many the most dramatic manifestation of this new identity, but far from the only.

The first crop of converts, as noted above, was contacted or even baptized into the Church while abroad. Others had had the privilege of visiting the West during the Soviet period, and as noted above, at least half of those interviewed were proficient in at least one Western language (and over one quarter were interviewed in English). Some worked as translators of church publications, and the rest read those publications eagerly. *Liahona*, the Church's official international magazine, received universal acclaim in the interviews and for many was a cherished link to the outside world. The monthly magazine contains, among other things, statements from church leaders in the United States, interviews with foreign Saints and news from branches abroad. "When you read *Liahona*, you get the big picture," said member Boris Mokhov, echoing the sentiments of many others. "You feel like a member of a worldwide family."⁹¹ Another identified through the magazine with believers abroad:

People with completely different natural conditions, in completely different cultural circumstances, living in different countries, but they feel the same way I feel. They have the same problems... Around the world, we all struggle with these. ... They help me with my own experience of life, my own spiritual experience.⁹²

Of course, among the peoples with completely different natural circumstances, one was of special importance. Many of the converts admit to being first drawn to the Church by its association with the United States. Some wanted to practice their English, some asked the missionaries what they ate or

⁹⁰ See Akimov (cited in note above), 10.

⁹¹ Mokhov, Boris Nikolaevich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1268, 10.

⁹² Martinov, Sergei Petrovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1269, 6.

what they wore; many had never seen an American in person.⁹³ Indeed, many more Russians came and went, satisfied with their interactions but seeking little more than American gossip.⁹⁴ Regarding actual converts, most of those interviewed denied that the American connection had much to do with their faith, but they sometimes, inadvertently, painted a more complex picture.⁹⁵ In one exchange, Anatolii Sitonin appeared to adjust the relative importance of the American connection mid-statement. When asked why he and his wife initially agreed to have the American missionaries over to their home (after meeting them elsewhere), he thought aloud:

[The missionaries] left, and my wife and I discussed the issue for a while. ... Americans. Come on, it's interesting. Interesting. Americans.

The interviewer then asked, "because they were Americans?" To which Sitonin responded,

No. Absolutely not. I don't know why. Not because they were Americans. ... Probably because the Holy Spirit said 'yes' in my place. I probably wanted to say 'no,' and the Holy Spirit said 'yes' for me. Most likely it was that.⁹⁶

The two explanations might not be mutually exclusive – as in many proselytizing faiths, Mormons believe that spiritual ends can justify more earthly means, and there are many paths to the truth. In this vein, each interview concludes with the convert's "testimony," a deeply personal and unscripted retelling of one's own personal path to the restored gospel. In his, early convert Andrei Semionov stated explicitly "that this is not a church of American people. This is the Church of Jesus Christ." That this warrants mention in the testimony, though, suggests that to others, the Church is both. At least two of the converts interviewed, by 1995, had children studying or living in the United States, and at least five of the former Soviet citizens who spoke to Heiss were interviewed in Utah.⁹⁷

The American connection is decidedly relevant in explaining the Church's appeal to some, and America remains the center of the global community these converts joined. More broadly, the universalist conception of Zion appealed as a principle and was affirmed through the tangible benefits it promised and delivered, first among these being charitable aid and connections to the West.

Zion and the Orthodox Church

Ties to the West alone, however, are insufficient to explain the Church's appeal. Countless other

⁹³ Moyle Program. See OH 1281, 7; OH 1289, 7; OH 1355, 11, among others.

⁹⁴ Efimov, Viachislav Ivanovich and Galina Petrovna. South Jordan, Utah, June 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1355, 11. Efimov estimates that 90% of seekers didn't commit to the Church, and suggests that most of these just wanted to interact with Americans.

⁹⁵ Previous studies, as this one, identify Mormonism's American cachet as a major draw – see Antonenko, 220. For this phenomenon in other denominations, see Catherine Wanner, "Explaining the Appeal of Evangelicalism in Ukraine," in Dominique Arel, and Blair A. Ruble, eds. *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine*, (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 258. In Catherine Wanner, "Missionaries of Faith and Culture: Evangelical Encounters in Ukraine." *Slavic Review* 63, no. 4 (n.d.): 732–755, Wanner makes a slightly different argument regarding Evangelicals in Ukraine, namely that converts choose qualities faiths selectively, adapting global ideals to local conditions, and the result is a sort of stateless Christianity that defies East-West or Colonized-Colonizer dichotomies.

⁹⁶ Sitonin, Anatolii L'vovich. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1279, 5.

⁹⁷ Interview OH1355 (a husband and wife) was conducted in South Jordan, UT; OH 1434 and OH 1579 were in Salt Lake City; and OH 2163 was in Provo. Originally, these interviewees are from Leningrad, Lithuania, Ekaterinburg, and Armenia respectively.

American or Western denominations were active in Russia at this time, and many demanded less of believers. Ultimately, international and American cachet was instrumental in bringing many Russians to the restored gospel, but cannot always explain why they read it. For that answer, we return to the Mormon faith itself - to its celebration of the Fall of Man, and the attendant emphasis on joy in this life. Although this doctrine does not translate directly into lived experience, and indeed, Mormons dwell little on theology, their conception of the Fall appears quite important to Russian converts. This is not to say that converts mention it explicitly - in fact none did so - but the underlying ethos is unmistakable, especially in converts' criticisms of Russian Orthodoxy. Beginning from their interpretation of the Fall, Mormon theology contains a unique optimism from Creation to the Second Coming. Concerning individuals, in between a pre-mortal existence alongside God and the Heavenly Kingdom in the afterlife, all humans enjoy the possibility of Zion here and now including the clean and virtuous living, supportive local communities, and global harmony described above. Russian Orthodoxy, at least in the perceptions of these converts, suffers from the comparison.

The operative word here, of course, is "perceptions." From the interviews, it is most often impossible to determine the source of these interpretations of Orthodoxy, but it is most often one of two things: direct experience of the Orthodox church, or a lack of experience, heavily colored by official Soviet caricature. Both seem in evidence below, and both seem to have cast the LDS Church in a flattering light. This question is further complicated by the difficulty of defining Orthodoxy. In September of 1991, a survey of two thousand Russians showed that 41% considered themselves believers, and that 95% of these were members of the Orthodox Church.⁹⁸ However, a different survey showed only 7% of self-described Orthodox to attend church at least once a month, and of "non-believers" surveyed, 50% called themselves Orthodox.⁹⁹ To many (or most, by these numbers) Russians, being Orthodox was a cultural designation, not necessarily tied to any particular beliefs or practices. In interviews with Mormon converts, it is not clear which understanding is central. In any case, for those former-Soviet people who *were* inclined towards active religious observance, Orthodoxy remained the "default" option, the closest and most familiar church. Why some Russians embraced Mormonism becomes clear when we understand why they rejected Orthodoxy, understood in all these myriad ways.

When the Mormons entered Russia, the Orthodox Church was in the middle of an historic revival. Although the Soviet regime largely ceased its violent persecution of the Church during the Great Patriotic War and had never officially outlawed it, the Church gained firm control over its own affairs only under Gorbachev. Although this process was drawn out and complex, the June 1988 millennial celebrations (commemorating the adoption of Christianity by Kievan Rus' in 988) were for many the Church's debut back into public life. The celebrations enjoyed official (if sometimes lukewarm) endorsement and widespread coverage in the Soviet press, and included high-profile visits from a variety of world leaders.¹⁰⁰ Part and parcel of this revival was an increased hostility towards competing

⁹⁸ Anderson, 207.

⁹⁹ See Kimmo Kaariainen and Dmitri Furman, "Religiosity in Russia in the 1990s," in *Religious Transition in Russia*, 53-54, cited in Emily B. Baran, "Negotiating the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Post-Soviet Russia: The Anticult Movement in the Russian Orthodox Church, 1990-2004," *Russian Review* 65, no. 4 (October 1, 2006), 637-656, 642. Contributing, surely, to that low figure was a relative lack of open churches, and the difficulty of starting new habits.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Bourdeaux, *Gorbachev, Glasnost & The Gospel*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 47-48. Howard Biddulph, first President of the Ukraine Kiev mission of the LDS Church, notes the importance of these events in his history of the period. See Biddulph, 30.

faiths, combined with an embrace of Russian nationalism by Church leaders. Towards competitors, the Church initiated a so-called anticult movement, claiming (with no small irony) that new and foreign (and growing) denominations were a threat to the newly-won freedom of religious conscience, as they deceived and brainwashed otherwise well-meaning Russians into making unwise choices.¹⁰¹ Every group under study in this dissertation - astrologers, Hare Krishnas, Mormons, apocalyptic sects and “New Chronology” supporters - was targeted by this movement.¹⁰² Another tactic to the same end, employed after the fall of the USSR, was collaboration with the new Russian state to pass restrictive laws that gave priority and privileges to Orthodoxy.¹⁰³ In return for such favored treatment, the Church lent its support to candidates with nationalist inclinations (or at least nationalist rhetoric).¹⁰⁴

These maneuvers were quite public, and alongside many Russians, Mormon converts noted the intentional conflation of Orthodoxy, the nation, and the state. Boris Mokhov was vaguely Orthodox for a time in the 1980s, before becoming first a Seventh-day Adventist and finally a Mormon. He described the Orthodox Church’s transformation into “essentially a state church,” with a more visible presence at state holidays (including Victory Day, an ostensibly secular holiday and arguably the most important). Alongside this, he described a growing feeling that to be patriotic, one must be “closer to the Orthodox Church,” and a growing strength and influence of the Church over the political discourse.

In this instance, the contrast with Mormonism appears based in direct experience of the newly-politicized Orthodox Church. At the time of his interview in 1995, Mokhov worked in “materials management” for the Latter-day Saints, primarily in importing literature and supplies from Germany, and he cited a specific example of Orthodox meddling. In his telling, the Orthodox Church had recently colluded with the Trade Ministry to block the distribution of foreign religious pamphlets.¹⁰⁵ But even those without personal investment in religious politics could observe these developments, which culminated in an Orthodox-backed restrictive 1997 law on religious organizations. The law codified Orthodoxy’s privileged place over “foreign” denominations, and introduced a strict regime of regulation and registration for the Church’s competitors.¹⁰⁶ The community that the Orthodox Church was attempting to construct – state-sanctioned, nationalistic, inward looking – was one that Mokhov, at least, was keen on leaving. But this was not the Mormons’ primary reason for their rejection of the Church.

¹⁰¹ Baran, beginning 642, discusses the appeal of cults, as seen through the eyes of the Orthodox Church. In sum, joining a cult is a response to different anxieties present at this time, including economic instability and the perceived corruption of youth. Though the Church adopted a deliberately broad definition of “cults,” there were indeed threatening and totalizing sects about – see note 35. Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia After Communism*, 1st ed. BASEES/RoutledgeCurzon Series on Russian and East European Studies 13, (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 89 also has a good discussion of cults and sects in this period.

¹⁰² Marat Shterin’s article, “New Religious Movements in Russia in the 1990s,” in Kotiranta, Matti, ed. *Religious Transition in Russia*. Helsinki: Kikumora Publications : Aleksanteri Institute, 2000, 190. describes the anti-cult movement, its leader Alexander Dvorkin, and the myriad groups he considers “totalitarian cults.”

¹⁰³ Anderson, section starting 193 suggests that the Orthodox Church already held a privileged status in most ways by 1993.

¹⁰⁴ Knox, 4. This topic is treated thoroughly in chapter 6, while chapter 2 describes links formed between Orthodoxy and national identity in the Gorbachev era. Anderson, 211 also discusses the relationship between nationalism and religion at this time (post-collapse).

¹⁰⁵ Mokhov, Boris Nikolaevich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1268, 10-11. In this instance, the pamphlets were promoting Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese doomsday sect responsible for the 1995 sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway. The group had a significant following inside Russia during this period.

¹⁰⁶ Knox, introduction. This introduction has a good, concise summary of the 1997 law.

Scholars have posited several theories as to why the Orthodoxy struggled to gain adherents in this period, and why Evangelical or other foreign Christian groups grew.¹⁰⁷ A common assumption is that Russians perceived Orthodoxy as tainted by years of complicity with the Soviet regime, which indeed strictly controlled church affairs.¹⁰⁸ Yet no Mormon took this position in the interviews. Other scholars have suggested that state secularism made citizens ignorant of doctrine and wary of institutions, preferring instead a more personal, unmediated relationship with God.¹⁰⁹ To a degree, this theory stems from the first, and indeed many Mormons do find appeal in their Church's elevation of the Holy Spirit and personal experience of God (and this larger thesis finds some confirmation in other chapters of this dissertation, particularly in the next, on the Vissarion sect).¹¹⁰ American missionaries and mission leaders tend, in their memoirs and recollections, to assume that Russians are dissatisfied with a perceived ritualism and superstition in Orthodoxy.¹¹¹ This theory finds some credence in the interviews with converts, most of whom flirted with that church, and many of whom were mystified or otherwise unimpressed with the liturgy.¹¹² Andrei Semionov, the first convert in the city of Vyborg, recalled his only contact with Orthodoxy, from his days in medical school:

Sometimes when we had exams in the institute, just for fun we went to the Orthodox cathedrals and lit their candles, just [so] that the exams [would be] good. Just for fun, without any meaning. I remember some old ladies yelled at us...

Ritual and superstition were undoubtedly associated with Orthodoxy, and here, it is fair to assume a certain success of Soviet anti-Church propaganda. The Mormons could not have avoided the official (Marxist-Leninist) critiques from the Soviet era, summarized succinctly by Ukrainian convert Vadim Malishkevich as resting on “corpulent ministers, ignorant babushkas, and rejection of science in any form.”¹¹³ Another convert accused the priests of hypocrisy, “teaching how to live right, but not heeding it themselves,” but did not elaborate.¹¹⁴ A third recalled her grandmother's disgust at drunken priests, which is certainly plausible.¹¹⁵ But one additional factor appeared more central than all those above – the allure of Zion.

¹⁰⁷ Statistics are scant and unreliable on the numbers of adherents and converts in this period. Millions of Russians identified culturally with the Orthodox Church, but determining how many of these were “active members” depends entirely on definitions. It was quite clear, however, that competing denominations were gaining adherents, and that the Orthodox Church perceived these rivals as a real and urgent threat.

¹⁰⁸ Knox, Ch 2. This chapter details the official Orthodox Church's place in Soviet society, in comparison with the ‘unofficial’ church, those actors outside of or somehow independent from the Moscow Patriarchate. Knox finds that the official church capitulated and compromised, while crediting the unofficial church with helping to foster the USSR's nascent civil society.

¹⁰⁹ Catherine Wanner, ed, *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), introduction, 23.

¹¹⁰ In another contentious deviation from mainstream Christian theology, Mormons consider God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit to be distinct personages, rather than the three being consubstantial and incorporeal. To the Mormons, God the Father and God the Son are physical beings, while the Holy Spirit, lacking a physical body, acts as manifestation of their will. The Holy Spirit has an outsized presence in Mormonism in practice, revealing the truth of the Church during prayer and protecting and guiding believers in matters large and small.

¹¹¹ Gary Browning, “Out of Obscurity.” Browning (though not without his biases, as head of an LDS mission) describes a general “dissatisfaction with ancient dogmas and rigid ideologies that restricted free inquiry.”

¹¹² Browning, “Russia and the Restored Gospel,” 232.

¹¹³ Malishkevich, Vadim Georgevich. Kiev, Ukraine, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 12655, page beginning “hope that in the future I will be able to help her” (pages not numbered).

¹¹⁴ Martinov, Sergei Petrovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1269, 2.

¹¹⁵ Getmanenko, Valerii Pavlovich and Natalia Ivanovna. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1267, 3.

While Orthodox theology does place emphasis on theosis – attaining union with God through righteous living – these Mormons saw Orthodoxy as sanctifying suffering as the surest means to salvation.¹¹⁶ This, too, was once a Soviet talking point, and so the impression may have multiple sources. Still, it was raised more than any other criticism, and clearly framed their embrace of the Mormon alternative. Galina Goncharova, in addition to taking offense at what she saw as excessive ritual and rules, ultimately decided she did not want to be “a slave of God.” Vladimir Batianov stated it more explicitly:

Salvation in the Orthodox religion means that people suffer here on Earth, and for that suffering they benefit later, in the Heavenly Kingdom, where they will live in God’s glory. But from [the Mormon] point of view, we’re not only here to suffer. We have physical bodies and are subject to suffering, but we’re also here, on earth, to learn to be happy.¹¹⁷

Andrei Semionov, who lit the candles for luck on his exams, ended his interview with the following testimony. Note how he placed consciousness after well-being, faith following results:

I know this church changed my life [for] the better. ... This is the reason why I know that this church is true. It brought happiness to my family. ... I believe that this is the true church because none of the other churches can give [such] blessings. And I believe that this is the blessing for my people, the people of Russia. I believe that we can make [a] much better life, much better society because of the church doctrine and the church actions. ... I learned to love people, and I want all of them to be happy, even in this life.

Those last four words warrant particular attention – “even in this life.” These Mormons, like all those who outlived the Soviet Union, had been promised utopia before and had seen it deferred. In this way, the Soviet faith was, to them, not so different from Orthodoxy. The Mormons were still willing to believe, but no longer willing to wait.

Conclusion

In Russia today, debate continues as to which of Alexei Akimov’s two alternating flags would be preferable. Western pundits and politicians often bristle at the Soviet nostalgia that seems to suffuse the Putin era, but this chapter, like the last, and like any honest study of the 1990s, should temper their indignation. Although there is indeed some whitewashing of Soviet failures in today’s Russia, nostalgic sentiments stem less from false memories of the Soviet era than from the real needs and aspirations that went unfulfilled after. Certainly, the two periods cannot be so neatly separated without some willful historical blindness, and the ills of the 1990s were to a great extent inherited. The Soviet Union fell far short of its promised utopia. But it is equally important to understand that, at least in the living memory of most Russians, it was not a dystopia either.

Early convert and district president Boris Mokhov’s recollections are perhaps representative:

¹¹⁶ See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Crestwood, N.Y: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976). Lossky, who left the USSR with his family in 1922, became a prominent Orthodox theologian in exile. To him, theosis is the central tenet of Orthodox theology.

¹¹⁷ Batianov, Vladimir Fedorovich. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1283, 5-6. Here, the word used for ‘salvation’ – *prednaznachenie* – translates more directly as ‘foreordination,’ a term with different meanings in Mormonism and Orthodoxy, but essentially denoting God’s plan for individuals. *Polnoe blazhenstvo* is literally ‘total bliss,’ but *blazhenstvo* can also mean glory in the theological sense.

During the period of building socialism, the non-material part of a person's life had great significance. Because the material part was basically automatically provided. People took interest in the theater, in books, and so on and so forth. ... Nobody could be fired, it wasn't possible.¹¹⁸

He goes on to praise the reforms of perestroika for allowing a spiritual flourishing, with the Mormon Church as its greatest product, before bemoaning the economic and political disarray that followed. Such a lack of hostility towards the Soviet period is a consistent feature of these interviews (which, in light of previous chapters, should no longer surprise). Rather, many express sympathy with the ideals of socialism, but feel that whatever socialism promised, Mormonism had delivered.

Valerii Getmanenko recognized “integrity and industry” and “belief in a beautiful future for all mankind” as ideals common to socialism and Christianity, but saw them lived out in the Mormon Church.¹¹⁹ Convert and translator Andrei Lokshin, echoing Vladimir Batianov's pairing of material well-being and consciousness, also looked to outcomes to justify his newfound faith.

As is said in the classics of Marxism-Leninism, ‘practice is the criterion for truth.’ There you have it. And we see that this Church is true, because it is living.

Criteria for truth were abundant in these converts' lives – clean living, a supportive community, a sense of place in the world, and joy, or least the possibility, in the present. That said, these Mormons were neither deluded nor insulated from their country – they too bore Russia's original sin. The collapse had wrought moral degeneration, political and economic turmoil, and isolation upon the new Russia – in short, corruption, suffering and ignorance unknown in more innocent times. In the postlapsarian wilderness of the new Russia, nearly everyone was keenly aware of what had been lost, and the Mormons were no exception. But having sustained that loss, these Mormons were now doing work they knew was necessary and meaningful, if difficult. They were no longer waiting for Zion, but had chosen to build it where they stood.

The work was not easy. Explaining why over 60% of converts were lapsing and becoming inactive, branch president Viacheslav Kondratev described the Church in Russia as still under construction.

In the Church, the foundation is now being built. A foundation is built of individual bricks. ... And we press on them a little bit with a spade, tilt them up and see – there are cracks in the bricks. And these cracks in the bricks, [God] throws these bricks aside. In its place He puts a different one. ... That is, right now the foundation of the Church is being constructed, and now we need people who will hold firm under any pressures. ... That's why, right now, only those who can withstand anything are coming. ... Later, when there will already be a foundation, then people will come [to the Church], and a larger portion will stay.¹²⁰

In Russia in 1995, Kondratev found that most of the bricks had cracks. His and others' interviews revealed the largest challenges facing Russians, reflected in those who came briefly to the Church but did not stay. Some could not quit drinking or smoking. Some sought handouts out of desperation, or simply had to work so much that attendance was too onerous a burden. Some sought an easy escape to the West. But a few chose to believe that Zion could be built in Russia, and as the brick foundation grew firm, so too did their faith. Like the fallen all around them, they now ate their food by the sweat of their brow. But in that, the Mormons found cause to celebrate.

¹¹⁸ Mokhov, Boris Nikolaevich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1268, 12. Mokhov uses the word “*dukhovnaia*,” which translates literally as “spiritual,” but “non-material” seems to better encapsulate his meaning.

¹¹⁹ Getmanenko, Valerii Pavlovich and Natalia Ivanovna. Moscow, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1267, 7.

¹²⁰ Kondratev, Viacheslav Anatol'evich. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1291, 9.

Those Who Know History



Those Who Know History

*“What earthly good is cleverness to people on the brink of ruin? ...
What’s the good of cleverness to a huntsman if there is no game?”*
The shepherd Luka, in Chekhov’s *The Pipe*

To reach the Mountain, as the sect’s elite settlement is called, I first flew five hours from Moscow to Abakan, a city in south-central Siberia.¹ I was met at the airport there by a follower of Vissarion who has made a small business of driving visitors to the believers’ villages. Her name was Zoia and she asked that I use the informal “you,” and not worry about patronymics or family names while I was visiting.

Abakan is built around a port at the confluence of the Abakan and Yenisei rivers, and a thirty-minute drive to the east took us across both rivers and into the neighboring city of Minusinsk. Neither city has many trees, and instead, high tension towers line the route between them. Minusinsk is the smaller of the two, but they look similar from the road, and similar to scores of others across Russia. Each has its gray apartment blocks against a lighter gray sky; its tall white church with gold or sky blue onion domes; an orderly and austere civic center with a statue at its center. All activity seemed confined to a narrow band between the roadway and the web of trolley cables above it. It was late February when I visited and there was little snow, but what was there would stay for at least two more months. Driving between the cities, one can see the taiga forest in the distance, held aloft by small rolling mountains.

Eastward from Minusinsk, the high tension towers turn to wooden poles, the road narrows to two lanes, and the forest closes in. After an hour we arrived in Kuragino, a wooden and wood-burning town along a small river, but one with paved roads, a general store and a bank. This was the last town on our route in which followers of Vissarion do not constitute a majority.

¹ My sincerest thanks to Alexander Panchenko for facilitating my initial contact with Vissarion’s followers, and to those followers who shared with me their lives and insights. For another description of the Mountain, see Panchenko’s “New Religious Movements and the Study of Folklore: The Russian Case,” *Folklore* 28 (2004): 111–28, 118.

The illustration on the title page is Nikolai Roerich’s “Sergei-Stroitel’ (1925).” It depicts the 14th century Orthodox saint Sergii Radonezhskii, a particularly revered figure for both the Roerichs and Vissarion’s followers. The art and thought of Nikolai and Elena Roerich are discussed below, in the section titled “Vissarion and the Roerichs.”

In the summer of 1992, when Vissarion called his flock east to take refuge from the apocalypse, they first gathered in Minusinsk and then in Kuragino, once they had built a large guest house there.² Kuragino, which had a population around 14,000 at that time, is the political center of its region, home to the local administration responsible for all the more distant villages that the new settlers eventually overwhelmed. One follower was made mediator between the new arrivals and the local government, and thus, the local population, many of whom (in this mediator's own words) took the newcomers to be insane:

Long hair, totally exotic clothing. One of us had toenails you wouldn't believe. When he walked on stone they clicked. That kind of people. Now I don't want to say all were like that, many were well-educated, cultured... [all we needed] was for the administration to see us as more or less normal, sane people.³

Beyond that, he needed to secure land on which to build. Relations smoothed on their own; the chaff self-selected from the wheat and many of the more "exotic" elements abandoned the project. Land was secured in several smaller villages to the east, where the steadfast could and did build homes.

Driving on from Kuragino to those villages, the power lines continued but the pavement ended, and another few hours on the packed-snow surface of logging roads led us to Petropavlovka.⁴ That village, while antedating Vissarion's ministry, is now expanded and populated mostly by his followers. Petropavlovka is only one of many villages of this type, though it boasts the sect's most elaborate temple. On the road, Zoia had spoken cheerfully of the place, and it seemed much as she described - a large and lively village along a river; sober, clean and without stray animals. Woodworking is the primary artistic form in the town, and the believers are artistic as a matter of highest spiritual principle - this is reflected in the artful forms and fine detail of their homes, temples and shrines. This quality is particularly striking, given that the vast majority of followers moved from larger urban centers and had no prior experience in building.

² Several scholars have studied Vissarion's sect, though to my knowledge this is the first formal history. The most ambitious study (though focusing on notions of apocalypse across several contemporary groups, not only this one) is Mariia Akhmetova, *Konets Sveta v Odnoi Otdel'no Vziatoi Strane: Religioznye Soobshchestva Rossii I Ikh Eskebatologicheskii Mif* (Moscow: OGI, 2011). Roman Lunkin's profile, "Tserkov' Vissariona: Bozhestvo S Chelovecheskimi Strastiami," *Keston Institute Russian Review*, October 2008, is the most thorough, while Alexander Panchenko's analysis, cited above, is stronger in argument (and in English translation). Rasa Pranskevičiūtė, "Vissarion and Anastasia Movements in Lithuania," *Grupės Ir Aplinkos (Groups and Environments) 2* (2010) compares Vissarion's followers with the New Age "Anastasia" Movement, and is the only work to assess those followers who did not migrate. C.A. Maksimov, "Pozovi Menia v Dal' Svetliu," *Missionerskaia Obozrenie*, 1998 is detailed, but compromised by an anticult agenda.

There are also several journalistic profiles and photo essays on the sect online, and a short documentary film by Vice magazine, though in my view the film does not take its task seriously.

³ Sergei Morozov, interview with the author, February 2015 [henceforth: Interview with (name)]. All biographical information in this chapter is derived from interviews conducted by the author in Petropavlovskoe (Kyrasnoyarsk Krai) and surrounding villages February of 2015, unless otherwise noted.

I conducted twelve in-depth interviews with early and influential followers of Vissarion, and although only three are profiled in depth, the points stressed recur elsewhere - the three were selected as representative of the whole. Others, throughout the chapter, will be nameless - "another follower," "one believer," etc., but will be cited in full in footnotes.

⁴ This is a nickname; on maps the village is Petropavlovskoe.



Petropavlovka's main road, and the sect's largest temple.⁵

Zoia's car could go no further, though it was still a drive from Petropavlovka to the Mountain. The next leg was thirty minutes through the forest in a Czechoslovakian-built, Soviet-marked transport truck that serves as a shuttle. In 1994, a particularly zealous group of followers had cleared this long road to the site.⁶ Three work brigades were assigned the task, each composed of eight people, felling trees with axes, binding them with ropes, and dragging them on rollers or sleds to be used in further construction. Few of them knew what they were doing. One explained to me that several of these builders were sent "to the North" to learn traditional methods and obtain special tools, but did not elaborate. Again, nearly all of the builders were born and raised in cities.

To establish a new and better rapport with Mother Earth, Vissarion did not permit the use of electric or gas-powered tools in the early years, and for every tree cleared on the road, the builders planted three more. And there was much to clear before they could reach the Mountain, much less build a settlement there. At that time the site was only taiga, a flat and thick and mosquito-plagued bit of wilderness between the physical mountain itself, called Sukhoi, and the hidden glacial lake Tiberkul.⁷ Some of the followers lived in shipping containers, for a year or two or perhaps longer, until they found time and space to build their own homes.⁸

When the shuttle parked, I walked from the road to the settlement, entering through a freestanding wooden gate that opened to an enormous clearing, with dozens of wooden homes for a few hundred followers. Each resident living there is hand-chosen by Vissarion for the privilege, and they can only

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are printed with permission from Vadim Redkin, who manages the sect's website and media contacts.

⁶ Interview with Sergei Chevalkov.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Interview with Sergei Morozov.

be “natural families” - a man and his wife, plus children.⁹ A striking symmetry has been imposed on the landscape, made particularly stark in the snow. The village’s center is an ornate wooden shrine, and six paths radiate outward from it, each beat flat by human boots, horse hooves and sleighs over the course of the winter.



The main gate, with the mountain Sukhoi in the background (photograph by the author).

⁹ This from Lunkin, “Tserkov’ Vissariona,” and confirmed by Vadim Redkin (profiled below).



Followers gathered in worship at the Mountain's central shrine, February 2015 (photograph by the author).
Ornate woodworking is a hallmark of the sect, and evident too in the gate above.



Overlooking the settlement from the mountain Sukhoi. The clearings in the background are farmed in the summer (photograph by the author).

Lenin in his day promised electrification of the entire country, and this goal was eventually met after his death, even in outposts more remote than this one. But there are no power lines here; the lines only reached to Petropavlovka, and instead the shuttle truck is the very furthest tendril of the Soviet world that grasps towards the Mountain. There are no October Streets or Marx Squares, no heroic mosaics, no sheafs of wheat around hammers and sickles, stamped into the concrete façades of buildings or into the iron covers of sewer manholes. There is no holiday to mark the Revolution in 1917, or the Great Victory in 1945, or Gagarin's flight in 1961, and indeed the calendar begins only in that year - in January, when Vissarion was born. When I visited, it was February of the 55th year of the Era of the Dawn. The sect has disavowed the past.

Placing Vissarion's sect in the context of the Soviet collapse - he began preaching in 1991, and the migration began a year later - is the central aim of this chapter, but a meaningless exercise to the followers. To them, Vissarion was not born in the late Soviet Union by historical chance, but appeared then by a grand design immune to our scrutiny. Yet this chapter, a history of the sect's formation, is built on the recollections of early converts, and their lives and beliefs locate them in Soviet and Russian time. The chapter does not advance an argument distinct from previous chapters, but rather examines in fine detail a particularly radical solution to the questions that animated those chapters' subjects. Those questions, put generally, concerned how to orient oneself when Soviet time abruptly ended, and nobody knew what would follow.

Previous chapters have described the emergence of new spiritual orientations, namely in esotericism, Eastern traditions, and imports by Western missionaries. By the time Vissarion emerged in 1991, the Soviet Union was already home to an extraordinarily rich and diverse spiritual milieu, expanding rapidly with the country's growing moral and material ills. Those ills, taken broadly,

included previously unseen levels of corruption, crime and destitution in Soviet cities, and acute degradation of the natural environments surrounding them. Naturally, this was a period of rupture in the lives of individuals, too. All but one of the subjects interviewed for this chapter, for instance, changed careers in the course of these few years, most often from one based in their education and specialization to one meant to pay the bills. All of these circumstances together - spiritual richness amidst moral and material poverty - raised new questions, to which preachers like Vissarion provided yet another type of answer. In fact, several charismatic sects appeared at this time, each providing an undivided authority to cut through the noise - that is, a divinely-inspired leader - and an explanation for a world in apparent free-fall, in the form of foretelling an apocalypse. Employing the newly liberalized media to their ends, these apocalyptic sects left an outsized mark on the culture of their era.

But among sects of this type, Vissarion's was by far the most successful in fulfilling its own promise - it achieved a radical separation from the old world, and built a stable, enduring new one. This success finds no equivalent either in the Soviet period before it, nor in the Russian Federation since. What qualities of the sect, and what conditions of the early 1990s, enabled this singular success?

Vissarion, possessed of great personal charisma, also shared the vocabulary and spiritual influences of his followers. He offered himself as a unified and unifying authority - unified, in that he promised answers to all questions, and unifying, in that he claimed a grand synthesis of all the many currents in circulation. With the attention of untold thousands of seekers and access to their networks, he cast the present in apocalyptic terms, but the cataclysm was less central to his vision than the renewal that would follow it. Drawing from several indigenous Russian traditions, and from the Silver Age mystic philosophy of the Roerichs in particular, Vissarion promised a vague yet hopeful future, centered in a remote wilderness commune, and the seekers themselves elaborated and largely fulfilled that promise. The result was the world described above, one severed from the Soviet and Russian past. Severed, of course, to the greatest extent possible, given that its residents had never known anything else.

Tania, the seeker

Tania weathered the Soviet collapse rather smoothly, at least in material terms.¹⁰ Born in 1960, by 1990 she had a car and an apartment in Moscow, furnished by a prestigious career in aerospace engineering. This career had been long in the making, born of a youthful interest in science and built on her education at Moscow's Institute of Radio Engineering, Electronics and Automation, from which she graduated with honors. In short, she was a likely adopter of the occult. By 1991, she had left official science and began a second education with the celebrity healer, illusionist and self-described sorcerer Yuri Longo. "Second," though, may be the wrong word - Tania herself, speaking in 2015, sees a single, unbroken track:

[By 1991] I was working as a healer. Though I have a technical education, in military-aerospace engineering. ... I worked in research and production at the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. ... I finished my bachelor's, then my master's, and then received an International Certificate from Yuri Longo.

Pressed on this apparent change of course, Tania sees only a change in application:

Author: Your education is in hard science, in cosmonautics even.

¹⁰ Interview with Tatiana Vanina.

Tania: Nuclear physics, quantum physics, radar.

Author: And that's all compatible [with extrasense healing]? ...

Tania: ...What does science examine? It examines matter, and it examines fields. What does quantum physics study? The structure of fields. Matter that can't be observed... healing is the same. Invisible fields. The body is matter, and fields. So yes, it's all explained... absolutely.

Extrasense healing, to her, was a science and a career, rather than a step in her spiritual development. It could pay the bills, but not answer her deeper questions. She recalls those questions in general terms of seeking meaning in life. Though she frames such existential seeking as a permanent feature of her psyche, she also links it to the odious materialism that consumed Russia after the Soviet collapse. Neither odious materialism nor seeking, of course, are specific to Russia in the early 1990s, but both were ascendant and in great tension with one another. Tania's path to answers - which ended in success in early 1993 - led through that miserable and magical world, though in her telling the search was quite ordinary:

I saw the way people were thinking, I heard their sentiments, and there was nothing good in what I saw or heard... I couldn't shake that question, "what are we living for, why are we here?"... I began studying psychology, parapsychology, paranormal phenomena, Doctor (Raymond) Moody's "Life After Life"¹¹ and so forth. I studied the Bhagavad-Gita, the Quran, [Carlos] Castaneda,¹² Scientology, [Helena] Blavatsky, the Roerichs - it's the path of a seeker. When a person is seeking, they all seek along the same path.

As Tania's list should make clear, they do *not* all seek along the same path. In truth, seeking only appears like a path in retrospect, and then, only to those who arrived at a final destination. At this time, there were as many paths as there are roads and alleyways in Moscow, and Tania and countless others wandered about that city through a network of signposts and waypoints. The seekers headed west and then east, walked the ring-road from science to mysticism and back, navigated narrow dogma and paused in the wide open squares, awed by the grandeur of the cosmos. They might have ended up in any chapter of this dissertation or elsewhere entirely; seeking itself is what unites them.¹³

In the second half of the 1980s, literature was the surest guide to the search, or *kruzhki* of fellow seekers for those with the right networks. Tania began reading in 1984, and of many texts, she followed the Bhagavad-Gita most seriously - indeed, she became a Hare Krishna, and took a guru and a spiritual name before moving on. By 1989, the volume of literature had grown immensely, and help in the search began to come over the radio and the television.¹⁴ Public spaces were opened to advertisements, and venues opened to rent by proselytizers and prophets of all kinds. Tania recalls one subtype:

At that time in Moscow there were so many confessions, so many currents, so much of everything, Moscow was buzzing. ... There was the White Brotherhood, [of] Maria Devi Christos, as they called her... there were posters everywhere, in the metro, on the suburban trains, in buses, that she was the Second Coming of Christ. There was

¹¹ Moody's 1975 work "Life After Life," is an ostensibly data-driven typology and analysis of near-death experiences which, over the protests of many of his psychiatrist colleagues, suggests an existence beyond the body. His books are frequently cited by those in the late-Soviet cultic milieu.

¹² Carlos Castaneda, another favorite of this milieu, drew attention from mystics and criticism from colleagues for his hands-on anthropology among the Yaqui Indians of northern Mexico.

¹³ This from Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972): 119-36. Campbell's concept of a "cultic milieu" is highly relevant to this dissertation. The milieu, in his rendering, is composed of truth seekers who are receptive to ideas and syncretic in worldview; who are united by their felt deviant status; and who have a highly developed communication structure. Seekership - the pursuit of truth or enlightenment by preparation or quest - is to him most central among these features.

¹⁴ The liberalization of Soviet media, and its role in spiritual affairs, is covered in depth in this dissertation's first chapter.

Giorgio Bongiovanni, he came to Moscow and on central television showed that he had stigmata, that he was an incarnation of Christ... Really a lot of people were declaring themselves the Second Coming. 1991, 1992, one got the impression that some kind of portal had opened.

In retrospect (and only in retrospect), Tania sees a fork in her path around the autumn of 1991, and the beginning of the end of her wanderings.

I had two paths: I could go to Austria and be a healer - because I have friends there, and we wanted to work as healers, or in America, where Yuri Longo had invited me to go. But I very much love Russia, and I said I could take a trip [abroad], but not live there. When I wanted to leave for Austria, I met a man who said to me: "In Siberia, some kind of saint has emerged; they call him Vissarion. He's young, something like a saint, like a prophet."

For the next two years, Vissarion's name circulated in the world of seekers. At the time Tania first heard of him, the only printed material available from the sect was *the Little Kernel (Malaia Krupitsa)*, compiled in 1992 from Vissarion's early writings. That text is undoubtedly important, and served as the basis for Vissarion's countless sermons; its meaning will be elaborated below. But during these early years of the ministry, information spread by audio, then video, recordings, and most of all, by word of mouth. Tania remembers a series of people mentioning Vissarion to her from 1991 to 1993. She recalls seeing feature in the newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets* titled "the Siberian Prophet."¹⁵ She was shown Vissarion's photograph by a friend, and was immediately drawn to his visage, and his eyes in particular. Eventually she obtained an audiocassette of him speaking, and she was struck by "his voice, his manner, his delivery, the volume of information."

As Tania's story approaches its climax - as her life draws closer to Vissarion - her memories grow more detailed and precise. In February 1993, she located Vissarion's local organization in Moscow. She began talking to followers there, and grew captivated by videocassettes of the prophet's sermons:

Seeing his face and his manner, it was utterly clear that this man was not entirely a man. He gave an impression of speaking from within. Not from the head, not from knowledge from his mind, he spoke from the soul... he cited no books, no authors, and when he spoke, he knew what he was saying.

She first glimpsed Vissarion at Moscow's Domodedovo airport on March 6th, 1993. She was one of thirty or forty followers there to greet him, and they formed a corridor for him to walk through. A few weeks later, on March 24th, 1993, Tania's search ended in a Moscow stadium:

It was at the huge TsSK athletics complex in the center of Moscow. There was something like six, maybe ten thousand people, who had come to hear [Vissarion's] sermon.¹⁶ ... I was sitting somewhere in the center, maybe closer, and he was on the ice, they'd laid carpeting over the ice rink, and he stood and addressed the people. ... The way he spoke put me in this state, as if everything extraneous and unnecessary fell aside, but in my soul something was flaring up, something important and beautiful. And I wanted to believe every word he spoke, because it resonated in my soul.

Tania now says that she had come to see that the world's faiths were "just parts, like a daisy has petals." Vissarion, she believed, was the center. In short order she would move to one of the villages east of Minusinsk, where Vissarion's followers were then gathering. Her mother and father, brother, sister and niece would come too, and settle in different villages nearby. The man who initially showed

¹⁵ Three early believers cited articles in the press as part of their conversions - I attempted, and failed, to corroborate any of them.

¹⁶ Numbers such as these also cannot be corroborated, but I consider them wholly plausible.

her Vissarion's photograph would move there too, and there become her husband.

Vadik, the chronicler

By the spring of 1992, Vadik - Vissarion's chief apostle, chronicler, and functionary - was also something of an adopted brother, active in his teacher's spiritual and personal affairs alike.¹⁷ When Vissarion's message was first broadcast on television, it was in Vadik's hometown of Voronezh, where Vissarion was staying in Vadik's mother's home. And when Vadik moved to Siberia later that year, Vissarion likewise took him in.

Vadik: In August [1992] I was already here. ... We lived in Minusinsk, the Teacher and I lived together. We lived together in his apartment, together with his kids. And we traveled a lot.

Author: Can you describe your relationship with him? You're in one apartment, it seems like first of all, there ought to be amicable relations, and you have to resolve more earthly problems, concrete problems. But you're also living as teacher and disciple.

Vadik: Of course. On one hand, we were close friends. But on the other, I understood that beside me is a friend to whose dictates I need to respond, moral dictates. So material issues, organizational issues, we could discuss. Technical ones. But at some spiritual juncture, I tried to defer to him....

Author: There were no conflicts?

Vadik: There were no conflicts. I could only come into conflict with myself... I understood that at times I was inattentive, at times I fell short. ... in due time I understood that beside him, you can really see your own inadequacies. Not somebody else's but your own.

Not all happy families are alike. As of 2015, the two remain kindred, with Vadik serving as Vissarion's gatekeeper and conduit of information, and accompanying him on his (increasingly rare) travels.¹⁸ At home on the Mountain, Vadik's house abuts Vissarion's, above and apart from the flock. Yet Vadik is no sheepdog - he has no formal status in the sect, nor does anybody else besides Vissarion. Nor is Vadik elevated in the scriptures that he himself penned and, speaking to the author, he downplayed that sizable contribution (the scriptures span many thousands of pages), preferring to dissolve his work into the collective. In his telling, his role as chronicler did not come by assignment, but simply by inspiration and a sense of duty:

Author: What was the first text that you wrote, by your own hand?

Vadik: The first text? That was our trip through Ukraine in 1992. I understood that these events needed to be committed to writing. ... We didn't have voice recording equipment at that time, so I began documenting events.

Author: You decided to do this yourself? The Teacher didn't ask?

Vadik: ...No, nobody asked me to. I remember, I just had a standard Soviet notebook, with the dark brown oilskin cover... at first, I recorded by memory as the conversations occurred. And when we began to publish, I would revise it all. That is, the first texts, the first chapters, I would record and then revise [with the Teacher]. 'Is that what was said? Is that right?'

Author: And with time you became essential to the organization? That is, the Teacher surely appreciated (*tsenil*) that you were recording everything?

Vadik: "Appreciated" is not quite the right word here. This is our shared lot. It is his task to speak, he is the Word, he speaks. And our task is to fix it to paper.

The recordings that first reached Tania were almost certainly prepared by Vadik. It was he who recorded, transcribed and distributed Vissarion's every conversation, meeting and sermon, and who

¹⁷ Interview with Vadim Redkin.

¹⁸ Vissarion has nearly ceased traveling, appears before his flock less irregularly, speaks to the media or other outsiders even less, and has quit painting, his primary hobby. The feverish pace of his early activity is detailed below, as is the significance of his artwork.

prepared these materials - what the sect calls his chronicles - for publication beginning in 1994. In the scriptures that resulted, compiled as *the Last Testament (Poslednii Zaveť)*, Vadik's chronicles dwarf Vissarion's own writings in the first tome (*the Little Kernel* is reproduced there), and make up the entirety of fifteen more.¹⁹



Vadik (facing camera) touring with Vissarion, Ekaterinburg, in 1992 or 1993.

Like Tania, Vadik had a scientific-technical education, though with emphasis on the technical - he specialized in the cold-forging of metals. After finishing university in Voronezh in 1980, he worked at a scientific research institute for two years, and then spent another two in graduate school. Although he was ostensibly continuing his education in metal manufacturing, he had completed most of the necessary research during his time at the institute, and Vadik spent the early 1980s listening to music and learning to sing instead. Drawn, in his words, to “the creative aspect of life,” he auditioned for his institute's vocal-instrumental ensemble, a school-sponsored rock band, and gradually transitioned towards a degree in music performance - a virtual requirement for playing professionally in the pre-Gorbachev USSR. This career pivot proved quite successful - by 1988, he was touring professionally as a vocalist with the long-running and popular rock ensemble *Integral*, and appearing somewhat regularly on radio and television.²⁰ And all the while, through both careers, he had been a seeker.

In the mid-1970s Vadik sought God through the Russian classics, a crack in the atheist edifice that

¹⁹ Much of the sect's early influx of money (from donations of followers, many of whom sold their possessions) went towards publishing thousands of copies of the times of the Last Testament at a press in St. Petersburg, and distributing these and other texts for free. Each tome is printed in a single edition; there are no plans to reprint earlier ones. In an email, Vadik assured me that “the Testament will continue to be written so long as this incarnation persists.”

²⁰ *Integral* began in the 1970s as a jazz ensemble, and went through many iterations up until the collapse. It is unclear in what capacity Redkin sang with the group - he does not appear on the official roster from this period but based on associates he named and various anecdotes, I have no reason to doubt he performed with them.

the state never patched.²¹ He also obtained a bible from the USSR's internal baptists, but neither made a Christian of him. In recalling the questions that guided his search, Vadik echoes Tania - generally, in seeking life's purpose, and specifically, in skepticism toward material values, or what he calls a "savage capitalism." Also like Tania, his first serious foray into faith was through the Bhagavad-Gita, which he kept "within reach" as he toured with his band. By 1991, he added to it the works of the Roerichs and Helena Blavatsky, the twin pillars of modern Russian esotericism.²² In all, although Vadik's role in Vissarion's sect is extraordinary, his path there was ordinary (all things considered).

Both words could be applied to his final conversion as well. After years of searching, Vadik met Vissarion first in February of 1992:

I was supposed to leave Moscow for Riga on tour, Riga and Voroshilovgrad, [now] Lugansk, in Ukraine. We had a show in Moscow before that. ... Some people at the concert had a bit much to drink, and ... after the show, as we got into the bus, a fight broke out totally unexpectedly. And in the fight I had a tooth broken, and my face took some damage. Naturally, in that shape - I wasn't hurt or shaken, but my face, which would be on display, it was a bit black and blue, and my tooth was broken. ... and so the director of the tour - we were working then with [pop-singer] Zhenia Belousov²³ - he said 'here's part of your pay. Stay here and recover, we're going to Riga without you. ... And all that happened at the exact moment - I didn't go to Riga - at the exact moment that the Teacher arrived in Moscow. An acquaintance phoned me and said 'listen - there's this man coming to town.'

Vissarion was coming to speak in the auditorium of the Stroganov Academy, one of Russia's oldest and most esteemed schools of art.²⁴ Vissarion was himself an artist, but was speaking instead as a prophet and the Second Coming of Christ. Tickets were free, and the hall was full.²⁵ Vadik stood at the door, and watched Vissarion walk past him and onto the stage.

What did I feel? You know, it was this upheaval... The others [other followers -*author*] probably told you something similar. I just felt this upheaval in my life, I can't say what it compared to. I had never felt anything like it. Upon meeting a girl you like - no, it's not like that, waiting for a date. It was unexpected. Something like meeting an old friend... this feeling of agitation, and I would add to that, that my heart raced. It was like that. We didn't speak to one another. There was no brainwashing or hypnosis. I can't say that he stared into my eyes. He lifted his head, greeted me, smiled.

And in this moment, Vadik was seized by the desire to spread the word. But unlike others (who, as we'll see, felt a similar impulse), Vadik had the means to do it. The networks and know-how of a touring musician served just as well for a touring prophet.

²¹ Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government* [forthcoming].

²² These two names often appear together, but in practice are not exactly "twin pillars" - their relationship is less Lennon to McCartney than Simon to Garfunkel, at least among my subjects. Several cited them together, but then followed with a caveat about Helena Blavatsky, describing her theosophical work as dense, complicated, or difficult to apply. Blavatsky was also in no way wedded to Russia, though few seem to know this or care - she was born in the Russian Empire in 1831 and apparently lived there as a child, but as a teenager embarked on various world travels, the details of which she deliberately obscured, and she wrote most of her texts from abroad, in English. In the Last Testament, a questioner asks Vissarion about Blavatsky's magnum opus "the Secret Doctrine," and he too seems unenthusiastic. In Blavatsky's defense, she probably has a larger footprint than the Roerichs outside of Russia.

²³ Zhenia (Evgenii) Belousov was a household name in the later 1980s and early 1990s, both as a frontman and occasional bassist in Integral - see note 21 - and as a solo artist. I would describe his genre as politically-benign, synthesizer-driven, rhinestone-emblazoned radio pop. Fans of the genre should see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vY6QMn0AWbI>, accessed 4 September 2016.

²⁴ At the time, it was the Moscow Institute for the Decorative and Applied Arts, now the Stroganov Moscow State University of Arts and Industry.

²⁵ Again, the precise size of crowds is lost to history, but full halls seem to me plausible.

And upon meeting him, it occurred to me that I must introduce my friends to this. My friends and acquaintances, and not just them, but as large a crowd of people as possible. Now the Teacher, naturally, had traveled before that - I want to say he he'd been to Tbilisi and other places. And I proposed more, called around Belarus, western Ukraine, called places where I had acquaintances, called concert organizers. And I said 'Guys, help! Can you just find me a venue somewhere, for free. And without tickets.'

Vadik's first call, though, was to his mother, and he told her that he had met Christ. Two days later, she was hosting Vissarion at her home in Voronezh.²⁶ During that stay, Vadik used his contacts in the media to put Vissarion on television, the sect's first major broadcast. As recounted by Vadik in *the Last Testament*, the public responded enthusiastically (the format, as always, was questions from the public and answers from Vissarion), and a studio full of TV operators, who were at first puzzled, grew soothed, and finally were brought to tears.²⁷ From that time forward, Vissarion's path through the world would be facilitated by Vadik and traced in his pen.

Sergei, the priest

When I was young, [my grandmother] baptized me and took me to the church, I went to a service. I was young, but the impression remains vivid. And that feeling, of the unseen presence of a [nonetheless] real world... my childhood ended and I lost interest, but I always had that feeling. Then, when these incidents began... I don't know if you remember or not, the Perm Triangle. In the Urals there was an anomalous zone, where UFOs were appearing, UFOlogists were working there...²⁸

For those who don't remember, the Perm Triangle was first described in Soviet newspapers in 1989, and quickly gained status as Russia's Area 51.²⁹ In the ensuing UFO-rush, experts and tourists flooded the tiny settlement of Moliobka in the southern Ural mountains, observing paranormal phenomena and, far more often, swapping stories of the observations of others. Above are the recollections of Sergei, who sees the events at the Perm Triangle as the first step on his own path, ordinary and extraordinary, to becoming high priest on the Mountain.³⁰ In 2015, his questions now all answered, he can explain the various phenomena of the Triangle, if the reader can follow:

Sergei: Everything around us is an expression of energies. It's a certain vibration, a certain frequency, energy saturation. Just as we gather in some place, all of that energy that we feel, we can interpret it, it's formed in all of us from childhood by the society in which we live. ... a picture forms for us. And then beside us [in the Perm Triangle -*author*], there's something we're not accustomed to interpreting. ... we may feel it as a threat, or as something unusual, or something benevolent. But we can't form a picture. ... so who was there? It may have been other civilizations which had worked there quite a lot before the Teacher appeared. And they didn't understand what was happening with humanity, this civilization gone rogue, which had shed external control. So first and foremost, it's a manifestation of extraterrestrial intelligence.

²⁶ In the scriptures that record these events, the timeline is more protracted - Vadik meets Vissarion on February 28th, but arrives in Vornoezh only in May. The Last Testament, tome 1, part 2, ch.1, v2-9 [henceforth, LT 1:2:1-2-9, for example.]. As both versions come from the same man, the truth is elusive, but also unimportant.

²⁷ LT 1:2:2:97.

²⁸ Interview with Sergei Chevalkov.

²⁹ The most popular contemporary source on the phenomena of the Triangle was the newspaper *Anomalia*, published by the UFOlogist group "Assotsiatsia 'Ekologiya Nepoznannogo'" and printed in hundreds of thousands of copies per month. Several other UFO newspapers emerged at this same time, and several of those are available in the Soviet Independent Press collection at the Bakhmeteff Archive at Columbia University (boxes 2, 73, and 87). Such sources, of course, might reveal more about UFO culture than about UFOs themselves.

³⁰ It is Sergei, in his vestments, leading the service in the photograph from the introduction.

Author: Were you a member of the party [at the time the Triangle was revealed]?

Sergei: Yes, I was a member of the CPSU. I was a communist. And at that time I sincerely believed.

The communist Sergei's understanding in 1989 may have differed from that of the spiritualist Sergei in 2015. We can't know for certain. But like Tania, Sergei sees no rupture between his Soviet education and the spiritual education that followed. To be sure, by 1989 he already knew something about "this civilization gone rogue." For the preceding decade, Sergei had been an officer on call in the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces, stationed in a complex of long- and medium-range intercontinental ballistic missiles in the Ural mountains, his finger on the button. He was also a spiritual seeker, interested in yoga above all. In 1991, having attained the rank of colonel, he moved to Moscow for a higher technical education in missile science at a military academy, and there found that his spiritual interests were no longer restrained by military discipline or the remote geography of the Soviet Union's strategic defenses.

I had always had [an interest in yoga]. But it was in Moscow that I could realize it; it wasn't possible back in the units. Serving there was very exacting. But in Moscow, while I studied in the academy, I had time both to study and look into these movements, currents, all kinds of Sufism, yoga of various types, Christian currents. ... All kinds of formerly forbidden spiritual currents were emerging, an enormous variety.

While writing his thesis (on a topic that remains classified), Sergei mingled in crowds of thousands, which gathered in public parks and fields outside Moscow to exchange energy, ideas, and rumors of mankind's coming doom or salvation.³¹ It was in this setting that he found Dances of Universal Peace, a Sufi-tinged, American-born spiritual practice based in group dance and the singing of sacred phrases from various world religions.³² For whatever reason, he could not reconcile such practices with his studies in military science. What's more, it was not the latter that troubled him:

I had always studied science, and did at that time, too. Military science. Though it has a philosophical basis. What I did was connected with field theory. What religion provided as an explanation, as elucidation, couldn't satisfy me, because everywhere I saw some correct aspects, and some contradictory. Contradictory either with other religions, or with science, or just generally with common sense. So I didn't find what I sought. The spirit is very similar across different currents, aspects of the soul and spirituality, they're similar. But the interpretations didn't sit well. So I searched and searched and searched. ... that was until the Teacher arrived.

Vissarion arrived in Moscow at the New Year, 1992 (his travels took him through the city frequently). Sergei met him very early, and within a few months declared his search over.

He arrived with just a few new and central truths that I, at least, had not found in other teachings. The contradictions disappeared, everything was in its place. It became clear that all was contradictory in other religions, when assembled correctly, was no longer in contradiction, all was woven together. Just a few central truths he brought. ... and it became possible to move forward.

Pressed on the nature of these truths, Sergei defers to Vissarion, and to imagery rather than points of doctrine. He also echoes Tania - where she sees a daisy, he sees an elephant:

[The Teacher] says: in every teaching there is some element of the Truth. But not the whole Truth. It's as if one person grabs by the tail, another - by the trunk, a third - the elephant's leg. [And the first says,] an elephant is a

³¹ Many interview subjects, throughout this dissertation, recall open-air gatherings of this type - they were an important site of exchange.

³² Dances of Universal Peace was founded by American mystic, theosophist and scientist Samuel L. Lewis in the 1960s. It was in this circle that Sergei first began promoting Vissarion.

sort of rope, with a tassel at the end. We can accept one [part] or the other, or the third. But to accept that you don't have it all, that another also possesses the Truth, and you have but a part - that, people can't do.

Possessed of the whole truth, Sergei's life changed almost immediately. "On one hand, I stopped darting around, seeking. The search had ended. And on the other, I felt a great desire to share this with people." In other words, he continued to dart around, with the sect's center in Moscow as his home base. When not working for the Moscow center, Sergei was with Vissarion "day and night," part of a traveling retinue of disciples. This inner circle was mostly young but not exclusively (Sergei at this time was just over forty), composed of men and women both, the men with beards, almost all with long hair, and many draped in white cloth girdled at the waist.³³ Vissarion now wore robes as well, his in a striking scarlet. His followers (usually coordinating with Vadik) organized his events, found hosts with apartments or cars to facilitate his movement. Most of all, they asked questions, hundreds of questions, from which, in Sergei's words, Vissarion "formed a picture of the world."

Only then did Sergei attain full understanding, including of the Perm Triangle - for this in particular, his scientific education was necessary but not sufficient. After just a few months with Vissarion, Sergei could see no inherent conflict in being at once a communist, a scientist, a nuclear watchman, and a spiritualist, though he would ultimately abandon all but the last. One conflict, however, remained, and only upon its resolution would Sergei give himself fully to Vissarion's cause.

In addition to those things above, and like many of Vissarion's followers (at least by their own telling), Sergei was a romantic. And shortly after meeting Vissarion, he fell in love with another disciple who, like him, had a spouse and children at the time. Sergei found himself in a world of jealousy and stress, weighing life's obligations against its possibilities, and unable to keep his own finger off the scale. But by this time, he knew that contradictions existed only in his understanding, not in the world at large. And so he explained the situation to Vissarion.

'Understand,' [the Teacher] said, 'you've got children, and to wreck the family for the sake of your own happiness is wrong. It's better for you two [he and the other follower -*author*] to separate.' And that was such a blow to me, of course. To my ego. And when I told her, this woman, it was such stress - what sort of love can destroy love? In the end, she left the Teacher.

And in 1993, Sergei moved to Minusinsk with his wife and children, because their final destination - Vissarion's New Jerusalem on the Mountain - was still an untouched expanse of the taiga.

Vissarion, the teacher

Once every summer, on the Mountain and in the surrounding villages, the followers celebrate the anniversary of Vissarion's first sermon.³⁴ Tradition places that sermon in Minusinsk on August 18th, 1991, though this is not wholly accurate.³⁵ In truth, Vissarion's divine mission was revealed to him in January of that year, and he in turn had revealed it to a club of so-called UFO contactors in Minusinsk that spring, many months before this official debut.

It is difficult to find an account of Vissarion's sect that does not dwell on UFOs, but this can be

³³ The aesthetic is meant to recall Christ's ministry, though more likely recalls Christ's ministry as seen in film. See note 74 below.

³⁴ The other major holidays for the group are on January 14th, marking the day of Vissarion's birth, and a spring festival.

³⁵ His earlier activities, including at the UFO contacting club, are recorded in the scriptures, so it is unclear why they consider this sermon on August 18th to be his first - it may have gained significance as a holiday retroactively, for reasons elaborated at the end of this section.

misleading. To be sure, alien intelligences do play an outsized role in the sect's doctrine and formation. It appears that Vissarion traveled in these circles before he began his ministry.³⁶ The scriptures show him on multiple occasions visiting and observing other contactors' sessions, and *the Little Kernel* is rife with references to extraterrestrial intelligences, which constitute a major column of Vissarion's esoteric cosmology.³⁷ Two followers I interviewed came to Vissarion via the UFO culture.³⁸ A message delivered via UFO contactors is depicted, in the scriptures, as perhaps the central event of his spiritual awakening.³⁹

All that said, I use the term "UFO" because the followers themselves do the same, but their meaning should be distinguished from the UFO-hunting familiar to Western readers. Contacting is more spiritualism than science-fiction, and in practice resembles a séance more than SETI or amateur sky-watching. Their contacts are on different planets, perhaps, but really on a different plane, from which they can see ours in its entirety. The contactors, in turn, seek information useful for humanity, rather than any physical interaction with other beings or escape to other places.⁴⁰ Vissarion himself was not a contactor, but he took seriously the messages that such people delivered.⁴¹

And so, according to tradition, a newspaper in the spring of 1990 printed one such message, foretelling humanity's self-destruction. "Man had lost the possibility of salvation," it warned, "having endowed himself with destructive power and developed it to enormous proportions." And this endeavor, it was predicted, would bear fruit in the near future. Vissarion's reaction (as depicted by Vadik in the scriptures, presumably based on Vissarion's own telling) was defiant. He strode out of his painting studio and into a copse of trees in a driving rain. Water streaming down his back, but with a burning heart, he cried out: "No! Man can still be saved; there is a way out!" Shortly thereafter, while he stared into the mountains surrounding Minusinsk, a voice within him assured him there was. He didn't yet know it was he himself.⁴²

At that time, Vissarion was about thirty years of age,⁴³ and was still Sergei Anatolievich Torop, an eager artist and reluctant police officer. His family had moved to Minusinsk in 1975, and it was to the taiga east of that city that he would return and settle, beginning in 1992, with five thousand of his (even larger) flock.⁴⁴ The scriptures record certain details of his life: frequent moving in his youth, a dear and devout Orthodox grandmother, a stint in the Soviet army, an early passion for painting and portraiture, brief employment with the police, a certain unease with Soviet society - all seem plausible,

³⁶ LT 1:1 details Vissarion's early life, and chapter 6, his final spiritual awakening.

³⁷ Several translations have been offered for Vissarion's term, *Vnezemnoi razum* in Russian, including External Consciousness, the Outer-World Mind, or the Galactic Mind; I have chosen extraterrestrial intelligences simply because it is the most direct and literal. The term's use within the group implies that these intelligences inhabit a realm separate from and outside the purview of any god of earth.

³⁸ Sergei, above, and also one Yuri Gubanov, who was told about Vissarion by a contactor-acquaintance.

³⁹ LT 1:1:6, detailed below.

⁴⁰ I believe this contacting culture to be heavily influenced by the esotericism of Nikolai and Elena Roerich, and indeed, the two schools appear together frequently in the literature and lives of Vissarion and his followers. The Roerichs (who will appear in more detail below in the text) sought contact with remote and enlightened masters, cloistered in a Himalayan Shambala, who might assist men and women on their journey. Early in the Last Testament, Vissarion visits a young contactor named Alyosha, and the Roerich's series Agni-Yoga plays a central role in the séance.

⁴¹ LT 1:2:3:40 has Vissarion among contactors, observing their practice but declining to ask questions or interfere.

⁴² LT 1:1:6:1-4

⁴³ Luke 3:23.

⁴⁴ LT 1:1:3. Estimates of the group's size range from 10,000 to 50,000 followers worldwide, but there's no way to know, and the word 'follower' can mean many things.

some could be confirmed, and none are particularly illuminating.⁴⁵

The Last Testament narrates his life around a series of stirring and deeply emotional visions, also plausible but immune to scrutiny. The last of these was said to occur after the deacon of an Orthodox church in Abakan criticized some of Torop's paintings, which had been commissioned for the church's iconostasis, and which Torop considered divinely inspired. The artist refused to alter them, returned the church's money, and then, after seeing a television show about the desecration and defilement of Orthodox shrines, retreated in grief to his studio. There, he felt something great awaken inside him. The ringing of bells, then heavenly voices, resounded in the room; the smell of incense filled it; and Torop - soon to take the name Vissarion and declare himself Christ - became conscious of his mission.⁴⁶ He began to fast and, after sixty days, "[his Father] revealed the world to him, an estranged world, which He was meant to heal and to judge."⁴⁷ So it is written in the scriptures.

Some time after this, Vissarion spoke to a UFO club in Minusinsk, and there found his first disciple, Vladimir Plesin.⁴⁸ Plesin would be with him when, finally, he gave a sermon on August 18th, 1991, and his ministry officially began. The next day, August 19th, saw the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev that triggered the final dissolution of the USSR. Followers I spoke with noted this curious sequence, and though they all maintain that nothing happens by accident, they were also not inclined to speculate on its meaning. This, again, because such grand designs are immune to human scrutiny.

⁴⁵ All of part 1 of Vadik's chronicles in the first tome of the Last Testament is dedicated to Vissarion's biography and origins story.

⁴⁶ The origins and meaning of the name Vissarion are murky. Roman Lunkin, in his profile *Tserkov' Vissariona*, says that Torop took the name in May of 1991, but neither he, nor other scholars, nor the group seems to offer an explanation for the choice (or assignment) of name. It does not appear to have any link to Stalin, whose father remains the world's best-known Vissarion.

⁴⁷ LT 1:1:6:66-79

⁴⁸ LT 1:2:3:64. Alexander Panchenko, in *New Religious Movements*, names the UFO club as "*gipoteza*", a group of UFOlogists and researchers of "anomalous phenomena," a catch-all term analogous to "paranormal activity" in English.



Vissarion, age 30, with his first disciple Vladimir Plesin (right) in Moscow, likely in the autumn of 1991. This is a rare photograph of Vissarion in civilian clothes, before he donned his robes.

Vissarion's Ministry

Vadik's chronicles - at least of events he witnessed firsthand - begin in central Ukraine in July of the 32nd year of the Era of the Dawn, or 1992 on the Gregorian calendar. Vissarion speaks at a center for children's art in Cherkasy, "a quiet, green and sunny city on the banks of the Dnieper." Then to Kiev, "one of the pillars of Orthodoxy," which "met the Son of Man with light rain and wet asphalt." There, Vissarion takes questions from seekers and critics, and visits that city's historic Monastery of the Caves. Next comes Kharkov, "considered by many the esoteric capital of Ukraine," where old believers (that is, Christians) meet Vissarion with hostility and accusations.⁴⁹ On the road back to Vadik's home in Voronezh, on a railroad platform in Belgorod, two drunks approach a robed disciple and ask for guidance. They are brought to Vissarion, and sitting across from him, they speak with halting uncertainty: "I don't know how I ended up in your presence... a coincidence, but please help me to live. Help deliver me from the past." Vissarion tells the speaker that there are no coincidences, and that the man's Father had led him there because he was ready to hear the Word.⁵⁰ The bulk of the chronicles take this form - series of towns and cities, brief impressions, and a scattering of lives touched by Vissarion in ways large and small, with light literary flourishes where Vadik deemed fit. Nearly all interactions with seekers take the form of questions and answers. As they travel about the former USSR, they move fluidly between its two worlds of magic and misery. Vadik visits both in this first trip:

⁴⁹ LT 1:2:2:1-59

⁵⁰ LT 1:2:2:60-74

A new road began on the morning of June 10th, which ended that evening in Balashov, a cozy city on the bank of the Khopior, a city of enigmas, which the travelers were keen to unravel. Many of the city's residents were taken with *Agni-Yoga*,⁵¹ clairvoyance, non-traditional diagnosis and healing, and communicating with the Great Teachers, with Shambala.⁵²

In Balashov, Vissarion meets with a powerful UFO contactor, a young boy named Alyosha, who relays messages between him and extraterrestrial sources (such sources cannot contact Vissarion directly, on account of his peculiar energy field - he is a "closed system," in Vadik's understanding).⁵³ Alyosha warns Vissarion of a black magician in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, but Vissarion is largely unconcerned.⁵⁴



Vissarion in Balashov, summer of 1992. Behind him and to the right is Vadik.

The disciples then see Vissarion back to Moscow, where he takes questions in a follower's apartment, and then to Belarus, where post-Soviet despair plays the muse to Vadik:

In the morning of a new day, the dismal city of Gomel welcomed the Son of Man with its dreary streets, baking sun and radiation from Chernobyl. People were living, working, raising families, building homes, but the city was suffused with sorrow and a deathly silence.

⁵¹ The seminal series of works by the Roerichs, whose outsized role in the sect's formation is described below under "points of doctrine."

⁵² LT 1:2:3:1-2

⁵³ Interview with Vadim Redkin.

⁵⁴ LT 1:2:3:23-31

Life carried on by inertia, its impetus exhausted, but with the parts of its worn-out body plodding on.⁵⁵

This is a riff on Vissarion's own notion of the apocalypse, one that appears repeatedly in his writings - a toxic and irradiated post-Soviet world, captive to Soviet inertia.⁵⁶ Importantly, it is not the inertia of a body at rest, but of one in motion; of a cold and concrete-gray colossus, lumbering towards the abyss. Vissarion foretold that the earth itself, sentient and wounded, would soon deliver the final push.

After Gomel they returned north to Moscow, but only en route to the small town of Narovlia, "in the [Chernobyl] radiation zone."⁵⁷ He then spoke in Minsk, Grodno, Brest, Lvov, Ivano-Frankovsk, Chernovtsy. August saw him back to Minusinsk and the surrounding towns. In September, St. Petersburg.⁵⁸ In October, Sochi, Yalta, Riga in Latvia, Almaty in Kazakhstan.

He spoke in parks, planetariums, stadiums, churches, community and culture centers, university auditoriums, and on the radio and television; to art students, spiritualist conferences, UFO clubs, editorial boards of magazines, and countless nameless individuals. In each city, when his schedule freed him to do so, he would spend long days and nights answering questions in volunteers' apartments.⁵⁹ In this way, and for several more years, Vissarion and his disciples circulated through the post-Soviet body, scarlet red and a cluster of white, on the railroads and bus lines and flight paths that connected every "dismal city" to the growing villages outside Minusinsk.

Of course, the vast majority of Vissarion's followers necessarily heard of him first from other followers, and only later glimpsed the man himself. As Vissarion and his disciples carried the word through the country's main arteries, local networks replicated the process on smaller and smaller scales. When Vissarion was near, local followers or groups of seekers, in concert with Vadik, arranged his affairs. In addition to housing followers at night, volunteers would provide cars when needed, hang posters and announcements in advance of sermons, and locate and rent venues in which Vissarion could speak. He would often speak twice in a city, so that word could spread and crowds could grow before he departed.⁶⁰ Then a flurry of activity followed in his trail, propelled by the newly converted. One such convert recalls volunteering his apartment to house others:

Vadik, after the end of Vissarion's event, said 'a lot of people have come with us, and tomorrow we have another event. Can anybody take these people in for the night?' And I had just received an apartment, it was totally empty, no furniture even. ... I said, 'I can.' Unexpectedly to even myself, I might add. Something compelled me from within. And they gave me ten people... in short, they were up almost all night, regaling me about Vissarion.

For the priest Sergei and many others of his ilk, the impulse to regale others about Vissarion was part and parcel of their conversion. Recall that in Sergei's memory, the end of his search was coupled

⁵⁵ LT 1:2:4:19-21

⁵⁶ From *the Little Kernel*: "The law of inertia which is inherent in any populous society will, from now on, play a fatal role;" or "Not heeding the warnings and the signs ... people have for a long time - and especially over the last decades - moved stubbornly towards the abyss."

⁵⁷ LT 1:2:4:27

⁵⁸ LT 1:2:7:1-23. On the sect's site www.vissarion.ru, one can search the scriptures by destination, and see lists of Vissarion's travels.

⁵⁹ The priest Sergei remembers followers' apartments as most important to his spiritual education. "We were with him night and day, asking. He would answer. We would ask further. And on this basis a picture of the world unfurled." Another early member describes people streaming into an apartment "with their problems, asking questions. The Teacher would answer. From morning to night. Have a bite to eat, then back to answering."

⁶⁰ LT 1:2:5:85.

with a desire to help others end theirs. Vadik too sought to reach “as large a crowd of people as possible.” One early follower recalls buying and distributing hundreds of copies of Vissarion’s early writings, and now seems embarrassed at her own enthusiasm:

In doing that I violated Vissarion’s commandment, his understanding that the Truth is not to be peddled, but arrived at; it doesn’t knock at the gates of the deaf, or shine in the windows of the blind, it doesn’t chase after people. ... But I wanted to bring it to everybody, to pour it down people’s throats... they didn’t want that, but I imposed it on them.

One Moldovan couple heard of Vissarion from their astrologer, met him in Moscow, and then returned to the Moldovan capital of Chişinău to found a local center. Employing substantial resources from a successful printing and paper business, they then toured Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. Today, nearly all of these countries are represented in the settlements east of Minusinsk.⁶¹ After their travels, the pair toured Moldova’s prisons and, in their final act at home, gained official recognition for the church from the Moldovan state employing the husband’s business ties. These were then cut, and they moved to Siberia. Such efforts were made at the followers’ initiative, and Vissarion himself had no hand in strategizing or in directing local centers (and as seen above, he was ambivalent about proselytizing at all).

Dozens of centers appeared in cities (and countries) across the former USSR and continued Vissarion’s work in his absence. Of my decidedly small group of subjects, they mentioned centers in Moscow, Petersburg, Kaluga, Tula, Kaluga, Belgorod and, again, in Chişinău; Vadik places the total number between fifty and sixty across Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Kazakhstan, the Baltic states, Bulgaria and Germany. Decisions about day-to-day functioning were made entirely at the local level. In the Moscow center, meetings were held two or three evenings a week, during which regulars and newcomers could listen to tapes of sermons and exchange their experiences of the Teacher.⁶² Centers in this mold would continue to operate even after the major migration in 1992-1994, and many survive to this day.⁶³

What resulted from this collective endeavor - from Vissarion’s frenetic activity, from Vadik’s record-keeping and constant promotion, from the work of disciples like Sergei and similarly inspired messengers - was an immense volume of material, whose size alone could not fail to impress. Hundreds of hours of tapes and recordings; hundreds of pages describing travels and meetings (and soon, thousands); hundreds of cities and towns with inspired people, seeking to inspire others, all of whom would produce ever greater volumes of material. And the vast bulk of this material was in the form of questions and answers, so many that a newcomer need no longer ask them personally. As with the organization’s centers, Vissarion governed primarily by inspiration, seldom by directive.

Therein lay the spirit of the sect - a massive collective effort across an entire continent, propelled by shared enthusiasm, producing evidence of its own momentousness. For those who believed, it seemed that this spirit might just animate the decrepit Soviet body, stir it to life, and correct its course.

⁶¹ Roman Lunkin’s “Tserkov’ Vissariona” cites Latvia as having a particularly strong following, and other Baltic states too; Rasa Pranskevičiūtė, “Vissarion and Anastasia Movements in Lithuania” confirms this and elaborates. Tania names Germans, Bulgarians, a Belgian and a Cuban as among those living in the villages in Siberia.

⁶² Interview with Yuri Gubanov.

⁶³ This migration was the largest, but there have been several waves since, the largest in 2000 and in 2012 on account of those years’ respective, unfulfilled apocalypses. Today, the group maintains centers or formal communications with followers in several Russian cities as well as in Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the three Baltic states, Bulgaria, and Germany, though followers exist elsewhere too.

And for those who believed, no matter their organizational work or their own impressive and growing number, the whole movement sprung from a single man who, in Tania's words, "was not entirely a man." What did Vissarion's followers believe him to be?

Articles of Faith

Vissarion's followers contend that he has united all the world's faiths with his doctrine, but this itself is an article of faith - a foundational premise disguised as an implication. In truth, the sect's beliefs are esoteric and rest on no particular philosophy or practice, and followers are free to spiritually roam. Faith itself is their guiding principle, and that faith rests on the person of Vissarion. Tania's conversion, like most, begins with him:

On March 26th [1993], I met him face to face in a Moscow apartment. I wanted to see him in the flesh and speak with him, and look into his eyes... When I did meet him and had asked a few questions, and taken his hand in mine, I drowned in his loving eyes. They aren't a man's eyes, full of love for a woman, they are eyes like an ocean of love. They have no gender, they have no body, you simply dive in and draw out an enormous amount of warmth, kindness and light.

At that very moment I decided I would take him as my teacher, and it didn't matter who he was. It didn't matter what label was applied to him. It doesn't matter to this day. And when people tell me he is or isn't this or that, it doesn't matter. I know what he carries within him.

As an historical source, not much can be deduced from a man's eyes, and Tania's emphasis on them is somewhat idiosyncratic among believers, though only in its specifics. Others mention his "mastery of words, gestures and mimicry," the "beautiful forms, metaphors, and imagery" in his words, his "serene and humble" demeanor, or his "singular face."⁶⁴ Followers distributed Vissarion's photograph as a means of proselytizing, and in each of their homes, I saw it framed in prominent places. To believers, Vissarion's persona sets him apart, and it must be mentioned early, however resistant it is to analysis. It is impossible, for instance, to place Tania's emotional response to his eyes in historical time. She locates it immediately upon meeting Vissarion, but one could imagine that her impression has been amplified since then, in resonance with similar impressions of fellow believers. Regardless, the personal experience of Vissarion was, for many, an early toehold of their faith.

Once a seeker became acquainted with the sect, faith itself quickly became its own justification - the impulse to take Vissarion as your teacher, in Tania's words, "no matter who he was."⁶⁵ In a clear majority of followers' conversion narratives, an ineffable experience precedes an immersion in doctrine. This is in keeping with the sect's central value - the elevation of the spirit over the intellect.

In one typical example, a follower joined before even meeting Vissarion: "when I saw him on television, I knew, just knew, I can't explain it to you, I simply felt total trust." Another saw him in an apartment session, but watched from a distance: "at that time I didn't even ask any questions. For me it was enough to just believe, believe that [Vissarion] was precisely what I needed." The priest Sergei says that "what came from him was something of a feeling," and Vadik felt upheaval, which he struggles to convey in words. As an historical source, not much can be deduced from an internal upheaval or a feeling, nor a sense of trust or a will to believe. But this is just the point - Vissarion drew

⁶⁴ Interviews with Yuri Gubanov, Tatiana Denisova, Valentina Rybak and again Tatiana Denisova, respectively.

⁶⁵ She continued: "It didn't matter what label they put on him, and it still doesn't matter. When they tell me he is or isn't this or that, it's all the same. I know what he carries within him."

followers at a time when many were skeptical of cold reason. Vissarion's thirty-eighth commandment captures the zeitgeist: "Attempting to dissect every mystery by scientific means is the sign of a sick mind." As we saw in the first chapter, on astrology, the fact that so many followers were educated in the sciences might have made this dictum more potent, rather than less.

Vissarion's own writing stresses the preeminence of faith, and thus helps followers along this path. He consistently denies utility of flashy miracle-working (all ears hear thunder, whether or not they are ready to hear),⁶⁶ and several more of his sixty-one commandments promote a skepticism towards the rational mind: "Do not seek to judge Great Things;" "it is unwise to reason about the essence of the Truth flowing from the Source;" "the mind cannot grasp what is spiritual;" "to develop reason first and foremost will bring incurable ailment;" and even "an untruth (*nepravda*) which brings good is wisdom."⁶⁷ A complementary set of commandments elevates children over adults, severing wisdom from knowledge or experience: "Do not strive to escape childhood, but to know its truth;" "If a child is on a higher spiritual plane, it follows to strive for that, without shame in your superior age."⁶⁸

Vissarion's conception of blind faith is, of course, not his alone. What matters is that, for Vissarion's followers, his persona seems to trigger it in the mind (or whatever lies beyond it). None of this is to say that Vissarion's doctrine is without substance (the doctrine is detailed below), but only that its substance was not its primary selling point. The sect is first and foremost a celebration of Vissarion himself.

So what, finally, do they believe Vissarion to be? At first glance, it would seem that Vissarion is claiming the mantle of Jesus Christ. He is, of course - he says so explicitly and looks the part; the name "Last Testament" evokes the previous two; crosses of a sort adorn their temples and shrines.⁶⁹ The sect's most vocal opponents - the Orthodox church and affiliated anti-cult activists - further this impression by labeling him an antichrist and, as evidenced in Vadik's chronicles and some videos that survive, accosting him with biblical refutations.⁷⁰ But Vissarion is more heathen than heretic, and Christian elements are actually tangential to sect's beliefs and practices. In truth, Vissarion's spiritual claim is even grander.

Concerning outward appearances, Vissarion does seem to believe himself Christ, and is presented that way in *the Last Testament*. He will, on rare occasion, cite Christian scriptures in that text, and as we saw above, his final and culminating vision follows deep reflection on Orthodoxy and its perceived degeneration.

Yet virtually nothing in doctrine or practice appears Christian under scrutiny - the holy trinity is nearly unrecognizable in his cosmology, for instance, and followers do not commonly read the bible; there is no baptism or communion or any other Christian sacrament.⁷¹ Vissarion denies that the cross, as a symbol, relates to the crucifixion, and their use of it (in their hands, a centered cross with a circle

⁶⁶ v. 116 in *Predvozheshchenie*, one of Vissarion's writings in *the Little Kernel*.

⁶⁷ Commandments 22, 55, 54, 36 and 3 respectively. These, too, are included in *the Little Kernel*.

⁶⁸ Commandments 48 and 47.

⁶⁹ Along with stars and crescents, floral inlays, and a host of other symbols, though the cross is always central.

⁷⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIXysaSzRxQ> (accessed 08/16/16) for an extensive theological dispute between Vissarion and an Orthodox priest from 1995. In the scriptures, many sermons are interrupted by doubting Orthodox Christians.

⁷¹ In *the Little Kernel*, the holy trinity is represented as three of five "great origins," with God the Father at times swapped out for other entities. The sect does have a ritual that bears resemblance to communion, but its meaning is substantially and, in my view, definitively divorced from the Christian understanding. They do not see it as the body of Christ.

around it) does not preserve that meaning.⁷² One scholar has argued convincingly that the outward Christian forms of the group - their clothing and particularities of their speech, for instance - seem derived from cinematographic representations of Christianity more than from the tradition itself.⁷³

When Tania said she accepted Vissarion as her teacher “no matter who he was,” she was implying ‘whether or not he is Christ,’ a common refrain from followers who were never invested in Christianity to begin with.⁷⁴ On whether Vissarion was indeed the Second Coming, Vadik said it “didn’t interest [him] much at the time” he converted. My subjects call Vissarion many things - “the Truth” or “the Word;” a “highly advanced human being;” an “exalted teacher;” a revolutionary thinker in the lineage of Copernicus and Galileo; a reincarnation of Jesus, but also the Buddha; and indeed, just Christ.⁷⁵ But pressed on what the latter means, several implied that Christ is really an historical unknown, and none seemed overly interested in the topic.⁷⁶ This list, alas, points to what they really believe about Vissarion. To them, he is the synthesis and culmination of *all* the world’s faiths, which became obsolete at his arrival in 1991 - relegated, as it were, to history.

We’ll recall that Tania, in explaining her ultimate conversion, came to the conclusion that the world’s faiths were but “petals of the same daisy” or, as she elaborated elsewhere, “cultural manifestations of this or that people.” The priest Sergei described them (and his science, and the anomalies of the Perm Triangle, too) as different parts of an elephant, grasped by different people ignorant to each other’s perspective. He credits Vissarion for reconciling them by bringing “a few new and central truths,” though his explication takes the reader in circles:

The bible is comprised of two books, as if it were one. The Old Testament and the New. In the Old it’s written, “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, the Lord chastens us and has done so many times. But then, God is Love, he does not seek to punish. It’s a clear contradiction. In Indian traditions, for example, there is one god here, multiple gods there, a god for every occasion, it’s not clear how this is reconciled. Buddhism, for instance, has no god at all. ... Islam is distilled somehow from all of these, parts taken from Christianity, from somewhere else, with a

⁷² Sergei says the cross works, like all symbols, on the subconscious, and carries protection, good will and purity, but he does not mention Christ. The four points, in their understanding, are the unity of four branches of world religion. One Tatiana Denisova, drawing from the scriptures and her own understanding, describes the cross as “an ancient symbol... given to us by the universe,” not Christian in origin. In question 114 of the section *Vstrechi* (meetings) in the Last Testament, Vissarion claims that the cross as a symbol antedates the crucifixion and even Mother Earth herself, and is found in African and American cultures as well as Middle Eastern ones. The circle around the cross seems to recall the symbol of the Roerich Society.

⁷³ Panchenko, “New Religious Movements,” 117.

⁷⁴ Of the twelve subjects I interviewed in depth, only one claims to have been a practicing Orthodox believer. Nearly all, in this chapter and the others, do recall grandmothers who still prayed or went to church, and this seems true of Vissarion himself. Some, like Sergei, were baptized by their grandmothers but did not attend services or otherwise practice the faith. One early convert, when asked about the connection between Vissarion’s teachings and the bible, dismissed the idea altogether. Asked to elaborate, and about naming the scriptures the “Last Testament” in particular, his answer was rather mundane: “[We registered] officially with the Ministry of Justice as the Church of the Last Testament. They asked, ‘why ‘Last’? And we said ‘eh it’s all the same, we have to call it something.’ It’s a historical progression... Old Testament, New Testament, Last Testament.” Scholar Romano Lunkin says the name was registered in 1995.

⁷⁵ The Word or the Truth are widespread in use. The other names are from Vadim Redkin, Tatiana Denisova, and Tatiana Vanina, respectively.

⁷⁶ One Tatiana Denisova says that others will see Vissarion as Christ, but only after enough reincarnations. When asked if he is Christ, Tania says “who is Christ? Do you know, or just know the name?,” and on Vissarion’s resemblance, she says (correctly, of course) that we don’t know what Jesus looked like. Vadik, when asked if Vissarion is Christ, says he’d rather call him simply “a bringer of Truth,” but that in Christian terms, that might be called a messiah, and thus, Christ, but he uses the phrase reluctantly. He also points out that Christians both believe he will return, but maintain that any particular instance can’t possibly be him - “if we follow this logical chain, it’s a dead end” - essentially, an argument that Vissarion *could* be Christ.

large element of guidance for daily life, highly elaborated... [The Teacher] says: in every teaching there is some element of the Truth. But not the whole Truth.

Vissarion's new and central truth, it seems, is that there is a new and central truth, one that reconciles all the old and partial ones. This circularity is not a weakness or inadequacy of the faith, nor even a distinguishing feature; all faith is circular.⁷⁷ It is simply worth noting how Vissarion is placed at its center.

To be sure, this premise of grand synthesis is part of Vissarion's self-conception; it does not stem only from his followers. "Religion," in his view, is a human error, a delusion from a bygone era when humans were limited by savage and tribal mindsets.⁷⁸ His initial writings in *the Little Kernel* describe monotheism as an intermediate stage, having emerged at a time when mankind could conceive of a unified God but not yet a unified self. "The Truth of the Unity was therefore divided into four Origins," he writes, "where each of them gave birth to new Teaching on Earth."⁷⁹ And these four teachings - Taoism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity (implied, with their various relatives and progenitors)⁸⁰ - are described as branches of a single tree, unaware of their shared trunk. And Vissarion heralds a new era with a "Unified Faith," the final faith, which needs no name (and as we see in followers' speech, Vissarion himself needs no name - he is simply the Teacher).⁸¹

Curiously, Vissarion's writings include some reluctant praise for atheists, who correctly seize on the contradictions and falsehoods of established world religions. Sergei seems to point to this problem above - the world's beliefs are not just partial but contradictory and at times absurd. And this is what Tania means when she talks about "cultural manifestations of this or that people" - human shortcomings in trying to reflect the "Truth of Unity." In Vissarion's doctrine, this grand unity is self-evident - at least to those who take it on faith. For them, Vissarion is Tania's "center of a daisy," Sergei's whole elephant, and the trunk of the tree of world faith.

Tania offers one last image:

Different religions speak of one and the same thing... the whole, seen from one side. And another religion sees the same whole, from another side. ... One looks from here, another from there, a third from somewhere else, and everyone sees differently. It's like, for instance, a jug. One person says 'it's a spout,' another 'a handle,' the third says 'a base,' the fourth 'a lid.' But really it's a jug with a lid.

Tania here gets closest to the truth. Vissarion is a jug - a beautiful and empty vessel, paraded

⁷⁷ Neither is the concept of grand synthesis unique, with the Bahá'í Faith as the most prominent example.

⁷⁸ Interview with Vladimir Vedernikov, for example: "People lived in tribes that fought, went to war with one another. How do you change a person's mindset when the scriptures in their hands, which they all follow, say 'kill or be killed'... 'Eye for an eye' and 'love your enemies' - those are very different, wholly oppositional concepts. And here [in Vissarion's teaching -author] it's not an opposition, it's an unveiling of the essence, how to love your enemy, even as he approaches you with a weapon. How to love your enemy, or pray for those who curse you. How? ... In the course of three years, two thousand years ago, the Teacher was not able to provide this, because people's mode of thought was utterly different. It was important from Him then, with those savage people, just to change their relationship to one another.

⁷⁹ *The Little Kernel* is the sect's only early writing available in English; this translation is by one Michael Forshaw. All other translations are my own.

⁸⁰ It is unclear why he chose these four in particular, but Judaism, for instance, is lumped in with Christianity among the followers, as is Hinduism with Buddhism. Because religion itself is a human corruption, points of theology are of secondary importance.

⁸¹ This is complicated, of course, by the fact that he gave himself the name "Vissarion." See note 47.

The group prefers this term, "United Faith," to the names applied by outsiders - the Church of the Last Testament or the Vissarionites. These are not used, except when necessary in dealing with the state or the media.

tirelessly about former USSR by his followers, filled from what material was available until he seemed to contain the entire world, the essence of everything together. It is difficult, likely impossible, for either followers or observers to express precisely what that means. But thanks to the chronicler Vadik, we can look at the process by which all faiths were united and the jug was filled.

Points of Doctrine

We'll recall that Sergei spent long days and nights with Vissarion asking questions and hearing the questions of others, and from Vissarion's answers, "a picture of the world was formed." The scriptures contain hundreds of these questions, organized by Vadik both chronologically and thematically for the followers' reference.⁸² The questions can be divided roughly into two types, of equal import to the followers but serving different ends. The first are personal, even psychotherapeutic - recall, for instance, Sergei as he wrestled with the morality of his affair.⁸³ Vissarion encourages his followers to ask such questions, and they comprise the majority of his interactions with his flock, then and now. As the commune operates today, answering such questions is Vissarion's primary means of management and governance, with more concrete matters left to the followers. The second type of question can be called doctrinal - questions about the universe and our place in it, for instance, or the workings of karma and fate, or the purpose of Vissarion's presence on earth. Questions such as these are accorded more prominence in the early scriptures.

Some questions were fairly urgent: Why are many people today calling Russia the Chosen Land? What is the apocalypse? What is the nature of the abyss, towards which humanity is moving? When do you expect the world to end? If people's actions can change the future, can the apocalypse be avoided?⁸⁴

Others took a long view: What does the soul experience in heaven? Can we help those who've gone to hell? If souls do transmigrate, why is it not mentioned in the bible? Were people with ailing bodies all great sinners in past lives? Might my next incarnation be given a healthier body?⁸⁵

Some came from folklore, old and new: Do ghosts exist? What are zombies? How can we protect ourselves from mind control? How should we view white magic? Can contact with extraterrestrial intelligences really bring about our deaths?⁸⁶

Many seem to have come from the pages of this dissertation: What are your views on astrology? Can a person's soul transmigrate into an animal's body, and vice versa? Then why do Indian scriptures say so? Orthodoxy sees astrology, magic and extrasensory healing as sins warranting excommunication. But what of the people who practice these, believe in God, and do good? Do you consider it a sin to use bioenergy to heal a person?⁸⁷

⁸² Questions organized thematically are titled *Встречи* in the "Word of Vissarion" section of the first tome of the Last Testament.

⁸³ This, including the term 'psychotherapeutic,' is Roman Lunkin's observation from his "Tserkov' Vissariona." He continues: "Vissarion carefully and, evidently with great joy, responds to the most minor of needs and injuries... mundane family needs, squabbles, conflicts, petty disputes or, on the other hand, friendship and free, happy coexistence, occupy the lion's share of Vissarion's time."

⁸⁴ LT 1:2:12:40; questions 62, 61, 65, 67 in *Vstrechi*, a section of the Last Testament composed of questions and answers organized thematically.

⁸⁵ Questions 3, 9, 40, 37 and 38 in *Vstrechi*.

⁸⁶ Questions 12, 47, 92, 93 in *Vstrechi*.

⁸⁷ Questions 88, 42, 43, 94, 90, 68 in *Vstrechi*.

Others come from competing sects: In Kiev in 1990, an organization was formed called the White Brotherhood. They maintain that Kiev is the New Jerusalem, and that John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary have returned. They also talk about the Last Testament. Who are they?⁸⁸ How do you relate to the Mother of God Center?⁸⁹ There is a man in Italy named Giorgio Bongiovanni, who has the wounds of Christ. He has declared Christ's imminent arrival.⁹⁰ Who sent him?⁹¹

Vissarion's answers to the questions above, and to all of the "doctrinal" questions that fill Vadik's pages, are not simple, at least not to newcomers or outsiders. His words seem to meander and circle, to focus and blur like an optometrist's lens, but in the audio and video that survive, his delivery is ever steady. This is the rhetorical ability praised by one follower above, and surely discussed by many others, perhaps as they lay awake on the floors of apartments regaling each other. Generally speaking, his answers elaborate on the cosmology described in *the Little Kernel* (see below), affirm or mildly adjust tenets of the various beliefs mentioned, dismiss competing or seemingly dark spiritual trends as manifestations of a remote and hostile intelligence, and urge followers to moral action along Christian or Communist lines (he and his followers see in these, like much else, a shared essence).⁹² In my small sample, followers came from serious practice in "extrasense" healing, Krishna Consciousness, Bahá'í, Mormonism, UFOlogy and Russian esotericism, and each of these, alongside many others (including all currents granted a chapter in this dissertation), find their way into the Last Testament via questioners.⁹³

Where do Vissarion's answers come from? If we ask Vissarion himself, they come from without, and most often from his Father in heaven; if we ask his followers, they come from within him. The latter is undoubtedly (if only partly) true. One follower insists that those with true knowledge - implied, Vissarion - "did not get it from somewhere, from reading books." Tania, in explaining her conversion above, immediately got the impression that he spoke "from within," "[citing] no books, no authors." Vadik calls Vissarion a "closed system," "self-sufficient," and continues:

The information is inside. It doesn't come from without, like you [an historian -*author*], passing along sources, but a closed system, where information is swirling around and then springs forth.

⁸⁸ The Great White Brotherhood emerged at the same time as Vissarion, and centered on one Maria Tsvigun (or Maria Devi Kristos within the group) who also declared herself the Second Coming. The group advertised more aggressively (the Bakhmeteff archive at Columbia has a small collection of their posters and leaflets), and was accused of far more egregious conduct than Vissarion's - primarily kidnapping and drugging. They predicted the apocalypse would come in November of 1993, and when the day came, they attempted to seize Saint Sophia's Cathedral in Kiev.

⁸⁹ The Mother of God Center (*Bogorodichnyi Tsentr*) also emerged in 1991 and might be called a New Religious Movement, though it tacked far closer to the Orthodox church than the White Brotherhood or Vissarion.

⁹⁰ Giorgio Bongiovanni, a Sicilian, claimed to have stigmata, and apparently backed this claim up. He also dabbled in UFO theories and later turned to investigative journalism. See Rory Carroll, "Written in Blood," *The Guardian*, June 17, 2002, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2002/jun/17/mondaymediasection.italy>, accessed 08/16/16.

⁹¹ Questions 80,81,82, in *Vstrechi*.

⁹² It is difficult to identify Vissarion's influences, as the very idea runs counter to his self-conception as a prophet. Roman Lunkin suggests that he had pursued Eastern martial arts, yoga, occultism, Christianity and Roerichism (discussed below in depth), though his source is unclear. In the scriptures, he is often found among UFO contactors, and can be spotted reading the Roerichs' Agni-Yoga and Ernest Renan's "Life of Christ" in a bookshop. He seems familiar with nearly every doctrine thrown at him. C.A. Maksimov, "Pozovi Menia v Dal' Svetluiu," 5 shows him circulating in yoga and "extrasense" circles, and speculates on the sources of certain points of doctrine, but Maksimov's own sources are often from the Orthodox church or anticult literature, and should be approached with caution.

⁹³ Seekership, non-rejection of spiritual ideas and a resistance to dogmatism are the guiding principles of the larger circles from which Vissarion's sect condenses. See note 14.

Much good scholarship has sought to locate the origins of Vissarion's doctrine, and below I will pass those sources along. Religious scholar and folklorist Alexander Panchenko's analysis is perhaps the most insightful, and in addition, he astutely identifies the value of "independent personalities" like Vissarion when old institutions are discredited. "Vissarion," he writes, "is capable of resolving any internal or external problem of existence, without deferring to the institutions of contemporary society, based as it is on complex divisions of knowledge, technology, labor and resources." This search for new and, most of all, undivided authorities illuminates every chapter of this dissertation, and in some sense Vissarion (and those like him - there were, of course, several like him) is its perfection - the source of sources, "citing no books." But as any historian knows, a lack of citations can mean many things.

Before deferring to other scholars on Vissarion's doctrine, we must only note that it is esoteric, and thus impressionistic by its nature. Adding to this challenge, few full recordings of sermons survive from the sect's first years, and in Vadik's chronicles, their substance is rarely (if ever) detailed - Vadik only notes their setting, attendance, reception, and so forth. From what does remain, it appears that the sermons are elaborations on his writings in *the Little Kernel*, which itself is a blending of esoteric cosmology, moral diktats, and vague proclamations of a coming apocalypse and renewal. Vissarion, at times, will rely on sacred mystery in explaining the connections among the doctrine's many parts, and this too should not be viewed as a weakness (or as exceptional among faiths). In a word, the doctrine is complex. "However," writes Alexander Panchenko, "there are some basic concepts playing a decisive role for religious ideology and practice of the movement." He continues,

These are: the idea of Vissarion's divine mission, the special cult of Mother Earth (or Mother Nature), and the concept of the so called "external consciousness" (or "galactic mind"),⁹⁴ which means both extraterrestrial civilizations (either friendly or hostile to humanity)⁹⁵ and various personages of the world religions⁹⁶ ... Generally speaking, it is an ecological cult representing Mother Earth as a living person suffering from technological activities of humanity, pollution of the environment, etc. The ideas of reincarnation and special energies connecting every person with the cosmic environment **are very popular among Vissarion's followers** [emphasis mine]. The teaching of the sect does not presume any personified evil. The Evil is considered to be the "negative energy" of mankind. All sectarians are complete vegetarians ... [and] all forms of aggression are strictly forbidden because of their "negative energetic effect".⁹⁷

Many beliefs and practices "popular among Vissarion's followers" do not derive from Vissarion himself, and the sect has no notion of heresy. Sometimes, teacher and pupils are even at odds, a natural outcome of their divergent backgrounds - Vissarion is of a provincial and working-class background, not of the urban technical and scientific intelligentsia, but it was they who came to comprise the flock. Vissarion's writings, thus, are strongly anti-intellectual, but this tendency is muted or denied among

⁹⁴ I have translated this same concept as "extraterrestrial intelligence," though not without hesitation. See note 38.

⁹⁵ See note 30. As academic studies go, Panchenko's "New Religious Movements," 125, elaborates on contacting and its meaning. For statistics on UFO beliefs, see Irena Borowik, "Between Orthodoxy and Eclecticism: On the Religious Transformations of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine," *Social Compass* 49, no. 4 (December 1, 2002): 497-508, Sergei Filatov and Dmitrii E. Furman, "Religiia i Politika v Massovom Soznanii," *Sotsiologicheskie Issledovaniia*, 1992, and Holly Denio Stephens, "The Occult in Russia Today," 359, in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁹⁶ Panchenko lists here "the Blessed Virgin (usually called Mother Maria or Mother Mariam), St. Nicholas, Sergei Radonezhskii (see note 1), Seraphim Sarovskii, Moses, Buddha and some others."

⁹⁷ Panchenko, "New Religious Movements" is the most explicit in showing the late-Soviet spiritual influences that come together in the group (124 in particular).

followers (Sergei and Tania describe a *reconciliation* of faith with science, for instance).⁹⁸ He emphasizes the Second Coming and shows a concern with Orthodoxy and its saints, but as we've seen, early followers seem more detached from Christian elements. Vissarion's own writings show a reverence for nature that is easier cultivated in Siberia than in Moscow, and no small part of his authority derives from his being provincial, and thus closer to Russia's spiritual essence than his followers (in dress and persona he recalls Christ, but perhaps, a certain Siberian mystic, too).⁹⁹ And accordingly, Vissarion's doomsaying was more focused on Russia's ecological distress, while his followers uniformly recall intractable moral and political corruption. It is precisely this give and take between Vissarion and his followers that shaped their shared worldview; this is the jug and its contents.

Vissarion and the Roerichs

There is a current among Vissarion's followers, however, that is particularly pronounced, likely because it was shared by teacher and pupils from the start. Despite differences in their backgrounds, both Vissarion and virtually all of his flock are versed in the writings and artistic production of the Roerichs - husband and wife Nikolai and Elena, whose art and philosophy represent Russia's strongest indigenous esoteric tradition (which in turn became a broad spiritual movement after *perestroika*).¹⁰⁰ Every subject I interviewed cited them prominently, and Vissarion can even be glimpsed reading their seminal series of works *Agni-Yoga* in the scriptures themselves.¹⁰¹ So-called "Roerichists" in Moscow, at the time of Vissarion's early ministry, were well aware of him, and at least once invited him to speak. Roerichism is the single most important influence on the Vissarion sect's philosophy, practice and internal culture, and provided the template for Vissarion's muted, ultimately hopeful apocalypse.

⁹⁸ The place of science in Russia's spiritual world at this time is particularly interesting, and of course, a major theme of this dissertation. If, on one hand, astrology seeks explicitly to fuse science and spirituality, Vissarion seems to fuse them inadvertently; they meet on the other side, so to speak. See Alexander Panchenko, "Dvadtsatyi Vek: Novoe Religioznoe Vobrazhenie," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, no. 17 (May 2012) on the spiritualization of science - he notes great interest in gravity waves, radiation, psychic energies, bio-fields and other such conceptions among scientific intelligentsia in the 1970s, and growing devotion to various scientific luminaries who dabbled in the occult, prominent among them Konstantin Tsiolkovskii and Vladimir Vernadskii.

⁹⁹ Many photographs show Vissarion in an elaborated peasant *kosovorotka*, though he's unlikely to have worn this before his ministry. Although Rasputin appears neither in the scriptures nor my interviews, it is not hard to place both him and Vissarion both in a certain, peculiarly Russian lineage of peasant-mystics.

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Panchenko's "Dvadtsatyi Vek: Novoe Religioznoe Vobrazhenie" contains an excellent analysis of Roerichism in the urban milieu, which makes the omission of Roerichism from his article on Vissarion's sect an odd oversight. In addition to Panchenko, see Sergei Filatov and Roman Lunkin, "Roerichanstvo: Sinteticheskoe Mirovozzrenie Ili Novaia Religiiia?," *Sovremennaia Religioznaia Zhizn' Rossii. Opyt Sistematicheskogo Opisaniia*, Keston Institute (2004) and Marat Shterin's "New Religious Movements in Russia in the 1990s" in Matti Kotiranta, ed., *Religious Transition in Russia*, Kikumora Publications 15 (Helsinki: Kikumora Publications : Aleksanteri Institute, 2000), 179.

¹⁰¹ LT 1:2:3:23-31



Vissarion at Moscow's International Center for the Roerichs, January 1992.

Nikolai Konstantinovich Roerich (1874-1947) was an important cultural figure of Russia's Silver Age, which itself was a time of spiritual seeking, mysticism and the occult for those in the educated classes.¹⁰² The spiritual elevation of culture united Roerich's many interests and public pursuits - he was at once an acclaimed painter, a campaigner for the protection of cultural heritage, and a pacifist who offered culture as an antidote to humanity's recurring bouts of war. Alongside his peers, Roerich took an interest in theosophy, esotericism and the occult, which accelerated following his union to Elena Ivanovna Roerich (1879-1955, née Shaposhnikova). Beginning in 1920, the two elaborated and published an idiosyncratic but accessible spiritual philosophy called *Agni-Yoga* (or alternatively, *Living Ethics*). The couple claimed that Elena was in contact with so-called Enlightened Teachers cloistered in a Himalayan Shambala, from whose teaching the doctrine was condensed, and the two lived their later lives in Himalayan India. At the same time they and their philosophy accorded particular significance to Russia and to Russian Orthodox spirituality. *Agni-Yoga* would see a resurgence in the Soviet Union from the 1970s onward, and Vissarion's sect is but one of many groups that considers the Roerichs saints.¹⁰³

As the above should make clear, the details of *Agni-Yoga* are not easily summarized, but scholars of religion Sergei Filatov and Roman Lunkin succeed:

¹⁰² This summary, and much in this section, is derived from Roman Lunkin and Sergei Filatov, "Roerichanstvo: Sinteticheskoe Mirovozzrenie Ili Novaia Religiiia?," *Sovremennaia Religioznaia Zhižn' Rossii. Opyt Sistematičeskogo Opisaniia*, Keston Institute (Logos, 2004). That article exists in translation, with minor change to content: Roman Lunkin and Sergei Filatov, "The Roerich Movement: A Homegrown Russian 'New Religious Movement,'" *Religion, State and Society* 28, no. 1 (2000): 135-48. On Silver Age spiritualism, see I. Iu. Vinistkii, *Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism* (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

¹⁰³ The central argument of Lunkin and Filatov's piece (see above), relevant to understanding the Roerichs' enduring appeal, is that their support for (some would say, collaboration with) the Soviet government gave them a unique capacity to bridge the gaps in Russia's fractured past, uniting old and new.

In the syncretic teachings of the Roerichs one can identify several independent components: the sacralization of culture and artistic production, borrowings from theosophy, Buddhism and Christianity, Russian patriotism, a pathos of revolutionary remaking of the world ... [and] they adopted foundational tenets of Eastern religions: reincarnation; karma as a law of fate; cycles of death and rebirth of the universe, individual worlds, our planet and historical epochs; [and] the relationship of the teacher, the “mahatma,” to the pupil in spiritual life. One of the fundamental ideas is a conception of spiritual hierarchy as the foundation of religious life, in which every individual occupies a place suited to their worth, advancing upward with each reincarnation. ... Teachings on salvation and eschatology in *Agni-Yōga*... are based above all on the bible and Christian notions of the Second Coming of Christ ...¹⁰⁴

Virtually all of the spiritual elements above appear, largely unadulterated, in the scriptures of Vissarion’s sect and in the stated beliefs of individuals. In more concrete matters, Vissarion presents himself as the Roerichs’ conception of an enlightened teacher (hence, “the Teacher”) - his authority, by virtue of his proximity to the divine, allows him to counsel followers in spiritual matters and in the minutia of their daily lives. He fields questions at a weekly mass, and often meets with the men or the women of the sect collectively to hear their grievances and offer solutions.¹⁰⁵ Filatov and Lunkin also observed that the believers’ way of life in their settlements closely resembles the commune envisioned in Elena Roerich’s 1926 tract *New Era Community*, which immediately preceded the *Agni-Yōga* series.¹⁰⁶ Lunkin summarizes the commune’s values - again, shared with the Roerichs - as “discipline, communal property, a foundation on trust and kindness to one another, a vegetarian diet, and family relations geared towards communalism.” Elsewhere, he adds incessant work, obedience to the Teachers, and collective education outside the home, each borne out on the Mountain (education is discussed in this chapter’s conclusion).¹⁰⁷ The sect’s symbol - a centered cross inscribed in a circle - recalls a symbol developed by Roerich in the 1930s, intended to be flown in wartime over objects of cultural heritage.

The sacralization of art, in particular, could be called the major focus of the Vissarion sect’s culture. Vissarion’s own paintings - like the celebrated and often haunting art of Nikolai Roerich himself¹⁰⁸ - are taken as evidence of his elevated perch on the spiritual ladder and are displayed in most followers’ homes. Vadik’s career and self-identification as a musician certainly drew him closer to Vissarion, and to this day Vadik writes hymns for the believers and performs his own songs - to particular fanfare - at festivals and internal talent shows (which are quite common). As seen in the photographs in this chapter’s introduction, believers dedicate great attention to woodworking and crafts, which to them are at once a hobby, a moral good, and an economic driver (though much of the sect’s money came from initial sale of homes and possessions, the followers now produce everything from handicrafts to prefabricated log cabins for sale to outsiders).¹⁰⁹ In all these respects, they are

¹⁰⁴ Filatov and Lunkin, “Roerichanstvo: Sinteticheskoe Mirovozzrenie Ili Novaia Religia?”

¹⁰⁵ In recent years (writing in 2015), Vissarion has receded somewhat from his flock, which believers attribute to a natural process of elevation back towards heaven. I was told by more than one follower that he is finding it more difficult to engage in worldly affairs as a result. He still does appear and commune with followers on occasion, but it is unpredictable when it will happen. He has also quit painting, rarely travels, and speaks even less often to media and, alas, visiting researchers (see note 112).

¹⁰⁶ This observation is Roman Lunkin’s in “Tserkov’ Vissariona.”

¹⁰⁷ Filatov and Lunkin, “The Roerich Movement (English version),” 141.

¹⁰⁸ This chapter’s cover image is one of Roerich’s paintings, see note 1. On his painting and art generally, see John McCannon, “Apocalypse and Tranquility: The World War I Paintings of Nicholai Roerich,” *Russian History* 30, no. 3 (2003): 301–21.

¹⁰⁹ Critics accuse Vissarion and his inner circle of embezzling and storing the wealth of believers for themselves, but I see no reason to take such claims seriously, even if the group’s finances are predictably opaque.

attempting to realize the Roerichs' identification of culture with spirituality and with peace.



Vissarion, *The Last Testament*. Oil on canvas.

The only element of Roerichism that seems out of place in Vissarion's sect is Russian patriotism, as the scriptures and followers alike aver a certain (Soviet?) internationalism and skepticism of borders of any kind, be they spiritual, intellectual or geopolitical. But in fact Russia does play an absolutely central role in the sect's worldview - "patriotism" is just too superficial a term (and not one the Roerichs would have used, either). Russia's misery and its magic, in the hands of Vissarion, become its singular agony and election, which in turn make Russia the center of a worldwide renewal.

Apocalypse in One Country

Believers and historians agree that the Soviet world ended, but differ on that event's meaning.¹¹⁰ While this chapter seeks to place Vissarion's sect in the cultural context of the collapse, believers, again, find any such connection meaningless, and uninteresting to boot.¹¹¹ Only the clumsiest

¹¹⁰ This section, and its title, are indebted to Mariia Akhmetova and her fascinating book *Konets Sveta v Odnoi Otdel'no Vziatoi Strane* (see note 2 for full citation). Drawing from four apocalyptic movements of this period in Russia, hers is the most comprehensive and convincing depiction of the postindustrial apocalyptic worldview.

irnatural Miriam Dobson's "Building Peace, Fearing the Apocalypse" (forthcoming) describes the Soviet government's attempt to place apocalypticism squarely in the West, and conflate it with religious fanaticism and a pessimism unknown to new Soviet people.

¹¹¹ This is also, perhaps, why Vissarion declined to speak with me - I submitted hand-written questions, historical in nature, and it seems he found them mundane.

interviewer would approach the question head-on, as I did in one instance. The response:

If two thousand years ago Christ came at a particular time and a place, then now, he'll necessarily come at a particular time and place. ... You and I can't right now give some clear-cut human explanation, and say "well, this all happened because of this or that..." We as people can talk details, connections with politics or economics, but I think it's more about giving humanity a new teaching, one that allows us to change many aspects of human existence. ... Why at that time exactly? Because there was a breakdown, the foundation on which people rested began to collapse, because the Soviet Union was a configuration of sorts, which a person could count on.

The actor in this telling is God, or at least some universal principle, unknown to history, by which humanity's needs are taken into account. What matters to believers is that the solution was found, not how it became necessary.

That said, the quotation above does suggest a starting point for understanding Vissarion's apocalypse. As a historian might, the speaker identifies the Soviet collapse as a time of disorientation, but then moves seamlessly between the problems of that country and those of humanity generally. All of humanity needed a new teaching, because Russia was in trouble.

The idea that Russia plays a universal role in humanity's salvation is ubiquitous in the writings of the Roerichs who, despite their Eastern and esoteric elaborations, always upheld Russian Orthodoxy of a particularly messianic cast.¹¹² Elena Roerich foresaw that "the downfall of Russia [would be] the downfall of the whole world," at least in part due to its central location between East and West. The Roerichs, too, did not write with citations, but such notions were not theirs alone, and in fact run wide and deep through Russian history (with the Soviet period emphatically included).¹¹³ Vissarion is cut from this cloth, as were several other apocalyptic sects of the 1990s.¹¹⁴ Recall, from above, one question from a believer: Why are many people today calling Russia the Chosen Land? Vissarion answers:

Russia is an ash heap of Faith.

And the soil is rich after a fire. This is why she is flooded with missionaries, each speaking a different language in their heart. And this is why our Heavenly Father has planted the Seed of the Great Fulfillment in this very land, and why the agony of Force has so clearly left its mark on this land.¹¹⁵

Hence "*the Little Kernel*," the seed of salvation sown in the ashes. In that text (the above is from Vadik's chronicles), Vissarion warns of a looming "state of savagery," by which "Russia is made ready for a great mission from the Lord." That mission, the so-called Great Fulfillment, is the sudden attainment of a higher level of spirituality throughout the world. In the scriptures, it is also described as a transition from the Kingdom of Force to the Kingdom of the Soul, and the triumph of light over dark, or of warmth over coldness.¹¹⁶ It is to follow a final decline of our current world.

What is the nature of that decline? What is the nature of the abyss, towards which humanity is

¹¹² Sergei Filatov and Roman Lunkin, "Roerichanstvo: Sinteticheskoe Mirovozzrenie Ili Novaia Religia?"

¹¹³ Peter J. S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Holy Revolution, Communism and After* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000). Duncan sees Russian messianism from above and from below from the early 19th century onward.

¹¹⁴ See note 111. Akhmetova convincingly connects apocalypticism to this sense of Russia's mission, though each exists independent of the other as well. For this trend in Orthodoxy before the 1917 revolution, see T. Alpitser, "Rossia I Apokalipsis' (Russia and Apocalypse)," *Problemy Filosofii*, November 7, 1996.

¹¹⁵ LT 1:2:12:40-42.

¹¹⁶ The two kingdoms are first mentioned in verses 11-13 in *Predvozheshchenie*, an introduction of sorts to the Little Kernel. Light/dark and warmth/coldness dichotomies suffuse the texts.

moving?¹¹⁷ Vissarion answers:

[The abyss] is a vision of the mass death of humanity. But not only death of the flesh, which the Earth will undertake in self-defense, but most tragically a spiritual death. ... You are given the opportunity to labor in the Great Fulfillment, in the Salvation of humanity and Mother Earth. To ignore God's call, to not justify the hope that He has vested in you, is to participate in the most wretched of all acts - the annihilation of mankind and Mother Earth. And in doing so, your soul stands to fall into irrelevance, into nothingness.

This is about as explicit as Vissarion gets in describing the end of the world - like the Roerichs, he generally focused less on the cataclysm or its timing, and far more on the spiritual advancement that would follow.¹¹⁸ And when Vissarion did describe the event, as above, his vision was in fact rather sunny compared with contemporaries and competitors like the Great White Brotherhood, which seized the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev and later attempted a mass suicide, or Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese apocalyptic sect that attacked the Tokyo subway with sarin gas (some 40,000 Russians had joined the sect at that time, the largest following outside Japan by far).¹¹⁹ Vissarion lacked their sense of urgency and emphatically eschewed violence, and his sect was never implicated in crime of any kind (though anti-cult activists often failed to draw such distinctions).¹²⁰

But what is an apocalypse without urgency and violence? When and how did they expect the end to come? Vissarion answers:

The Judgment is not a single day, when all are called to a trial and judged. Indeed, your souls have faced judgment for thousands of years, since the time the commandments were given to love God and your brethren. ... But before the hour of Nature's grim exertions, you will be given the Word of Judgment. In a short time, like lightning, all will see and hear it, as was foreordained. And only then will you quickly and openly be divided wheat from chaff... that sorrowful time will last around fifteen years.

Vissarion never named a date and often relied on formulations as vague as the ones above.¹²¹ Only one subject raised the issue at all in interview, recalling it in an early sermon. That said, at least one surviving video from 1992 shows Vissarion describing those "sorrowful" fifteen years fairly explicitly - he claims the judgment has already begun quietly; that humanity can expect brutal wars, earthquakes, the devastation of cities, new diseases, all stemming from a sickness of Earth itself; and that, by 2007 (fifteen years hence), no nonbelievers will remain alive.¹²² There's no reason to believe that this

¹¹⁷ Question 61 in *Vstrechi*.

¹¹⁸ Holly Denio Stephens, "The Occult in Russia Today," 364, in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹¹⁹ This figure is an estimate from 1994. At that time, the group operated six centers in Moscow, and the leader Syoko Asahara toured extensively in Russia, particular at elite universities (as was the case in Japan). They also spent over a million dollars (US) on advertising and radio broadcasting, and their texts were translated into Russian (and to my knowledge, only Russian). All this from I. Ia. Kanterova, "Aum Sinrikyo," *Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia* (Moscow, 2005).

irnaturalIt is interesting to note that, of contemporary groups, Vissarion's was the least concrete about the apocalypse and the most concrete about what comes after. The two are likely related.

¹²⁰ Emily B. Baran, "Negotiating the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Post-Soviet Russia: The Anticult Movement in the Russian Orthodox Church, 1990-2004," *Russian Review* 65, no. 4 (October 1, 2006): 637-56, describes the anticult movement and its relationship to the Russian Orthodox Church, with emphasis on Alexander Dvorkin, the movement's longtime leader. Vissarion's sect is a hodgepodge of every movement they despised, and particularly offensive for its declaration of a Second Coming.

¹²¹ Panchenko, "New Religious Movements," 118. He writes, "the ideas by Vissarion have latent but strong eschatological shade. He often stressed that his Coming is the last Coming, that his Testament is the Last Testament, and that the whole humankind is very close to the end of its history. However, he never predicted the exact time of the Judgment Day."

¹²² *Vissarion, (nesbybshiesia) prororobestva o Kontse Sveta*, accessed 17 August 17 2016,

pronouncement was unique. But at the same time, there is no evidence that it was centrally important to his followers.

This raises what would seem a vitally important question - was the apocalypse something that could be avoided? When one follower asked this in the scriptures, Vissarion answered in the affirmative - it is, given a complete and immediate halt to polluting industry and mineral extraction.¹²³ This condition was never met, though the collapse certainly helped. But ultimately, if a higher level of spirituality would follow, why should a believer resist? In the end, this paradox may help explain the followers' apparently casual attitude towards this element of the teaching. One follower reflected on it without great passion:

Eh, it was all the same to me, whether or not [a cataclysm] was coming. I didn't concern myself with it, and it wasn't what spurred us to save ourselves. And today too, few talk about it. That was said in 1991, and already so much time has passed, a quarter century. And anyway, he didn't say it would come tomorrow, he said at the beginning of the next millennium.¹²⁴

He said many things. Then and now, in the scriptures and the impressions of believers, the apocalypse seems to come as a peal of thunder and a thief in the night, literally and in allegory, at once past and ongoing and expected in the future, in Russia and for all humanity. So did the apocalypse come? Ultimately it's not important, because Vissarion and his followers left the world behind, and this had been the plan from the start.

The Great Fulfillment

To be sure, the Soviet world did end, and very few people were saved. Vissarion's followers were an exception. Whether this makes Vissarion a prophet is a matter of choice. On one hand, his story can be told in full without miracles or magic, and of the thousands of seekers who might have seen him, most continued seeking. On the other, he himself disavowed miracles, and when asked this very question - "how do we distinguish false prophets from the Truth?" - he made no extraordinary claims. He only repeated verbatim what he'd said ages ago, that you will know the tree by its fruits.¹²⁵

We have seen that the movement was made by its members, and Vissarion himself might be considered just one of them. It would seem that his beliefs only differ from theirs in the finer points, including beliefs about Vissarion himself - the tree, as it were, is not Vissarion alone, but the entire movement. And what are the fruits? A new world, which has forgotten Russia's troubles but, in the eyes of its denizens, preserved its spiritual life.

To them (perhaps, with Vissarion himself included), Vissarion's knowledge is a closed system, authority from outside the doomed world, wisdom without citation. Clearly the ideas are gathered from the ether, that is, from other sources, but once attributed to Vissarion and circulated among the flock, they were freed from their origins - a collective weighing of the anchors. Among my subjects, for instance, were former astrologers, Hare Krishnas and Mormons, and none would now decry those traditions - their experience in the sect just rendered them defunct.

This is the major tenet of the faith - old traditions are defunct, because they were bastardized by past human cultures, and humans weren't ready for the whole truth until 1991. A historian wonders

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaVF2gevQZY&spfreload=5>.

¹²³ Question 67 in *V strechi*.

¹²⁴ This is a bit of wordplay, if unintended - which millennium was Vissarion referring to?

¹²⁵ Question 75 in *V strechi*.

why 1991 was a new era, but in the believers' view, the question is flawed - what matters is that it *was* a new era, whether or not politics and economics had something to do with it. What matters is that tradition became unnecessary and even a hindrance, nothing but old, corrupted mindsets codified and reproduced so as to keep people (or at least Russian people - what's the difference?) in their rut. Vissarion's faith, regardless of the roots we might locate, was essentially new.

This is borne out in the doctrine's finer details. UFOlogy, for instance, was not the sect's invention, but plays a central role in Vissarion's emergence and the conversions of several early members. This subculture has a history - it dates from the 1970s, when some members of the Soviet scientific elite grew skeptical of their own colleagues.¹²⁶ But in the hands of the believers, the origins are irrelevant - what matters is simply that other authorities exist, utterly unlike our own, and with a new and far better view of our affairs. Likewise with reincarnation, whoever first described it. Amnesia and rebirth on a higher spiritual plane are not just possible but inevitable, and wholly desirable at that. And hence the emphasis on art and creative production, creating something from nothing, and the emphasis on children - "strive not to escape childhood, but to know its truth," the 48th commandment. The less you know the better, and the better your creations might be.

All of this culminates in the Great Fulfillment, itself an act of creation. Where outsiders might expect wailing and gnashing of teeth, believers see a new beginning, and borne out in practice, the Mountain is only so beautiful because it has no past at all. It's a town apart from the world, and certainly from the Soviet world, in which nobody uses last names and time moves on a new track.

Conclusion

Every year, an assessor from the Russian Ministry of Education and Science follows my same path to the Mountain, stopping in each of the surrounding villages en route to ensure that the sect's children are educated in compliance with national standards. The assessor's task is not simple. Education of the young there is a mixture of home schooling and correspondence courses, and adhering to national standards is distinctly a matter of the letter, not the spirit. The followers of Vissarion have always sought to obey the rules. But only the assessor knows how this is squared with a history education "cleansed of all mention of war, retribution, and similar manifestations of cruelty," which views history textbooks (in Vissarion's own words) as a "baited hook" for the young generation, a trojan horse for the self-replicating violence that marred mankind's pre-Vissarion mindset.¹²⁷ History, taught correctly, ought to be the history of art. Such is the "alternative program" for the followers' children.¹²⁸

On the Mountain, I stayed with Valerii and Iulia Pikunov and their pre-teen son, in a sunny wooden

¹²⁶ The most famous rebel of this type was the mathematician and astronomer Feliks Zigel', who can be called the founder of Soviet UFOlogy. The UFO magazine *Anomaliia* (see note 30) claimed descent from him, and indeed its early editors were members of his UFO *kruszhok*. Zigel' died in 1988, before such publications were possible. As of spring 2015, the organization that publishes the paper holds a semi-annual conference bearing Zigel's name, dedicated to new research into various paranormal fields.

¹²⁷ The first phrase is from Lunkin, "Tserkov' Vissariona," and the second (baited hook) from Akhmetova, *Konets Sveta v Odnoi Otdel'no Vziatoi Strane*, 59, quoting Vissarion in 1996.

¹²⁸ The oldest of children born after the migration are now young adults. In my limited interactions with them, they do not seem to be reproducing the enthusiasm of their parents. This would suggest that Vissarion answered their parents' questions, rather than all questions.

home they built themselves.¹²⁹ One of those mornings, while Iulia was visiting a friend and their son was in drama class, Valerii and I drank tea and looked through his photo albums. The USSR's old age was Valerii's youth; he was thirty when that country passed on. Valerii was born and raised in Leningrad. The earliest photographs were of a more formal nature - a group shot from the *komsomol* in the later 1970s, and a similar one from the army just a few years thereafter. Both in the army and after his discharge, Valerii was an athlete - he studied at an institute for athletics in Leningrad, and I saw him in his early 20s with skis, and his later 20s in a track outfit. By the end of the 1980s, he was both a runner and a trainer for would-be Olympians. In one picture he was at a sanatorium on vacation; in another, with a group of friends. One of those friends, he told me, was murdered over a debt of a few hundred dollars. That happened in the Russian Federation; the photo was shot in the Soviet Union.

Valerii's path to Vissarion was familiar, and ended at Vissarion's center in St. Petersburg (as the city was now called). There, in 1994, Valerii watched Vissarion speak on videocassettes, and he insists that it changed his life nearly immediately, though he can't recall the specifics of what was said. "It made no difference who [Vissarion] was. He was simply a man that answered my questions."

Until the late 1980s, he had no notion of or interest in spirituality. Somewhere between 1987-1989, he became "interest[ed] in life, understanding life. ... How should I live?" Why then? His answer was, at first, universal: "It's very hard to say. It just came up, I thought about it a lot. Maybe I'm just a certain type of person." But it also seems that his conversion belonged to its era, and that his world changed, not him. He continued:

I had friends, for instance, who were into the East... [they lived] simpler, you know? They did a bit of yoga. I looked at [other] friends and understood that those values - making money - weren't the only option. It constrains you and smothers you. And I tried hard to restrain myself in that regard. I could see that there's never enough money. You get something and all the same it's not enough.

The friends he admired had heard of Vissarion through their yoga circles, and told Valerii. By 1997 Valerii had moved to Siberia, and there met his wife.

Valerii and Iulia are both well-versed in the theories of Anatolii Fomenko, a prominent Soviet mathematician who gained notoriety in 1990s Russia with his radical revision of historical chronology. Fomenko and his ideas are the subject of the next chapter. When we discussed him, Valerii reiterated several principles that guide Fomenko's work and animate his readers. The first is that history has been totally rewritten several times over by subsequent regimes, and its truth has fallen victim to its politics. The second is that, as a result of contradictory histories invented by feuding elites, conflicts have been woven into history's fabric, but this needn't be the case. Finally, Valerii and Fomenko share a conviction that official history is beyond reforming, and instead requires a revolution. Fomenko's revolution consists of discarding textbooks and reassembling the past through astronomical and other hard data. Valerii believes that just discarding textbooks should suffice. He regrets the imposition of national education standards, and when asked which subject he'd want eliminated from his child's curriculum, he immediately chose history.¹³⁰ It was Pikunov who said, some pages above, that those with real knowledge "did not get it from somewhere, from reading books."

Clearly there is some sort of negative energy in history, and that can be taught, that's how we raise children. But you can see the same fact from different sides. Not just: he seized, conquered, killed some hundreds of people.

¹²⁹ Interview with Valerii and Iulia Pikunov

¹³⁰ He later changed his answer to mathematics, perhaps to mitigate any offense (none was taken).

History is sometimes just like that: conquered this territory, killed this many, executed this many. ... But it could have been different. ... maybe that was an era when people's consciousness, say, was more narrow ... The higher a person's spiritual level, the less negativity they carry with them.

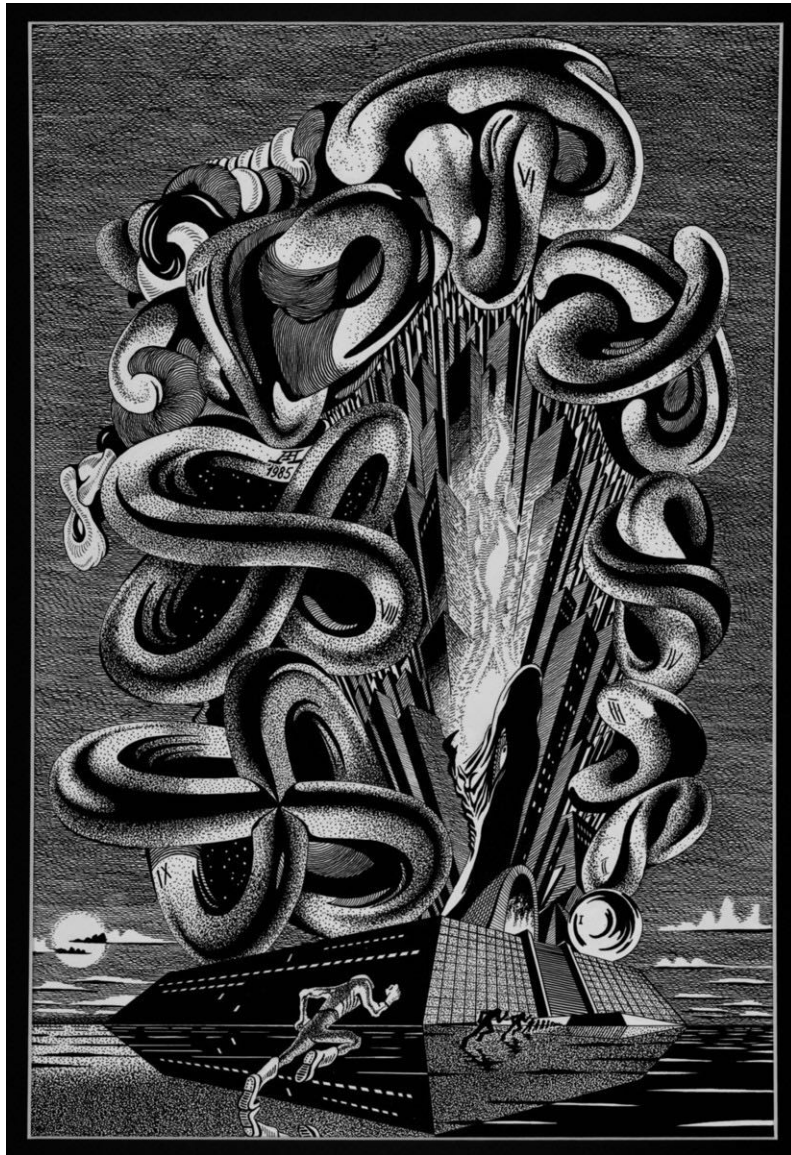
History's problems, in this telling, stem from humanity's stunted spiritual development. To attain a higher spiritual level, we need only to endure more reincarnations, and in time broaden our consciousness beyond that of history's flawed actors. Progress is wholly possible, even inevitable, but it cannot come from books, because books themselves are the vector of mankind's chronic illness. History is the first subject to go, because those who know it are condemned to repeat it.

Ultimately, the impulse to cut ties with history is what places Vissarion within it, rather than outside of it. Is all of history a cycle of violence and corruption, or just Russian history? Did the world end in 1991, or just the Soviet world? Was Vissarion sent at that time by a grand design, or born at the right moment by historical chance? Alas, would-be prophets are always sent by grand design, but rarely born at the right moment. Vissarion's sect could only succeed at a moment when time itself seemed to rupture, and when its end seemed imminent but renewal seemed remote. The agony of Russia in 1991 lives on in the election of Vissarion's followers, and in the total and peculiar glory of their new world.



Path to a shrine at the top of the mountain Sukhoi (photograph by the author).

The End of History



The End of History

"Knowledge, absolutely certain of its own perfection - that's belief."

D-503, in Evgenii Zamiatin's *We*

Who can say if Mongols invaded Europe? Most people I know would say so, as would an even greater proportion of people in Russia. There is a general consensus, at least among people of a certain level of education, that such an event took place, with far fewer who could place it in the thirteenth century, and fewer still who could speak to the event's significance. Still, most would indeed say that it happened.¹

But who among them *knows* that Mongols invaded Europe, in the sense of possessing direct, empirical knowledge of the event or its consequences?² I cannot say that I do, and I am a professional historian of Russia. Because of my line of work, I know people, who themselves know people, who have seen the footprint of a ruined city wall, or have held medieval manuscripts in their hands, and perhaps compared European accounts to the few surviving accounts in preclassical Mongolian. And these experts have staked positions on the Mongols' tactics and their weaponry, their motivations and beliefs, their impact on eastern Europe's development, their treatment of subjugated populations, and the meanings that those populations ascribed to their misfortune, at the time and through subsequent historical epochs. In any one of these debates, I can only weigh one expert's take against another's. My students, were they interested in these questions, would ask me, an expert-once-removed, where to begin reading. Even if most people could see the primary historical sources (and I include myself), we could not readily understand them. The few human beings who *know* that Mongols invaded Europe could barely man a small fortification on the steppe, while those of us who take it on faith are an incalculable, roiling horde.

Debates over the nature and origins of knowledge have animated thinkers for some 2500 years, but they get us no closer to knowing about the Mongols. Even if philosophers know what makes a given proposition true, they are debating how the *knowers* know, how the root clutches the soil, rather

¹ The illustration on the title page is Anatolii Timofeevich Fomenko, "A 2-dimensional sphere in 3-dimensional space can be turned inside out," (No. 233), 1985. India ink on paper. It is reprinted here with permission of the artist. I thank Anatolii Timofeevich for his generosity in this, and in granting an interview and furnishing materials on a continuing basis, particularly in light of his ongoing and acrimonious dispute with others of my profession. To that dispute, I hope this chapter contributes nothing at all.

² If I must, I will adopt Plato's notion of knowledge as entailing a "justified, true belief." The question here turns on "justification."

than how mass consciousness grows from it. Modern theorists and their more empirically-minded counterparts, in particular sociologists and historians of science, have paid greater attention to knowledge as it flourishes in society, but their findings can be troubling.³ They debate how structures of authority form and how they function, but they all agree that those structures are themselves without epistemic foundation.⁴ If prodded, those of us who believe that Mongols invaded Europe will ultimately evince belief in academic standards of proof, or belief in church tradition (in the Eastern Orthodox case), or belief in an individual whom we find compelling, rather than any direct evidence. No matter how voracious our reading, how discerning our intellect, or how universally acclaimed our source, we still remain in the horde. The vast majority of us believe that Mongols invaded Europe because we believe the person who told us so, usually by way of the institutions that back them.

Anatoli Fomenko does not believe that Mongols invaded Europe, and hundreds of thousands of his readers believe him. Fomenko is not a historian but a renowned Soviet-Russian mathematician, who in the 1990s became yet more renowned for his “New Chronology,” a radical revision of history.⁵ Fomenko’s theory caught fire at the beginning of that decade, in a brief window when startling historical revelations dominated the media landscape, when censorship was defunct, but before garish, profit-driven media made skeptics of the masses.⁶ His major contention (or as his supporters would have it, discovery), which he and fellow mathematicians began elaborating in the 1970s, is that all we know of history actually transpired in the last thousand years. In its much-publicized expansion in the 1990s, New Chronology described (among other things) a hypothetical Slavic-Turkic empire that ruled most of Eurasia from the 14th-17th centuries. That empire, Fomenko maintains, was united in faith and language, and distinguished for its tolerance and peaceful development. As for the Mongols, the “invasion” was invented by the upstart Romanovs as they sought to legitimize themselves, and divide their enemies, following their seizure of the throne in the 17th century. In truth, the Mongols were part and parcel of this pre-Romanov formation, rather than an external enemy or even a clearly-defined ethnic group.

Beginning in 1990, vast numbers of Russians came to believe this, and many more would at least claim to be agnostic on the question.⁷ Most Russians who were present and conscious through the

³ The ideas in this paragraph recur across periods and disciplines from the late 19th century - if we begin with Max Weber’s *Science as a Vocation* - but in the history of science they are best articulated in Shapin, Steven. *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England. Science and Its Conceptual Foundations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, particularly in his epilogue.

⁴ Shapin, *A Social History of Trust*, 411-13. This trust is not only essential for understanding, but often for our physical safety. Shapin takes the example of air travel, a complex of expertise in which we place enormous and utterly blind faith. Shapin here draws most directly from Niklas Luhmann’s *Trust and Power*, part 1, and his notion of “system trust” - the predicament that we moderns can’t *help* but trust experts and their institutions, and have no possibility of personal familiarity with those making (often crucially) important claims.

⁵ “New Chronology” is more formally called the “Fomenko-Nosovskii New Chronology” - Gleb Nosovskii, another MGU mathematician, is Fomenko’s primary collaborator in this work, at least since it went public after the USSR’s collapse.

⁶ Yurchak, Alexei. “A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom.” *Slavic Review* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 312-13. Yurchak shows how, rather than undermining Soviet faith in mass media, the revelations of *glasnost* lent the media great authority, particularly as concerned science and history, at least for a period of a few years.

⁷ As with astrology, “belief” is a spectrum, on which a person may accept New Chronology as a possibility but not dwell on it, or at the other end, adopt New Chronology as truth to the exclusion of all academic history, and in addition, derive major elements of their identity or worldview from the texts. As the figures below demonstrate, millions of people were exposed to the theory, and hundreds of thousands of books were sold.

1990s are at least familiar with the theory, as the books themselves were impossible to miss - over 150 editions, compilations, translations and elaborations of various parts of the theory, many with print runs in the tens of thousands, were published and accorded a central place in bookstores across the country.⁸ Alongside Fomenko on the shelves, if less prominent, were dozens of other “alternative histories” inspired by him, which cited him and developed, adjusted or diverged with his theory.⁹ For those people who avoided bookstores altogether, New Chronology saw frequent newspaper and TV features, both for and against.¹⁰ If media spectacle seemed beneath the dignity of true science, Fomenko had public endorsements from prominent intellectuals, including the mathematician-dissident Igor Shafarevich, the philosopher-dissident Alexander Zinoviev and, briefly, the chess great-turned-dissident Gary Kasparov.¹¹ And for those who find dissent distasteful, Fomenko appears to have had scattered support in and around the Russian State Duma and, for one brief moment, his theory was suggested for inclusion in school textbooks.¹² By the end of the 1990s, the mathematician Anatolii Fomenko was unquestionably the most popular historian in Russia.

Among professional historians, naturally, Fomenko was the *least* popular historian in Russia, though he had competitors for the title. The collapse of the Soviet Union fostered an entire industry of alternative histories, which dwarfed the output (and of course the sales) of professionals in spite of, or indeed because of, those professionals’ vocal objections.¹³ The historical establishment, as some

⁸ That figure is from a full bibliography published on the theory’s official site, http://chronologia.org/lit_nx.html. As we will see, Fomenko is stunningly prolific in all his endeavors, though most of the books are recombinations of previous ones. Concerning bookstores, historian and Fomenko critic Dmitri Volodikhin, told me that the publishing figures were “colossal,” and paired with aggressive marketing (and central placement) in the stores themselves. I interviewed him in the spring of 2015. Another account, Alexei Laushkin, *Loz’b’ novoi khronologii. Kak voinet s khristianstvom A.T. Fomenko i ego edinomyshlenniki* (Moscow: Palomnik, 2002), repeats that Fomenko occupied prime shelf space inside bookstores across Russia. My thanks to Konstantin Sheiko for this reference. A contemporary newspaper account, Sergei Leskov, “Po raschetam vyshlo: sluzhil iisus khristos rimskim papoi,” *Izvestiia*, January 29, 1997, describes the books “flying off the shelves.”

⁹ Konstantin Sheiko, “Lomonosov’s Bastards: Anatolii Fomenko, Pseudo-History, and Russia’s Search for a Post-Communist Identity” (University of Wollongong, 2004), 3, footnote 5, lists 27 such titles, and the list is not comprehensive.

¹⁰ In newspapers, see for example Andrei Tarasov, “Interview with Anatolii Fomenko,” *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, September 13, 1995; Andrei Tarasov, “Kak nebesnaia mekhanika otmenila tataro-mongol’skoe igo (Book Review),” *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, October 30, 1996; Sergei Leskov, “Po raschetam vyshlo: sluzhil iisus khristos rimskim papoi,” *Izvestiia*, January 29, 1997; Nadezhda Azhgikhina, “Akademiki protiv ‘novoi khronologii,’” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, December 23, 1999; Savellii Kashnitskii, “Vse vrut kalendari,” *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, November 13, 1999. Television is harder to document, but stands out in the memories of Fomenko’s proponents and antagonists both.

¹¹ On Kasparov’s endorsement, see Dmitrii Tsygankov, “Kasparov stanovitsia istorikom,” *Segodnia*, August 2, 1999, or from Kasparov himself, G Kasparov, “Chernye dyry istorii,” *Ogonek*, 1, 2, 3, Jan 1999. For Zinoviev, see the introduction he penned for Fomenko’s *History: Fiction or Science*, Delamere Publishing, Paris, 2003. These last two citations from Konstantin Sheiko, “Lomonosov’s Bastards: Anatolii Fomenko, Pseudo-History, and Russia’s Search for a Post-Communist Identity” (University of Wollongong, 2004), 4.

¹² Historian Roman Kazakov recalls an assistant to a Duma deputy threatening the organizers of an anti-Fomenko conference, and statements from officials that suggested Fomenko had some popularity in the educational bureaucracy. This is echoed by Dmitrii Volodikhin, who recalls discussion among deputies of inserting Fomenko into textbooks, and a successful attempt in Kazakhstan to insert a different but related alternative historian, Murad Adzhiev, into grade school curriculum. Historian Igor Danilevskii recalled a movement towards incorporating Fomenko into the educational mainstream, which to him was the prime motivation for his opposition work.

¹³ For a list of particularly popular alternative histories, see Konstantin Sheiko, “Lomonosov’s Bastards: Anatolii Fomenko, Pseudo-History, and Russia’s Search for a Post-Communist Identity” (University of Wollongong, 2004), 6, footnote 13. That dissertation, and the subsequent book, Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown, *History as Therapy: Alternative History and Nationalist Imaginings in Russia* (ibidem Press, 2014), are excellent overviews of the Fomenko phenomenon in its context. Other English-language appraisals of the larger phenomenon include James Billington, *Russia in Search of Itself* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Charles J. Halperin, *False Identity and Multiple Identities in Russian History: The Mongol*

but not all of its members realized, was severely damaged by real and perceived complicity in Soviet whitewashes and coverups. Most Soviet people, for instance, only learned in 1989 that the NKVD had ordered the massacre of 20,000 Polish officers and civilians in the Katyn forest on the eve of World War Two - until then, German responsibility was, officially, an historical fact.¹⁴ Speaking generally, as the crimes and victims of the Stalin era were revealed throughout the late 1980s, historians were most often caught flat-footed. Thus when they spoke out against what they perceived as rampant dilettantism in the historical field, they found their voice to be quite weak. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the fight against Anatolii Fomenko, whose New Chronology inspired panicked meetings at the Russian Academy of Sciences, entire conferences dedicated to debunking its claims, and volume after volume of critical essays, all intended to convince the public that, among other things, Mongols had once invaded Europe.¹⁵

Some called Fomenko a charlatan or a profit-seeker and many more called him crazy, but by this chapter's end, none of these claims should seem compelling to the reader. More thorough critiques ascribe to him a political agenda, placing him in a wave of new Russian patriotism, and not without cause, given the Russia-centric themes that emerge from his historical reconstruction. Yet Fomenko developed his theory for decades before these elements surfaced at all, and then and now, he describes his work, almost uniformly, in the language of science. He denies any political agenda. Some say this is a deflection, and I admit we cannot know. Some suggest that, even if Fomenko truly believes his own theories, this is irrelevant given the result and its reception. But by placing those theories in the historical context of Fomenko's era, his life's work appears less Russian-patriotic than distinctly Soviet, and his theory appears grander than any politically-charged epithet. Fomenko's notoriety turned less on his politics (which seems to occupy anglophone critics more than Russian ones) than on his iconoclasm, and on the deep questions of science, authority and belief that his success raised. It is for this reason that Fomenko belongs in this dissertation, and makes most sense among the prophets that fill its pages.

Fomenko himself would certainly reject a label so grand as "prophet," but this chapter will show science and prophecy to meld together during Khrushchev's Thaw. It will then follow Anatolii Fomenko from his youth in that era through his brilliant academic career, and then, through his discovery and development of New Chronology in the 1970s and 1980s. Although Fomenko would publish descriptions of his methods and findings in Soviet academic journals, and attract some Soviet academic detractors, it was only in post-Soviet Russia that the theory could be elaborated, widely published, and widely debated. Existing scholarship has focused on the content and implications of this later New Chronology, either to disprove its claims or to place it alongside other patriotic literature of its era. The best of these analyses view New Chronology as a symptom of the erosion of academic authority, paired with hard science's enduring prestige. This last point finds support in this dissertation's first chapter, and indeed, all of these interpretations find a place in the history described

Empire and Ivan the Terrible, Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 2103 (Pittsburgh, PA: Center for Russian and East European Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 2011); Marlene Laruelle, "Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?," *The Russian Review*, September 2012.

¹⁴ Members of the intelligentsia, consumers of foreign media and other skeptical types would have already known this, or at least been aware of the controversy. Such people were not Fomenko's readers.

¹⁵ The "antifomenko" movement is detailed below, but in brief, it involved dozens of academics, at least three conferences between 1997-2000, several edited volumes of essays derived from those conferences (Marlene Laruelle identifies 12), TV and newspaper appearances, and substantial passion, disbelief and frustration among those involved.

below. But New Chronology was first and foremost a radical alternative to the world as known, and in this, a solution to the profound disorientation at the end of Soviet time.

Fomenko and his era

Recall, from this dissertation's first chapter, Moscow's Monument to the Conquerors of Space - the star-bound rocket, perched atop its titanium contrail:



View from the base of the Monument to the Conquerors of Space (photograph by the author).

And recall the poem inscribed at its base:

...And thus rewarded are our toils,
That having vanquished lawlessness and darkness,
We have forged flaming wings,
For our country
And our age.

That first chapter emphasized the poem's first line, the toils rewarded, the hope that space exploration represented after many decades' suffering. But the poem in full reveals still more about its era, and about the nature of that suffering. The cult of hard science during the Thaw was at least partly about righting communism's wrongs, about vanquishing the "lawlessness and darkness" that, rather than belonging to the dim recesses of history, nipped at the heels of Khrushchev and his era.¹⁶

This is not to say that the exaltation of hard science was a rejection of ideology. Quite the opposite - hard science, rid to the extent possible of human interference, was expected to finally realize communism's utopian promise. The failure of the Stalin period, in this telling, was not its inhumanity, but rather an excess of humanity, a corruption of sound ideas by insufficiently conscious individuals granted too much power. This had been, perhaps, a failing of Marxist-Leninist theoreticians, but not of Marxism-Leninism. The new cult of science was simply a correction, an adjustment towards an already-extant current, which saw utopia emerging not from politics but from the arcane math of planning and development.¹⁷ The heroes of this era were thus not political leaders who could imagine the future, but scientists who, by dint of their intellectual gifts, could calculate and describe it in fine detail.

This shift was already underway before Stalin's death, when Soviet physicists were freed from political interference in their pursuit of the atomic bomb. Until then, they had operated in the shadow of Trofim Lysenko, that is, with one ear trained on Stalin's personal whims.¹⁸ Most centrally, this entailed science in one country, a reflexive rejection of and isolation from Western peers. But out of military necessity, the nuclear weapons program made generous use of Western knowledge (albeit without the Westerners' knowledge), and its success proved a rebuttal not only to claims of Soviet backwardness, but to the politicians' claims of intellectual leadership.¹⁹ While it served the state, science gained an authority all its own.

Khrushchev was all the happier to cede such authority, in keeping with his struggle against the "arbitrariness" and the "violations of socialist legality" of his predecessor - in other words, against lawlessness and darkness. After Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet science would be rapidly opened to exchange with the West, and by 1956, computer scientists in particular were traveling to Western conferences and embracing once-taboo cybernetics.²⁰ With the success of Sputnik in 1957 - a feat impossible without cybernetic systems - the computer seemed to stand before the general secretary at the forefront of Soviet progress.²¹ Indeed, in the pantheon of the era's heroes, Soviet and Russian scientists stood shoulder to shoulder with Galileo and Copernicus, whose official persecution was the

¹⁶ Petr Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, *60-E - mir sovet'skogo cheloveka* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), 100.

¹⁷ The relationship between the party-state and the scientist was in fact productive at least as often as it was antagonistic, even under Stalin - Soviet science had authority and accomplishments of its own, for this very reason that hard science was always part of the Soviet worldview. Kojevnikov, Alexei B. *Stalin's Great Science: The Times and Adventures of Soviet Physicists*. London : Singapore ; River Edge, NJ: Imperial College Press, 2004.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Kojevnikov would suggest that the Lysenko Affair is in some ways exceptional, as Stalin's era did see much productive scientific work, particularly in military applications. And this says nothing of the pre-Stalinist Soviet period, which Kojevnikov shows to be extraordinarily, perhaps uniquely, productive, with socialist ideology and science operating in sync rather than in conflict. But concerning late Stalinism, ideology was quite clearly at best a complicating factor, at worst a complete barrier to the progress of most scientific fields. See chapter 8 in particular on this period.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 104 and Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 163.

²⁰ Gerovitch, 156-157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

surest evidence of their greatness.²² Meanwhile, no living politician appeared on the stone reliefs on either side of the Monument to the Conquerors of Space, as such practice had been outlawed.²³ Instead, the rocket soars over workers, thinkers, cosmonauts, engineers, and a computer scientist, holding a strip of perforated tape.

The intellectual world of the Soviet 1960s was described at the time as a sort of socialist competition between “*fiziki*” and “*liriki*,” hard scientists and their artistic- and literary-minded counterparts, for primacy in socialist culture.²⁴ But the very juxtaposition is misleading, because the best artists of the Thaw were Soviet scientists themselves. In the first place, the opposition of *fiziki* to *liriki* obscures an important sense in which science was imagined as art’s precondition. This was evident not just in the popular press, films and literature of the time, which looked to scientists and their machines for inspiration.²⁵ It was the very premise of Soviet socialism, which at this point few in the intelligentsia had abandoned - the entire purpose of scientific progress, once decoupled from the profit motive, was to leave humanity to its poetic devices.²⁶ And even after that time arrived, it was wholly expected that humanity would continue to pursue science.²⁷

What’s more, the *fiziki-liriki* dichotomy was illusory in the most immediate sense, as any good scientist was also quite literally an artist. To borrow from a gentle satire of the time,

A good physicist sings and plays guitar, dances the twist, drinks vodka, keeps a lover, suffers from all manner of problems, risks it all, fights professionally, hits a bad physicist in the chin, and in his free time, sacrifices himself for science.²⁸

And finally, the good *fizik* was not just an artist in his proclivities. Even more directly, the science for which he sacrificed himself was itself an act of creation and of inspiration.²⁹ Unlike Soviet heroes of old - the revolutionary, the shock worker, the aviator, the border guard - the modern scientist’s feat was arcane, summoned in a frenzy of figures and formulae, and revealed, fully-formed, to the waiting public in a press release.³⁰

The scientist, in short, was unchallenged in his (and it was almost always *his*) cultural supremacy.

²² *Ibid.*, 189. It is worth noting that three of my interview subjects for this dissertation mention Galileo and Copernicus in precisely this manner, and my advisor Yuri Slezkine recalls writing, as a child in this period, biographical essays in their honor.

²³ Lenin was there, of course - a tacit admission that he was, in fact, dead.

²⁴ The debate, or at least its terms, originated with a poem by Boris Slutsky, published in 1959 in *Literaturnaia gazeta*. The poem begins, “It seems physicists are in, and lyricists are out,” and takes a tone of graciousness in defeat. Slutsky’s fellow lyricists did not follow suit.

²⁵ Gerovitch, 160 discusses the press, and later (162) identifies the 1958 book *Signal* as the first popular Soviet book on computers. Petr Vail’ and Aleksandr Genis, *60-E - mir sovetskogo cheloveka* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), 101 highlights the 1962 film *Nine Days in One Year*, which raises many of the themes discussed here. *Ibid.*, 103 calls science fiction the era’s most popular genre, and more thorough notes on the topic can be found in the first chapter of this dissertation.

²⁶ Vail’ and Genis, 13, and generally on the party program of 1961. Also, 100, on science as the gateway to utopia. For a far more thorough intellectual history of the idea, see Andrzej Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom: The Rise and Fall of the Communist Utopia* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995).

²⁷ Gerovitch, 160.

²⁸ From a humor collection by Vladimir Bladin, *Fiziki prodolzhaet shutit’*, Moscow, 1968, 308, cited in Vail’ and Genis, 101.

²⁹ In an interesting parallel to the culture of an earlier era - one of many, as my first chapter elaborates - Michael Holquist observes a blurring of science, science-fiction and avant-garde art in the first decades of the 20th century in Russia. Michael Holquist, “Tsiolkovsky as a moment in the prehistory of the Avant-Garde,” in Bowlt, John E., and Olga Matich, eds. *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996, 100-01.

³⁰ Vail’ and Genis, 101-102.

He was lionized by the state, but also stood for objective truth against human arbitrariness, including political arbitrariness. He was admired by the intelligentsia, and where he was resented, it was not for lack of art but because his art might be superior. At the height of the space age, it certainly was. At that time, the scientist's confidence was the confidence of the country, because he embodied the end goal - human creativity for its own sake - and he was leading the masses in that direction. Or more accurately, he was following science, and the masses followed him. This was progress, the asymptotic curve of that titanium contrail - science was leading upward, with humanity close behind.

Fomenko the mathematician

It was in this world that Anatolii Fomenko would grow up and thrive. Fomenko was born in 1945 in the Ukrainian city of Stalino, but moved to Magadan at age 5.³¹ If that city is familiar to the reader, it is for nothing positive - Magadan rose from the bleak northeastern tundra in 1930 as a transit hub for Stalin's gulag, drawing laborers under extreme coercion and shipping out Siberia's mineral wealth. Fomenko's father was sent to Magadan in 1950 not as a prisoner but as a mineral scientist, and was accompanied there by his wife, a teacher of Russian literature and talented amateur painter. For nine years, the family lived in makeshift housing in this subarctic outpost. The severity of the family's living situation contrasted with the warmth and attention they showered on Anatolii, their only child, whose education did not suffer from his isolation. It was in his youth in Magadan that Anatolii first exhibited unusual abilities in math and in drawing.

For the next several decades, Anatolii Fomenko's life appears a series of intellectual triumphs. In 1958, at age 13, he wrote an essay that won a nationwide children's literature competition, and was subsequently published in the national youth paper *Pionerskaia Pravda* (the topic, naturally, was "science and technology in the future"). He finished his primary school curriculum a year in advance with the highest honors, and by the early 1960s was winning competitions in both physics and math. On the strength of this record he gained acceptance to the prestigious Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (colloquially, *Fiztekh*), but on account of poor vision was redirected to the (equally prestigious) mechanics-mathematics department of Moscow State University (*Mekhmat* at MGU).³² It was in that department of that university that he would build his career, again with distinction and unusual speed. He began studying celestial mechanics but transferred to geometry, and in that discipline earned a degree, then an advanced degree, and finally a doctorate in 1969, ahead of schedule and indeed younger than any other doctor in the entire USSR (he was then 24 years old, and a Soviet doctorate entailed more work than its Western equivalent).³³ It is worth noting that Fomenko's path was unobstructed by "core requirements" in the humanities. His education, like most educations in the USSR, was entirely focused on his own field from the beginning of university, as a planned economy has little use for generalists.³⁴ Later in life, when he would come under searing public

³¹ Biographical details are from Anatolii T. Fomenko, *Mathematical Impressions* (Providence, R.I: American Mathematical Society, 1990), from the introduction by Richard Lipkin. Stalino was renamed Donetsk in 1961 as part of Khrushchev's destalinization measures.

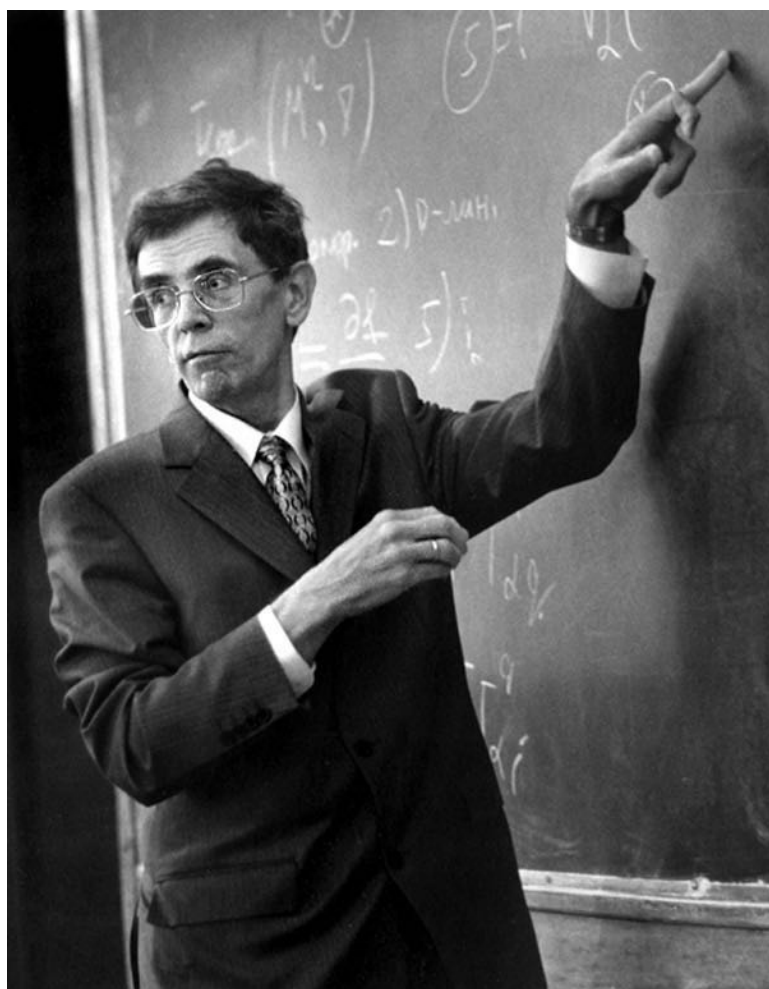
³² I can confirm that there was a minimum vision requirement for admission to *Fiztekh*, but cannot explain its logic.

³³ This fact has found its way into hagiographies of Fomenko, but was repeated to me by Lev Danilkin and Dmitrii Volodikhin separately, neither of whom are Fomenko-boosters (though Danilkin, in his upcoming biography, is not a detractor either). I have not independently verified it, but in any case, 24 was extraordinarily young to earn a Soviet doctoral degree.

³⁴ A common criticism of the Soviet (and now Russian) education system is that, in addition to this early specialization, primary school education placed heavy emphasis on memorization and recital, rather than on the "critical thinking"

criticism, this fact in particular would animate his detractors.

But this would be later in life. In 1970, Fomenko had just joined the heroic elite of Soviet science, who had only recently been his mentors. He had studied at different times under Valentin Rumiantsev and Dmitrii Okhotsimskii, both decorated specialists of Soviet physics and the space program in particular, and finished his work under Piotr Rashevskii, who guided Fomenko to his first internationally recognized publications in topology. As a student, he attended informal lectures with these luminaries and others and conversed in the hallways with still more, and he recalls camaraderie, talent and inspiration shared equally between students and faculty.³⁵ By age 24 he had transitioned from one to the next, and by 1974 had made sufficient waves to be invited to address the most prestigious international conference in mathematics, the International Congress of Mathematicians, in Vancouver.³⁶ His pioneering work in topology, particularly concerning the spectral bordism classes on Riemannian manifolds, requires no introduction.



Anatolii Fomenko around 1999, teaching differential geometry and topology

fashionable in Western early schooling today. Anatolii Fomenko's limited historical education would have been strictly Marxist-Leninist in its conceptual framing, and centered heavily on dates, facts and figures.

³⁵ Anatolii Fomenko, interview with the author, November 2014.

³⁶ The conference is held every four years, but was hosted only once in the USSR - in 1966, during the glory days of Soviet science.

to 3rd-year university students. Printed with the permission of A.T. Fomenko.

It requires no introduction because Fomenko is an artist; his process and his product are fundamentally inaccessible. Soviet people then, and readers now, could only take his authority on faith - it emanates not from the complex surfaces in his topological proofs but from their very obscurity, combined with the office and the accolades that those proofs have earned him.³⁷ And this authority would prove invaluable to Fomenko when he later became a public figure - anybody who encountered his historical work knew that he spoke from the apex of Soviet science.³⁸

In addition to the charisma of his office and his accolades, Fomenko would benefit from charisma of a plainer type (which at least one critic would later call showmanship or self-promotion).³⁹ Within his department, Fomenko enjoyed (and enjoys) a reputation as a popular mentor and teacher.⁴⁰ In that same department he organized a successful music club, which grew popular and outlasted his leadership. As we will see below, he was also able to gather and motivate a circle of mathematicians around himself in the 1970s, each driven to pursue and elaborate his theory of historical chronology. And outside the confines of MGU, and in keeping with the heroes of his age, Anatolii Fomenko distinguished himself as an artist, too.

Fomenko the artist

³⁷ See notes 3 and 4 above for the literature on the trust we place - indeed, we *must* place - in archaic science and the institutions that produce it. On numbers specifically, I would add Porter, Theodore M. *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995, which describes the long-term triumph of quantification in institutions of public administration.

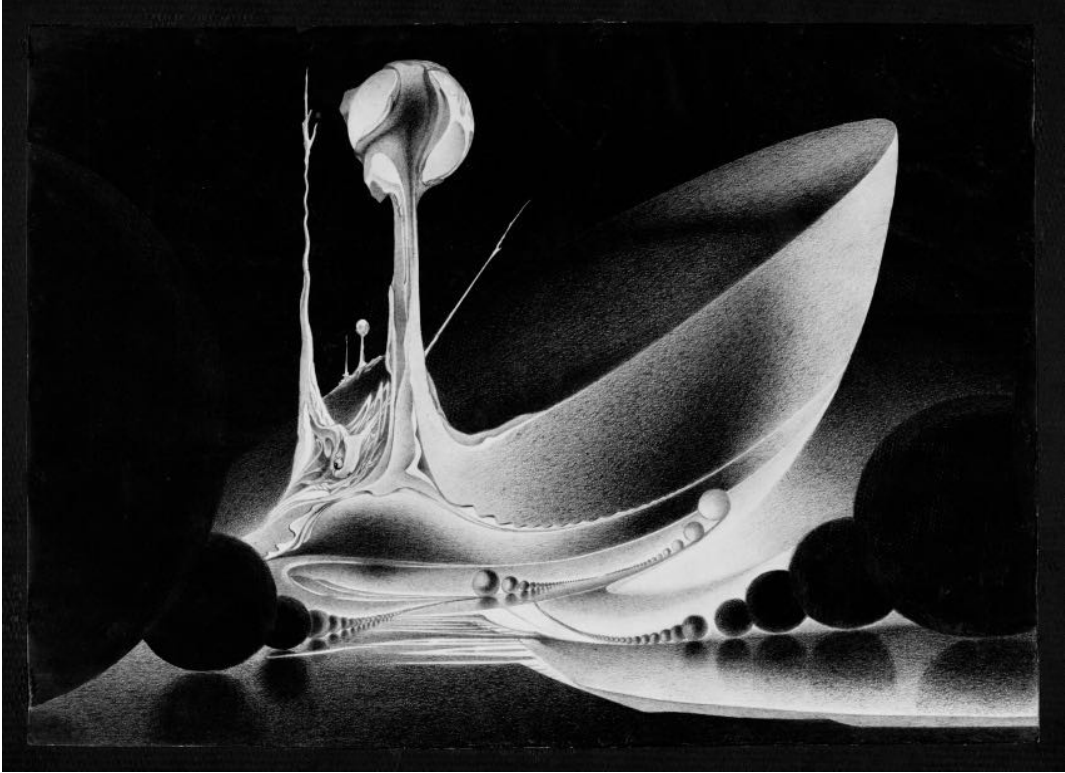
³⁸ Few criticisms of Fomenko spare this detail; see for example Laruelle 574-575 and S.P. Novikov, "Pseudohistory and Pseudomathematics: Fantasy in Our Life," trans. Natalia Pluzhnikova, *Russian Math. Surveys* 55, no. 2 (n.d.): 366. Sergei Novikov was Fomenko's collaborator on a major textbook in their shared field of topology, but split with him over New Chronology and, it seems from their public writings, perhaps over more personal matters. For a vision of this feud from Fomenko's perspective, see the first few sections of http://chronologia.org/ans_bib_rus.html, accessed 23 May 2017.

³⁹ This from Sergei Novikov - see note above.

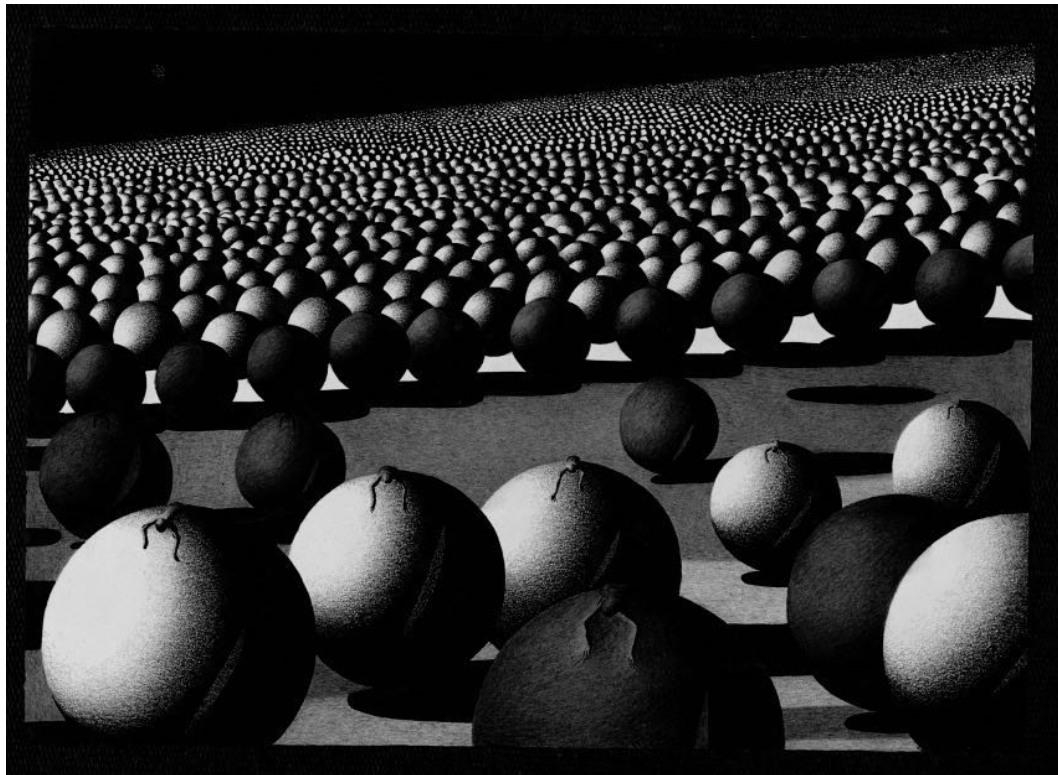
⁴⁰ Mikhail Levin, the mathematician-turned-astrologer from this dissertation's first chapter, studied in Fomenko's department and recalls this reputation, as well as his renown among the students as an artist. Levin recalls students "in awe" of Fomenko's drawings. Another former colleague, professor of mathematics Nikolai Reshetikhin, recalls Fomenko as well-liked and charismatic, though Reshetikhin does not subscribe to Fomenko's views on history.



Anatolii Fomenko, *Spectral sequences and the orbits of the action of groups* (No. 26), 1967. India ink on paper.
Reprinted with permission of the artist.



Anatolii Fomenko, *Interior and boundary points of a manifold and symmetric spaces* (No. 80), 1972. India ink and pencil on paper. Reprinted with permission of the artist.



Anatolii Fomenko, *Billiards and Ergodicity* (No. 67), 1973. India ink and pencil on paper. Reprinted with

permission of the artist.



Anatolii Fomenko, *Deformation of the Riemann surface of an algebraic function* (No. 229), 1983. India ink on paper.
Reprinted with permission of the artist.

Fomenko's art is dramatic in form and desolate in mood, and quite unsettling when he introduces human forms, which are caught in movements much larger than themselves and never interact with one another.⁴¹ Yet the bleak and indeterminate worlds he explores are at odds with his technical precision, not to mention his technical titles. In all, he appears as both an artist and a mathematician in full standing, the two things clearly connected, but by a means as mysterious as the drawings themselves. But Fomenko has spoken on his art at length - unsurprisingly, it has drawn great interest from the public⁴² - and in his words, that mysterious connection becomes much clearer. When

⁴¹ 26 and 67 above, as well as the title image, share this quality, though Fomenko's humans can sometimes be difficult to locate at all.

⁴² Fomenko's art was first exhibited in his early university days in Moscow, but by the early 1990s had seen over 100 exhibitions in the USSR, across Eastern Europe, in Holland, and in India. His mathematical drawings were also used extensively in V.I. Tarasov's animated adaptation of Kir Bulychov's science-fiction novel *Pereval*, and he was commissioned to illustrate a successful edition of Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*. Anatolii T. Fomenko, *Mathematical Impressions*

prompted, Fomenko provides a window into his process, and in doing so reveals his perspective on the world - a perspective that the reader will by now find familiar.

I have always been intrigued by the possibility of showing non-mathematicians the intrinsic richness of the mathematical world, whose charm can only really be appreciated after spending many years traveling along its fantastical landscapes. ... In no way do I consider my musical⁴³ and artistic hobbies to be a rest from mathematics. They are simply (for me) a somewhat different form of mathematical thought. My graphics, which have no formal connection with mathematics, nevertheless bear the indelible imprint of my profession. In my opinion, mathematics is not simply a profession, but rather a way of thinking, a way of life. One does not put it aside.⁴⁴

There is reason to believe that this description is not itself an artistic flourish. Fomenko first began publishing art in the form of illustrations to his co-authored textbooks, including one book that became a standard of his field for many decades (his co-author, incidentally, would later fight to block Fomenko's nomination to the Russian Academy of Sciences, on both professional and personal grounds).⁴⁵ The titles of his works suggest the primacy of math in their creation, and his formal descriptions of each piece are incomprehensible to the non-specialist.⁴⁶ He ventured into non-mathematical themes only later in his career, after his earlier works were so well-received, and even those pieces preserve his preoccupation with complex surfaces. The "fantastical landscapes" he depicts are, at least in his view, the deeper essence of the field of topology, where he has made his professional name.

That text (which continues below) was published in 1991, but the ethos it reveals is clearly of the 1960s. His drawings, to borrow his words from above, "bear the indelible imprint of [his] profession." And that profession, when he took it up in the heroic days of the Thaw, was "not simply a profession, but rather a way of thinking, a way of life."

He speaks first on his experience of math, which comes to him from without:

Mathematical intuition is very informal, very flexible - something cloud-like. You wander inside these clouds and then suddenly you see something. It is impossible to reconstruct the trajectory of thinking inside these clouds ... In my mind, I see geometrical pictures, sometimes complicated, sometimes flexible, sometimes clouded. I see deformations of space. Sometimes, in my dreams, I see mathematical images, and when I awake I see solutions to very complicated problems, as if the solutions are in some way contained in the geometrical shapes.

And then, on his artistic process, which bears no small resemblance to a prophetic vision:

At first I am immersed in the ordinary world... Then my thoughts (and this internal psychological state) begin to move in the direction of this special **parallel real world ... access to which is usually barred and opens**

(Providence, R.I: American Mathematical Society, 1990) is an excellent English-language collection of his artwork, and he discusses his process there (in the introduction) and in Neal and Ann Koblitz, "Mathematics and the External World: An Interview with Prof. A.T. Fomenko," *The Mathematical Intelligencer* 8, no. 2 (1986): 8–17.

⁴³ In his department at MGU, Fomenko founded a music club called *Торпаж* which proved extremely popular and outlived his leadership. He professes a lifelong love of music, and describes it in mathematical terms much as he does his own artwork. The inclination of high-level mathematicians and physicists towards classical music is a well-documented phenomenon in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. Many famous physicists have excelled as musicians, though Fomenko himself only listens, and does not play.

⁴⁴ This excerpt is from the introduction to *Mathematical Impressions* (see note 31 above).

⁴⁵ See note 38 above.

⁴⁶ An excerpt from Fomenko's description of the first painting above, "Spectral sequences and the orbits of the action of groups:" "In this image, several families of orbits correspond to the actions of certain Lie groups. For example, in the lower right corner of the image, there are orbits creating concentric spheres, the result of a subgroup of a group of orthogonal transformations acting on a Euclidean space."

only at moments of strong emotional stimulations and times of vigorous mathematical investigation. There is a kind of ‘blow’ to the boundary separating these two worlds, and I break through into a new world, leaving the world of the ordinary. ...

[H]aving fallen into the ‘parallel world,’ I begin a journey into it, sometimes a fairly long journey. Outwardly, this is expressed as almost complete isolation from the ordinary world... In some sense, such a state is like a trance or state of meditation ... It is an immensely rich parallel world, absolutely unlike the ordinary world. ... Part of this world is made up of the ‘sphere of mathematics,’ something like the ideal sphere of Ideas in ancient greek philosophy, where mathematical images, concepts, constructions, theorems actually materialize. **Then, as I look over this virtual landscape, it is as if I photograph it with a ‘camera,’ making snapshots of the structures and events taking place.** While there, I am able to glide through like a disembodied phantom, instantaneously carrying myself enormous distances, speeding into the cosmos and back again, moving forwards and backward in time, penetrating objects, and drawing from a sea of information preserved in the memory of all that has happened. ... Although this parallel world coexists with the ‘real’ world, its laws differ from what are considered ordinary. It is possible to be simultaneously in several places, and **one can observe the deep causal mechanism of events that people do not usually see.** The journey can last a long time. And as it continues, the ‘camera’ collects more and more information until finally it reaches some critical value. Then there is a sort of explosion. An artistic creation is born. **And a work of graphic art emerges as a result, created while still in the parallel world, a process that amounts to little more than developing the photograph, so to speak. ... The image is not created but, as a photograph, per se, is developed and fixed...** At the beginning of the drawing, I do not know its end. **Therefore I always work without rough copies, sketches or outlines. The drawing, in a sense, appears all at once as a clean copy. ... Each mark is final, and my hand does not return to it again.**⁴⁷ [emphasis mine]

Put aside the question of myth-making, and that gossamer line between modesty and self-aggrandizement that artists walk with such grace. To be sure, Fomenko’s emphasis on effortlessness over practice, and on inspiration over design, would impress his fans and repulse his detractors in equal measure. Whether he ever erases a mark is of course irrelevant. But taken as a whole, a very particular perspective on the world emerges from the text above.

The Soviet scientist

The world that Fomenko inhabits, when following his “mathematical intuition,” seems an alien one, but it is very much real - Fomenko’s process is not drawing but “developing a photograph,” producing a copy of an existing landscape. But the landscape, however real, is accessible only to some - its wild expanses and violent eruptions, its folds and twists and infinite repetitions exist independent of the observer, and can be named and calculated and communicated, but only by those with specialized training. Possessed of this training, Fomenko navigates through it with supreme self-confidence, viewing that world from all angles, and aware of all “that people do not usually see.” Mathematics is the only guide to this world, but it can be trusted entirely - each mark is final, and the human hand need never return to it. And its essence is art, of a peculiarly Soviet kind - it invites the viewers to gaze in wonder at the world they already inhabit.

[Having] fully developed the photograph, I separate myself from the image, leave the parallel world, and return to the world of the ordinary. I look around and see the picture standing far away. I approach it with astonishment, an onlooker like all others, scarcely recognizing the image before me.

This closing statement of Fomenko’s applies readily to his historical work. Because of his utter faith in his process, Fomenko exhibits a distinct scientific detachment from his own sensational results. This, too, would become part of Fomenko’s public image - that of an inspired artist, offending official

⁴⁷ *Mathematical impressions*, 7-9

society not out of malice but out of solemn obligation to the truth. That posture would infuriate his expert-critics, and inspire the horde besieging them.

Fomenko's theory

Anatolii Fomenko began his historical work in the early 1970s. In his telling it was spurred by a single observation, made by an American physicist, about an apparent aberration in the motion of the moon - that and other details will be elaborated below. Regardless, he was struck by an idea, and in its pursuit, embarked on a "vigorous mathematical investigation," following his math where it led. As his theory developed - first alone, then informed by existing literature, then with a circle of other mathematicians and the aid of computers - it increasingly took the form of an alien landscape, with apparently dry numbers revealing a folding and curving and twisting surface of historical time wholly unlike the "world of the ordinary." This astonishing world appears to have developed before him like a photograph; each mark he made was final, and his hand never returned to it.

The basic premises of Fomenko's theory were fixed by 1980, and from that year forward, he published dozens of articles in Soviet scientific journals, each emphasizing different elements of the theory and, more so, its underlying methods. The core of the theory can be summarized concisely. Fomenko contends that all of human history as we know it transpired in the last thousand years. What looks to us today as several millennia of history is in fact multiple copies of the same events, misidentified and mistakenly staggered in time by early modern scholars, and then uncritically echoed by their successors to the present day. His research methods center on the search for "isomorphisms" or "duplicates" - the identification of repeating units of history than can be "folded" atop one another, and thus reconciled into a single, far shorter timeline. Fomenko finds four such units, and shifts the older three into the future. Specifically, much of (conventional) pre-classical history is advanced by 1526 years, classical antiquity advances 1053 years, and the early medieval period advances 333, such that all three units are merged into the most recent. In doing so, he claims to eliminate all dark ages, resolve all chronological disputes, and begin history when the source base actually begins, i.e. when writing emerged, around 960 A.D. In the 1990s, when his work saw wide publication and prompted furious debate across the former USSR, Fomenko elaborated greatly on both the causes of our modern chronological delusion and the details of history between the 10th and 17th centuries. *New Chronology* - a term introduced only in this later phase - aligns with convention after the 17th century.

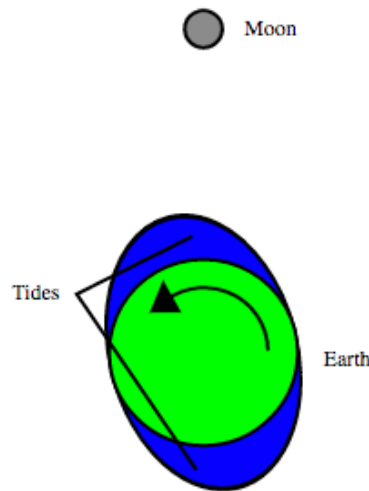
Discovery

As it stands today, the moon orbits the earth once every 27.3 days.⁴⁸ But this number is not constant - the moon is accelerating on its path and our rotation is slowing down. I urge the reader to careful attention here, as this phenomenon - seldom given serious treatment by historians - led Anatolii Fomenko to doubt everything we know about historical chronology.

Fomenko's insight was as follows: imagine a fixed spot on the earth - say, an observatory on the equator - as it speeds around earth's axis. The observatory outpaces the moon above it by a factor of

⁴⁸ If this number seems too small, there is a reason: 27.3 days is the *sidereal period* of the moon, the time it takes the moon to orbit the earth relative to the fixed backdrop of distant stars. The moon returns to the same place *relative to the sun, as seen from earth*, every 29.5 days - this is called the *synodic period*, which one can imagine as the time it takes for the moon to cycle through all of its phases.

27.3, overtaking it repeatedly while the moon struggles to keep pace. This arrangement gives rise to something called *tidal acceleration*. The moon, of course, causes the tides, pulling the oceans (and to a lesser extent the land) to itself in an enormous bulge. But because the earth is rotating so quickly underneath it, the tidal bulge is actually ahead of the moon, leading it slightly.



Tidal acceleration (Image licensed under Creative Commons)

That enormous bulge, with its corresponding enormous mass, has a gravitational effect on the moon, urging it ever forward. The moon, likewise, pulls back on the bulge and, due to friction between the oceans and the seabed, slows the earth's rotation. The system, in sum, generates torque between the moon and the earth. With each passing century, a day on earth lengthens by a few milliseconds, and the moon slowly gains on that observatory at the equator.

This phenomenon itself is not controversial; the moon's acceleration was first observed at the end of the 17th century, the tidal mechanism proposed in the mid-19th, and its precise effects quantified in the mid-20th.⁴⁹ But beginning in the 1970s, an American physicist named Robert Newton took up the task of comparing historical eclipses with what we might expect from calculation. He discovered, to his great surprise, that the rate of tidal acceleration was not constant throughout history, but seemed to have changed dramatically between 700-1300 A.D., before once again stabilizing.⁵⁰ Newton sounded the alarm in 1972 and called on fellow physicists to seek a yet-unidentified, non-gravitational force in the Earth-Moon system to explain the aberration. Anatolii Fomenko, who had long been interested in celestial mechanics, caught word of this controversy around 1973 and set about checking Newton's work. Newton's calculations, in Fomenko's (and others') appraisal, were correct. Fomenko was puzzled, and saw no solution to Newton's riddle. That is, he saw no solution, until he heard the name of Nikolai Morozov.⁵¹

⁴⁹ The first to describe the phenomenon, albeit without understanding it, was Edmond Halley (of comet-fame). That was in 1695. F. Richard Stephenson, "Harold Jeffreys Lecture 2002: Historical Eclipses and Earth's Rotation," *Astronomy and Geophysics* 44 (April 1, 2003): 2.22-2.27, presents a comprehensive historical and physical summary of tidal acceleration in the Earth-Moon system.

⁵⁰ R.R. Newton, "Astronomical Evidence Concerning Non-Gravitational Forces in the Earth-Moon System," *Astrophysics and Space Science* 16 (1972): 179-200.

⁵¹ This is Fomenko's own narrative of these events – see note 54 below for a competing version. Ultimately, the sequence

Nikolai Morozov and historical chronology

Nikolai Morozov, born in 1854, was a lifelong revolutionary and highly accomplished polymath, having demonstrated the latter while in prison for the former.⁵² Because of his major role in the People's Will revolutionary organization in the years preceding their assassination of tsar Alexander II, Morozov spent nearly all of the period 1881-1914 behind bars, reading and writing prolifically, and with great erudition, on most every topic in both the natural and social sciences. His body of work as a whole evinces both the creative brilliance and the glaring blunders of an autodidact. Since the early 1990s, he has enjoyed a second life as the inspiration and intellectual progenitor of Anatolii Fomenko's New Chronology.

In Morozov's later years, he drew up extensive astronomical tables based on historical instances of eclipses, comets and other celestial phenomena, and from these claimed major errors in the accepted chronology of world history.⁵³ This work was never published, but in the 1950s, a decade or so after Morozov's death, it was picked up by MGU mathematician Mikhail Postnikov, who set about promoting it among graduate students and faculty at MGU. This, most likely, is how it reached Fomenko.⁵⁴ And although Morozov's work was rife with errors (by Fomenko's and others' accounts), his basic premise seemed, to Fomenko, to suggest a solution to Robert Newton's problem. A mistake in chronology could explain Newton's anomaly without recourse to mysterious physical forces. Specifically, Fomenko suggested that, if ancient lunar observations were shifted forward by some 700 years and "folded" over the medieval period, the discrepancy would vanish and tidal acceleration would once again appear constant over time. He wrote a short article to this end in 1974 and, as he recalls, it was very well received.⁵⁵

is irrelevant to our larger questions.

⁵² For an account of Morozov, see Semion Vol'kovich, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Morozov 1854-1946, *ego zhizn' i trudy po khimii* (Moscow: Priroda, 1947). This reference from Sheiko and Brown, *History as Therapy*, 68, which also offers an abbreviated biography, focused specifically on Morozov's work in chronology.

⁵³ See note above. For yet more detail on Morozov's chronology, see Florin Diacu, *The Lost Millennium: History's Timetables under Siege*, 2nd ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), beginning at 44. This book is an English-language popular investigation of Fomenko's theory with strong basis in the technical-scientific aspects but a strong tendency to obfuscate, too. In addition, Diacu is a mathematician at the University of Victoria, and many of the critiques leveled at Fomenko by humanists could likewise be leveled at him.

⁵⁴ The question of artists' mythmaking returns here regarding the chronology of Fomenko's discovery. In particular, when recounting the story to me in November of 2014, Fomenko claimed no knowledge of Morozov until *after* he had worked on Newton's problem. There is some reason to doubt this timeline. Mikhail Postnikov worked at MGU from 1954, and in *Mekbmat* (Fomenko's department) from 1965. He promoted Morozov's theory actively to students and colleagues as early as the later 1950s. This according to Albert Schwartz, a graduate student at that time at MGU, with whom I communicated by email. Postnikov tried to sell Schwartz on Morozov, but without success.

⁵⁵ Anatolii Fomenko, interview with the author, November 2014.

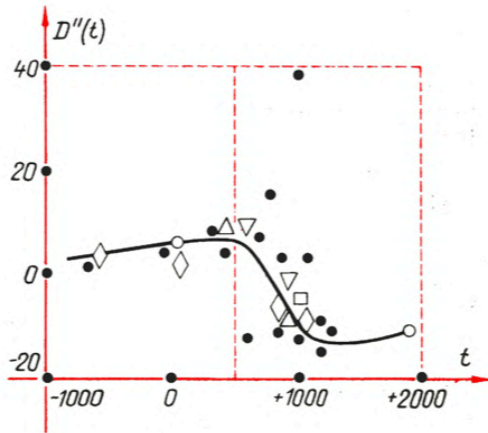


Рис. 1

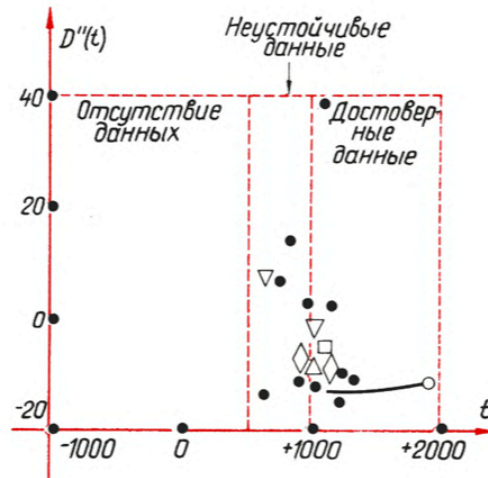


Рис. 2

- Newton's historical calculation of tidal acceleration as summarized by Fomenko (left), and Fomenko's adjustment (right).⁵⁶(Image printed with permission of the author)

This was the germ of Fomenko's New Chronology, but a caveat is in order. While Robert Newton was supremely qualified to calculate the motion of the moon, not all physicists endorsed Newton's findings at the time, and many denied that there was ever a riddle to be solved.⁵⁷The dispute did not concern Newton's calculation from historical data, which to a scientist of particular training is trivial (or at least cut and dry). It instead concerned Newton's process for selecting his original data - in other words, it concerned his grasp of historical methods.⁵⁸ How much do we really know about historical eclipses? How do we appraise how reliable a historical record might be? To what extent can the more reliable sources be trusted in their details? What motivations guided an ancient astronomer or medieval chronicler as they documented and described an eclipse? What meaning did they ascribe to astronomical events, and what meaning was ascribed by their readers or by those who commissioned their work? When were they recording direct observations, and when were they reproducing accounts of their predecessors, and how can we tell the difference? And finally, how accurately have we moderns located their writings in historical time? It was this last question that animated Anatolii Fomenko, and his answer was "not at all."

⁵⁶ Anatolii T. Fomenko, "Statisticheskaiia khronologiia," *Matematika I kibernetika*, July 1990, 20-22. The details of these charts are elaborated, and critiqued, by Diacu, 96.

⁵⁷ This is not to say that Newton was ever accused of dishonesty or miscalculation, and indeed he was deeply invested in combatting scientific fraud and error throughout his career. His best-known publication was *The Crime of Claudius Ptolemy*, a controversial exposé of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, a foundational work of classical astronomy traditionally dated in the second century A.D. Newton suggested that the *Almagest* was a fraud; he believed Ptolemy had calculated his data, but claimed it was based on observation. Fomenko (and Nikolai Morozov before him), invested in the question from very different premises, claimed that the data were in fact real observations, but were recorded many centuries later when Ptolemy actually lived. Diacu, 99-111, gives an overview of the controversy surrounding Ptolemy. See note 53 for Diacu's limitations.

⁵⁸ Of 370 historical cases, Newton used only a handful that he deemed trustworthy; see Diacu, 96-99. Newton, it should be noted, continued to revise his work on tidal acceleration until his death in 1991.

Framing the problem

Prior to revealing history's true shape, Fomenko claims to have had no interest in the subject at all. He does not admit this sheepishly, but states it as neutral fact, or even with a hint of pride - it affirms his status as an objective outsider, with a mind unclouded by dogma.⁵⁹ By the middle of the 1970s, three or four other mathematicians, all equally unburdened by history, had gathered around him and formed a sort of school. They pursued this work quietly and in parallel with their official obligations, and would develop the theory much further before publishing their findings. Fomenko remained the intellectual leader and primary author of their publications, though he would always stress the work's collaborative nature.⁶⁰ From their small fortification inside MGU, the mathematicians would fight two battles at once - first, to discredit traditional chronology, and second, to develop a set of methods - each employing the dazzling power of computers - to correct the record. A third fight, against the old order's defenders, was still in the offing.

In discrediting traditional chronology, Fomenko and his collaborators (I will use "Fomenko," but note that this is shorthand)⁶¹ make two central claims, rehearsed in several articles throughout the 1980s.⁶² The first is that the edifice of chronology rests on surprisingly weak pillars. That argument runs as follows: The chronological calculations of Joseph Justus Scaliger and Dionysius Petavius, which were critically undermined by the limits of early modern mathematics, form the backbone of modern chronology.⁶³ Our essential timeline is inherited from these 16th century thinkers, and the following centuries saw great elaboration without serious investigation of the original source. In this formulation, historians are by and large honest actors, but their so-called science ultimately rests on tradition and on faith. Chronology, then, has never really been investigated scientifically, except by a few daring skeptics.

Fomenko's second claim concerns those skeptics - he maintains that, in pursuing such investigation, he and his collaborators join a long lineage of truth-tellers. In one sense, it is the lineage of Copernicus and Galileo, the lone voices whose truth was evidenced by the outcry against it, and some readers certainly take this view.⁶⁴ But the authors themselves view New Chronology as the culmination of a specific and rebellious underground intellectual current that began with Newton

⁵⁹ Anatolii fomenko, interview with the author, November 2014.

⁶⁰ In the 1990s, when his theory went public, he would solicit and consider contributions not just from his inner circle, but from any reader who could build on the theory. Formally, MGU mathematician Gleb nosovskii is Fomenko's primary collaborator and coauthor, and the theory is often called the "Fomenko-nosovskii New Chronology."

⁶¹ On collaboration, see the note above. Gleb nosovskii and Vladimir Kalashnikov are Fomenko's best-known and most active collaborators.

⁶² This argument is presented quite clearly, and for a popular audience, in Anatolii T. Fomenko, "Global'naia khronologicheskaiia karta," *Khimiia i Zhizn'*, no. 9 (1983): 86-87. How Fomenko reached this popular audience under the Soviet publishing regime is elaborated below; this article was exceptional in its reach. Its content, though, was familiar, and was repeated in various forms and iterations in many (more strictly scholarly) journals through the 1980s.

⁶³ Scaliger (1540-1609) was a French religious figure and scholar, and did indeed take interest in chronology. His most famous contribution was to incorporate other ancient civilizations into the timeline of the Greeks and the Romans. Petavius (1583-1652) was a Jesuit theologian and scholar, and elaborated substantially on the work of Scaliger. In my interview with him, Fomenko claims that Scaliger and Petavius investigated this question via applied mathematics, but that mathematics as a discipline was inadequately developed. In this view, chronology was always the realm of mathematicians, and what historians did with it was necessarily derivative.

⁶⁴ Zalizniak, A.A. "Lingvistika po A.T. Fomenko." *Uspekhi matematicheskikh nauk* 55, no. 2 (2000): 162-88. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4213/rm288>, 162. Fomenko himself would not say this outright, though in our interview, he suggested that his critics have already begun to adopt his theory piecemeal, all while criticizing him vociferously. He noted, with a laugh, that this was an "entirely normal scientific process."

himself - Isaac, not Robert. It is true that the former Newton, in his latter years, was deeply invested in historical revision, and believed his contemporaries had erred. Other early modern notables, by Fomenko's telling, include a 16th century professor by the name of de Arsilla in Salamanca, Spain, and the 17th century French classicist Jean Hardouin. While de Arsilla is not easily located in sources independent of Fomenko, Hardouin did claim much of ancient history to be a forgery.⁶⁵ His theories saw a revival at the end of the 19th century by the Swiss philologist Robert Baldauf, who specifically implicated the Italian humanists in this grand historical fraud. Concerning other (relatively) recent scholars, particularly those who studied the ancient world, Fomenko highlights Theodor Mommsen, a great classicist of the 19th century, and Heinrich Karl Brugsch, a prominent Egyptologist of the same era, both of whom raised chronological questions (but of a more local nature).⁶⁶ Fomenko has been criticized for his selection and interpretation of each case, but he is justified in claiming a lineage.⁶⁷ Nikolai Morozov stands at the end of this chain, and is held up as the first to make a true modern science of chronology, primarily through the application of astronomy. Fomenko's work is the correction and perfection of Morozov's.

Morozov required correction for two reasons. First, he was prone to technical mistakes, which Fomenko bemoans as unjustly undermining the larger idea.⁶⁸ But second, Morozov, like Scaliger and Petavius before him, was limited by the science of his era. History, on account of its great complexity, could only be resolved by mathematics with the aid of modern computers.

Fomenko's methods

Anatolii Fomenko and his colleagues were captivated by computers. His formative years saw mathematics heralded as both map and compass for Soviet society and the world, which could describe the present as it truly was and reveal a better future. Computers, in the service of the Soviet Union's best mathematical minds, would be the most direct route to that future. Thus it is unremarkable that Fomenko saw the computer as an unambiguous improvement on the human mind and, in that, on the human historian.⁶⁹ What was remarkable were his findings, and perhaps even more, the computing methods he developed to arrive at them.

The reader is once more called to careful attention, as Anatolii Fomenko's methodology is highly idiosyncratic, and his assumptions may seem alien to the historical discipline. Fomenko himself would not deny this - he was taking up a task for which historians, whether by training or ideology, were unequipped: distilling history to its numerical essence. Following this, Fomenko would then crunch the numbers to prove his central contention: that the traditional chronology of history is a series of duplications, the same events described differently and erroneously placed in different historical

⁶⁵ Fomenko quotes generously from sources such as these and elaborates on their claims, but does not footnote consistently.

⁶⁶ "Global'naia khronologicheskaiia karta," 86. Later, this style of argument - emphasizing the perceived flimsiness of the accepted timeline and highlighting expert skepticism - would be applied to other methods of historical dating, including radiocarbon analysis and dendrochronology. Fomenko would also suggest that both of these, in many applications, rest all the same on Scaliger and Petavius.

⁶⁷ Fomenko often takes a shotgun approach to historical criticism, relying on the volume of citations and on quotations, but without thorough context. For one pre-collapse example, see "Statisticheskaiia khronologiia," 7-10.

⁶⁸ "Global'naia khronologicheskaiia karta," 87.

⁶⁹ This may or may not be a fair characterization - in his early articles, Fomenko repeatedly stresses that his findings are preliminary and should be corroborated by historical experts. That said, there's little evidence that he ever seriously considered these experts' criticisms. From the very earliest interactions, there was little love lost on either side.

epochs.⁷⁰

Fomenko's data were derived from a wide selection of historical manuscripts, and subjected to two different analyses; each of these is explored in more detail below. Both analyses share a central goal - the statistical processing of numeric or quantifiable characteristics of historical texts. In the first method, Fomenko would compare texts in their superficial forms, and in this way reveal previously obscure similarities between them. These similarities were presumed to indicate either a shared common source or a duplication. And second, Fomenko would compare the texts in their literal content, in particular in the details of historical dynasties, again to reveal evidence of duplication. Historians, again, were not so much in denial of these duplications as they were incapable of finding them, given the technical complexity of the task itself.

⁷⁰ His early writing did not speculate on the mechanism of this error or the intent of the manuscripts' authors, that would come only after the theory went public. See section "New Chronology" below.

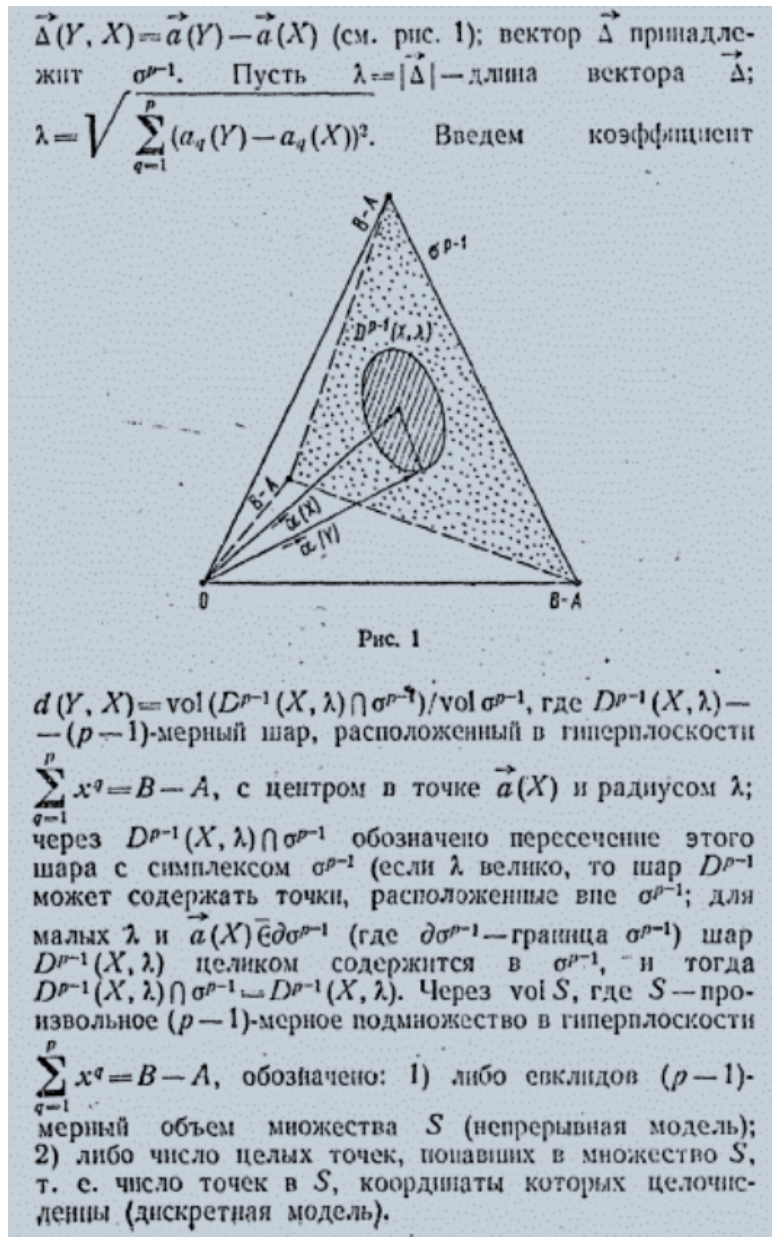


Figure 1. This example is from Anatolii T. Fomenko, “Nekotorye statisticheskie zakonomernosti raspredeleniia plotnosti informatsii v tekstakh so shkaloi,” *Semiotika i informatika*, no. 15 (1980), 105, and concerns the rate at which historical information is lost, which Fomenko presumes to be constant over time. Technical elaboration of Fomenko’s methods would gradually fade from his writing, instead taking the form of footnotes to these earlier articles. (Image printed with permission of the author)

In his first core method, the comparison of historical texts in their external form, Fomenko breaks manuscripts down by their metadata - he counts words, phrases and lines, and attaches these numbers to the particular topics, events or years being described.⁷¹ As in the earlier astronomical work,

⁷¹ The following analysis of Fomenko’s methods is derived from a general reading of many early articles, but wherever possible from a very early one, specifically Anatolii T. Fomenko, “Nekotorye statisticheskie zakonomernosti raspredeleniia plotnosti informatsii v tekstakh so shkaloi,” *Semiotika i informatika*, no. 15 (1980). That article is heaviest on the central mathematical methods, which are increasingly relegated to footnotes as time passes.

Fomenko does not elaborate on the selection criteria for the original sources, and no clear distinction between primary and secondary sources is observable in the articles. Generally speaking, he seems to take as his source any textual descriptions of ancient and medieval history, whether of ancient, medieval or contemporary origin. Questions of translation - Fomenko does not claim competence in any of the original languages of the manuscripts - are likewise not treated explicitly in the articles; he appears to rely on the form of the original texts⁷² for his numbers and on accompanying Russian translations for meaning.⁷³ Questions of narrative form - for instance, concerning the literary norms of the original text's epoch - are not addressed in the articles, and no single manuscript or event is processed in full for scrutiny. It seems that Fomenko takes the texts to be literal factual accounts, at least in their broad outlines - that is, he deals in major themes (wars, reigns, periodizations) rather than in minutiae. Having broken down hundreds of texts in this way, he then was able to probe their relation to one another. The actual calculations were performed by a computer (of the MINSK series), operated by specialists in MGU's computing center, using algorithms provided by Fomenko.⁷⁴ For any two texts, the computer would produce a number - the smaller that number's value, the more closely correlated the two texts.

The aim of this method was to show the statistical probability that one text, or part of one text, is derived from another. The logic was as follows: if one presumes that historical knowledge, as transmitted in texts, deteriorates at a steady rate over time (see figure 1 above), and additionally, that all historical information preserved in texts derives exclusively from earlier, textual sources, the method identifies not only which texts derive from others, but roughly how much time elapsed between their respective writings. Because knowledge decays at a steady rate, we can expect a more recent text to preserve less detail, and because texts derive from a fixed set of earlier texts, we can expect two texts describing the same history to dedicate more ink on the page to the same people or events.

⁷² Or rather, published editions of them - the original manuscripts most often do not break text into words or phrases at all.

⁷³ On this point I am hypothesizing - the issue is not addressed in the articles themselves.

⁷⁴ This from Fomenko himself, in email correspondence with the author.

В качестве X была взята, например, монография В. С. Сергеева «Очерки по истории древнего Рима», тт. 1, 2, Москва, ОГИЗ, 1938; в качестве Y — «Римская история» Т. Ливия, тт. 1—6, Москва, 1897—1899 гг. Здесь $A = (-757)$ (знак «—» указывает гг. до н. э.),

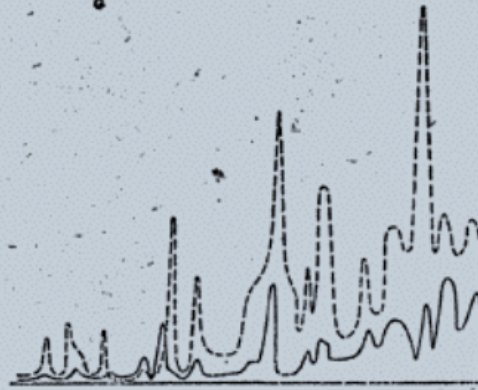
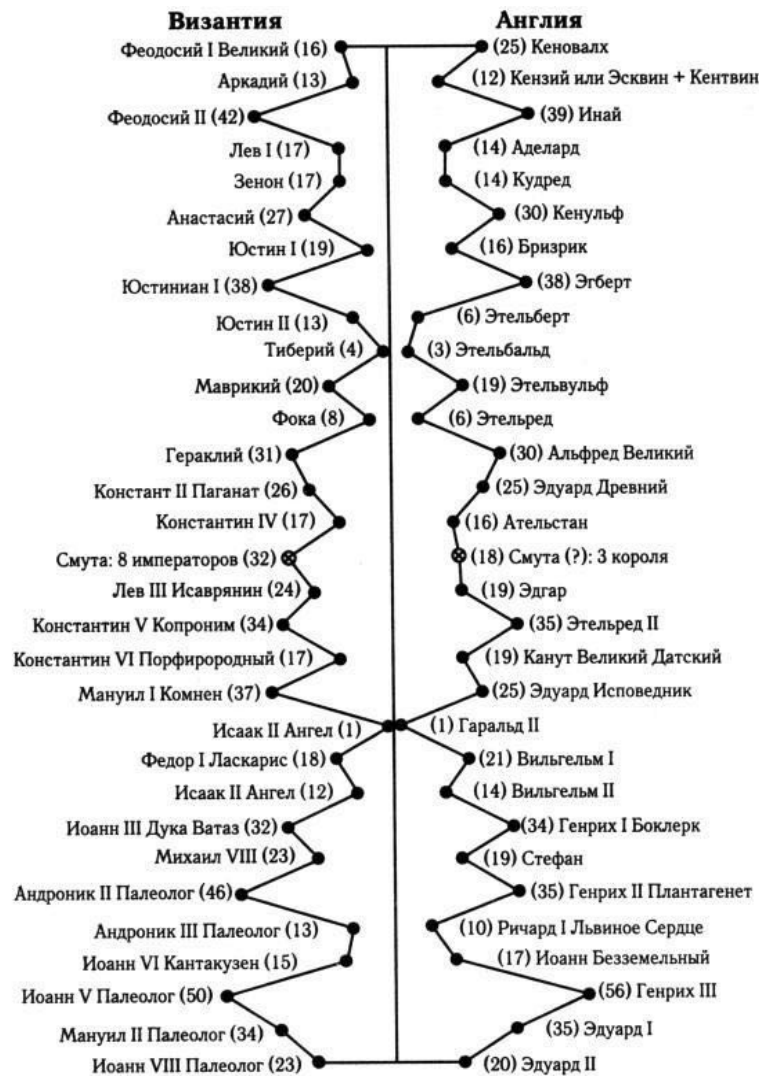


Рис. 2

$B = (-287)$, $B - A = 470$. Графики $f_1(t, X)$, $f_1(t, Y)$ см. на рис. 2 — черная линия для X и пунктир для Y . Оказывается, что $\lambda = 21$, $p = 14$ и коэффициент $d(Y, X)$, измеряющий близость векторов $\vec{a}(Y)$ и $\vec{a}(X)$ на расстоянии $\lambda = 21$, равен $2 \cdot 10^{-12}$; другими словами, близость Y и X

Figure 2. Here, Fomenko demonstrates this concept by comparing Livy's *History of Rome*, traditionally placed in the late first century B.C. (Fomenko uses a late 19th-century Russian edition), with early Soviet historian Vladimir Sergeev's *Outline of the History of Ancient Rome*, published in 1938. The texts exhibit high correlation, and thus are presumed to describe the same history and descend from the same sources. Fomenko, "Nekotorye Statisticheskie Zakonomernosti," 109. (Image printed with permission of the author)

Fomenko's second core method lends itself to easier description, and accordingly, to easier propagation. These findings would be particularly effective in spreading Fomenko's fame. The method compares historical dynasties, stripping them of their names, locations and eras in order to reveal their underlying similarities.



Graphics of this type do not appear in Fomenko's Soviet-era work; they are a later phenomenon, when the theory was already widely published. Here, Fomenko shows the Roman-Byzantine lineage from Theodosius the Great to John VIII Palaiologos - traditionally stretching from the 4th century to the 15th - to be essentially identical to an English lineage from the Anglo-Saxon king Cenwalh of Wessex through Edward II.⁷⁵ (Image printed with permission of the author)

The raw data for this project were drawn from 15 foundational chronological tables and 228 historical texts, presumably selected by the same criteria outlined above.⁷⁶ Rather than converting the entire texts into numbers for processing, Fomenko here focused specifically on ruling dynasties, quantifying them for computerized comparison with one another. Thousands of individual reigns were

⁷⁵ Nosovskii, G. V., and Anatolii T. Fomenko. *Taina russkoi istorii. Novaya khronologiya Rusi*. Vol. 2. Moscow: RIMIS, 2007.

⁷⁶ These numbers are from "Global'naia khronologicheskaiia karta," not "Nekotorye statisticheskie zakonomernost." Anatolii T. Fomenko, "K voprosu o mistifikatsiakh," *Tekhnika i nauka*, no. 11 (1982), has another description of the production of the chart, perhaps the most comprehensive. That article is also interesting for its defensive tone and cautious language, which appears intended to distinguish himself from another (perhaps Mikhail Postnikov? See note 84 below) who has taken these methods and conclusions too far (or at least, farther than was permissible under the Soviet censorship regime).

considered, spanning (in traditional dating) from 3000 B.C. to 1800 A.D.⁷⁷

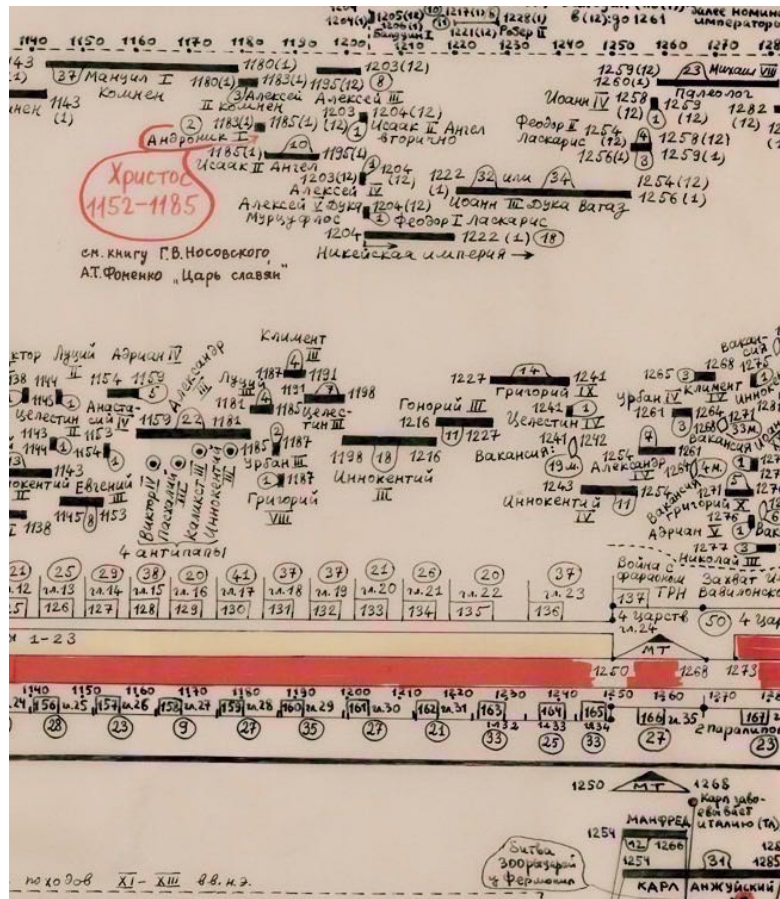
In describing this method, Fomenko acknowledges the ambiguity inherent in such texts, and so relies on only those points he considers unambiguous.⁷⁸ These include, for instance, the gender of the ruler, the structure of their family, the length of their rule, their title, the way they died (in battle, in power, in disgrace, etc.), astronomical events associated with their rule, geological events associated with their rule, details of the wars they fought (scale, location, outcome), cities they seized, location of their capital, and so forth.⁷⁹ Fomenko identified 34 discrete categories of this type, and for each category established a scale or metric by which the facts could be assigned numerical values. These values were then placed in a matrix for each ruler, which was then processed by the computer, again with the goal of comparing one to another - the smaller the output value, the closer the correlation between the two rules.

This work was accompanied by an extraordinary mapping project by which, between 1975-1979, all of these thousands of rules and their particular features were drawn on a single global timeline, called the “global chronological chart” by its creators. Fomenko and his team developed a system of colors, shapes and other graphic representations of particular types of rule in order to facilitate visual comparisons, and the scope, detail and precision of their final product is staggering. The chart bears the unmistakable imprint of Fomenko’s artistic gift. The section included here is perhaps one one-hundredth of the chart’s total area:

⁷⁷ “Nekotorye statisticheskie zakonomernosti,” 115.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.



This detail of Fomenko’s “global chronological chart” runs from 1140-1280 A.D. and features the life of Christ, which New Chronology locates between 1152-1185 A.D. The larger timeline runs from the first century B.C. to perhaps the 18th century A.D., and includes a biblical timeline, the succession of popes, and general timelines of the governance of ancient Rome, Byzantium, and the Carolingian dynasty. Fomenko and his collaborators produced five such timelines, each covering different topics and regions. (Image printed with permission of the author)

Possessed of this chart and the data that inform it, Fomenko and his collaborators could then produce their grand synthesis. In its more understated form, the synthesis would show certain dynasties to resemble others, and thus suggest that history’s chroniclers had erred in separating them in time.⁸⁰ These findings were paired with, and said to corroborate, the findings from his textual comparisons and with his calculations of tidal acceleration.

⁸⁰ In early works, Fomenko is cautious in his wording and presents his findings as speculative, but deserving of exploration by historical specialists. Read on for two possible reasons.

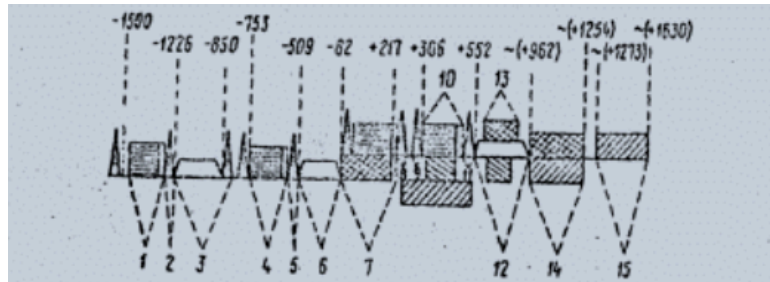


Рис. 5

рые высекаются этим отрезком (т. е. — одновременные события) на изображенных прямоугольниках, треугольниках и трапециях. Для наглядности, в тех местах, где одновременно имеется несколько таких фигур, они изображены одна над другой (развертка по вертикали), вместо того, чтобы накладывать их друг на друга.

На рис. 6 показано разложение этой карты в композицию нескольких сдвигов, при которых некоторая часть карты (условно назовем ее «хроникой X»), рассматриваемая как жесткое целое, последовательно сдвигается вниз (справа налево) на величины: 333, 1053 и 1526

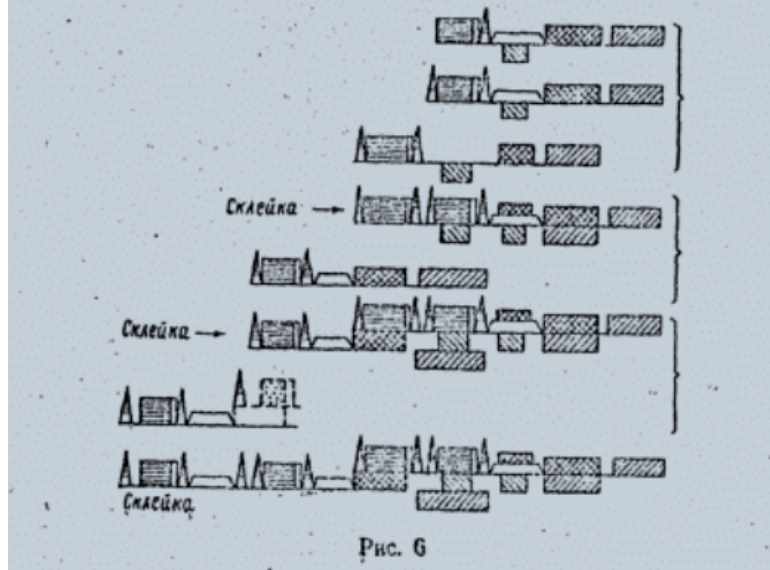


Рис. 6

Preliminary “shifts” in time that seem to reconcile distant, but strikingly similar, dynasties. Fomenko, “Nekotorye Statisticheskie Zakonomernosti,” 109. (Image printed with permission of the author)

In their more strident form, these findings would reveal a fantastical new landscape of historical time, folding and twisting and upending everything we know of the past.

Early publicity

In these early years, however, Fomenko leaned towards understatement, explicitly acknowledging the limits of mathematics and calling for interdisciplinary collaboration:

It goes without saying that the work outlined above cannot serve as a basis for any definitive conclusions, nor in the given case can historical material - in its great complexity, multifacetedness, and at times, subjective coloring

- be analyzed by strictly mathematical means. Such analysis unquestionably requires a combination of the most diverse methods: purely historical, archeological, linguistic, physical-chemical and, with these, mathematical, which as the reader can see allows for a new perspective on the problem of chronology.⁸¹

How one explains this circumspection would likely fall along strictly partisan lines. A sympathetic interpretation would see in it the deference of an honest scientist to his peers in other disciplines, and an awareness of the limits of his own. To be sure, the text itself could not be more explicit in this way. But critics would just as readily point to the larger historical context (something, incidentally, that they would routinely accuse Fomenko of ignoring). The text above was published in 1983 in the Soviet popular science magazine *Chemistry and Life* (*Khimiia i zhizn'*), which had a monthly print run of more than 300,000 copies.⁸² It is nothing short of amazing that Fomenko slipped his theory past the censor to begin with, given the conservatism of such magazines and of that historical moment in particular.⁸³ All of Fomenko's other articles were in narrowly-focused scientific journals, and in those he adopts a less obsequious posture. Yet in *Chemistry and Life*, and not only in the excerpt above but throughout, his deference seems at times excessive, and gives the appearance of defensiveness:

Generally speaking, the major result of the work presented is of a formal, statistical nature - and nothing more. And meanwhile, some without any specialization in history have attempted pseudoscientific interpretations of that result, ignoring data from the humanistic sciences. I decidedly reject such interpretations.⁸⁴

There can be little doubt, then, that his caveats in *Chemistry and Life* were a political necessity for publication. But that does not necessarily imply a political motive in writing them.

There is in fact some reason to believe that Fomenko was speaking earnestly - from a very early stage, he seems to have hoped for collaboration with those outside of his discipline. His critics would later call him an interloper and a charlatan and an obscurantist, driven by anti-humanist or commercial or political motives. But this ignores the fact that, as soon as Fomenko had fully developed his findings - in the early 1980s, when there was no profit motive and little chance of political impact - he distributed and promoted his work among his peers in the humanities.

Fomenko's Triumph

"As they say, 'to know if a pot is full of honey, or of something else, you don't have to drink the whole thing.'"

Such was one historian's first impression of Fomenko's work, as recalled from their interaction in the early 1980s. Her training was in historical methodology, and she had met Fomenko as he sought support at Moscow's Institute of History and Archives.⁸⁵ In response to questions she gave him, she

⁸¹ "Global'naia khronologicheskaiia karta," 91.

⁸² Despite the title, this (and other similar) magazines could stray outside their disciplinary boundaries.

⁸³ Even with his caution, the article caused something of a stir - Igor Danilevskii, a historians of medieval Russia who became one of Fomenko's most vocal critics, first encountered his ideas in this article.

⁸⁴ "Global'naia khronologicheskaiia karta," 91. My sense is that this particular paragraph refers to Mikhail Postnikov, the Morozov-booster in MGU's mathematics department, who by this time had already sharply diverged with Fomenko on the nature of our chronological delusion and begun to criticize him publicly. As soon as Fomenko spoke of his findings aloud, he was battling critics on two fronts.

⁸⁵ The study of historical sources and their use, or *istochnikovedenie*, is a distinct field of historical work in the Soviet and Russian historical fields, and one without a clear parallel in the United States.

remembers Fomenko personally giving her a carbon-copied, typewritten bibliography of his published works. I decline to name her here because she, unlike many of her peers, never sought to be involved in the public dispute. She believes Fomenko's work to be honest, if mistaken, unlike those who came to comprise the "antifomenko" movement.

In that historian's memory, Fomenko sought the input of several of her colleagues at once, spreading his word rather than seeking specific individuals as collaborators. At this same time, Fomenko himself claims to have been approaching individuals with particular expertise in the relevant fields. Immediately following his insight about Robert Newton's work, he wrote to Newton, and he visited the history department of MGU. Newton, Fomenko says, wrote back that he believed in the traditional dating, and the historians said - again, as Fomenko paraphrases - that they "of course did not know celestial mechanics, or math either, but were sure of the dates."⁸⁶ In his (yet unpublished) autobiography, Fomenko also recalls approaching Vasilii Kuzishchin, a prominent historian of ancient Rome, and Lev Gumilev, a famed (and controversial) Soviet ethnologist, only to be rebuffed by both.⁸⁷ In Fomenko's telling, both deferred to "tradition" over mathematics, with Gumilev doing so after clearly recognizing the truth of Fomenko's chronological critique. Again, these details speak more to how Fomenko himself views the question - as mathematics versus tradition, science versus irrational belief. But it is clear, particularly from the first case, that Fomenko did expect interest and support from scholars in the humanities, and approached them in good faith.

No support was forthcoming - when the controversy was still limited to expert circles, those experts who did speak out appear to have been united against Fomenko. Historian of antiquity Elena Golubtsova, archeologist Gennadii Koshelenko, zoologist Vladimir Smirin and astronomer Iulii Zaveniagin all wrote against Fomenko in the 1980s, quickly after his work began to appear in published form.⁸⁸ These were likely people who saw Fomenko's work in journals or was shown it by others, not those who Fomenko himself tried to recruit - a backlash took shape of its own accord as soon as Fomenko had published. Some of these names, and many new ones, would appear under the "antifomenko" banner in the 1990s.

Among those waving that banner, few were as strident as the historian Igor Danilevskii, who happened upon a Fomenko publication in the early 1980s and would, in the 1990s, write one of the more popular and enduring "antifomenko" essays.⁸⁹ Danilevskii would appear ideally suited to fight Fomenko - he is among those rare few who can claim to *know* medieval Russian history (rather than those of us who believe him, or believe Fomenko). In his formal work, he has distinguished himself as an authority on the Primary Chronicle - the most foundational textual source on the Eastern Slavs between the 9th and 12th centuries - and has analyzed the literary use of biblical citations in that text. What's more, his dissertation focused heavily on historical dating methods and the nature of historical epistemology. On account of this interest, he was even aware of Nikolai Morozov before Fomenko's

⁸⁶ This information is from my interview with Fomenko, but confirmed by several historians (this is elaborated below). Florin Diacu, in *The Lost Millennium*, claims that Robert Newton lived and died without hearing of Fomenko, while Fomenko claims to have exchanged multiple letters with him. There are reasons to distrust both accounts.

⁸⁷ Gumilev is an interesting case, in that the two clearly disagreed but are now often mentioned in the same breath, usually as nationalists or Eurasianist ideologues. Fomenko's autobiography is still in manuscript, and these segments were provided to me by Fomenko himself. The working title of the autobiography is *Kak bylo na samom dele. Kazhdaia istoriia z'belat' byt' rasskazannoii*.

⁸⁸ Dmitrii M. Volodikhin, "Fenomen fol'k-khystori," *Mezhdunarodnyi istoricheskii zhurnal*, 1999.

⁸⁹ Igor N. Danilevskii, "Pustye mnozhestva 'Novoi khronologii,'" *Antifomenkovskaia mozaika*, 2001, 12-42.

attempt to rehabilitate him, and had long been active in combating methodological laziness even among his historian peers. So it only follows that Danilevskii would take an early and active interest in fighting Fomenkoism (as it was later termed), and would be well-positioned to do so.

For his efforts, Danilevskii seems to have earned Anatolii Fomenko's particular disdain. Fomenko typically responds to his critics at great length (and with apparent relish), but never deemed Danilevskii worthy of such treatment.⁹⁰ Danilevskii, for his part, claims that a filmmaker approached him in the 1990s to produce a debate about New Chronology, but that Fomenko, however interested in principle, specifically ruled out any cooperation with Danilevskii.⁹¹ There is no question that both parties would dispute the details of what I've just described, but clearly there is no surfeit of warmth between the two. Explanations for this again fall along partisan lines. Those inclined to support Danilevskii would point to his historical expertise - he has dedicated his life's work to, on one hand, the struggle for methodological rigor in historical science, and on the other, to the critical analysis of complex historical texts, which he accuses Fomenko of butchering. But those who support Fomenko would point out, with some justification, that Danilevskii's critiques are not always scholarly in tone. This excerpt is from the introduction to Danilevskii's major antifomenko essay, titled "The Empty Multitudes of New Chronology". In it, Danilevskii posits something of a New Mathematics, mimicking Fomenko's prose for effect:

If you divide 8 by 2 you get 3 (dividing along the vertical axis) or 0 (dividing along the horizontal). Therefore the number 8 is equivalent either to two 3's or to two 0's. Because mathematics does not stipulate how, exactly, to divide 8 by 2, one can divide it either way. And finally, anybody can divide 8 by 2 and get two 4's, although how mathematicians manage this remains, in many ways, a mystery. But that is beside the point: what matters is that, clearly, by any means these results must be equivalent, that is, $4=3=0$. From that follows one more very important finding: $8=6$ (a different way of denoting two "vertical" halves of an 8) $= 0$ (likewise, denoting two "horizontal" halves of an 8). Thus $8=6=4=3=0$. Therefore, in all numbers that include the figures 8, 6, 4 or 3, a researcher might freely substitute the figure "0" if needed. ...

Granted, some might contend that the word "divide," in mathematics, connotes the division of a *quantity* rather than dividing the figure itself into parts, but the word "divide" can be understood in many ways ... the conventional perspective on this question is the result of countless errors, inculcated into the public consciousness by the mathematical professoriate, which is hidebound by dogmas that contradict all common sense.

When I spoke with Danilevskii in 2016, he was more introspective.

Author: I was surprised at how early you began to fight against Fomenko. That is, that you started before it became a popular phenomenon. Why did you consider that necessary then? What threat did it pose?

Danilevskii: I think the issue here is quite simple. I have just generally dedicated my attention to poor quality historical research. ... [it] is the presumption that "if that person can do it, so can anybody else." That's all. It's about setting a precedent. If that person wrote such-and-such, and used such a method, and nobody criticized that method, that means I can do it too. But if we criticize it, that's a different question. And for that reason I have written not just about Fomenko, but about our reputable historians too, when they use substandard methodologies.

Author: And how do you appraise your success in this struggle?

Danilevskii: It is utterly fruitless work.

History in crisis

⁹⁰ For a collection of Fomenko's rebuttals to critics, see <http://chronologia.org/answers.html>, accessed 23 May 2017.

⁹¹ Igor Danilevskii, interview with the author, March 2015.

When Danilevskii and his colleagues found themselves without a public voice against Fomenko, it wasn't on account of substandard methodologies. Nor was it for any personal complicity in the whitewashes and coverups of the Soviet era, though critics may have found this a convenient shorthand. In reality it was worse - rather than actively obscuring history, Soviet educators didn't seem to know it to begin with. Danilevskii, for instance, recalled to me his own experience of the revelations of the late 1980s:

Glasnost, when there was discussion of what had come before... it was beyond what Khrushchev had said in 1956 or after 1961 [sic], when that became a shared legacy, when one could speak about it. All the same we spoke about it very carefully. [But] when I read a short story called - I may be mistaken - "Black Angel," by Kaverin,⁹² I couldn't understand anything. ... a man in a leather jacket, executing people en masse in a basement. I couldn't understand anything. Although I had read Solzhenitsyn, I'd read [physicist and dissident Yuri] Orlov. I knew that there had been prisoners, but mass executions, nobody spoke of that.⁹³

To be sure, many of Danilevskii's guild were well aware of the Great Terror of 1937-1938, particularly those working in the capital cities and at well-connected universities. The shock he conveys here, whether by invention of his memory or isolation from more critical circles, would seem overstated. Yet Fomenko's readers, by their number alone, were necessarily removed from those small critical circles. In that view Danilevskii's memory is illustrative. Whether or not individual historians knew the truth of the Stalinist repressions was irrelevant, because their knowledge had not reached the public. An official history of the party published in 1974, for instance, failed to even mention Stalin's name.⁹⁴ The Soviet institutions responsible for general historical education - the complex of authority and credentials that average people could not help but depend on - had failed to record the Soviet past.

This became clear, as Danilevskii suggests, in sudden and traumatic fashion. *Glasnost*' saw teachers writing the newspapers, horrified that they'd long been lying to their students.⁹⁵ Lecturers with the Komsomol wrote too, aghast that the Komsomol itself had once been violently assaulted by its patron-party.⁹⁶ Importantly, these discoveries were coming from outside expert circles. When purged Old Bolsheviks, whose names had for decades been slandered or silenced, were rehabilitated, it was at the demand of their families and undertaken by the party, with historians playing only secondary roles. When Stalin's victims were rescued from obscurity, it was again not by experts but by citizens themselves, often in cooperation with *Memorial*, endeavoring to research the past on their own.⁹⁷ And in the early 1990s when Soviet archives finally opened, it was foreign historians who were best positioned to make sense of them - although they had been observing the USSR from a distance, their view was somehow less obstructed. Nobody seemed to know less about history than the Soviet-trained experts.

⁹² It does seem that Danilevskii is mistaken; I am unsure which story he is referring to, and would welcome suggestions by better-informed readers.

⁹³ Interview with Igor Danilevskii.

⁹⁴ Ponomarev, B. N., ed. *A Short History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. 2nd ed. rev. Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1974.

⁹⁵ James Riordan and Susan Bridger, *Dear Comrade Editor: Readers' Letters to the Soviet Press under Perestroika* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 19

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20. Five of the first six leaders of the komsomol were shot during the Great Terror.

⁹⁷ Smith, Kathleen. *Remembering Stalin's Victims : Popular Memory and the End of the USSR*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1996 is an excellent history of *Memorial*, though Smith is a political scientist. It addresses Memorial as an independent claimant on Soviet history, something entirely novel at that time.

As a result, others quickly assumed the historians' public role, in large part due to the peculiar media climate of the period. The late 1980s-early 1990s were a brief window in which media had not yet been privatized, and television and publishing had not yet turned to crass profit-seeking.⁹⁸ Skepticism towards historians, therefore, was paired with a broad faith in media, founded on the revelations that were streaming out of Soviet news kiosks and televisions.⁹⁹ In the late 1980s, news stands drew lines, even crowds, from 6 a.m. and sold out in a few hours, such was the appetite for newly-revealed truths.¹⁰⁰ In this climate, academics and their dry tomes remained as marginal as before, but journalists and popularizers of science and history enjoyed heightened public esteem and influence.

Thus historians were rendered impotent in the face of upstart competitors. It was difficult for a reader to distinguish "alternative history," by which dismissive experts meant a certain fantastical dilettantism, from "real history" as it was being unearthed by amateurs circumventing those same experts.¹⁰¹ When Nikolai Bukharin was rehabilitated, for instance, and an alternate Soviet past was imagined under his humane and consensus-driven leadership, was it any less real than sanitized Stalinism?¹⁰² When the public imagination ran wild with Bukharin, who had the authority to object? Likewise for the popular rehabilitation of Tsar Nicholas II and his capitalist reformer Piotr Stolypin, who might have spared Russia from Bolshevism altogether - such hypothetical histories were expounded in dozens of books.¹⁰³ And this process led further and further back - alternative histories published at this time rewrote the biographies of Catherine II and Peter the Great; the 17th century Time of Troubles became less troubled; Ivan the Terrible became a democrat, and indeed, the Mongols became allies of Muscovy.¹⁰⁴ Such histories were almost universally flattering to Russia, but no more than Soviet-published histories flattered the Soviet Union. Both served to improve the past in light of an imperfect present. Fomenko, in this sense, is just the most radical and widely read of his type.

The antifomenko movement

Fomenko's mature theory is, in certain respects, at odds with the historical consensus. For instance, some would argue that Fomenko's shortened timeline does not square with what we know of medieval Russian coinage. So claimed MGU historian Dmitrii Volodikhin, at least, when I spoke

⁹⁸ Yurchak, "A Parasite from Outer Space," 312-13; 319.

⁹⁹ For an excellent summary of journalism's many triumphs at this time, see Natalia Rostova's web project *Rozhdenie rossiiskikh SMI, Epokha Gorbacheva (1985-1991)*, <http://gorbymedia.com>, accessed 19 January 2018. Rostova has compiled a multimedia chronology, with highly detailed accounts and analysis, of major events of the Russian media's transformation at the end of the Soviet era. Some of its major milestones are described in this dissertation's first chapter, in the section titled "Conjunction."

¹⁰⁰ Aron, Leon Rabinovich. Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas, and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987-1991. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012, 39.

¹⁰¹ The term "alternative history" was first used in 1986 by a mathematician, who was advocating for mathematical methods to be applied in the humanities. I. D. Koval'chenko, "Vozmozhnoe i deistvitel'noe i problemy alternativnosti v istoricheskom razvitiu," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1986, no. 4:83-104. Citation from Laruelle, 568.

¹⁰² Laruelle, 568. Aron, 45, describes a "N.I. Bukharin club," a reading and debate society of sorts at one of the country's largest auto plants, whose members clearly saw in Bukharin a more preferable past.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 569. Laruelle notes the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *Red Wheel*, which envisioned a rosier Russian past in which the Bolshevik revolution was avoided altogether. Sheiko, "Lomonosov's Bastards," 6, footnote 13, lists 24 works of "alternative history," along with the substantial print run of each, and reminds the reader that books of any kind were a luxury for most in the 1990s.

¹⁰⁴ Laruelle, 569.

with him in 2015. Fomenko does not believe that medieval Russians could have produced high-quality coins in the Kievan period, then only crude and warped coins for a period after, and then only several centuries later returned to form. Volodikhin counters that, first of all, most coins dating from the 10th or 11th century (of which only a few hundred survive) *were* of poor quality, and the few of better quality were likely made by a visiting Greek master, or at least by a professional artisan for specific purposes. And second, in the period that followed, Moscow was only a small part of medieval Rus', and that poorly developed and under-populated regions to the Northeast - still struggling under the Mongol yoke, perhaps - would naturally make low-quality coins. Where Fomenko claims to resolve a mystery, Volodikhin sees no mystery at all. But facing such criticisms in the 1990s, Fomenko's theory somehow endured.

Dmitrii Volodikhin, to his credit, did not make this argument to the public. Of the many talented scholars who waged the "antifomenko" struggle, Volodikhin more than any other acknowledged the futility of battling Fomenko in the realm of historical science. In an article titled "The Phenomenon of Folk-history," Volodikhin instead made the case that "Fomenkoism" was not about medieval Russia at all, but about Russia in the 1990s - we will return to his argument below. Most of Volodikhin's allies in the fight, while likely aware of the larger context, chose to criticize Fomenko's methods and conclusions. This was utterly fruitless work.

The antifomenko movement took formal shape only towards the end of the 1990s, when rumors circulated that New Chronology might enter school curricula. Volodikhin recalls officials in Russia's education bureaucracy lobbying to insert "alternative history" into textbooks, and in Kazakhstan, the alternative historian Murat Adzhiev succeeded in just that.¹⁰⁵ The first formal antifomenko conference was held in 1997, and in 1998 the historical section of the Russian Academy of Sciences called a meeting of experts to establish an antifomenko strategy.¹⁰⁶

All parties at the 1998 meeting at the Academy of Sciences accepted the premise that science itself would be Fomenko's undoing, if only it were deftly deployed.¹⁰⁷ After a short introduction, the first to speak was none other than Igor Danilevskii, Fomenko's oldest critic. After criticizing Fomenko's methods, Danilevskii said that censoring Fomenko would lead nowhere, and that historians must fight him, and further, that upcoming antifomenko volumes will be "extremely helpful." Historian and paleographer Vladimir Kozlov spoke next, speculating at length on Fomenko's motivations (insanity, vanity, self-deception, malice towards the historical profession, flawed methods, theoretical problems within mathematics), and then proposed public debate with Fomenko himself.¹⁰⁸ Historian of India and Central Asia Grigorii Bongard-Levin countered that, because Fomenko rests on his real academic accomplishments, he should be countered not in mass media but in academic fora. Archeologist of medieval Russia Nikolai Makarov argued that historians have facilitated Fomenko by inadequately

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Dmitrii Volodikhin. Adzhiev's theory of Turkic history differs from Fomenko's in detail but not in ambition. It posits a golden age of ancient Turkic civilization, and begins Russia's own history 2,5000 years ago in the Altai mountains.

¹⁰⁶ Sergei Leskov, "Po raschetam vyshlo: sluzhil iisus khristos rimskim papoi," *Izvestiia*, January 29, 1997.

¹⁰⁷ "Mify i real'nosti v istorii," Pub. L. No. Protokol #4, Minutes of a meeting of the office of the history section of the Russian Academy of Sciences (1998).

¹⁰⁸ The linguist Andrei Zalizniak, in his major antifomenko work, offers an even more unlikely but intriguing motivation: "... I cannot completely cast off the suspicion that for [Fomenko], his works on the humanities are an amusing, though rather too drawn out, farce, a Mephistophelean mockery by a mathematician of humanist simpletons, whose discipline is so helpless that they are not able to tell a parody from a scientific theory. If it is indeed so, then the main guinea pigs of this refined experiment are his followers." Zalizniak, "Lingvistika po A.T. Fomenko," 166, fn. 6.

researching chronology, and that its systematic study (employing radiocarbon dating and dendrochronology in particular)¹⁰⁹ will eventually resolve the problem. Ancient historian Viktoria Ukolova agreed, and insisted on the publication of comparative histories and historical encyclopedias with chronological tables. She found support from the medievalist Dmitrii Kharitonovich, who urged a new “academic publication of chronology.” Orientalist Vladimir Miasnikov returned to Bongard-Levin’s suggestion, and countered that they *should* go on television, but not invite Fomenko, and further, recommended a formal, ongoing antifomenko seminar of experts to produce media-ready material. Ultimately the committee agreed on four points of resolution: first, that Fomenko was a pseudoscientist; second, that experts have *shown* Fomenko to be a pseudoscientist; third, that Fomenko was poisoning minds and historical education generally; and fourth, that fighting with him publicly only raises his stature, and that the solution is to produce new and better historical work.¹¹⁰

The following year another conference was convened, and then another, and from each sprung edited volumes of essays, composed of criticisms by historians, archeologists, linguists, and experts in the hard sciences too.¹¹¹ These academics found allies in the Orthodox Church, which was aghast at Fomenko’s perceived sacrilege, and among the Old Believers, who found Fomenko’s sacrilege as egregious as that of the Orthodox Church.¹¹² Together, the antifomenko forces assailed New Chronology in popular and academic print media and on television. And Fomenko, nothing if not prolific, attempted to answer each critic in a series of expansive essays (one collection of his “responses to critics” runs 17,000 words, and is just one of eight published on his website).¹¹³ In refuting his critics, he frequently accused them of emotional, unprofessional and ad hominem attacks, and though he occasionally responded in kind, he far more often sheltered in the citadel of science.

Appraising one antifomenko conference as a whole, Fomenko describes its tone as “sharply critical, sometimes straying far outside the bounds of scientific discourse,” deeming it “senseless to respond to such a stream of emotions and insults.”¹¹⁴ On a critical essay by colleague-turned-adversary Sergei Novikov, Fomenko claimed that “it [was] without concrete arguments... and not an analysis of our work, [but] a sort of memoir. ... the essential content of the article is emotion.”¹¹⁵ In these defenses, emotion becomes a byword for irrationality, which Fomenko is always quick to contrast with true science and his own scientific credentials. Responding to that article by Novikov for instance, and specifically to its accusations of pseudoscience, Fomenko notes that Novikov, “in addition to not

¹⁰⁹ Fomenko and his collaborators are unimpressed by dendrochronology, numismatic dating, and radiocarbon dating. Each is seen by them, though in different ways, as dependent on flawed conventional timelines, and thus useless. This line of argument is straightest for numismatics; on trees and radiocarbon, it meanders far from the focus of this chapter.

¹¹⁰ In full, they seek better historical work “free of dogma or contrived historical schemas,” which does reflect an understanding of how they arrived at this place to begin with.

¹¹¹ Laruelle, 575. Laruelle claims that 12 such volumes were published; Fomenko himself notes 7, neither shows how they arrived at the number, but the truth is probably somewhere between. The conferences are certainly the origin of the papers, for the most part, and many papers were published in different forms multiple times. Today, they are all available online, but scattered about.

¹¹² Interview with Dmitrii Volodikhin. Fomenko’s primary coauthor Gleb Nosovski was himself an Old Believer, and his particular church displayed antifomenko collections for his perusal.

¹¹³ This particular collection of responses to critics is at http://chronologia.org/ans_bib_rus.html; the full bibliography is at <http://chronologia.org/answers.html>. Both accessed 23 May 2017.

¹¹⁴ This was written in response to a conference of the history department at MGU in 1999, titled “The Myths of New Chronology.” The response can be read in full at first link above, under the subheading “РАЗБОР КНИГ “АНТИФОМЕНКО.” New Chronology, incidentally, is recognizable by its idiosyncratic capitalization.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* For the feud with Novikov, see note 38 above.

mentioning the names of our books published by academic presses, does not mention several dozen articles on our topic published in scientific journals.”

Of course, Fomenko’s critics *had* challenged him on scientific grounds. Fomenko was accused, at various times by various experts, of misusing dendrochronology; of misreading English maps; of confusing the age of manuscripts with the age of their bindings; of arbitrarily shifting vowels in linguistic analysis. But there too, he accused his critics of departing from scientific reason, of demagoguery, and most often, of over-reliance on received tradition. Certainly, he cannot be accused of anti-intellectualism, however dim his view of many intellectuals. The volume of these exchanges is immense, but nothing is gained from further elaboration - the authors decry Fomenko’s abuse of science and Fomenko decries theirs, and refers them via footnotes to his earlier work. It was fruitless work, because both sides were debating how the *knowers* know, how the root of science clutches the soil. Readers, removed to varying degrees from the science itself, were left to choose whom they believed.

The only departure from this mode is Dmitrii Volodikhin who, in his critique, dedicates little ink to Fomenko’s particular claims (and none to coinage). Instead, Volodikhin argues that Fomenko’s success is a product of its historical moment.¹¹⁶ After developing a typology of “alternative history” as a literary genre, he goes on to describe the discrediting of Soviet historical scholarship as a precursor to the genre’s emergence. In Volodikhin’s view, Soviet historians’ real and perceived submission to a failed ideology hobbled their attempts to counter dilettantism in their field, especially when that dilettantism was burnished with hard-scientific credentials. In a newly-freed publishing market that rewarded sensation and controversy, Fomenko’s mastery of scientific forms and his iconoclastic vision assured his success, with or without the approval of his historian-peers. Volodikhin, unique among those peers, did not endeavor to defend the mantle of science from Fomenko - he understood that it was already lost.

Fomenko’s response to Volodikhin’s essay was consistent in its posture, but unusual in its brevity:

D.M. Volodikhin, in his article “The place of ‘New Chronology’ in folk-history,” pp. 53-56, expounds a subjective viewpoint on several things unrelated to the problems of historical chronology. To D.M. Volodikhin we have absolutely nothing to say. The stream of his “valuable insights” ends after three and a half pages.¹¹⁷

New Chronology

It should now be clearer how, in the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of Russians learned that Mongols did not invade Europe. The man who made this discovery, as all his readers would know, was an extraordinarily accomplished mathematician and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who published (at least initially) under the aegis of MGU, Russia’s most prestigious university. Every introduction to every book of New Chronology emphasized the author’s (or more often, authors’) mathematical prowess as testament to their credibility, and the writing itself is dry and academic (if idiosyncratic) in style.¹¹⁸ In a formulation typical to the New Chronology canon, one book describes

¹¹⁶ Dmitrii M. Volodikhin, “Novaia khronologiya kak avangard fol’k-historii,” available at <http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/HISTORY/FOLKHIST.HTM>, accessed 23 May 2017. Like most of the antifomenko canon, this article is available in multiple places online and is best found by search engine.

¹¹⁷ This is from the same sprawling collection of responses to critics; see note 113 above.

¹¹⁸ Most notable among these is an introduction to a 1999 publication by Soviet dissident-mathematician Alexander Zinoviev who, among other things, calls New Chronology the greatest scientific breakthrough of the 20th century. It is

itself as “intended for wide circles of readers who are interested in the application of scientific methods to the humanities”.¹¹⁹ Of course Fomenko’s readers, like the rest of us, may not be qualified to appraise scientific methods. For that, we look to scientists.

Fomenko saw the world from Soviet science’s greatest heights, and from there he perceived no Mongol invaders. Instead, he proposed the following reconstruction: the “invasion” of modern memory was only a series of minor skirmishes at the edges of a vast Slavic-Turkic empire, likely in that empire’s south rather than in the East, and involving the Khazars (whom we have erred in distinguishing from the Cossacks).¹²⁰ If the mounted warriors that defended the empire ever imposed on the civilian population, it was only to claim the tithe they were due from the tsar, or perhaps the grand prince, or perhaps the khan (these distinctions, too, are of more recent provenance).¹²¹ And that tithe was worth fighting for - the spectacular riches of the empire were known throughout the world, and in the West from the travel chronicles of John of Plano Carpini and Marco Polo, both of whom visited and documented the capital at Yaroslavl (though the city was called Novgorod at the time, and we have since transposed it to Karakorum on the Mongolian steppe).¹²² If the summary above disorients the reader, the fault lies not with Fomenko but with the Romanovs and their chroniclers and historians, through the 17th and 18th centuries, who invented much of “conventional” history to separate Russians from their steppe heritage, and more broadly to legitimize their rule.¹²³

The 17th-century ascent of the Romanovs marks the end of Fomenko’s reconstruction, and an ignominious end at that. Fomenko argues that the world before them was defined by progress and consolidation, culminating in that Slavic-Turkic empire, also called the Russian Horde - a vast, peaceable, multiethnic union of Eurasia’s many peoples. This history begins in the bronze age in the 8th-9th centuries A.D. in an empire centered in Alexandria, which we today know both as ancient Egypt and as ancient Rome.¹²⁴ That empire witnessed man’s mastery of iron and the emergence of writing in the 10th and 11th centuries, before its center of power moved to Rome, variably referred to today as Constantinople, Jerusalem or Troy. This second Rome witnessed the crucifixion of Christ in the 11th or 12th century, and the subsequent flourishing of a universal and united Christian faith throughout the realm, which then included North Africa, Turkey, Rus’, and the whole of Western Europe.¹²⁵ The Russian Horde formed in the 14th century, and soon came to rule all Christian lands -

available online at <http://chronologia.org/zinovjev.html>.

¹¹⁹ Zalizniak, “Lingvistika po A.T. Fomenko,” 164.

¹²⁰ Sheiko and Brown, *History as Therapy*, 153. I am indebted to the authors for this summary, and for the heroic research it required - Fomenko’s work after my period, through the 1990s and 2000s, is extraordinary in its volume and density, totaling many thousands of pages scattered across dozens of disparate and overlapping volumes.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 148-149.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 153, citing Fomenko, A.T., Nosovskii, G.V., *Bibleiskaia Rus’*, II volumes, (Moscow: ‘Faktorial press’, 1998, 2000), I, 149-50. On 182-83, Sheiko and Brown cite the same text of Fomenko and Nosovskii, I, 107, wherein the Romanovs invent Ivan the Terrible to justify the ascent of Mikhail Romanov to the throne. There is a longer tradition in Russia, among patriotic intellectuals, of attributing foreign treachery to the Romanovs. Mikhail Lomonosov is certainly its most prominent figure - he accused the dynasty’s historians of downplaying Russian achievements in favor of Western ones - but this current of thought has seen a great revival since the collapse of the USSR, and often paints the Romanovs as being of Prussian descent. This too is from Sheika and Brown, *History as Therapy*, 1; 9.

¹²⁴ This synopsis is from Dmitrii Kharitonovich, “Fenomen ‘Fomenko,’” *Novyi Mir*, no. 3 (1998), http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/1998/3/harit.html. See the paragraph beginning “В чем же суть НХ?”

¹²⁵ Kharitonovich places the crucifixion in 1095-1089, but the global chronological chart excerpted above places the life of Christ 1152 to 1185. Kharitonovich’s sources are likely more recent, and thus closer to New Chronology as published in the 1990s.

Europe, Siberia, China, India, and Turkey - from its magnificent center on the Volga. The empire's faith was Christian until it was riven by conflict in the 15th century. Initially the conflict was religious in nature - this is when Christianity split into Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. But political schisms soon followed, and in a series of skirmishes and shifting alliances, Russia, Ottoman Turkey and Western powers parted forevermore. Finally, in the 16th century, civil war broke out in the Russian Horde itself, and a combination of internal disorder and Western military aggression destabilized the Horde's ruling dynasty, creating an opening for the usurper Romanovs. Once installed, they quickly went about obscuring all that is described above, in order to sow useful discord between Orthodox and other believers, and between Slavs and their kindred neighbors.

In all of the above, incidentally, one can see the patriotic implications of New Chronology, insofar as it constructs for Russians a glorious past (one of a certain religious chauvinism but ethnic universalism). This interpretation of Fomenkoism has been the focus of every English-language analysis, most of which are insightful, though uniformly critical. In these accounts Fomenko is by turns an imperialist, a Eurasianist, a mystic nationalist, or a state ideologue bolstering Russia's national identity.¹²⁶ In this frame, New Chronology is placed - consciously or not - in a long tradition of speculative and politically-tinged Russian ethnography.¹²⁷

Yet Fomenko's readers are conspicuously absent from these studies of New Chronology's political meaning, and the readers' motivations should not (and cannot) be presumed through analysis of the texts in isolation. This chapter's conclusion will return to this point, and offer an alternative theory of Fomenko's appeal, entirely separate from (though not discounting) politics. I will argue there that Russian patriotism is too narrow a view on New Chronology, as it obscures the far deeper questions that the theory clearly raised - questions of science, authority and belief; in short, the questions that

¹²⁶ Fomenko and Fomenkoism are framed by Marlene Laruelle as a conspiracy-minded nationalist project, bent on depriving Russia's neighbors their history, in "Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?," *The Russian Review*, September 2012. James Billington places Fomenko squarely in the Eurasianist tradition in *Russia in Search of Itself*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004; Dmitrii Sidorov, "Post-Imperial Third Romes: Resurrections of a Russian Orthodox Geopolitical Metaphor," *Geopolitics* 11, no. 2 (2006): 317-47 does the same; both emphasize Russian messianism and the concept of the "Third Rome." Martinez, Francisco. "Anatolii Fomenko and the Perennial 'Remont' of Russian History," Tallinn: Estonian Institute of the Humanities, 2015, is a distinctly theoretical take, but in its interpretation tacks closely to Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown, *History as Therapy: Alternative History and Nationalist Imaginings in Russia* (ibidem Press, 2014). They stress New Chronology as a justification for Russian empire past and future, in response to the anxieties introduced by capitalism and democracy at the time of Fomenko's major publications. Specifically, the authors emphasize the anti-Normanist and anti-Mongol Yoke schools of alternative history, in which they place Fomenko. Charles J. Halperin does the same, though with less equivocal language and more intimations of Fomenko's antisemitism, in "False Identity and Multiple Identities in Russian History: The Mongol Empire and Ivan the Terrible," *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 2103 (Pittsburgh, PA: Center for Russian and East European Studies, University Center for International Studies, University of Pittsburgh, 2011). Many Russian titles could be added to this list; the Russian anti-Fomenko movement (and its scholarly production) is treated in depth below.

¹²⁷ In this interpretation, New Chronology's pre- and early-Soviet lineage might feature Nikolai Marr (1864-1934), who connected disparate language families to Georgian and speculated on a single ur-language (see Yuri Slezkine, "N. Ia. Marr and the National Origins of Soviet Ethnogenetics," *Slavic Review* 55, no. 4 (1996): 826-62) and Velimir Khlebnikov (1885-1922), the futurist poet and linguist whose diverse work drew on Slavic mythology and, separately, proposed a heavily mathematized universal language. Concerning more recent thinkers, one might place New Chronology alongside Olzhas Suleimenov (b. 1936), the Soviet-Kazakh poet who suggested Turkic origins for a 13th-century Slavic chronicle, and of course Lev Gumilev, whose Eurasia-centric theory of ethnogenesis blurs ethnic origins. See Mark Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016) for Gumilev's thought, its origins, and its legacy. More radical critics of New Chronology have connected it to the nationalist fantasies of Alexander Dugin, but this seems more a political attack than an honest intellectual analysis.

guide this dissertation as a whole. Nowhere was this clearer than in the public discourse inside Russia, in which Fomenko's loudest opponents attacked his science, leaving politics aside entirely.

Conclusion

One of Volodikhin's valuable insights was to note science's enduring prestige, and other chapters of this dissertation have made this plain. Anatolii Kashpirovskii, whose mass psychic healings captivated the Soviet Union in its final years, was a licensed psychiatrist, his own charisma inseparable from that of his office.¹²⁸ The astrologer Mikhail Levin, like most of his competitors and most of his early students, drew both private inspiration and public credibility from lifetimes spent in hard science. Fomenko's preeminence in math was undoubtedly the basis of his confidence, and then, the confidence of his readers. It is clear that hundreds of thousands of people came to believe Fomenko, and that their belief rested on the credentials of the author and the prestige of his discipline, as well as the lowered status of the discipline he usurped.

It is another question, though, why they cared to read. Part of the answer, surely, lies not in the theory itself, but in the scandal it provoked - scandal was a thriving sphere of culture in the 1990s. Concerning the theory, many more were surely drawn by the allure of a novel idea, by the excitement of scientific breakthrough, and by the historical detective story that drives New Chronology's narrative. Some readers, it can be assumed, read casually and curiously, but without great investment in the truth or falsehood of the claims, or in their deeper implications.

A far more common explanation, again, is that Fomenko's narrative satisfied a particular political need, and was a contender in the much-hyped competition for a new, unifying "Russian Idea." But this premise, as it manifested in the 1990s, implies the loss of a unifying Soviet idea, while any cultural analysis of the late Soviet Union - this one included - shows the abject failure of Soviet ideology to achieve anything of the sort. In the Soviet Union's last decades, the lived experience of individual Soviet people certainly did not map onto the party's grand vision - the shape of time that, in another epoch, had governed the Bolshevik cosmos. While the country itself had an identity among other countries, what it meant for an individual to be "Soviet" came clear largely in retrospect, that is, by contrast. In other words, people had been living for decades without an Idea, but life had carried on. Though New Chronology could, perhaps, suggest what it means to be "Russian," this single explanation for its popularity rests on a great many assumptions, which in turn lead the researcher to seek some pure meaning in New Chronology, distilled from the text alone (and only in its late and elaborated form).

An idea that animates hundreds of thousands of people, though, cannot be confined to a text; it necessarily becomes the possession and the product of a community. This is clearly true of New Chronology, when "Fomenkoism" grew so much larger than the man and his work. In addition to the simple metric of book sales, the text spawned dozens of other histories which expanded or adjusted or diverged from the original, and Fomenko and his coauthors engaged with such works.¹²⁹ Many

¹²⁸ Anna Geltzer, "Surrogate Epistemology: The Transition from Soviet to Russian Biomedicine" (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 2012) includes a chapter on extrasense healing, and on Kashpirovskii in particular. Chapter 5 in Galina Lindquist, *Conjuring Hope: Magic and Healing in Contemporary Russia, Epistemologies of Healing*, v. 1 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006) explores charisma of office and credentials in the biomedical field during this period.

¹²⁹ See note 13 above.

more people, with far less time, wrote (and continue to write) thousands of letters to Fomenko and his coauthors, suggesting leads, expounding theories, and sharing insights from their own regions of Russia and their own areas of expertise.¹³⁰ The iconoclastic subtext of New Chronology, which gained further credibility from the establishment's attacks, placed all of its readers on one side of a barricade in broader cultural battles over the Soviet legacy and, certainly, over Russia's past. These lines were hardened still more, and the community still better defined, by the proclamations of certain prominent intellectuals, who held up that New Chronology was a scientific breakthrough of epochal significance.¹³¹ Indeed, underlying all of this was the credibility of hard science, which more than any other factor accounted for New Chronology's power. None of this can be credited to Anatolii Fomenko, and he was powerless to meaningfully guide it.

In this light, it is clear that Anatolii Fomenko was not primarily a political agitator, or primarily a scientist, but a prophet of the peculiar type that people this dissertation - indeed, he is their perfection. He led an exemplary Soviet life and, without ever forsaking that world, radically diverged from its conventions, and revealed a new world in its place. The basis of that world is a (now explicit) reconfiguration of time itself, in his case a refashioning of the past to reveal a different present and future. His great impact was as the charismatic progenitor of a worldview, around which formed a community of belief, which nonetheless held the truth of modern science not just as a certain epistemology worthy of respect, but now as its central principle. And like the other leaders we've seen, with Vissarion as only the most clearly demonstrated, Fomenko is ultimately a follower as well, "an onlooker like all others," as he said of his artwork above. The world of ideas and debates attributed to him arose from the mutual elaborations of a community of belief.

"Belief," it must be noted, carries here no connotation of truth or falsehood. I believe that Mongols invaded Europe, just as Fomenko believes they did not. New Chronology does not appear in this dissertation as either a discovery or a delusion, but as a new and highly visible worldview, which clearly served the present needs of hundreds of thousands of Russians following the Soviet collapse.

What need that was in particular cannot be easily deduced, and certainly not from the text alone. Fomenko's math made of history a new and fantastical landscape, looping and weaving and folding time on itself. But the shape of time only matters if one can plausibly affix their own life to its outline, and for that purpose, New Chronology might seem too far removed. After the 17th century, it aligns with convention, and its source and methods are necessarily obscure. Its language is adamantly scientific, without any outlet into allegory or transcendence, and apparently morally inert.

So what did New Chronology mean to its readers? I have spoken with only one reader, Anatolii Fomenko himself. His interpretation holds no more weight than that of any other, and again, he could not impose it on them if he tried. There is, besides, no single answer, nothing so crude as a two-dimensional shape that emerges from New Chronology or from Fomenko's own meditations. But what is clear from his words is that, despite his public protestations, New Chronology is not and cannot be strictly about numbers. It is a community of people engaged with an idea, and exploring time and their place within it. Like all in this dissertation, they are united as much by exploration itself, than by anything they might have found.

¹³⁰ Interview with Anatolii Fomenko. Fomenko, unfortunately, does not archive such letters.

¹³¹ Logician-turned-dissident-turned-Soviet-apologist Alexander Zinoviev, one of Fomenko's primary boosters, called New Chronology "one of the most remarkable scientific discoveries of the 20th century" in a self-published article titled "Kogda zhil Aristotel", 11 February 2004, <http://zinoviev.org/az/texts/articles/zlobo/kogda-zhil-aristotel/>, accessed 12 January 2018.

Interview with a reader

I met Anatolii Fomenko at his office in the mathematics department of MGU. The building itself is the tallest of seven Stalin-era skyscrapers, a magnificent and imposing stone giant that dominates its region of Moscow. It is a monument to Soviet history and to Soviet science, but more so, to the universal vision that united and transcended them. Its profile appears on books published in the university's name, and it is Fomenko's office here that lends him such enormous authority in Russia. Yet when I spoke to him as an authority - as a leader - there was little to discuss. On his discovery or his theory, its development or its fame and controversy, he could only repeat what was already recorded elsewhere (endless repetition, it seems, is the lot of leaders everywhere). On the theory's adoption by Russian patriots, Fomenko said even less - namely, that he was a scientist, and that he has no capacity for or interest in political games. But on the theory's meaning - to him alone - he came across as a thoughtful and deeply invested reader.

In the most immediate and literal sense, New Chronology seems to describe a golden age before the 17th century, under the enlightened rule of the Russian Horde. Fomenko places clear social value on this element of the theory.

New Chronology paints an entirely different picture of the past before the 17th century. ... it would seem [to] alleviate a great number of problems and tensions between current-day states and peoples. It's a means to look calmly at the way things were. ... In our model, before the 17th century, there was a grand unity of the most diverse peoples across an enormous territory. We've termed that a sort of super-empire. There was more or less a unified religion there, more or less, which branched off into our contemporary faiths, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam. ... And across this large territory there was a more or less unified governing structure, a more or less unified culture, a certain collectivity among the people. That collective ethos was lost in the 17th century. ... If one accepts the version we are proposing, it will help us to recognize this sort of unity, which before the 17th century was evident in culture, religion, even language, this sense of community.¹³²

For those who have read this dissertation from the beginning, the outlines of this golden age should be familiar - a unified order, of which we have inherited only sharp fragments. It is an essentially nostalgic view of the world. Our conversation continued:

Author: Does New Chronology contain any general rules of history, that is, on the grandest scale? ... How can we explain the overall trajectory of history?

Anatolii Fomenko: I'll tell you. ... Scaliger's chronology, our conventional chronology, manifests a clear sine curve, the effect of the rise of a culture and its decline.

Author: Right.

Fomenko: Rise and fall, rise and fall. Ancient Greece rises and it falls. Ancient Egypt rises, it falls. Rome rises, falls. The Arab caliphate rises and falls. With New Chronology we maintain, insofar as that is all condensed, all of these sine curves in fact fold one over the other, and the picture of civilization is entirely different. In the 10th century, just as a tentative example, we see the emergence of written language, and what came before we simply don't know, there are no documents. Beginning in the 10th century there are no breakdowns to speak of, no global catastrophes. It was more or less steady growth, as today. Beginning in the 17th century, we see more or less steady growth in culture, in science...

Author: A history of progress, then.

Fomenko: It's a history of progress.

A history of progress is in tension with a golden age - the latter is time in decline, humanity descending from great heights. Yet New Chronology adheres to convention after the 17th century, and Fomenko and historians of modernity see the same astounding development since then. A history

¹³² *Ibid.*

of progress would also seem to conflict with the experience of any Soviet reader, Fomenko included.

Author: How then do you explain the collapse of the Soviet Union in particular?

Fomenko: Just as we do the splintering of the empire in the 17th century. It was, of course, a very significant event, but the world hasn't slid back into the stone age.

Author: Not yet, anyway.

Fomenko: Not yet, not yet. The world hasn't yet slid into the dark ages. ... Now, of course, the collapse of the USSR is a very significant event. I would say, a negative one. But it's like the splintering of the empire in the 17th century. A very significant event. But all the same...

Author: Local turbulence, that can happen...

Fomenko: You know it's a wave, turbulence of a sort. But on the whole, in spite of it, there's development. As of yet, we're not back in the dark ages.

Fomenko the topologist sees no conflict at all between inexorable progress and a lost golden age - the two tendencies, to him, operate on different scales. History, in its grand arc, has not forsaken us. But this is cold comfort even to Fomenko - the collapse was "a very significant event. I would say, a negative one."

It seems important that, at the same moment Fomenko introduces his own experience, he draws an explicit parallel between the USSR and the Russian Horde - described above as "a grand unity of the most diverse peoples across an enormous territory," with a "more or less a unified religion," "a more or less unified governing structure, a more or less unified culture, a certain collectivity among the people." Nostalgia thus becomes less abstract, not drawn from ancient texts (as with Krishna Consciousness), nor even from the computation of ancient texts, but from the smoothing action of memory, with history in a supporting role. Here in particular, as history merges with memory, Anatolii Fomenko does not speak as a leader or as an expert. Or more accurately, he speaks with the same expertise as anybody else.

Author: My last question then ... It's a question I ask in every interview. I want to hear your personal opinion. How would you explain to somebody why the Soviet Union collapsed? I realize it's not your expertise. But in your view, why is that country no more?

Fomenko: You know, it's difficult for me to say. It's a deep question, a question of politics. And I deeply regret that the Soviet Union collapsed. But why and how? There are a lot of versions. An awful lot of them... to give an answer, you would need information from the top, which I don't have. So I will only repeat that for me, personally, it was deeply regrettable.

Author: In what sense, personally, was it regrettable?

Fomenko: Well, I much preferred the atmosphere in the USSR. There was a greater sense of community then. We lived as one big community. A big community. And people were more invested in collaborative work. In our circles, everybody had more or less the same salary, and had more time to dedicate to their interests, outside the bounds of their work. People who worked as engineers were into the theater, made music, made art, it was stimulating. And now people are more like automatons. There's the chance to earn more money, or spend more time on earning more money. And less chance to let your gaze wander.

Fomenko's reflections - like his art - operate on two scales simultaneously. On the scale of human lives - of his own life - time is in constant and disruptive motion, deforming the ground underneath us, wrenching human beings apart from one another. But on the grand scale - of New Chronology, of history - that same motion appears smooth and graceful, even sublime, and reveals to us real and utterly different worlds. Fomenko, for one, seems to find comfort in the latter.

Author: But in principle, there is hope, in the sense of history's grand scale - this is a ripple.

Fomenko: Well yes, as I said, it's something of an undulating plane. But all the same, it leads upward. I am counting on that.

Conclusion

The introduction to this dissertation showed how the Soviet collapse and transition eroded the foundations on which Soviet people had built and planned their lives. Although Gorbachev's reforms to the press and economy at first fostered a moment of hope, economic restructuring soon faltered, and the liberalized press broadcast each setback and disgrace in real time - *perestroika* and *glasnost*' were a feedback loop that accelerated the state's unraveling. By 1989, that unraveling manifested as a cascade of material crises - of unemployment, inflation, mass emigration, declining public health, and crime. With these came a moral crisis, in which drugs, alcohol, pornography, prostitution and garish advertising flooded the streets, overwhelmed the senses, and made people strangers in the country they had inhabited their entire lives. And all of this, again, was relative to a recent past in which that same country had made historic gains in space, in science and technology generally, in international sport, in literature, and in the equitable provision of public goods. Taken together, I described this crisis as spiritual in nature, in that people were severed from anything fixed or eternal, and left in a world without reference points around which they could organize their existence.

The collapse and transition evoked a cultural response which appeared, to those outside of it, as a flourishing of utterly new worldviews. Each was a particular solution to the era's problems, and from my case studies, it emerges that each was, fundamentally, an orientation in time itself. As a result of the spiritual crisis, Soviet people were unsure where their lives or their country were headed, and unsure of both the past and the future - previously-held assumptions about the world and its direction could not withstand wrenching societal change. The prophets, proselytizers, messiahs and mystics that poured onto the streets in those days offered new orientations and, it would seem, the seeds of a new culture.

The case studies, however, also show that those worldviews and orientations were only "new" in their particular formulations, and in fact drew their concrete sources and their inspiration from within Soviet culture (or at least, in the case of Mormonism, held appeal for distinctly late-Soviet reasons). Each worldview, like the countless others that animated the seeking milieu, was an amalgamation of backward-looking, or nostalgic, or ostensibly pre-modern sensibilities, and some reckoning with the authority of hard science, not least because its carriers were often scientists and engineers themselves. In the introduction, I posited that this reflects the imperfection of the Russian revolution itself, which in most ways wrenched the country out of the past and made modern subjects of its population, but which never successfully provided that population with a transcendent morality or meaning that could be conveyed across generations. Thus at the time of the collapse and transition, millions of Soviet people gazed backwards in search of meaning, but at the same time exalted science (as they understood it) and interpreted the distant past through its lens.

The particular preoccupations of the seeking milieu thus came of Russian and Soviet conditions, and their exposition here has revealed the ways that the Soviet experience did and did not refashion

Soviet minds. Yet it bears mention that, in all this reconstruction of history and redefinition of science, neither history nor science was of particular importance in themselves. Both were only valuable insofar as they could impart meaning and inspiration to Soviet people's lives, as they were meant to over the past seventy years. Astrology was not just a scientific discipline, and Fomenko was not just describing history - both provided direction in a world whose central feature was disorientation. This is why astrologers and Hare Krishnas came of the same *kruzhki*, even as Srila Prabhupada derided modern expertise altogether, and it is why followers of Vissarion read Fomenko in their wilderness exile, even while Vissarion himself abjured history in its entirety. What unites these currents, again, is their capacity to reshape time itself. In other words, there is a deeper story at play here, of which the Soviet case is just one particularly florid manifestation. I will conclude this dissertation by suggesting that, while it is peculiarly Soviet in its details, the story above might also represent a generalizable portrait of human cultures in times of transition and crisis.

It is plainly evident that there is a cyclical quality to large-scale political crises, and that such cycles, however we might explain them, echo to the present day from the dim recesses of historical memory. In the 1990s, some Russians dubbed the crisis the *semibankirshchina*, "the rule of the seven bankers," evoking the "Rule of the Seven Boyars," when Russian society collapsed into chaos and war at the turn of the seventeenth century. And in the seventeenth century, too, there had been a visible uptick in astrology, sorcery, necromancy and doomsaying, which subsided with the establishment of the Romanov dynasty.¹ More recently, Russia's twentieth century opened with such a period, in addition to closing with one. From 1905 to 1917 there was a proliferation of religious movements and political groupings that resembled sects in their egalitarian ethos, their sharp differentiation from the outside world, and their various prophecies of the coming apocalypse or revolution (or both). Whether or not we accept wholesale that the Bolsheviks should be seen in this light, there is no question that, following a world-altering crisis and a fierce competition of worldviews, the political order that emerged was governed by the principles of a monistic ideology, born of a larger milieu.

More to the point, the Bolsheviks, in their pursuit of a new world and of new men, very much sought to reshape time itself. In the enthusiastic early days, they redrew calendars; they supplanted old holidays with new ones that reoriented the year around revolutionary reference points; they attempted to restructure the work week and the work day, and some believed that revolutionary time could be so inculcated in people that watches and clocks would be rendered superfluous.² The revolution, by most any interpretation, was understood by its makers as a rupture in time and the beginning of a fundamentally new era, which would culminate in communism, a time outside of history itself. Thus Russia's twentieth century was framed by two such moments of cultural ferment - the first in which a particular worldview triumphed over all the others, and the second in which the ferment settled, and the actors reincorporated back into a more mundane order.

Other intriguing comparisons can be drawn directly from the case studies detailed in the chapters above. The astrologers looked back to the European and Russian esotericists and spiritualists of the later nineteenth century, who themselves occupied a time of great change, thrust forward by that century's dizzying modernization but uncertain of its ultimate good. They, too, were obsessed with a

¹ Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 24.

² Stites, Richard. *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, ch. 7.

search for “primordial” traditions, but necessarily sought them within their historical moment. This meant, on one hand, peering Eastward in their philosophy, such that Krishna and Rama joined Jesus and Moses among their prophets, and on the other, blending occult practices like tarot and witchcraft with flashy science experiments and demonstrations, and summoning shades of historical figures to garner from them objective, positive truths about the past.³ Importantly, this was a time when science and industry were accelerating in lockstep, history seemed headed in a clear direction, and humanity seemed poised to steer it. And even then, rapid change contained within it other possibilities, and a culture emerged that looked in other directions and to other times.

Perhaps the most striking parallel to the period I’ve described is the 1960s in the West and in the United States in particular, and not only for the firm link of Krishna Consciousness. That counterculture seemed to contain many of the currents and assumptions of the Soviet 1980s and 1990s. There were other Eastern spiritualities like zen buddhism and transcendental meditation (which were present in both times and places), authoritarian sects like the S.L.A., the Manson family and the People’s Temple, and indeed, proclamations of a new era - a New Age, the Age of Aquarius. Yet the New Age was paired with gazing backwards, in back-to-the-land movements; the related hippy rediscovery of the original and socialist Jesus; and most importantly, the recovery of prophetic religions, whether it was Islam or Christianity among African-Americans to lend the Civil Rights struggle its transcendent meaning, or the strict biblicism of Evangelical Christianity, which in the 1960s still contained strong countercultural currents.⁴ Although there was no political breakdown to speak of, the 1960s were unquestionably a disturbing rupture in the arc of American time - assassination and racial strife and rebellion at home, unchecked militarism in Vietnam, and an increasingly alienating economic order based on Cold War pathologies were disorienting in the moral and spiritual senses I’ve described in the Soviet case. The phenomenon seems to cross the Cold War divide in substantial ways.

Yet as the evocation of the Seven Boyars suggests, there is little reason to concentrate such studies on the twentieth century, or even the modern period. In suggesting other comparisons I am straying further from my own expertise, but it must be noted that the 1960s was only one peak in a cycle of societal change and spiritual imagination in the United States. Here too, the case studies above suggest a parallel - Mormonism itself was the product of just such a time, in the Second Great Awakening of the late antebellum period. Massive societal changes due to urbanization, industrialization (and the related changes to gender and family structures), growing literacy, and new means of mass communication, as well as the simmering moral reckoning over slavery, created conditions for a broad swelling of religious feeling and a large-scale rethinking of protestant theology, in the direction of egalitarianism and direct experience of the divine. Once again, a radicalization and proliferation of sects, as well as highly public demonstrations of piety and mass revivals, colored an era of change. Concerning the theme of time, Mormonism was just one of several primitivist movements claiming a spiritual return to the early church, a time before human corruption, seeking an ancient wisdom that might ensure the larger society’s salvation.

³ Faivre, Antoine. *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*. SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions. Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press, 2010. Chapter 4 addresses primordial truths and Eastern philosophy. On summoning shades for historical insights, see Vinitskii, Ilya. *Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism*. Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009, chapter 2.

⁴ This last point is revealed in Schäfer, Axel R. *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right*. Studies in American Thought and Culture. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.

And what of that early church? Of course, the Jesus sect was just one of many like it in Judea, possessed of a millenarian prophecy, radically egalitarian, public-facing, and situated in a longer era of rebellion and ferment. This social and political context is harder to integrate into this history, and not only for my lack of expertise. I am suggesting, though, that there is a universal quality in this particular mode of cultural upheaval, a sort of transitional imagination that constitutes a worthwhile object for historical study. Just as these milieus are small in numbers but highly visible and firmly woven into the cultural mainstream, so too are their tumultuous historical eras, however fleeting, outsized in their contribution to the future. They appear as an engine of new ideologies and, by the occasional whim of history, of new civilizations, which envelop not only the believers, but the vast majority outside, whose indifference leaves no trace at all.

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Oral History Interviews

The following is a complete list of oral histories conducted by the author, all between September of 2014 and April of 2015, and all in Moscow unless otherwise noted. Interviews were conducted with the prior (and ongoing) approval of the University of California, Berkeley's Office for the Protection of Human Subjects, and after obtaining the written or oral consent of the participant, in accordance with that office's guidelines. These interviews are used in chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5. Citations for the oral histories for chapter 3 follow below.

Some subjects requested the use of pseudonyms, but those are not specifically indicated below. Others have adopted Sanskrit spiritual names which, where they appear in the main text, are transliterated following scholarly norms from Sanskrit to English. Here, the names are transliterated directly from their Russian forms. In that, they are also inconsistent in their use of the suffixes 'dasa' and 'sakhi,' which is reproduced here. I apologize for these discrepancies. The proper transliterations were provided by Sohini Pillai; my own Sanskrit is somewhat weaker.

- Akhladini Radkhika. February, 2015.
Ananda Govinda dasa. October, 2014.
Brushlinskaia, Ol'ga Timofeevna. March and April, 2015.
Bychkova, Zoiia Vasil'evna. December, 2014.
Chevalkov, Sergei. March, 2015. Petropavlovskoe, Krasnoyarsk krai.
Chiverova, Tat'iana Olegovna. January, 2015.
Danilevskii, Igor' Nikolaevich. September and November, 2014.
Denisova, Tat'iana. March, 2015. Petropavlovskoe, Krasnoyarsk krai.
Fedichkin, Aleksandr Vasil'evich. November, 2014.
Fomenko, Anatolii Timofeevich. November, 2014.
Galankina, Ol'ga Aleksandrovna. January, 2015.
Gevorkian, Eduard. April, 2015.
Gubanov, Iurii. March, 2015.
Il'inaia, Natal'ia Vital'evna. November, 2014.
Kalinin, Aleksei Nikolaevich. January, 2015.
Koltypin, Aleksandr Viktorovich. October, 2014.
Komogortsev, Aleksei Iur'evich. September, 2014.
Krishnananda dasa. January, 2015.
Kuklev, Valentin. November, 2014.
Levin, Mikhail Borisovich. October, 2014.
Maikov, Vladimir. December, 2014.

Mendeleev, Mikhail. October, 2014.
 Mitiaeva, Tat'iana. December, 2014.
 Molianova, Ol'ga Sergeevna. January, 2015.
 Monastyrev, Anatolii. March, 2015. Petropavlovskoe, Krasnoyarsk krai.
 Morozov, Sergei. March, 2015. Petropavlovskoe, Krasnoyarsk krai.
 Naboichenko, Sergei Iur'evich. December, 2014.
 Nefed'ev, Georgii Vadimirovich. March, 2015.
 Nepomniashchii, Nikolai Nikolaevich. September, 2014.
 Patita Pavina. February, 2015.
 Pikunov, Valerii. March, 2015. Obitel' rassveta, Krasnoyarsk krai.
 Piterburgskii, Aleksandr. March, 2015. Obitel' rassveta, Krasnoyarsk krai.
 Privalskaia, Svetlana. October, 2014.
 Redkin, Vadim. March, 2015. Obitel' rassveta, Krasnoyarsk krai.
 Rumiantseva, Marina Federovna. December, 2014.
 Rybak, Valentina. March, 2015. Petropavlovskoe, Krasnoyarsk krai.
 Semenov, Aleksandr Evgen'evich. September, 2014.
 Semenov, Andrei Vladimirovich. November, 2014.
 Semenova, Marina Federovna. November, 2014.
 Shruti Dkhara dasa. February, 2015.
 Sinichkin, Aleksei Valer'evich. October, 2014.
 Smirnov, Aleksei Vasil'evich. October, 2014.
 Stepanian, Araik Ogenesovich. January, 2015.
 Tokarchuk, Pavel. September, 2014.
 Toots, Natal'ia Aleksandrovna. March, 2015.
 Tungovidia Sakkhi. March, 2015.
 Usmonov, Amir. November, 2014.
 Vanina, Tat'iana. March, 2015. Petropavlovskoe, Krasnoyarsk krai.
 Vedernikov, Vladimir. March, 2015. Obitel' rassveta, Krasnoyarsk krai.
 Zaichenko, Aleksandr Sergeevich. January, 2015.
 Zhukov, Andrei Viacheslavovich. September, 2014.
 Zuev, Sergei Vasil'evich (Radkha Damodar dasa). October, 2014.

The third chapter, on Mormonism, draws on a collection of oral histories commissioned by the Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For each of these, I use the following abbreviation: I indicate the interviewee, the location and the date of the interview. For example:

Akhrameev, Alexander Viktorovich. Moscow, Russia, May 1995.

The full citation, identical for each document aside from the details given, is as follows:

Akhrameev, Alexander Viktorovich. Oral History. Interviewed by Matthew K. Heiss, Moscow, Russia, May 1995. The James Moyle Oral History Program, Archives Division, Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT.

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 Martinov, Sergei P. Moscow, Russia, May 1995.
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Note on capitalization: Russian-language titles are typically capitalized only at the first word, but here I have rendered them as one would an English title, because I want to finish graduate school as quickly as possible.

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