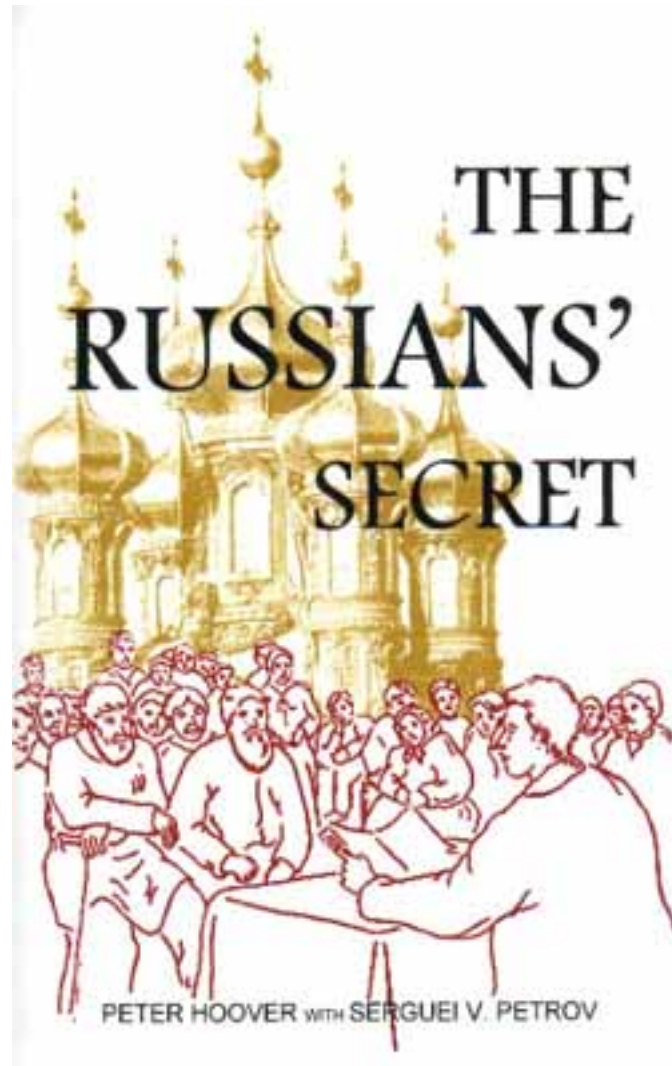


# *The Russians' Secret*

**What Christians Today Would Survive Persecution?**

by Peter Hoover with Serguei V. Petrov



**Martyrdom**, in early Christian times, already appealed to believers intent on doing great things for Christ. The early Christians venerated martyrs, the dates of whose executions grew into a calendar of saints, and wearing a martyrs' halo is still extremely popular. But martyr's halos do not come in the mail.

A great amount of persecution faced by Christians today results not from what they believe, but from what they own, and from where they come. Missionaries in poor countries lose their possessions, and sometimes their lives, because people associate them with foreign wealth.

Other "martyrs" lose their lives in political conflict. But does having our vehicles and cameras stolen, our children kidnapped, or being killed for political "correctness," assure that we have "witnessed for Jesus" (martyr means witness, Rev. 6:9, 12:17, and 19:10)?

Real martyrs for Christ do not wear halos. They only carry crosses. Most people, even Christians, quickly discredit and forget these martyrs. Real martyrs suffer persecution, not like "great heroes of the faith" but like eccentrics and fools. Ordinary people usually consider them fanatics. Does that disappoint or alarm you?

Do not worry. Reading this book about Russia's "underground" believers will assure you that if you are a typical Western Christian you will never face persecution. You will never have to be a real martyr for Christ.

Only if you are not typical - if you choose to be a "weed that floats upstream" - you may want to know the secret by which Russian Christianity survived through a thousand years of suffering.

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"True to the spirit of Russia's believers, this work gives a colorful and detailed description of faith 'underground.' But what makes it unique is the author's penetration of the soul of Russian belief — in so many ways dissimilar to western belief in God." —*Leonid Maslennikov, Russian professor, James Madison University*

"Westerners have become increasingly aware of the Russian people's deep roots in Eastern Orthodoxy. *The Russians' Secret* introduces us to 'another' side of Russian Christianity not as well known in the West, the 'little traditions' of sectarian, mystical, and evangelical faith that have always existed alongside the official Orthodox church. This book, written for the general reader, offers a sweeping and detailed view of those radical Christian movements without stooping to superficiality." — *William Rushby, member, Rockingham Meeting of Conservative Friends and independent scholar.*

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**There are two other books by Peter Hoover on the [www.ElmendorfBooks.com](http://www.ElmendorfBooks.com) web site.**

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To all who long for freedom from this world's things and fellowship with the Infinite, we present this book with a prayer that your longings may lead to eternal reality.

--Peter Hoover

## Introduction

The loud ringing of a bell interrupted our class. The teacher commanded all of us to crawl under our desks. I was an elementary student in the public school system. It was the early 1960s, and we had just gone through an air raid drill. Substantial buildings in town were designated as fallout shelters in case of a nuclear attack. The Cold War was on, and it seemed that everyone was worried about the Russians.

As a young boy growing up in a Christian home, I was shielded from the things that most of my classmates were seeing in movies and on television. They did not seem to be bothered by the threat of war and violence. But I was petrified. To me, the Russians were atheists, and the prospect of meeting them was quite dismal. I was a believer in Christ! There could be no compromise!

As I was thinking about my own welfare, it did not occur to me to consider the experience of believers who actually lived in Russia. They were Russians too, numbering in the thousands!

What would it be like living as a Russian? Had the government of Russia always been opposed to Christianity? If not, what took place in history to bring the nation to this place?

The Russians' Secret tells about life in Russia, not only in recent times, but also through a thousand years of history. The rulers as well as the common people come alive in this story, with names and narratives about them that captivate the reader.

Many of these people were believers. Their lives had short intervals of peace, but most lived daily with the threat of prison and death. While we in the West were trying to protect ourselves and our lands from Russian aggression, the Russian believers were giving up their families, possessions, and lives for Christ's sake.

How did the believers remain faithful in this intense persecution? Why did the

church grow so rapidly and large while experiencing horrible suffering? Why did so many believers turn their backs on wealth and fame to be numbered with the poor? Why did they choose suffering? What was their secret?

They believed Jesus, and they loved him! Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he die, yet shall he live!" (John 11:25)

"For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection" (Rom. 6:5).

Death to the Russian believers was not the end, but the beginning! It was the path to life. They saw a victorious Christ. Their lives were a celebration of Christ's resurrection, and their victory was found in calling on the name of Jesus.

Many believers refused to compromise on what some would call minor issues. Simply refusing to sign their name to a government document often meant years in prison, separation from family, and ultimate death. Believers in the West often have faulted them for such "unnecessary" disobedience. Was their consequent suffering senseless or was it a crucial part of the secret? The reader will have the opportunity to ponder the answer for himself.

Today, I am a father. My concerns and questions have changed. The question is not "Will persecution come to us?" But we must ask: "Have I chosen the path of suffering?" Will my children choose this path as well, or will the world swallow them? Is there a Christian bypass around this path, and will it lead then to Christ?

Our society has not become more Christ-friendly, yet there seems to be little pressure on the church. Is it because the church is in essence no threat to the world system?

The world does not hate good morals or values. It hates the Son! Where the Son is revealed, suffering follows.

The Russian believers succeeded when Jesus was their sole devotion. He became

their Mighty Warrior who was also the Victor!

This book will encourage those who are risen with Christ to "set [their] affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For [they] are dead and [their] life is hid with Christ in God."

Lynn F. Martin

Shippensburg Christian Fellowship

Shippensburg, Pennsylvania

October 23, 1999



## Speaking Without a Tongue

The sun set in gold on a treeless ocean of snow, the Kulunda Steppe, at the end of Christmas, 1963. Here and there a dry weed stood in the snow. Snow had blown across the frozen river Ob. It had whirled down the streets of Barnaul, filling the gaps between small houses and piling itself on their back window sills. Smoke curled from the houses and from a square cement-block building in the middle of town. But in those houses and in that sparsely lit building the snowy evening produced no coziness, and Christmas it was not supposed to be.

In their over clothes, Vasily and Nikolai Khmara, and one woman, Lyubov Khmara, stood before the Altai Regional Court.

One year earlier no one would have found this surprising. The Khmaras were wild living people. Nikolai, an incorrigible drunkard, had gotten into so many fights no one kept track of them all. The Khmaras stole and got into trouble with the law. But now, at the end of 1963, those who knew them felt differently. Instinctively they felt that something wrong was taking place—that the Khmaras should not be in court—and they feared.

The Khmaras had become “believers” and changed their ways. No one doubted that it happened. Nikolai, whom no one knew apart from his drunkenness or periods of grouchy irresponsibility had become a new man. His face shone. He wore clean clothes. He smiled and helped the neighbours. In the summer of 1963 a visiting believer had taken him and his wife Mariya down to the river and baptised them.

Now they stood before the court.

“Why must you tell others what you believe?” one of the judges, a woman with a knitted cap and a red nose, asked Nikolai. “Why can’t you keep your nonsense to yourself and stop contaminating the town?”

Nikolai answered gladly, with a smile, “I was a drunkard. I came to know Christ. He rescued me from my bad way of life and gave me hope and joy. It is so good

with Christ I cannot help but share what I have found!”

Cries of disgust and impatience rose from around the room. “We don’t need your preaching! Hush him up comrades, judges! Give him a week in solitary confinement and we’ll see whether Christ gives him hope and joy!”

It was time to close the court anyway. The prosecutors had said what they planned to say. The judges had listened to the de-fendants long enough. After a brief recess and the defendants’ last address their verdict came: Vasily, Nikolai and Lyubov Khmara, three years in a labour camp after processing in a local jail.

Three years. Without Nikolai, the chief encouragement in their new way of life, the time looked long to Mariya and their four children. But it turned out short.

After two weeks the police asked Mariya to pick up her husband’s body. He had died, they said, and would come home in a sealed coffin.

Neither Mariya nor the other believers of the Kulunda Steppe could believe that Nikolai had died a normal death. He was not old. Since he had stopped drinking he had enjoyed excellent health, so they pried the lid off his metal coffin to see him.

Their imagination could not have prepared them for what they saw. Bruises covered his body. People in the prison had burned the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. They had torn out his finger and toe nails. They had taken a sharp, heated object to puncture his abdomen and his legs were swollen and blue.

Already horrified, Mariya noticed his mouth stuffed with cotton. When she removed it she saw they had pulled out his tongue.

Piece by piece, the believers at Barnaul learned the story of Nikolai’s death in jail. Other prisoners told how he had spoken fearlessly to everyone about Christ. They told how he had com-forted the downhearted and warned the godless to repent until they fell on him in senseless rage.

Nikolai’s funeral was sad, but not hopeless. Many other believers were in prison at the time. Some of their wives and children could attend. But the fu-neral, as young people sang and those who had known Nikolai spoke to the crowd, turned strangely from grief and horror into an atmosphere of other-worldly joy. “Do not weep for Nikolai,” Mariya admonished her friends through tears. “He is with the

Lord. Weep for those still in darkness!”

All over Russia, in secret meetings in back rooms, brothers and sisters cheered one another with the words: “Brother Nikolai lives! Like Christ he overcame the devil and hell. They cut out his tongue and killed him, but like Abel he still speaks!”

What does he speak?

Russia’s believers have not found it easy to put into words. Thirty years have passed. Situations in Russia and elsewhere have drastically changed, but more people than ever are anxious to hear what he says. Nikolai, and numberless Russians who like him re-mained true to what they believed in the face of the devil’s worst opposition have something to say.

Shall we listen?

## Snow, Fire, and Gold

Russia—strange and wild stories of murder, villages burning, wheat fields ripening on the steppe, long trains of rickety wagons, and horses fleeing in the mud, winter in Siberia—even though we had heard them before, our wonder as children grew while we listened to the grandmother talk.

The grandmother lived far from Russia, in Canada. After the Bolshevik revolution and her husband's death, she escaped from Borosenko, in the Ukraine, with her children. When she fell off a wagon she broke her back. Now she was tiny and stooped half over. Others of the family had stayed behind and fled east through Siberia to Blagoveschensk and Manchuria. There they crossed the Amur river on the ice into China. "They got so hungry," the grand-mother told us, "that they thanked God for the Chinese who let them drink their dish water." Eventually those of the family who survived got reunited in Brazil.

As she grew older the grandmother began to forget where she was, in North or South America, in Asia, or Europe. But more often than not she would peer through her flower plants onto her Kitchener street and watch for the neighbours she knew—in Russia.

That, theoretically, would not have been impossible. Many Russian immigrants lived in Kitchener, Ontario. Several immigrant congregations met in the city and through them I became aware of more to the story.

That awareness involved my friendship, and eventually marriage, to Susan Krahn (with relatives in an unregistered congregation in Kazakhstan), the mission *Licht im Osten*, and a book given to us in 1972. The book, *Christen unter Hammer und*

1  
*Sichel* (Christians under Hammer and Sickle), became my first introduction to a strange new world—a world where Christian believers survived incredible opposition for a thousand years. More than that, where they have flourished, often numbering in the millions "under ground."

How did they do it?

## What to Expect

I took as a clue to the Russians' secret what seemed the most obvious: One should expect to suffer while following Christ.

Both what Russian believers wrote and the story of their sufferings in snowy oblivion pointed to such a view of life. The “underground church” of the 1970's was the child of an “underground church” of the early 1900's. That church, in turn, descended from an “underground church” of the 1860's that came from an “underground” tradition that took me like a subway train with only a few quick stops on the surface back to where Christianity began.

Georgi Vins, a Russian believer, wrote in the 1960's:

The history of the Evangelical Christian and Baptist Church in Russia, except for a short period of time, has been the history of a people doomed to lifelong suffering, a history of camps and imprisonment affecting fathers, children and grandchildren. . . .

Persecution has become hereditary—our grandfathers were persecuted, our fathers were persecuted; now we our-selves are persecuted and oppressed, while our children are suffering hardships and deprivations.<sup>2</sup>

A young medical student, tried for Christian activity before a Soviet court in Odessa declared in 1967:

The church lives as long as it suffers. Looking at the history of Christianity we see how faith in Christ survived as long as the church suffered. On the other hand, when the church no longer walked with Christ its sufferings ended.<sup>3</sup>

All this I believed, but I soon found a more important clue:

## What to Expect in Life to Come

My father has an adopted cousin (the six-foot-seven “giant” of our growing up years) who came from Russia to Canada. His parents owned a vast estate in the Ukraine. But they lost their lives in the Bolshevik Revolution and left cousin

Andrey (we called him Henry) an orphan. He knew I liked to read. One day when I stopped in to see him he told me to take any book I wanted from his library. I chose the autobiography of a Russian believer, Ivan Prokhanov, published in 1933. In the book I found a “Call to Resurrection” addressed by Russian believers to “all Christians in the world” in 1928:

With the greeting *Khristos voskrese!* (Christ is risen!) we write to you. . . . Today, like in Christ’s time the power that transformed Zacchaeus and the thief on the cross still works! From its source (Christ) a stream of light, love and peace still flows into all the world. . . . Those who live by Christ’s Gospel still get the power to forget themselves and serve others for the healing of the human race. But by holding up a little parasol or drawing the curtains we can keep the sun from shining on us. In the same way, by making little changes to the Gospel, men have obstructed its radiant light and kept masses of people in darkness.

There is nothing wrong with the light! The Sun of the Gospel still shines! . . . He who has ears to hear, let him hear what God says to the church: *Khristos voskrese!* Let us rise and walk in the light!<sup>4</sup>

Resurrection and light from heaven. A fire of hope! When Christians suffer with Christ do they naturally become optimistic? Wherever I turned among Russian Christian writings I sensed their joy in springtime and the Resurrection of Christ. At first I supposed it was the counterpart—the “other side of the coin”—of suffering, and that it might be the secret to their survival under persecution. But then I discovered a third clue:

### **What “Conversion” Meant in Russia**

In 1978 I began to teach school in northeastern Ontario. The fall colours, yellow and flaming orange, were coming on. Up from the log house where I stayed with the family of three of my students, I would climb over rail fences, cross a creek, and sit on lichen-spotted boulders high above a pasture where the lead cow with a bell grazed among her companions. Abandoned houses and barns, very small and wooden, stood among sunlit hills and land that had been farmed. On the upper side of that pasture a road led through the trees, down into a clearing along the Madawaska river and a Christian community at a place called Combermere.

The people with whom I stayed were friends of the community and soon took me for a visit. We bought used clothing at their second-hand store. But as I learned,

little by little, the story behind them, I got unspeakably more from the people at Combermere than used pants and shirts.

Yekaterina Kolyschkin, once the Baroness de Hueck and later the wife of a famous writer had come to this place in the Canadian “taiga” to rediscover her Russian Christian roots. Many had followed her and from that the community had grown.

Yekaterina spent her childhood on the estate of her wealthy father near St. Petersburg, in tsarist Russia. At fifteen she married the baron Boris de Hueck. In 1917 she accompanied her husband, a Russian officer, to the German front and served as a nurse. After the Bolshevik revolution, penniless and starving, she fled with him and her infant son through Finland to Canada. Times were hard. Her husband turned sick and could not work. Yekaterina washed clothes, worked as a maid, and finally got a job as a sales clerk in New York City. There another woman discovered who she was, a “baroness in rags,” and arranged for her to tell a group of people about her experiences. So strange was her story that she soon got appointments to speak in many places and made three hundred dollars a week.

Yekaterina expected her return to wealth and good fortune to make her happy. But exactly the opposite occurred. Boris left her and died. The fine house and car she bought lay heavily on her conscience and made her miserable. Now that she knew the “fellowship of poverty” (life among the lowest classes) the world’s artificial pleasures disgusted her. Then she turned to the Gospels and remembered Russia.

In Russia it had not been uncommon for people to take the Gospel literally. Every so often it happened. A man or woman simply “left the world” and began to follow Christ. Yekaterina particularly remembered a very wealthy man named Pyotr.

One evening Pyotr came to her father and said, “Fyodor, I have been reading the Gospels and I have decided to follow Christ.” Her father listened and Pyotr went on, “I am going to take my money out of the bank and give it away.” It did not take long. Pyotr and Yekaterina’s father loaded the bags of silver pieces (there were many bags) onto a wagon pulled by three horses. They drove into the poorest section of St. Petersburg and started giving them away. When the wagon was empty they returned home. Pyotr, dressed in the rough linen of a peasant, with a stick in his hand, a loaf of bread and a little bag of salt kissed Yekaterina’s father good-bye and set off walking down the road. They stood and watched him disappear in the sunset’s golden light.

Now, remembering him, it became clear to Yekaterina what Christ wanted her to do. She bought her son what he needed, gave her own things away and moved into an apartment in a Toronto slum. It was 1931.

Yekaterina enjoyed immediate rapport with the poor as she lived among them and served them. She spent more time in New York and in 1947 she moved with her second husband (Boris had died) to Combermere, Ontario. There her testimony, and the community that formed around her, led me much closer to discovering the secret of Russia's persecuted believers. But before it came to me I looked deeper into . . .

1 Winrich Scheffbuch, *Christen unter Hammer und Sichel*, Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1972

2 Bourdeaux, *Faith on Trial in Russia*

3 Scheffbuch, *Christen unter Hammer und Sichel*

4 Prokhanov, *In The Cauldron of Russia*



## Old Russia—Its Heart and Soul

Yekaterina, when she left all to follow Christ, remembered a common but very special kind of Russian believer: the *poustinik*. Every so often some peasant, and less frequently a wealthy person in Russia, like Pyotr, would get rid of his or her things and take to the *poustinia*. That word means desert.

The *poustinik* however did not go to a literal desert. He only put on rough linen clothing and went to live in the barest, simplest house in the village. There, with no lock on the door, he lived with nothing but the Bible, his daily bread, and his clothes. The *poustinik* was no hermit. On call, day or night, he lived to help others. Whether that meant feeding the sick, counselling a distressed sinner at midnight, or quick helping a farmer get his hay in before it rained, did not matter. He lived in the “desert” of free-dom from personal ambition and let Christ use him however it suited. All his free time he spent in his house or garden alone.

Doing what?

Committed to discover what Russia’s believers knew and we did not, I set out on a spiritual journey through the land of the Tsars, secret meetings in woods and basements, Tol-stoy’s estate at Yasnaya Polyana, green valleys between snow capped ranges in the Caucasus, communities of Spirit Wrestlers in Tambov, Saratov and Tver, Old Believers so poor they used cow stomachs for window panes in Si-beria, a monastery of logs on the River Sora . . . and back to where its story began, in what is now the Ukrainian Republic.

### Kiev

Horsemen on the streets of Kiev did not worry whose clothes got splattered in AD 980. The women of Kiev did not wear silk. Under thick straw roofs they sat in log houses to braid shoes from birch bark while tending their food cooking on open fires. Kiev was a young city, and its ruler, Prince Vladimir, was a young man.

All Russia, in fact—centred around Kiev on the Dnepr River—felt young in AD 980. Young and rough. Prince Vladimir began his rule by killing his oldest brother (who, in turn, had killed his remaining brothers) to rule after their father died.

Such events—murders, treachery, and acts of revenge—took place only too frequently among Slavs and Norsemen (Varangians) who lived along both sides of the broad Dnepr.<sup>1</sup> But far to the south, in Greek Thessalonika, a series of events had begun that would change Russia forever.

## Cyril

Long before Prince Vladimir with his seven wives and wooden idols overcame his brother and made himself ruler of Russia in Kiev, a young man in Thessalonika overcame himself and decided not to rule, but to serve Christ. His name was Cyril. He spoke Greek. Like other Christians in Thessalonika Cyril kept to the way of Christ even though many had grown careless and worldly. He prepared to serve Christ by studying at the Imperial University at Constantinople.

In the capitol of the Byzantine Empire—a glorious city where the Emperor, the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, numberless merchants, prelates, and military officials lived in splendour—Cyril felt tiny but not lost. He studied to graduate as soon as possible and gained a commission to travel on official business to Arabic and Khazar<sup>2</sup> tribes in the east.

During his stay with the Khazars, to whom he told stories from the Bible, Cyril learned all he could about wide steppes and forested lands to the north. He learned about other tribes—Russian Slavs among them—who lived in settled villages, who farmed and raised fruits, but who served wooden idols. After he came to know some of them Cyril sensed what Christ wanted him to do.

Back in Constantinople Cyril learned that Ratislav, a leader of a Slavic tribe north of the Danube River had called for Christian teachers. With his brother Methodius he set out in 863 A. D. to answer that call.

Up the rivers and through the forested wilderness where Ratislav's people lived (in what is now the Czech Republic) Cyril and Methodius worked their way,<sup>3</sup>

learning Slavonic while teach-ing Christ. From the beginning Cyril determined to teach the Slavs what Christ himself taught. But a serious obstacle stood in the way. Very few Slavs could read and write. Those who could, used a disorderly collection of letters to portray Slavonic sounds. Cyril purposed at once to teach them a better way.

With Methodius' help Cyril gathered a circle of Slavic youths about him, and began to write in charcoal, big black letters on birch bark, while making sounds. It did not take long. The boys hurried home, thrilled with their discovery that "birch bark speaks" and told their parents about a great teacher whom their Greek instructors said had taught them.

As their knowledge of Slavonic increased, Cyril and Methodius discovered that their Greek alphabet did not have letters to match all its sounds. Also, writing with crude materials did not produce nice looking Greek. But Cyril did not despair. With the help of another Christian who came to Moravia, Clement of Ohrid, he borrowed bold, easy shapes from Hebrew and Greek and invented others. "We can use other alphabets as a pattern," he decided, "and if we find nothing suitable we will simply have to make our own."

That alphabet, now used by several hundred million Slavs,<sup>4</sup> is called Cyrillic and Cyril did not die until he had taught people how to use it, written for them numerous books, and overseen for them the translation of the entire Bible, including the Apocrypha.

## **The "Conversion" of Russia**

By the time Cyril and Methodius died a large number of Western Slavs knew of Christ and the Scriptures. Many had gotten baptised. But few Eastern Slavs (Russians) heard about Christ until Basil II, the "Christian" emperor of Byzantium,<sup>5</sup> asked Prince Vladimir to help him fight the Bulgars.

Russians and Byzantines, fighting together, won the battle. They celebrated their victory and were happy together until the emperor learned what Prince Vladimir wanted for his wage: Basil's sister Anna in marriage.

Basil and his sister were shocked. Vladimir already had seven wives. Anna was an educated Byzantine woman and a "Christian." To think of her living in pagan Russia filled them with horror. But Vladimir would not change his mind. When Anna refused to come to Kiev, he called his troops together and over-ran the Crimean peninsula (Byzantine territory), taking the city of Kherson (later Sevastopol) and all its people as hostages.

Then Basil made a proposition: If Prince Vladimir and the Russians would convert to Christianity, Anna would come. Vladimir happily agreed. Anna packed her

belongings and landed a short time later—still apprehensive—on the Crimean shore.

Vladimir called his troops together for a great feast and wedding celebration. A Greek priest—a *pope* as they called them in Byzantium—baptised him by immersion and united him to Anna in marriage. Then the Russians hurried back the Dnepr to Kiev. Everywhere Vladimir shouted: “We are Christians now! Out with the false gods!”

In Kiev the whole city came down to the river at Vladimir’s command. Encircled by previously “Christened” warriors with sabres unsheathed, the people could do nothing but allow themselves to be pulled into the water and baptized. Vladimir tore down the temple he had built and threw the idols, including a huge statue of the Slavic god Perun, into the Dnepr. Men with long sticks pushed the idols out from the shore and sent them across the rapids of the Dnepr, downstream. All through Russia, from Kiev to Novgorod the *Volkhvy* (pagan priests) fled, their temples fell, and warriors helped priests to baptise masses of people at once.

Sixty years later a Kievan chronicler wrote:

The darkness of the demonic cult perished and the sun of the Gospel shone over our land. The idols’ temples were destroyed, and churches built. The idols were broken down and ikons of the saints appeared. Demons fled away. The cross sanctified the towns. As shepherds of spiritual lambs came presbyters, priests and deacons, offering the immaculate sacrifice. They adorned all the sanctuary and vested holy churches with beauty. Angel’s trumpet and Gospel’s thunder sounded through all the towns. Incense rising to God sanctified the air. Monasteries stood on mountains. Men and women, small and great, all people filled holy churches.<sup>6</sup>

AD 988, the date of the great baptism at Kiev, marked the beginning of Christianity as the state religion of Russia. But the Kingdom of Heaven, the spiritual territory of the *poustinikki* and the “underground” church, came . . .

1 Slavic tribes were among the first to settle in Russia. Herodotes already mentions settlements of farmers, believed to be the ancestors of the Eastern Slavs, that lived as neighbours to Scythians (nomadic horsemen) north of the Black Sea. Scholars believe them to be predecessors of the Eastern Slavs.

2 Like the Scythians, who lived north of the Black Sea in Bible Times, the Khazars lived in tent villages, moving about the Don and Volga areas on horseback. Before the middle of the eighth century they converted to Judaism.

3 A language still spoken in its ancient form in Macedonia.

4 Russians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Macedonians, Serbs, and many non-Slavic minorities living in Russia today

5 After the emperor Constantine I got “converted” in AD 313, the Roman Empire became Christian in name, although its government remained foundationally pagan and totally unlike the Kingdom of Heaven described in the New Testament.

6 Ilaryon of Kiev, *Sermon on Law and Grace*, ca. 1050

## Not With Observation

The first Christians could not have believed the story of Russia's violent "conversion." They would not have wanted to believe it. Neither would they have wanted to hear what went on in "Christian" Constantinople at the time. But thanks to Christ and what the Byzantine church remembered of him, a miracle happened.

Byzantine priests who came to Russia with Anna worked hand in hand with Prince Vladimir. In black robes, wearing un-trimmed beards and black cylindrical hats, they hung up painted ikons. They swung censers with smoking incense. Behind ornate partitions in new churches that sprang up everywhere, they celebrated the Eucharist while people stood chanting Psalms and prayers. But the priests did more than observe ritual. Reading from the Scriptures was still an important part of Byzantine worship and in Russia this led to results that no one could have foreseen.

### Good News

Anna's priests brought Cyril's Slavonic Bible with them. When they read from it Russians looked up, startled, to hear simple stories in their own language.

Cyril's translators had done well with the Gospels. They wrote down Jesus' stories and the Acts of the Apostles in such simple Slavonic that no one could misunderstand them. But when they got to the epistles they had problems. Many words in the Greek text had no Slavonic equivalent so they invented new words. First the Western Slavs, and now the Russians, did not know what they meant. This made the epistles cumbersome to read and hard to remember. The first priests in Russia discovered this, and decided to stick with the Gospels, at least for most services throughout the year. The Russians, especially the illiterate, could not hear enough of the Gospels' stories anyway (even though they stood through services that lasted from five to seven hours) and eagerly learned to sing Greek hymns along with them.

### Two Kinds of Christians

During the Dark Ages, in a time of great wickedness and turmoil among “Christian” nations, the people of Russia heard the Gospel. In many hearts it fell on good ground. It sprouted, and produced far more fruit than anyone could have expected.

How did it happen? Were the Russians blind to Byzantium’s faults?

Not at all.

Centuries before Russia’s “conversion,” Byzantine Christianity had become a “state church.” Christians in Byzantium believed God wanted their emperors to rule the world. They expected their emperors to punish evil, protect the church, and conquer infidels in the name of Christ. This led them into terrible worldliness and sin.

No kings on earth had lived as sumptuously as the “Christian” emperors at Constantinople. None had carried as many magnificent titles, and perhaps none had been so persistently wicked. After Constantine I (the “converted” emperor) who had his son killed and his wife suffocated in her bathroom, thirty Byzantine emperors died violently—starved, poisoned, blinded, bludgeoned, strangled, stabbed, dismembered or decapitated. Never-ending intrigues tore royal families apart and turned church or government officials against one another. People came to expect that young rulers would kill off their brothers and when enemies or evildoers needed punishment their imagination knew no bounds.

In Byzantium, drowning thieves or apostates was not enough. “Christian” authorities drowned people in bags with live pigs, roosters, snakes, and monkeys. Lawbreakers paid fines by having a hand or foot cut off, or perhaps an ear. Standard punishments included the splitting of noses, the cutting out of tongues, and setting people onto pointed stakes. Whole armies were regularly blinded and castrated. In the very battle Prince Vladimir fought with the Byzantines, they took fifteen thousand young men as prisoners of war. Out of every hundred they left one with eyes to guide them home. So dreadful was the sight that when their ruler saw them come—wailing, clutching one another, and trailing blood as they stumbled along—he went into shock and died.

All this the Russians knew only too well. And what they had not seen among “Christians” in Byzantium, they soon saw at Kiev. But the Lord helped them understand that this was only one side—the dark and “worldly” side of Christianity in the 900s—and to be sure there was another side.

Here and there in the Byzantine empire, often hidden but resting firm on Christ, remnants of true faith and holiness re-mained. Here and there, especially in religious orders, honest men and women loved Christ and lived in communion with him. They treasured the teachings of Christ and obeyed him. Speaking and reading Greek, they still used early Christian writings. They sang early Christian songs. Even in Russia, where missionaries had come to Greek colonies along the Black Sea (perhaps already in Paul's time) some knew there was more to Christianity than what Prince Vladimir had found.

In Bulgaria and Moravia, some Christian Slavs, students of Cyril and Methodius, had always believed the Gospels at face value. They had long learned to take what was good from Greek Christianity and leave the rest. Hundreds of Russians, especially those who worked hard and were poor, the *muzhiks* (peasants), now learned to do the same. Not caring or even knowing about Byzantine theology, not bowing to the state church but to Christ, they let much of what they heard "go in one ear and come out the other," like Filofey a believer from Pskov who wrote:

I am a villager. I have learned to read and to write, but I have not examined Greek subtleties. I have not read the rhetors and astronomers. I was not born in Athens and have not conversed with the philosophers. All I have studied is the teaching of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

## The "Church" and the "Believers"

Most Russians did not doubt that some of their "Christian" rulers (both national and church leaders), were villains racing down the broad road to hell. They deplored the fact but did not expect it otherwise. After all, those very rulers claimed to be successors of Israel's kings. That some of them should be Sauls, Ahabs, or Manassehs had to be taken in stride. But while their rulers built "Golden Kiev," crowning it with crosses, towers, and shining domes, another kingdom took shape in Russia.

It was an *inner* kingdom—a kingdom of *believers*—ruled by . . .

<sup>1</sup> Gorodetzky, *Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk*



## Christ Victorious

From the halls of churches in which they stood to worship,<sup>1</sup> Russian Christians looked up into great domes from where Christ's likeness, serene on his rainbow throne, shone down upon them. Byzantine artists depicted Christ for them as the Ruler of the Universe, surrounded by the martyrs and prophets of both Testaments, patriarchs, apostles, and heavenly hosts in the glory and light of the Resurrection. For centuries following, all Russian believers (long after they left the Greek church) stood in awe of Christ's majesty and worshipped him. But they knew that Christ, like David, grew up among common people and he did not intimidate them.

Russian Christians remembered how Christ suffered helplessly on the cross: the "Good Friday Christ." But they saw him in their day as a mighty warrior, standing victor over Satan, death, and hell: the "Christ of the Resurrection." Ilaryon of Kiev wrote in 1050:

Christ was a true man, not in appearance but truly in our flesh. Yet he was perfect God. . . . He suffered for me as man, but as God remained incorruptible. He died, even though he was immortal, to bring me to life from the dead. He descended to Hell to rescue my forefather Adam and to bind the devil. Then Godly majesty came back to him. After three days he rose from the dead. He arose the victor. He arose to be Christ the King!<sup>2</sup>

Russian Christians did not only see Christ as a victim of God's justice. They saw him as God's pride and joy, his brave Son who dared break down the gates of hell, bind the devil, and rescue them from Satan like David rescued his lambs from the lion and the bear. Kirill Turovsky, presbyter in a small town near Kiev, wrote in the mid-1100s:

Our Lord Christ was crucified as a man, but as God he eclipsed the sun, and changed the moon into blood, bringing the whole earth into darkness. As man, he cried and yielded up the ghost, but as God he shook the earth and tore the

rocks in two. As man he was pierced in his side. But as God he tore the veil apart. . . . He darkened the sun, shook the earth and made all creatures lament, to destroy the hidden battlements of hell. Souls living there saw the light and Eve's tears turned to joy. . . . Then the Angel hosts, running with him, shouted, "Lift up your heads, O you gates, and the King of glory shall come in." As he freed bound souls and chained the hostile powers they sang, "Where is your sting, oh death? And hell, where is your victory?"

## **Christ as Lord and Master**

Next to his rising from the dead, the Russians celebrated Christ's ascending to heaven—the feast of his eternal coronation.

Christ is our brother. But he is much more than a common fellow-family member—someone always around and to whom one has little responsibility. He is our Joseph, now placed by the King of Heaven in direct command over us. Even though he likes to do us special favours, the Russians felt like falling on their faces when bringing petitions before him. For the muzhiks, in particular, that came naturally.

For as long as they knew, the muzhiks had served powerful masters. If they had a good master they lived happily. Everything and everyone depended on him. But if they had a bad one they suffered. They considered themselves fortunate, therefore, to have a good master like Christ in heaven. They believed that Christ, like David, was a good shepherd while on earth. But like David he fought the boasting giant (Satan, Goliath) and won. Now, like David in Jerusalem, he sits on his golden throne.

With King David/Christ for their master—commanding them wisely, taking care of them and easily able to protect them from their enemy (Satan)—Russian believers gladly lived as slaves. Slaves of Christ they entertained no thought of sinning and getting by. Kirill Turovsky wrote:

You are a candle for another to light and use. Only to the doors of the church may you have a will of your own. Do not examine how and what you are made of. You are a cloth. Only until someone picks you up may you be conscious of yourself. Do not worry if they tear you up for footwear.

## **Repentance**

From the Greek (Byzantine) Church, Russians learned that two birds sing in paradise: the bird of sorrow and the bird of joy. Only through the sorrow of repentance, tribulation, and bodily death, they believed, does it become possible for us to discover everlasting joy. An eleventh century believer, a man who signed his name “Vasily” wrote:

Have a meek gait, a meek way of sitting, a meek glance. . . . Lower your voice. Eat and drink without shouting and with moderation. Keep silence before old people. Do not argue. Do not laugh easily. Hold the eyes low and the soul high. My child, always remember death. Thinking about death will teach you what is good and how you are to live in this short space of life.<sup>3</sup>

Living precarious lives in a vast, cold, isolated land, no Russian could take death lightly. Georgy, a tenth century celibate of Zarub, wrote to a friend:

Avoid foolish laughter. Do not bring jugglers, clowns, or musicians into your home for amusement. That is pagan, not Christian. Those who must be amused are unbelievers.

Always remember ferocious death, its suddenness, how many it ravishes without giving them time to say a word. And what comes after it? Is it not judgment and various torments, cruel, endless . . . and thrones of glory and crowns in heaven for the righteous? . . . Bear the fear of God in your heart and love him.

A believer who signed his name “Gennady” wrote:

It is most profitable for repentance to visit the dying. Who is not struck to the heart by seeing one of his own kind descend into the grave, his name stroked out, and the glory of fortune rotting away?

Straight-forward talk about death did not, however, make Russian believers gloomy or affectedly “pious.” They wept easily—especially in church—but foreigners who came to know them reported their outstanding friendliness, their spontaneity and good humour.

Neither did thinking about death bring Russian believers to morbid fear. It brought

them to peace and trust in God. The anonymous author of the *Introduction to Repentance* wrote:

Jesus Christ who takes away the sins of the whole world will take away yours as well—if you repent with all your heart and do what he wants you to do.

If you have stolen, go and return what you stole. Make things right with those you have wronged—at once. Then come in true repentance and your sins will all be forgiven.

## **Grace and Truth**

Russian believers did not make much of grace meaning “God’s unmerited favour.” Neither did they limit grace to the sacraments. Starting with John 1:14<sup>4</sup> they ordinarily spoke of grace in connection with truth (*pravda*, which included for them the concept of fairness or social equity) and believed it to be God’s enabling power. It took grace, they said, to live the truth.

Grace and truth transforms sinners into saints and prepares them for eternal life. Ilaryon of Kiev wrote:

Moses’ law was a forerunner and pointed to grace and truth. In the same way grace and truth point to the world to come and eternal life. . . . Moses and the prophets led men to Christ. Christ and his apostles (full of grace and truth), lead us to the resurrection and the world to come.

The Jews were made righteous by laws and pictures of future things. Christians are saved by grace and truth. For the Jews, justification is in this world. For us salvation will be in ages to come.

Justification, for Russian believers, was much more than knowing oneself to be “just as if one had not sinned.” Righteousness was much more than to be doctrinally “right” like the Phari-see in the temple. Neither justice nor righteousness, for them, had moral value apart from human experience. To be “just” was to give beds to strangers and food to the poor. To be righteous was to think little of oneself, and to deny oneself of unnecessary luxuries.

## **Believers and the Poor**

Though they served Christ as the King of Heaven, Russian believers did not forget how he lived on earth. In Judaea—before his victory and heavenly coronation—they knew he had lived among slaves and the poor. His followers, they believed, should do likewise.

The man who signed his name “Gennady” wrote:

Do not say, “I am the son of a rich man and poverty is a shame for me.” Nobody is richer than Christ, your heavenly Father who engendered you in baptism. Yet he walked in poverty with nowhere to lay his head.

Without a doubt, two Greek Christians, John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea had much to do with the Russian’ feeling for the poor. The writings of both men, translated to Slavonic soon after the time of Cyril and Methodius, got widely circulated in Russia. The Russians loved to hear them read and to this day, innumerable parents name their baby boys *Ivan* or *Vasily*, the Russian forms of the good men’s names.

John Chrysostom, one of the last “early Christians” to speak of community and Christ’s view of wealth, not only advocated helping the poor. He rejected the idea that people could be rich and Christian at the same time. The Russians translated what he wrote about the Rich Man and Lazarus and used that theme for innumerable songs and stories. Basil of Caesarea wrote in the same spirit:

Are you not a robber, you who consider your own what you received only to distribute to others? The bread you set aside is the bread of the hungry. The garment you have locked away is the clothing of the naked. The shoes you let rot are the shoes of him who has none. The riches you hoard are the riches of the poor.

Gennady of Kiev wrote in the eleventh century:

When you are sitting at a table loaded with many kinds of food, remember those who eat stale bread and cannot fetch water because they are sick. . . . While enjoying your drinks remember the one who drinks warm water, heated by the sun and mixed with dust. . . . Lying in featherbeds and stretching out your limbs, remember the one who sleeps on the bare earth under rags, with his legs curled up

for the cold.

Russians did not look down on people who handled their money recklessly, particularly not if they did so because of Christ. The wayward son of Christ's parable was not described as *prodigal* (something that did not seem evil to them) but as *profligate* in their Slavonic Bibles. An early example of this attitude was Fyodor Pechersky.

Fyodor, born into a family of boyars did not care for senseless games and the diversions of the wealthy. He put on simple clothes and worked with his father's serfs in the fields. When his friends and family made fun of him he said, "Our Lord Jesus Christ humbled himself and allowed others to degrade him. Shall we not follow his example?" After his father died (he was only thirteen) he escaped from home and set out to be a wandering pilgrim. But his mother caught him and put him into chains.

Even then, Fyodor could not be restrained. As soon as he was on his own he went to live in caves the Varangians had dug for a hideout years before in chalky heights above the Dnepr, south of Kiev. A friend, Nikon, and others joined him. Over the years, Christian celibates had lived in the caves, digging them deeper and adding tunnels until they become like the catacombs. Fyodor liked living there, but he strongly disapproved of Christians hiding away and not serving others. "Remembering Christ's command," he told the cave dwellers, "I tell you that it is good for us to feed the hungry and care for the homeless with the fruits of our labour. . . . If God were not to lift us up and feed us through the poor, of what value would be our work?"

Fyodor got the cave dwellers to live together in community. Together they built a guest house for travelers, a hospital for the sick, and set up a soup kitchen for the hungry. Fyodor established a pattern by being the first to volunteer to chop firewood, peel onions for the soup, or weed the community garden. Nikon (with many eager helpers) began to translate, copy books by hand, and bind them for distribution. The community's members baked bread for the hungry in prison and when they heard of people in trouble anywhere, they risked their lives, if necessary, to assist or intercede. To explain their actions, Fyodor wrote:

Should the words of the Gospel not cause our hearts to burn? . . . What did we do for Christ that he chose us? What motivated him to rescue us from our precarious situation? Have we not all strayed from the way and become useless to

him? . . . Yet he did not leave us alone in our predicament. He did not despise us. Rather he took the form of a servant and became like us.

He looked for us until he found us. He carried us on his shoulders and took us back to sit at our Father's right hand. Do you not see his mercy and love for man? We did not look for him. He found us! . . . Christ, the Word of God, came to earth not for himself but for others. He suffered and died for all. He excludes no one from his love, so why should we?

Another earnest Russian, a believer named Yakov, wrote to a young man:

If you wish to imitate the apostles' miracles it is within your power. They made the lame walk and healed dried-up hands. You can raise up the lame in faith and start them walking to church and religious events again. You can make their hands, dried up from avarice, flexible again by giving to the poor.

Along with sharing with the poor, the Russians counted it a sacred opportunity to give lodging or food to strangers. They had frequent opportunity to do so. They lived far apart on bad roads and long winters made travel difficult in the snow. But in the vil-lages they needed no hotels. Gladly, even though her pantry was bare, the wife of the poorest muzhik would share her last piece of bread with whoever came to the door.<sup>5</sup> The last and greatest sin to keep people out of heaven, the Russians believed, was to have treated a beggar unkindly.

## **Patient Suffering**

Christ rules heaven and earth. God has highly exalted him. But he reached his high position, Russian believers taught, through poverty, humility, and love.<sup>6</sup> It looked like a mystery. How could a person by choosing the way down, come out on top? How shall the meek subdue the mighty, the weak overcome the strong, and the poor triumph over the rich? The Russians could not answer, but they knew Christ walked this way and determined to follow him. Even to the cross.

Kirill Turovsky wrote to a friend:

You should take the example of Christ who suffered from birth to death. You should remember how people laid things in his way. They slandered him. They

tried to insult him, and in the end he was wounded for your sake.

Yakov, in a letter to Dmitry his “spiritual son” described the sufferings of Christ:

He was almighty. Angels carried him. But look at him now in bonds, with soldiers leading him around. In heaven he sat at his Father’s right hand. But look at him now, standing before the archpriest and the Roman governor . . . He had shone, on the mountain, more brightly than the sun. But now the ungodly beat him and spit into his face!

The fact that Christ never fought back deeply impressed Russian believers, and his patience in suffering—turning the other cheek—became their ideal. Two of Prince Vladimir’s sons were among the first to live up to it.

Before his death, Prince Vladimir dispatched his twelve sons to the twelve main settlements of Russia. He hoped they would become Christian leaders for the Russian people and show them how to live. But his hopes could not have resulted in greater disappointment.

Svyatopolk, the oldest son who took his father’s place at Kiev was a scoundrel. As a young man he already got into trouble, but Vladimir punished him lightly and forgave him. The second son, Yaroslav, a kind and thoughtful man, went to Novgorod. Every-one left home, even the two youngest sons, Boris and Gleb.

Boris and Gleb particularly liked one another. Boris loved to read and entertained Gleb with stories from the Bible and early Greek Christians during winter evenings. When he married in his mid-teens and had to leave for Rostov, and Gleb (still an adoles-cent) for Murom, they missed one another.

Soon afterward they learned of their father Prince Vladimir’s death—and on the heels of it that Svyatopolk, the new prince, intended to kill all his brothers. Boris was already traveling to Kiev when he discovered that a party of murderers was already on its way and about to fall upon him. “What shall I, as a Chris-tian, do now?” Boris asked his companions. “Now that we know, shall we defend ourselves?”

For a long time at night, in their camp by the Alta River Boris struggled with temptation. He went out to stand under the stars alone. He prayed, until he



remembered the words of John: “If a man may say, I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar. For he that loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”

Suddenly it became clear to him. “Of course, as a Christian I will suffer wrong like Christ. I cannot defend myself. If God wants to protect me that is up to him. But if not I will die like Christ, unarmed.”

With a sense of imminent victory already upon him, Boris returned to his companions and said:

Supposing I should take my father’s place in Kiev the people would no doubt pervert my heart and I might well treat my brothers like I am now being treated. . . . I might do wickedly for the sake of glory and the kingdom of this world which passes away—a kingdom that hangs on less than a spider’s web. . . . What, after all, did my father and his brothers gain? Where are they now? Of what value is the glory of this world: the purple robes and ornaments, the silver and gold, the wine and mead, the tasty food, swift horses, high and stately houses, many possessions, tributes and honour without measure and the pride of those who served them? All this is like it never existed. Everything dis-appeared with them . . . For this reason, Solomon, having passed through all and acquired everything, said: vanity of vanities, all is vanity.<sup>7</sup>

Before he sent his companions away so he could meet his brother’s murderers alone, Boris prayed, “Lord Jesus, you came to earth like a man and let men nail you, unjustly, to the cross. You accepted that suffering patiently. Now I ask you, give me grace to accept mine. I must suffer not from my enemies but from my brother. Lord, do not count it against him.”

With such calm did Boris meet his murderers when they arrived that they hardly knew what to do. But a rough youth among them threw the first lance. One of Boris’s companions, a Magyar who could not bring himself to desert him, threw himself in the way. But the men, once they began, could not be deterred. They rolled Boris’s body in a mat and brought it back to Kiev in a cart.

Gleb, coming down the Dnepr in a boat met the murderers near Smolensk, coming upstream. When he discovered their intentions he cried, “Don’t harm me brothers, please don’t! I did you no evil. . . . Have mercy on my youth. Have mercy, lords! You may be my masters and I your slave, but do not reap me from

my immature life. Do not reap the unripe ear. Do not cut down the vine-shoot that has not grown up. . . .”

Svyatopolk’s men took no mercy on him. Spotting one of their comrades on Gleb’s boat (the man who did his cooking) they got him on their side. He jumped on Gleb and cut his throat.

“You forsook the perishable glory of this world,” wrote the chronicler about Gleb. “You hated the kingdom of this world and loved purity. You have suffered a wicked death without resisting your murderous brother in any way. . . . You were killed for the sake of the perfect Lamb, the Saviour of our Souls who was sacrificed for us.”

No doubt the chroniclers who wrote the story of Boris and Gleb somewhat “standardized” the account to give it literary form. But the murder of the two boys and their nonresistant response shook Russia to its foundations. What, in fact, was this strange new Gospel that came with Anna from Byzantium? Such a thing had not happened before. That fair-haired Kievan princes who discovered a death plot against them would choose not to defend them-selves—it was unreal! All over Russia people began to ask: How seriously should Jesus’ Gospel be taken? To some it became steadily clearer that if allowed free course, the Gospel would not stop until it totally changed their lives.

After the boys’ death, Yaroslav returned from Novgorod. Svyatopolk, for whom the people felt nothing but horror and shame, fled to Poland. But multitudes who visited the graves of Boris and Gleb, the “holy sufferers,” in Kiev left with a strange new flame burning in their hearts.

To live like Christ—to follow him through suffering and death—it dawned on them, is the way to triumph with him in heaven. This led them, even in deepest poverty and distress, to . . .

## **The Love of Beauty**

When Fyodor Dostoyevsky made what perhaps became his best-loved statement, “The world will be saved by beauty,” he put more to words than what meets the eye. Nine centuries before him, the believers of Russia already began to discover that truth.<sup>8</sup>

The love of beauty (called by the Greeks *philokalia*) came to Russians in hard

circumstances. Scattered in settlements hundreds if not thousands of verst removed one from another, they spent months at a time with little else but God. Frightful winters came upon them. Snow fell thick and fast in the fall and came to stay—obliterating trails and loading birch trees and houses alike with a deep blanket of silence. People died in the winter, from sicknesses no one knew, from cold and hunger. The sun grew small and pale above the southern horizon.

But in the spring, in the time of the Holy Celebration<sup>9</sup> when snow disappeared, the sun shone warmly, and fields of young wheat turned green in its heavenly light, the people of Russia revived. They prostrated themselves to the east. They closed their eyes—overwhelmed in the goodness of deep black soil, bees in the plum blossoms, and white clouds like wool floating once more above the steppes and awakening forests.

In the late tenth century David, a man from Smolensk on the Dnepr tried to put his feelings to words:

God immortal! I praise you for everything you made. You are the only King. You give all good things for your creatures to enjoy. You made this earth and watch over it, waiting for those you have placed on it to return to you. You honour with heavenly grace those who lead a good life. . . . All your judgments are fair. You are forever alive. You give your grace to all who look to you.

Vladimir Monomakh wrote:

Who would not praise you God? Who would not glorify your power and your great wonder and beauty visible on this earth? We are amazed Lord, how you rule the heavens, the sun, the moon and the stars! We are amazed at darkness and light, and the earth that floats on water Lord, by your goodness! We are amazed at how you adorned the animals, the birds and the fish! This wonder we admire: how you created man out of dust and how varied are the looks of human faces! Even if we brought the whole world together, no two faces should be found exactly alike. In your wisdom you gave us all a personal image. We stand amazed at the birds! The birds from paradise that do not stay in one country but fly, both the strong and the weak, over all countries by your command. They fly over all the forests and fields. All this Lord, you gave for our food and joy! . . . And you teach the birds to sing for our delight as well as yours!

To notice beauty is to notice God. Russians saw beauty and rejoiced, even where others drew back in fear. “I love thunder-showers in the spring,” wrote Fyodor Tyutchev. “From east to west joyful thunder rumbles through the sky. Water nimbly courses down. In the forest birds cannot be silent. Their twittering conversation, water running—all things echo thunder’s heavenly joy!”

Worship and the love of beauty became one in Russian experience. *Umilenie*, they called it, a word they sometimes equated with the Greek, *katanuxis* (a tingling sensation, inner experience heightened to the point of reeling or dizziness). To have *umilenie* was to become conscious of God to the point that one’s heart changed. It came to Russian believers in the repentance attitude. In *umilenie* they got grace to live in truth. In *umilenie* they freed themselves from earthly things. Once I began to understand this, and as *umilenie* became a part of my own experience, I knew how Russian believers survived persecution. They did far more than just “follow Christ.” They walked . . .

1 Eastern Orthodox churches are divided into three sections: the “hall” where the audience stands, the “altar” where the Eucharist is consecrated, and the sacristy.

2 Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind* (remaining quotations in this chapter from this work unless identified otherwise)

3 Vasily’s epistle, a letter of instruction written before his death, is usually called “Pseudo-Vasily” because its author, following a Byzantine and Russian tradition, remained anonymous by using a pseudonym.

4 The Word was made flesh , and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

5 Mennonites, who settled in Russia in the 1700’s, gave testimony to this.

6 2 Corinthians 13:4: “He was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God’s power.”

7 Quotations on Boris and Gleb taken from translations of *Skazanie* (The Legend), written not long after the boys’ death and translated by Georgy Fedotov.

8 A Russian legend tells how Prince Vladimir sent his men to the Khazars, to the Turks, and to Byzantium to find the best religion. The men found Judaism dull. They did not like Muslim worship. But in Byzantium, they reported “we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. On earth there is no such splendour or such beauty. We are at a loss to describe it. We only know that God lives there among men, and their service is fairer

than the ceremonies of other nations. We cannot forget that beauty. Every man, once he has tasted the sweet, refuses to settle for the sour any longer.” The legend is definitely fictitious. But its depiction of Russian character—seeking God in the beautiful while leaving rational judgment out of the picture—is true to form. Russian believers, even after they knew Christ and the Bible, tended to operate this way.

## [9](#) The Feast of the Resurrection

## 6

### With Him

Travelers coming to a halt at the gate of the compound of the Prince of Chernigov on the Desna often glanced sharply at the young man who let them in. Even in rain and falling snow he greeted them warmly and seemed happy. “Who is that boy?” they would ask, feeling sorry for him with his poor clothes in the cold.

“That is Nikolai,” the stable servants would answer. “He lives and works with us. But. . .” with a strange look on their faces they would add, “he is the prince’s son.”

Travelers wondered and observed.

It began when Nikolai, as far back as he could remember, stood among crowds of worshipers in Chernigov’s cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in the centre of town. Above the rising incense, above the ikons, high above the people singing Slavonic hymns, he saw the calm, manly, face of Christ the King. It shone from the dome. Far above all else, it held Nikolai’s gaze through the service, but he wondered what the three strange letters beside it meant.

“Those letters,” his mother had told him, “are Greek. They spell the name of Christ.”

“But how can three letters spell *Jesus*?” Nikolai wanted to know. His mother was unable to answer and not until he became a teenager and studied Greek did he discover what they meant.

The three letters ●●●, stand for *YHWH*, the name God gave himself at Sinai. Greek Christians believed that was the same as *Yah-Shua*—the name they translated “Jesus”—and with the first Christians and Jews, they respected it deeply. They also believed that man’s salvation somehow depended on it.

“How does it work?” Nikolai would ask himself. “Does the word *Jesus* have magical power? Will anything happen by simply “calling on the name of the Lord?” But when his teacher, a *staretz* who lived a godly life, told him to try it even though he did not understand, he obeyed.

He began by saying “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” every once in a while, like the staretz had told him. By himself he said it out loud. In the company of others he said it silently, in his mind. At first it was almost embarrassing, knowing how well Christ heard him every time he said it. But he gradually became more confident. Saying the name, he knew, was to greet Christ, and he found that every time he did it the awareness of being in his presence jolted him.

At first he kept that awareness only for short times. But the oftener he said the name the more it grew on him, and within a few days his life began to change. A well-to-do and friendly boy, Nikolai had been popular among the teenagers of Chernigov. But now, conscious of being in Christ’s presence, their stories no longer amused him. Stylish clothes, and racing about on horseback so the girls would notice, suddenly seemed foolish.

Nikolai used to hate getting up in the morning and poked at his work. But now, waking up to “call on the name” he began each day with mounting excitement. It worked! Calling on the name of the Lord throughout the day—day after day—saved him!

When he felt guilty he called on the name and confessed.

When fear overtook him, or boredom, or embarrassment, or pride, or anger—every emotion came to heel when he called on the name of Christ. When bad thoughts popped up (as they often did) he called on the name and they left. So simple! It had to be too good for real. Yet it was real, and all who knew Nikolai Svyatosha, son of the prince of Chernigov, felt the shock of his transformation.

Nikolai moved from his father’s palace into the workers’ quarters. He gave his horse, his good clothes, and all his money away. Then, even though his parents were embarrassed to tears, he asked the head steward for a job in the kitchen and later on as a gatekeeper.

It worked strangely. His popularity among the well-to-do ended at once (people thought he had lost his mind), but the stable boys, the muzhiks, the beggars—vast numbers of people from the surrounding countryside heard of Nikolai and came to visit him. They held him in deep respect.

Nikolai had studied much. Now he taught those who came to see him. He learned how to make clothes and took care of sick people, taking every opportunity to lead Russian Christians from the painted “Christs” of their churches to the real Christ.

“All it takes to be saved,” Nikolai told them, “is to become fully aware of him. Then all it takes to stay saved is to keep that awareness by calling on his name.”

## Early Christian Teaching

It was not hard for the common people of Chernigov to accept what Nikolai Svyatosha told them. They had heard of “calling on the name of the Lord to be saved” ever since Byzantine Christianity came to Russia a hundred years earlier. Fyodosy Pechersky had spoken of it. So had Vladimir Monomakh and others who learned through John Chrysostom and Basil of Caesarea what the early Christians believed.

The early Christians, Russian believers discovered, took their teaching about the name of Christ from Joel’s prophecy. Immediately after Pentecost, when Peter spoke to the people he quoted Joel, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” On another occasion he added: “For there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” Paul repeated that same prophecy in his letter to the Romans.

The early Christians, remembering what Christ said after his resurrection,<sup>1</sup> associated repentance and forgiveness of sins with his name. They did not think of baptizing converts without calling on it. But “calling on the name of the Lord” was more to them than a one-time formality. They kept on doing it to be washed, sancti-fied, and justified.<sup>2</sup> All this, especially for the Gentiles, became a fulfillment of Jewish predictions that many would trust in the Anointed One’s name. And it confirmed what the Old Testament said about finding salvation in it—especially the words of King David.

Like King David who called on the Lord in his temple, the early Christians called on him in their hearts and discovered a quiet place in his presence. It was their most holy place—out of reach of what went on the world and of what others did to them. And those who knew it discovered inner fellowship one with another.

We enter Christ’s presence, the early Christians believed, through constant *inner*<sup>3</sup> prayer. For this reason we need no elaborate *outer* demonstrations. When we pray we do not need to shout, cry, or babble like the heathen.

Since we cannot put our deepest feelings to words and the Spirit of God must



speak for us, our words may as well be few. Just being still and knowing that God is God, is also prayer. Basil of Caesarea, a church leader of the fourth century already counseled Christians to reduce all prayer to the words Nikolai Svyatosha learned: “Lord Jesus, have mercy!” This became known in the Greek church as the “Jesus Prayer.”

One could pray the Jesus Prayer in any circumstance. John Chrysostom wrote in the fourth century:

No one should say that a person too busy or unable to attend formal worship cannot pray all the time. You can set up an altar to God anywhere, in your mind. You can pray where you work, while traveling, standing behind a counter, or with your tools in hand. Everywhere, any time, you can pray. And to be sure, if people get serious they do pray!

If people believed that prayer is of all things the most important they would make sure they got it done. They would make necessary conversations with others shorter. They would spend more time in silence and not bother repeating things of no consequence. Neither would they waste time worrying.

If people would pray, their actions would show that power comes from calling on the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . They would discover how easy it is, calling on his name, to rise from vocal prayer to prayer of the mind, and from that to prayer of the heart which opens up the Kingdom of God within us.<sup>4</sup>

## **Greek Christian Teaching**

Those who loved Christ and remained faithful to him, thousands of Greek Christians scattered through the Byzantine Empire, had kept beliefs and practices of the early church alive. It had not been easy. But among the things they remembered was the teaching on “perpetual prayer,” and after A.D. 988 they brought it to Russia.

Isaac, a Greek Christian in Jerusalem wrote in the 400’s:

The one who desires to see Christ purifies his heart by remembering him constantly. By doing this he discovers his spiritual country within. The sun that shines on that country is the light of the Holy Trinity. The air its inhabitants breathe is the All-holy Spirit. Its Life, joy and gladness is Christ. Its Light of Lights is the Father. This country is Jeru-salem, the Kingdom of God within us,

like Christ said.<sup>5</sup>

John, a Greek celibate of Sinai, wrote in the late 500's:

When the spirit is darkened by unclean thoughts, put the enemy to flight by the name of Jesus, repeated frequently. A more powerful and effective weapon than this you will not find in heaven or on earth.<sup>6</sup>

Kallistos, a cook's helper in Greece who learned the secret of the name and helped many to salvation wrote:

To pray without ceasing is to call without ceasing on the name of the Lord. Whether talking, sitting, walking, work-ing with our hands, eating, or occupied in any other way, we should at all times and in every place call on the name of the Lord. . . . If we do this, Satan's attempts on our life will fail.

We must pray with the heart. When we are alone it is also good to pray with the mouth. But when we are in the market or with others we should not pray with the lips, but only with the mind. We must keep our eyes in control, looking away from distraction and the enemy's snares. Prayer reaches perfection when we offer it to God without our minds wandering away. It reaches perfection when all our thoughts and feelings are gathered into one prayer: "Lord Jesus, have mercy!"<sup>7</sup>

Barsanofius, another Greek Christian, wrote:

Watching, while spiritually awake, completely delivers us with God's help from sinful actions, thoughts, and words. . . . Silence of heart, a guarding of the mind, it is to stand at attention, thinking of nothing else but to call on Jesus Christ, the Son of God.<sup>8</sup>

Gregory, a member of a Greek community at Sinai, wrote in the 1300's:

None of us, to be sure, can control our minds by ourselves. When bad thoughts come it is only by calling often, at regular intervals, on the name of Jesus Christ

that our minds quiet down and bad thoughts go away.

The secret of Salvation lies in unceasing prayer. Christian, if you feel unable to worship God in spirit and in truth, if nothing comes to you (no sensation of warmth or fulfillment) when you pray, then you must simply do what you can. You can call on the name of Jesus. You can do it frequently and keep it up. It takes little effort and anyone can do it.

To pray continually can certainly become a habit. It can become our second nature, bringing our minds and hearts continually back to the right place. If people obeyed God in this one area (to pray continually) they would obey him in everything, for those who keep calling in secret on Jesus' name—even though they must force themselves to do it at first—have no time for foolish talking, for criticizing their neighbours, or for wasting their time in sinful entertainment. If people would remember Christ their sinful thoughts would diminish. Their sinful ideas (hatched in idleness) would not get carried out. Multitudes of unnecessary words would never get said, and for calling on his holy name, every sin would be washed from their souls.<sup>9</sup>

Niceforus, a Greek teacher of the later Byzantine period, summed up what those who still followed Christ believed. “Calling on the name of the Lord,” he said, “leads one to salvation without hard work and sweat.”

## **Russian Teaching**

In Russia, Feodosy Pechersky may first have written about Christ awareness. But by his time the simple practice of “calling on the name of the Lord to be saved” had spread among the common people. To them it was “prayer”—living in the presence of God.

“Gennady” wrote:

To pray is to open one's soul to the light. . . . Do not neglect prayer, the soul's nourishment. As a body deprived of food suffers and grows weak, so the soul deprived of prayer heads toward spiritual death.<sup>10</sup>

Centuries later the author of one of the “home wisdom” documents wrote:

My son, be low of head but high in spirit. Keep your eyes on the earth but let your soul rise up. Keep your lips closed but always cry in your heart to the Lord. Keep your feet walking humbly but race in the spirit to the gate of heaven.<sup>11</sup>

Vasily Polyanomerulsky, Serafim Sarovsky, Paisy Yaroslavov who translated Greek Christian documents into Slavonic, and other Russian believers wrote about the Jesus Prayer. But after Nikolai Svyatosha perhaps no one did more to teach it to the people than one of Paisy Yaroslavov's students, a young man called Nil.

## **Nil Sorsky**

Nil (as a child they had called him Nikolai too) grew up in a peasant village fifty years before Columbus discovered America. His parents were poor people and could not read. But they believed and walked with Christ. They made it possible for Nil to learn how to read and he fulfilled their desires by studying Christian writings.

Nil read the Gospels and the first letters to the churches, then he discovered more. "Like a bee flitting from one beautiful flower to another," he described his search among Greek Christian writings "to know the garden of life and Christian truth." He discovered in them a treasurehouse of practical instructions and made it his life's work to translate and copy them.

A number of Nil's friends joined him at a small clearing beside the Sora River. They built log houses. They set up a chapel where—dressed like peasants in linen—they celebrated communion in crudely carved vessels. But these things did not matter. Their aim was to translate and copy by hand as carefully and as much as they could for the Russian people.

Nil also wrote. Aware of Christ and the value of standing in silence before him, he instructed the people:

Prayer of the heart is the source of all blessing. It waters the soul like rain does a garden.

Just as frost ruins a garden, so an excess of human conversation (even when it is good), destroys the tender flowers of virtue that come to bloom in an atmosphere of silence.<sup>12</sup>

Nil Sorsky, like the early Christians, taught against the fool-ishness of long, eloquent prayers. He believed in “calling on the name of the Lord,” but even in this he encouraged believers not to overdo themselves. Work and worship, if done in awareness of Christ are also “prayer.” He wrote:

Does calling on the Lord Jesus make you tired after a while? Do not worry. It is alright to just sing or work sometimes, as long as we keep returning to him. <sup>13</sup>

Calling on Christ is the surest and quickest access to *umilenie* and what Russian believers called the “love of beauty” (recognizing God in the beautiful). It enhanced their fascination with nature, music, and wholesome human relationships. But *umilenie* does not depend only on the senses. It also comes with recognizing Christ in the beauty of simply being aware of him. Believers discovered it even in appalling circumstances. Nil Sorsky wrote:

During prayer the mind rises above earthly things. Through it we become conscious of the unseen and what our senses cannot reach. Suddenly gladness fills the soul and we are struck speechless with incomparable joy. The heart overflows with *umilenye* and oblivious to all things sensual we enter a state of well-being our ordinary speech cannot describe. <sup>14</sup>

## **Tikhon Zadonsky**

Timofey Sokolov, born in a peasant village at Korotzk near Novgorod in 1724, knew hunger and cold. His father died when he was little. His older brothers worked hard but they could not earn enough to feed the family. One day his mother, unable to see Timofey hungry any longer, decided to give him away. She found a coachman with money who would take him and thought she would quick get it over with before the other children caught on.

Her plan did not work.

One of the older boys, Yefim, saw her walking down the village street. She was crying and leading Timofey by the hand. Yefim dropped his work and came running to see what had happened. When he learned of his mother’s plans he begged and pled with her, falling on his knees in the middle of the street, to bring

her to change her mind.

“But it is for the child’s good,” his mother insisted. “Shall we keep him at home only to watch him starve? I cannot do it any longer. . . .”

“Leave it to us, his brothers,” Yefim promised. “The Lord will give. We will teach him how to read and write and someday he may become the *dyachok’s* helper.”<sup>15</sup>

Yefim could not have imagined how his spur-of-the-moment idea would affect the Kingdom of Christ in Russia. But Timofey and his mother turned back. The older boys worked harder than ever. After a number of years, to keep their promise, they took Timofey to live with one of them (now married) in the city of Novgorod. There they sent him to school and he weeded vegetable gardens after class to help with expenses.

Timofey put his whole heart into his studies. He not only learned how to read but learned Greek as well and became a writer. After he became part of a religious community and people called him by a new name, Tikhon, he wrote:

Blessed are those who saw Christ in the flesh. . . . Still more blessed are we who see him through the teaching of the Gospels, who hear him speak through that teaching, who confess and call upon his name. In a way we cannot explain his perfectly pure body becomes ours and his blood becomes our life.

We meet Christ in the inner room of our souls. We meet him in prayer. We meet him in acts of love toward people—in everything on earth that gives us an idea of how life will be when Christ will rule over all. To know Christ is our only absolute necessity. Let our first and greatest effort, therefore, be to discover him. All else is nothing, even though the whole world lies at our feet. . . .

To pray is not to stand and bow with your body or to read written prayers. One can pray at all times, in all places, by the mind and spirit. One can lift up the mind and heart to Christ while walking, sitting, working, in a crowd or alone. Unlike ours, Christ’s door is always open. We can always say to him in our hearts:

“Lord, have mercy!”<sup>16</sup>

Not many years after Tikhon (Timofey) died at Zadonsk, another boy who became a Christian writer was born in Russia. He also joined a religious community (an Orthodox community) and took the name Ignaty.

## Constant Awareness

After moving to far southern Russia, into the Caucasus, Ignaty Bryanchaninov wrote, “In the name of Jesus the soul, killed by sin, comes back to life. The Lord Jesus is life! His name lives! It awakens and gives life to those who contact, through it, the source of life itself.” To this he added:

The one who desires to purify his heart should cleanse it continually with the fire of Christ awareness. He should make this his constant meditation and work. The one who desires to overcome his old nature must do more than pray sometimes and sometimes not. He must pray without ceasing with his mind awake, even when he is not in a house of prayer. Goldsmiths, if they let the fire in their furnaces burn low while purifying their metal, cause it to harden again. In the same way, the one who is sometimes mindful of God and sometimes not, ruins through carelessness what he hopes to gain. <sup>17</sup>

<sup>18</sup>

The *skhimnik* in the story of the Pilgrim of Orel said:

No distraction can interrupt the one who seriously wants to pray. He frees his thoughts from what goes on around him and prays at all times. . . in the presence of many people and while working with his hands. Business cannot be so important nor conversation so interesting that it becomes impossible to call on the name of Christ.

If it were impossible to pray amid the noise and commotion of society, it would not be required of us.

To this, a listening Russian professor replied: “I agree that while working with our hands it is possible—even easy—to pray continuously. But how can I concentrate on reading, studying or writing and at the same time be conscious of Christ? I have only one mind. How can I focus on two things at the same time?”

The *skhimnik* answered:

It is easy. . . . Just think how you would feel if the tsar ordered you to write a complicated report in his presence, sitting on the steps of his throne. Even though

your mind would be occupied, the presence of the tsar who holds your life in his hands would not allow you to forget for a moment that you are thinking and writing, not in solitude, but in a place that demands your highest reverence, respect, and proper behaviour. The acute awareness you would feel, so close to him, describes exactly what we mean by continual prayer.

## **Awareness and Holiness**

Noise and activity cannot keep us from Christ awareness. Neither can strenuous mental effort. But self-indulgence and sin certainly can—and will. It does not work, Russian believers discovered, to pray the Jesus Prayer while hiding sin. Nil Sorsky drew up a list of things to get rid of:

1. Gluttony. We should eat when we need to and not just for pleasure.
2. Impurity. We dare not entertain wicked fantasies.
3. Greed. A desire to hoard things ruins our trust in God.
4. Anger.
5. Sadness. To get discouraged is to lose our souls.
6. Harshness.
7. Vanity and pride.

Ignaty Bryanchaninov wrote:

“Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord stop sinning” (2 Tim. 2:19). . . . The name of Christ cannot exist in the midst of impurity. For it to live within us, all impurities must go. Our souls must be clean. . . .

Let us stop overeating and doing things to feel good. Let us take moderation as our rule and cut back on tasty foods and drinks for pleasure. Let us sleep enough but not too much. Let us renounce idle talk, laughing, joking and making fun of others. Let us put a stop to unprofitable chatting done under the pretext of love because it leads to unnecessary words that devastate the soul. Let us renounce day-dreaming and vain thoughts. . . .



Hold back and keep all your impulses under control, the good ones as well as the bad. . . . Let the “old man” inside you shut up! Then let Christ do what he wants. If you live like this the Jesus Prayer will certainly blossom within you, quite independently of whether you dwell in the deepest solitude or amid the hustle and bustle of community.

## **Awareness Among the Common People**

Russians who wrote about Christ Awareness and prayer (the men I quote in this chapter) were the professionals, the artists, who put this early Christian teaching to words. They stood closest to the Greek Christians through whom it came. But it was Rus-sia’s common people—the muzhiks—who made of what they taught a way of life.

It was so simple. First thing in the morning, before the sun came up and they stepped out to milk the cow, they prayed the Jesus Prayer. All day long they prayed it—out loud or silently—however it suited or whenever necessary. “Calling on the name of the Lord,” they believed, “is to Christians what nursing is to an infant.”

Only a few Russian peasants could read. But the vast number who could not, found walking with Christ just as easy. Ignaty Bryanchaninov wrote:

Basil told those who could not read, and those not eloquent in prayer to simply call on Jesus’ name. With this he started nothing new. He merely confirmed a known practice. Since then, Basil’s suggestion has come with the other traditions of the church, from Greece to Russia. And many people with little education, even those who are totally illiterate have found salvation and eternal life through the Jesus Prayer.

The Lord Christ rejoices with incomprehensible joy at our success. He declares that the mysteries of the Christian faith are revealed not to the wise and exalted of the world, but to those who are children in worldly things. Of such were his disciples. He took them from among the simple, the unlearned and illiterate. To follow Christ we must become children and accept his teaching with childlike minds in simplicity and love. If we follow him like this, he explains his deepest teaching to us. He explains to us how the Son, even though he became human, remains above the grasp of human rationalists. His holy name also remains above their grasp. Only with the simplicity and trust of children can we receive the teaching of prayer in Jesus’ name. Let us practice it the same way.

What no one could have envisioned was what would come of this direct access to Christ. By calling on Christ the King, any man in rough linen, any woman in rags with a scarf tucked around her face, any boy or girl hoeing turnips or beating out the clothes could—and did—bypass the state church to get what they needed straight from heaven. Ignaty Bryanchaninov wrote:

Only the poor in spirit, only those constantly aware of their poverty and need, cling constantly to Christ in prayer. Only they are capable of discovering within themselves the great-ness of his name. “The poor and needy will praise your name” (Psalm 73:21) “Blessed is the man who trusts in the name of the Lord” (Psalm 39:5).

Not the rich and powerful, not those smugly in charge of religious institutions, but great numbers of common people in Russia learned like Nikolai Svyatosha how to walk *with Christ*. With him they survived persecution and got ready for . . .

[1](#) Luke 24:46-47

[2](#) 1 Corinthians 6:11

[3](#) 1 Thessalonians 5:17

[4](#) quoted by Ignaty Bryanchaninov in his *Ascetic Essays*

[5](#) From the *Dobrotoliubie* (Philokalia), a collection of early writings translated from Slavonic into Russian by Paisy Velichkovsky in the 1700’s.

[6](#) From *The Ladder to Paradise*

[7](#) *Dobrotoliubie*

[8](#) *ibid.*

[9](#) *ibid.*

[10](#) *ibid.*

11 Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind*

12 de Grünwald, *Saints of Russia*

13 *ibid.*

14 *ibid.*

15 The *dyachok* is a deacon who takes part in the Eastern Orthodox worship service.

16 Gorodetzky, *Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk* (remaining citations from this work)

17 Bryanchaninov, *On the Prayer of Jesus* (all remaining citations from this work)

18 an older, celibate, teacher

## The Antichrist

All Russians sensed—two hundred years after Kiev became “Christian”—that something dark and terrible was coming upon them. In outlying settlements on the great plains they heard pounding hoof beats at night, bringing dozens then hundreds of stocky round-faced horsemen with slanted slit-like eyes. No one knew the wild language they spoke. But their shouts sounded like curses. Their curving scimitars flashed and wherever they suddenly appeared, blood ran.

During the summer of 1240 hundreds of marauders seemed to turn into thousands. *Batu*—here and there one heard the word, or was it a name? Batu, if so, who was he? What would he do?

Only after it happened did the few who survived know.

Batu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, Tatar “ruler of the universe” from Mongolia, surrounded Kiev with untold thousands of horsemen. He attacked, burned and killed almost everyone.

Then, with his “Golden Horde” (the Tatars from Mongolia) he took control of Russia. The horror of that conquest could only have paled before the knowledge that Russia would languish under Tatar rule for nearly three hundred years.

### A Long Night

Unlike the newcomers from Scandinavia the Tatars did not mix with the Russians nor settle in their towns. All they wanted was food, furs and women. Every spring they rounded up thousands of Russian girls for their harems. At the site they would designate as a *deviche pole* (virgin’s field) they would gather like dealers at a stock yard to divide them up. The crying of the girls rose to heaven, and their parents who believed in Christ prayed they would quickly die.

Many did.

The greatest camp of the Tatars, Saray Berke, stood on a muddy hoof-trampled bank along the lower Volga. Six hundred thousand people, at times, lived in its

felt tents among the stench of fermented milk and horse manure. But lesser camps sprung up across the steppes, up the Volga to Kazan, down to Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea, and into the Crimean Peninsula.

Not even after the Tatars under Öz Beg Khan started to mix with the Turks and convert to Islam in the 1300s did their ways improve. Ruthless, relentless, they broke Russia and the land of the Eastern Slavs would never be the same again.

## A Parting of Ways

During the Tatar invasion lords and serfs, princes and muzhiks fled together. They shared their poverty and distress. They huddled in the same hideouts in the woods. But after the Tatars' grip began to loosen (a process accelerated by the Black Death that swept through their camps in the 1340s) divisions among Russians reappeared—deeper than ever.

Russians divided as they struggled to survive under the Tatars. Some—including Prince Vladimir's ruling descendants and even church leaders—began to

[1](#)  
collaborate with the khans at Saray and rebuilt log forts called *kremlins* in out-of-the-way corners in the woods. One of them, the son of Prince Aleksandr Nevsky, rebuilt a kremlin among the headwaters of the Oka and Volga rivers. People called it Moscow.

Other Russians, including a large number of “believers” as distinct from the “church,” did not collaborate with nor rebel against the Tatars. They fled. Far to the north into snowy forests where Tatar horsemen hated to go they escaped with their wives and children. They built log houses and fished. During short summers they planted turnips and wheat in their clearings.

With every new winter that came to the taiga—the vast sub-Arctic hinterland north of Novgorod, Pskov, and Tver—these Russians' memory of other people and lands to the south grew fainter. They forgot how far they had left “civilised” people behind them. They forgot the ways of their Greek and Slavic ex-neighbours. But they did not forget the name of the Lord.

During winters that seemed to last most of the year, when wolves howled and mighty storms blew in from the White Sea they met in their homes to pray, and to sing early Christian songs. Every year at the time of the Paschal feast, when the sun warmed the land, their joy in Christ revived. And here, in the wilderness,

many shrugged off what had not been truly *Christian* in Greek Christianity.

“Why give money to priests for their services, when Paul said they should not serve for gain?” some Russian believers began to ask. “Who says we need their services at all? Christ Jesus is our Father and Priest!”

Even in fortified towns close to the northern forests people began to ask these questions. But when Karp, a dyachok from Pskov (a man who knew how to cut hair), and Nikita another believer challenged them publicly, Orthodox authorities arrested them. They beat the two men and tortured them, but they refused to recant. Then the authorities threw them down from a bridge in Novgorod.

All who sympathised with Karp and Nikita got called in derision, *Strigolniki* (barbers). But nothing could stamp out the fire of love for Christ in Russian believers’ hearts and the movement went “underground.”<sup>2</sup>

By the time Constantinople fell to the Turks and the Byzantine Empire ended in 1453, those who loved Christ in Russia had grown numerous—and groups of Strigolniki met in secret in most of its northern towns.

## **Another Rome**

A young prince, Ivan I, married to a niece of the last Byzantine emperor, governed Russia from the kremlin at Moscow at the time Constantinople fell. He did not take that event lightly. “Since Constantinople and the emperor are no more,” he told his subjects, “we must do what we can. God depends on us, the Russians, to carry on his Kingdom. We are his Church and what remains of the Roman and Byzantine Empires.”

With the help of his *boyars* (noblemen), Ivan built a bigger and stronger kremlin at Moscow than Russia had ever seen. He forced the towns of Novgorod and Tver to honour his rule. Then he began to use the golden double-headed eagle of Byzantium for his royal seal. He introduced all he could (and what his wife remembered) of Byzantine court ritual and before long the princes of Moscow<sup>3</sup> called themselves *tsars*.

A monk, Filofey, put the new situation to words: “Two Romes have fallen, the third one (Moscow) stands, and a fourth there will not be.”

## Another Ivan

Prince Ivan of Moscow had a sickly, not at all good-looking grandson who got his name. At first no one thought little Ivan II would pull through. But the winter after he turned three his father died and they crowned him tsar in his place.

For years no one took the sickly, moody little tsar seriously. Others ruled in his place (and poisoned his mother when he was eight). But when Ivan, at thirteen, had a boyar killed and at fifteen cut out another one's tongue "for saying rude things" people began to take note. In a quarrel, a year later, he killed his best friend.

At seventeen Ivan married the beautiful daughter of a Moscow boyar. Her name was Anastasya, and he loved her. Anastasya bore him six children and as long as she lived he governed Russia fairly well. Only when she died young, did trouble begin.

Ivan felt certain someone had killed his wife. He suspected a boyar had done it, and when none of them confessed he began to distrust them all. He lived obsessed with fears of conspiracy. In 1546 he suddenly left Moscow and fortified himself in the nearby village of Aleksandrovsk. The people debated what to do. Should they call him back? He was, after all, their God-given ruler. . . .

Ivan promised to come back under one condition: he alone would rule as God's judge and lawgiver, and all Russians great or small would submit to him. The people, considering the fact that he had spent time in a monastery as a young man and seemed pious, agreed—to their undoing.

## Terror in the New Rome

On his return to Moscow Ivan divided Russia in two regions. The smaller region (including his own estates and those of his friends) he called the *oprichnina*. Whoever lived in it became a privileged *oprichnik*, entitled to wear black clothes, ride a black horse and carry a dog's head and broom as symbols of his authority. All the rest of Russia became the *zemshchina*.

Ivan forbade the *oprichniki* to socialise in any way with the *zemskye* (residents of the *zemshchina*) who as "second class citizens" were to serve them. He ordered ditches dug around *oprichnina* property and forbade the *zemskye* to cross them on pain of death. Many families, friends and neighbours found themselves divided.

All of Ivan's bizarre new laws favoured the oprichniki. "Judge fairly," one of them read, "but remember, we (of the oprichnina) will never be in the wrong." Such laws set loose a wave of violence that far surpassed anything Russia, even under the Tatars, had seen.

## **Isolation**

On all Russian roads Ivan placed oprichniki guards to keep people from travelling without permission. Everyone had to register and carry a passport. Travellers without passports he ordered stripped and rolled in the snow until they died, or else burned alive.

Ivan sealed Russia's borders. When he suspected three towns close to Poland of communicating with "westerners" he had their men decapitated and their heads sent in bags to Moscow as proof and warning. Foreigners who came to Russia (and a good number actually did) found themselves whisked at once to Moscow by Ivan's guards. In special communities, Ivan offered them houses, land, and religious freedom. Their only obligation was never to leave Russia again.

Ivan made a rule that anyone, Russian or foreigner alike, caught escaping the country should be impaled on a pointed post as a warning.

## **Religious Fakes and Holy Fools**

Throughout his fifty-one-year reign "Ivan the Terrible" (as other Europeans came to call him) saw himself as God's faithful servant, chosen like the Byzantine emperors to rule God's kingdom on earth while Christ ruled in heaven. He attended at least one church service a day. He paid the priests large sums of money to pray for the eternal damnation of those he killed (and for the salvation of those that might have been innocent—like his oldest son whom he knocked down in a fit of rage). All his life Ivan supported the Orthodox church with huge sums of money, rebuilding the monasteries of Solovets on an island off the Arctic coast, and embellishing to no end the "sugar candy" cathedrals of Moscow and Sergiyev Posad.

Ivan lived on vodka. He spent most of his days somewhat drunk, but he wrote beautiful prayers and hymns. He kept all Christian fasts and had church leaders publish a list of approved devotional literature for the people to read.

This—Ivan the Terrible's "Christianity"—heightened as nothing before the



contrast between Russia's *church* and its *believers*. While Orthodox church leaders praised Ivan as the "unshakeable pillar, the immovable foundation of true Christianity, the holder of the reins of the Holy Church of God which is the throne <sup>4</sup> of all bishops and priests, the sage helmsman of the ship of this world," believers throughout Russia saw him quite simply as an incarnation of the devil.

Some who opposed Ivan and his wickedness saw their becoming *yurodivi* (holy <sup>5</sup> fools) the only option.

The *yurodivi* threw off all worldly possessions (sometimes including even their clothes) and became wanderers. A few, like a man called Vasily who lived on the streets of Moscow, puzzled everyone. Were they crazy? Or were they only putting into perspective how crazy society had become?

Vasily prayed in sun or snow on the streets. He shambled in and out of shops, taking things from the rich and giving them to the poor. Without fear he walked into Ivan's palace and told him what was wrong with Russia. One day in Lent he brought the tsar a big piece of raw meat. Ivan was shocked. "I do not eat meat in Lent," he protested.

"Then why," Vasily asked him, "do you drink the blood of men?"

No one else could have done this and gotten by. But Ivan feared the *yurodivi*. He suspected they were messengers sent from God, and ordered his men to leave them alone. When Vasily died, Ivan buried him beside the exotic multicoloured church he had built on Red Square in Moscow. People began to call it "Vasily's church" and after the Orthodox canonised him it became officially St. Vasily's (St. Basil's), a name it has kept till today.

## **Refuge in Christ**

Heinrich von Staden a German official in Ivan's court (and in the *oprichnina*) mentioned in his memoirs in 1579 that many a peasant, before getting struck over the head by an *oprichnik*, would cry out: "*Gospode Isuse Khriste, syne Bozhii, pomiloye!*" (Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy).

Never before had as many people in Russia called on the Lord's name—and as their troubles increased they did so in ever increasing numbers.

A plague struck in the 1570s. So many died that unburied corpses lay throughout Russia's homes. Too many were sick to work the land and business ceased. Ivan the Terrible, who had hoarded thousands of wagon loads of unthreshed grain (and kept his cellars full of fish in ice, and wax), shared nothing. Thousands starved, wandering about in the fields, until eaten by dogs. Outside Moscow, city work crews dumped corpses in piles of two to five hundred. The following year Tatars from the Crimea attacked and burned part of Moscow. Numberless bells rang in the flames <sup>6</sup> as its churches came crashing down but Ivan, as always, escaped.

Some people managed to escape Russia's disasters and find refuge in the far north where they became self-sufficient and avoided contact with larger towns. But most could not do that. Their only refuge was Christ.

## **Spirit Christians**

During Ivan the Terrible's rule a young man, Matvey Semyonovich Dalmatov, worked for a farmer in Tambov who read the Bible. When the farmer came home one night with a foreign doctor <sup>7</sup> who also studied the Bible, Matvey listened to the two men talk and became curious. "What does that book say?" he wondered. He could do nothing but learn to read and find out.

Matvey was deeply moved. The more he read the Gospels for himself the more he realised that the Christianity he knew in no way matched the teachings of Christ. The more he read, the more uncomfortable he became with the state church until he quietly, without raising issues, withdrew.

Nothing might have happened, had not Matvey's life changed so much. He no longer took part in dances and festivals. He taught his children godliness at home. Whenever opportunities came he warned his fellow-servants on the farm to turn from Satan to Christ, until those who persisted in sin reported him to the oprichnina. "This man," they said, "no longer falls down before the ikons. He

<sup>8</sup>  
neglects the church services and drinks milk on holy days!"

The oprichniki interrogated Matvey. So did state church officials who pronounced him a heretic. In 1553 they had Matvey flogged, pulled on the rack, his abdomen slit, and his intestines tied to a wheel. As the executioner slowly turned the wheel they gave Matvey time to change his mind. But he did not. In a clear voice heard by a multitude gathered on Red Square, he declared while he still had breath: "The

Spirit says: Blessed are those who die in the name of the Lord. They rest from their labours and their work follows after them. But you who are enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ will stand before his judgment.”<sup>9</sup>

The people feared, and Matvey’s life spoke even louder after his death. All around Tambov where he had lived, God-fearing people began to meet in secret to encourage one another, read the Bible, and pray. The movement grew rapidly to include hundreds, then thousands of “underground” believers in Tambov, Voronezh, and beyond. Their enemies called them *Molokans* (milk drinkers).<sup>10</sup> But among themselves they simply spoke of Christians, often *Dukhovnye Khristiane* (Spirit Christians) and “those of the world.”

## **A Time of Troubles**

On March 18, 1584, when Ivan the Terrible finally died he left Russia full of gleaming white churches with golden domes—but in unspeakable misery. Because he had killed the wealthy and reduced the size of their estates, the muzhiks had to work harder than ever. Taxes had risen and new laws ensured their collection.

Of all Ivan’s marriages only two of Anastasya’s sons, a mentally retarded boy and an epileptic survived. They both died and years of strife followed until the zemsky *sobor* (the council of the zemshchina) pulled a poorly educated sixteen-year-old boy out of the Kostroma monastery where he had grown up with his mother, a nun. He was Mikhail Romanov, a grandson of Anastasya’s (Ivan the Terrible’s first wife’s) brother.

Mikhail Romanov and his son Aleksey, a quiet friendly youth crowned in Moscow when he was sixteen, began a new line of tsars. They made fair laws. They promoted foreign trade and education. Most Russians might have been happy under their rule, had it not been for Revelation 13:18 and what they saw happening in the state church.

## **Guardians of Piety**

Beginning in the early years of the Romanov tsars, a group of concerned Russians began to meet regularly in Moscow. Calling themselves “Guardians of Piety,” they set out, under the leadership of a strong-willed ambitious man named Nikon, to improve the spiritual condition of the Orthodox church.

Nikon, whose wife and three children had died, took what he felt was his call to celibacy seriously and lived a sober life. His earnestness appealed to Tsar Aleksey Romanov who, after his coronation, made him his religious advisor. The “Guardians of Piety” supported him. Nikon became more popular and widely known, until in 1652 he became “Patriarch of all Russia.”

## **The Year of the Beast**

Nikon’s rise to power, considering his personality and the changes he soon called for, could not have occurred at a more critical time.

For years, a large number of Russia’s Christians had looked at their leaders (both religious and political) as possible agents of the devil. Now, as the mid 1600s drew near and they read Slavonic translations of books like Ephraim of Syria’s *The Terror of Judgment and Antichrist* their suspicions grew into powerful conviction.

Ephraim of Syria wrote:

The one gifted with divine wisdom and understanding will easily notice when the Antichrist comes. But the one immersed in the things of this world, the one who loves what is worldly, shall not be able to do so. Those who are married to the affairs of this life will hear the Word but not know the truth. If anyone preaches it, in fact, they will hate him.

Believers in Russia also read John’s Revelation where he described the “beast” and difficult times at the end of the world. About the beast, John wrote:

He forced everyone small and great, rich and poor, free and slave to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.

With the year 1666 coming up, most believers did not wonder what awaited them. Besides that, numerous signs of the times confirmed their suspicions.

## **Changes For The Worse**

No sooner did Nikon become Patriarch in Moscow, than he brought about reforms quite different from what the “Guardians of Piety” had expected. He took Greek texts, recently printed in Italy (in Roman Catholic publishing houses) as the <sup>11</sup> pattern for his reforms. Then, with the long arm of Russian law he tried to force everyone to accept them.

Some of Nikon’s reforms no longer seem important to us—singing three hallelujahs instead of two or spelling Jesus’ name with an extra vowel—but the reason many Russians opposed them was real and resistance to them quickly grew as large as Russia itself.

Those who defied Nikon and kept to the old way believed his reforms were an accommodation to Roman Catholicism (that is, to the “world”). They saw his enforcement of them as just another example of the state church corrupting itself through political affairs. Across Russia, millions of impoverished and poorly educated farm workers, celibates in remote communities, and local church leaders with little responsibility, dared to rise up and declare that *what* they believed and *how* they believed was no one’s matter but their own—that belief was a matter of conviction, not legislation. They dared, at the price of their lives, to challenge Moscow, Constantinople, and whatever civil authorities or means of repression would fall upon them.

## **The Price of Conviction**

At the very meeting where Nikon announced his plans for reform, Pavel the presbyter of Kolomna calmly said he could not comply. Nikon removed him from office and had him beaten before the council. He sent Pavel into the far north, where he died after repeated tortures. Then Nikon pronounced the *anathema* on all others who refused to obey his orders to change, and by 1666, the year of the beast, several hundred thousand “Old Believers” found themselves outside the Orthodox church. In great suffering and weakness they learned that one can walk with Christ and survive persecution, only in . . .

<sup>1</sup> Tatar chiefs

<sup>2</sup> “Underground,” did not mean invisible, however, nor silent. Sources prove that members of the Strigolnik movement were exceptionally bold when explaining their beliefs before courts and prosecutors. When the Strigolnik Zakhar was brought before

Gennady, archbishop of Novgorod, and asked why he had not received the Holy Communion for three years, he replied: “Whom shall I come to for that? Priests are being ordained for money just as Metropolitans and bishops are!” Gennady did not know at first what to say. Then he mumbled, “The Metropolitan is clear of this sin.” Zakhar objected, “He had to pay the Patriarch of Constantinople to be ordained. So who is worthy to give the Holy Communion?”

3 Russian for *Caesar*

4 Curtiss *Church and State in Russia*

5 “If any one takes himself for wise in the world, let him become a fool,” they read in 1 Corinthians 3:18.

6 Ivan the Terrible loved the sound of bells, and by the time he died he had around five thousand ringing intermittently throughout Moscow.

7 a man from Great Britain

8 On weekly fast days the Orthodox church forbade the consumption of meat, eggs, and dairy products.

9 *Book of Spirit and Life*, 9:7

10 When this name came into general use, the Molokans reconciled themselves to it, on the basis of 1 Peter 2:2: “As newborn babies, desire the sincere milk of the word.” They believed their teachings to be this spiritual “milk.”

11 The Greek Orthodox Church, by now under Muslim rule and deprived of its privileges and power, had begun to seek union with the Pope at Rome--the very symbol of heresy for Eastern Christians during previous centuries.

## Nonconformity

Almost hidden under great roofs of straw, mud plastered houses of Russian muzhiks huddled like chicks with their mother hen around rickety wooden churches topped by onion domes. Far from Moscow and Kiev, but within easy reach of heaven, those who lived under bunches of dried pears hanging in semi-darkness from their beams, called on the name of Christ. And as they did so, what Christ wanted became more and more important to them--while the demands of Russia's church and state took second place.

As far back as they could remember, the muzhiks had lived in distrust of what happened at Moscow. "Live, live, until Moscow gets a hold of you!" their parents and grandparents had said. So now, when many of them got separated from Moscow's state church, they felt no remorse. Called *Raskolniki* (separatists) or "nonconformists" by other Russians, they began at once to live like they thought Christians should. That, in every place, was not the same. But in every place it drew the wrath of Moscow's authorities upon them and by the mid-1660s, the "year of the beast," the tsar's men were torturing and publicly flogging Old Believers from Kiev and Smolensk to Ryazan, Kazan, Yaroslavl, Saratov, Novgorod, Pskov and Tver. Everywhere they tore up homes and villages and drove families to Siberia. But such persecution only confirmed what many believed: The state church had become an institution of the Antichrist.

### Avvakum

Many, but not all, Old Believers were uneducated country people. An outstanding exception was Avvakum Petrovich, an ordained leader in the Orthodox church, who had been Nikon's companion and fellow-worker. Avakkum grew up in the village of Grigorovo, near Nizhny Novgorod (Nikon's home area), and with Nikon he became a member of the "Guardians of Piety." But where Nikon sought earthly power and prestige, Avvakum sought to please Christ no matter what it cost.

Before his first ordination (as a dyachok when he was twenty-one years old) Avvakum chose Nastasya Markovna, a poor orphan, to be his wife. She became his faithful and patient companion, supporting him no matter how badly his non-conformity to the world brought him into conflict with it.

An early occasion for conflict arose when Vasily Sheremetev, a high-ranking boyar, came down the Volga. The people of Grigorovo, including Avvakum, went on board his ship to greet him. When he saw that he was a religious man, Vasily ordered Avvakum to bless his son Matvey. But Avvakum could not obey. "How can I pronounce a blessing on a man who has shaved off his beard, deliberately changing the way God made him?" he asked.

Vasily Sheremetov was stunned. "You take it upon yourself to disobey me?" he thundered. "For this you shall be thrown into the river!"

Fortunately, no one carried out the boyar's orders. But within a few years Avvakum found himself imprisoned then exiled with his family to Tobolsk in Siberia (for withstanding Nikon's reforms). When they detected his influence even from there, Russian authorities sent him as far away as they could--to Dauria, on the border with Mongolia. There the district governor, Afanasy Pashkov, did what he could to make Avvakum and his family's lives miserable. He tortured Avvakum, often keeping him in chains in the prison, and severely beat him. Two of Avvakum's children died from hunger, but he did not give up in his struggle to walk the narrow way. Everywhere he warned the faithful not to have anything to do with Nikon's fallen church. "When the priest comes to sprinkle your house with holy water," he told them, just follow him around and sweep it out with a broom. And if they drag you into church keep right on whispering your prayer to Jesus!"

### **"I Kept On Preaching"**

In an attempt to reconcile Avvakum with the Orthodox Church (and rid himself in this way of a formidable adversary) Nikon recalled him to Moscow in 1663. While travelling through the country toward the capital Avvakum could not help but notice the state church's reforms being carried out with great vigour. He wrote in his diary:

In sadness I wondered if I should keep on preaching or if I should escape somewhere for the sake of my wife and children to whom I was intimately bound. Then my wife came up to me and gently asked, "Why are you so sad?" I explained what I had been thinking and asked her in turn, "What shall I do? Shall I speak or keep silence?" She replied, "How strange you talk! Do not the children and I bless and support you? Preach the Word of God and stop feeling sorry for us. We will stay together until God wishes. If we get separated, only remember us



in your prayers. Christ is strong enough to take care of us!" I thanked her and, as having my eyes opened from blindness, I kept on preaching in towns along the way, denouncing Nikon's heresy.

About his arrival in Moscow Avvakum wrote:

The tsar and the boyars accepted me as an angel of God . . . They offered me any position I might like... providing I would unite with them in faith. I regarded all this as refuse, however, to remain with Christ, remembering death and that all worldly things pass away.

When his attempt to win Avvakum to his side failed, Nikon exiled him and his family to the far north, to the Mezen region, where they remained until 1666. In that year (the "Year of the Beast"), Avvakum appeared for the last time in Central Russia. Nikon called him before a council that condemned him and all Old Believers with him as the worst heretics. Then he sent Avvakum and three other nonconformed believers, Lazar, Yepifany, and Fedor (who already had their rights hand cut off and their tongues cut out) to the dreaded underground prison at Pustozersk. Avvakum wrote:

It is strange how little they (of the state church) think of discussing things. No, all they think of is using fire, the whip and the gallows to bring us to their faith. Who of the apostles ever taught such a thing? I would not know. The Christ I know never taught that fire, whips and bonds are educators in faith... It was the Tatar prophet Mohammed who wrote: "Our duty is to strike off with the sword the heads of those who will not submit to our tradition and rules."

During the fourteen years Avvakum and his friends languished in the Pustozersk prison, Old Believers from all over Russia travelled the long road to see him. Then, in 1682, after admonishing a great crowd that had gathered to weep and pray, Avvakum allowed his guards to chain him to a stake. Lazar, Yepifany, and Fedor suffered the same treatment and they died together, shouting encouragements one to another in the flames.

## **The Antichrist in Person**

Eight years after Avvakum's death, Tsar Aleksey's son Pe-ter took charge in

Moscow. Only eighteen, he had grown into a six-foot-seven-inch giant. Fascinated with ships and exploration, he fidgeted when he talked. His eyes darted about and his big hands appeared always itching to land on something.

Newly married and with his servants in tight control, Peter enjoyed being tsar. But he saw his position as far more than an opportunity to lead a comfortable life. He aspired to personal greatness and wanted to make Russia great too. In 1697 he travelled with two hundred and fifty “Grand Ambassadors” to western Europe to see how modern people lived. In disguise, he worked in the shipyard of the Dutch East India Company at Saardam. He visited doctors and lawyers, looked through telescopes, listened to musicians, attended lavish receptions (shocking a German girl in one when he lifted her up by the ears to see her better) and a session of Parliament in London. Then during his visit to Vienna he learned of a revolt in Russia and hurried home.

Peter did not come to Moscow like travellers usually did. He visited no churches and said no prayers of thanksgiving for his safe return. The people were shocked. They were even more shocked to hear him curse and swear, laugh at holy traditions, and seize respectable men to cut off their beards (on his trip west, Peter concluded it was necessary and important for men to shave).

It did not take the Old Believers and the “underground” Christians of northern forests long to reach a firm conclusion. The Antichrist had come *in person!*

## **Success for the Antichrist**

Nothing worried the Old Believers more than Peter’s rapid take-over of Russia and seemingly unlimited success. With a mug of beer in his hand, wearing shoes with holes and a sloppy hat, Peter appeared everywhere. Sometimes he marched with his soldiers. Sometimes he worked with his shipwrights swinging a hammer or wielding an axe.

Peter always carried a club and no one dared get in his way. (He used it freely, even on his best friends.) But he knew a clever person when he saw one and promoted only those who de-served it. “Necessity drove away sloth and forced me to work night and day,” he wrote. Peter was Russia’s best carpenter, a black-smith, a printer, a horse breaker, soldier, and tsar at the same time.

In 1703, after winning a twenty-one year war with Sweden, Peter began the biggest project of his life: building a city. On the marshy banks of the Neva, a

desolate northern river flowing into the Gulf of Finland, he built Saint Petersburg on innumerable wooden piles pounded into the bog. Perhaps as many as one hundred thousand workmen died from the cold, disease, overwork and accidents at the job site.

Peter's family, however, had little praise for his success. His timid and refined wife, Yevdokiya, never got used to the way he acted after his return from the west. He resented her criticism and shut her up in a convent. Their only son grew up in the care of others and when he ran off to western Europe Peter had him brought back and executed in jail.

The poor people of Russia, the muzhiks, did not think much of Peter's success either. For the first time they became "individual serfs." That meant the boyars could take anyone out of any family and buy or sell his labour at will. This brought division to old village communities and sorrow to families that got scattered.

Even the Orthodox church had second thoughts. Peter got rid of the Patriarch at Moscow and put a "Holy Synod," monitored by an *Oberprokurator* (an official who served as the tsar's "eye on the church"), in his place.

### **The Agent of All Wickedness**

Of all Russians, however, no one suffered more under Peter's successful rule than the "underground" believers. Peter could not tolerate dissent. The very idea that anyone would dare oppose him made him furious. The worst floggings and the slowest or most painful tortures could not do justice to his revenge.

At the same time, under Peter's rule it became much harder for the Old Believers and their sympathisers to hide. He tried to take a census and register all Russians. He made a law that births, marriages, and deaths had to be legally reported. But many refused to comply.

Thinking of King David's census and the fact that Peter quite likely was the Antichrist, Old Believers feared eternal damnation should they become registered. "The Tsar," one of them wrote, "has become an agent of all wickedness and of Satan's will. He has raised himself on high above all false gods."

The situation, particularly after Peter ordered everyone to pay a poll tax and carry a passport, became one where compromise was unthinkable. An Old Believer

tract written in the early 1700s stated:

Christ has instructed us and given us his law. We keep his commandments and our faith in him. For that reason we will not submit to the false Christ (Tsar Peter Alekseyevich) and obey him. We will not let ourselves be inscribed in his books, taking part like that in the sins of the godless. Instead, we will tell everyone who wants to be saved not to do so by any means. . . . We are seeing the mystery of the Apocalypse revealed in our time. The reign of the first and greatest beast is established among us. He is making the earth and all that live in it to bow the knee to Satan and say, "Settle our account, we humbly beg you to grant us passports." Then Satan answers, "Out with your poll tax for the new year! Are you sure there is nothing else to pay? Remember you live on my earth!" Here you see the great pit that stands open to swallow the human race.<sup>2</sup>

## **Wickedness and Steadfast Faith**

Among the first to fall into the tsar's "pit" were the celibates of Solovets on the White Sea. Five times they had asked for permission to conduct services like the Old Believers. Their answer came in a contingent of troops sent north to "convert" them. The celibates, living in their stone community buildings, locked their doors. But the soldiers would not go away. They stood guard for several years until someone betrayed the brothers' way of entry and the soldiers rushed in to hang, stab, and drown around four hundred believers. Only fourteen escaped.

Even after the tsar removed Nikon from the patriarch's office, the Old Believers' situation did not improve. Nikon's successor, the Patriarch Ioakim, issued twelve articles against them. Under his severe laws, those who as much as gave food or drink to Old Believers had to be publicly flogged. Those who went so far as to join them, make converts or baptise others, subjected themselves to an unconditional death penalty--even those who recanted.

Only in the first decades of persecution under the state church, it is estimated that more than one hundred thousand Old Believers died martyrs' deaths. But the greater their trials, the more Russians took note. Even families of the wealthy and those in government positions did not remain untouched--as in the case of Feodosiya Morozova and Yevdokiya Urusova.

From their childhood Feodosiya and Urusova enjoyed the luxuries of a noble upbringing. Both of them spent time in the tsar's court. But when faced with the issue of supporting the state church or the cause of the Old Believers they let go of

their wealth, respect, and honour to suffer affliction with the people of God. After their arrest the sisters survived incredible torture before landing in the dungeon of the Borovsk prison near Kaluga. There they lay without food (the authorities expected to force them through starvation to recant) until Yevdokiya died. After fifty-one days Feodosiya died, triumphant in the faith she had chosen, as well.

## **Baffling the Antichrist**

As the arrests and executions of Old Believers increased, around three thousand of them took refuge on the island of Pal in Lake Onega. In this remote place, far from Russia's cities, they hoped to avoid attention by hiding in the buildings of an ancient monastery. But they hoped in vain. Tsarist troops surrounded them, set fire to the buildings, and all of them perished in the flames.

Was it this incident, or simply mass terror when the soldiers came that convinced many Old Believers the only way to escape the Antichrist was through death? After what happened at Lake Onega more and more fires blazed throughout Russia. Hundreds of Old Believers, men and women with their children and aged parents, would crowd into a large straw-roofed house or shed when they saw the soldiers coming. Then, before the "powers of Antichrist" could do anything to them, they would light the straw. Amid roaring flames and fiery beams crashing around them they sang their last songs and prayed to Christ as soldiers looked help-lessly on.

"Baffling the Antichrist," they called it, and by the end of Tsar Peter's reign thousands of Old Believers had died in these dreadful fires. But throughout his rule others were already choosing a better way of escape.

They escaped, as always, to the wilderness.

## **The Dispersion of the Old Believers**

East and southward from Moscow Old Believers fled through Voronezh, Saratov, and Tambov, down the Don River and into the Kuban and Terek areas on the border with Persia. They fled into the deserts of Kazakhstan and the Crimean peninsula held by the Turks. But nowhere did they find a better refuge than north of Novgorod and east beyond the Ural mountains in seemingly endless birch and pine forests, brambles and mosquitoes under a pale grey sky--in Siberia.

Fleeing into the north and east meant fleeing from all earthly comfort--something

that did not matter much to Russia's believers. Sleeping on moss, eating wild roots and berries, even the sorrow they felt when they buried their little ones along the way, drove them further from a wicked world and into the arms of Christ.

Many of the Old Believers were simple people. "No learn-ing, no heresy," they said. No doubt for this reason they misunder-stood some Scriptures and made mistakes in their prophecy. Along with them, into the wilderness, they also took what may seem like useless traditions (if not traces of fanaticism) today. But even their opponents had to admit, they gave everything up for Christ. They called on Christ's name to be saved and he blessed them.

He even blessed them with fellowship.

## **Teachers in the Wilderness**

Old Believers in Arctic forests soon found what remained of Nil Sorsky's nonchurch disciples and the Strigolniki who had survived there for centuries "underground." Rapport was immedi-ate. There can be no doubt that the nonchurch disciples helped an ever growing number of Old Believers to feel comfortable with-out "apostolic succession" and the rites of the Orthodox Church. Like them, the majority of Old Believers, the *Bespopovtsy* (priestless ones) took to confessing their sins one to another instead of to a priest. Family heads began to perform simple communion services and baptisms, and in some areas it became common for converts to baptise themselves by trine immersion.

## **The Church of the Old Believers**

Far removed from religious institutions the Old Believers became what they had always envisioned as the real church. A 1723 statement from close to the Arctic Ocean (the Vygovsky Raskol community) describes it:

All (Old Testament) assemblies and rituals, feasts, celebra-tions and sacrifices were established to purify men from their sins so God could come in. But now the one who car-ries God (the Christian) does not depend on visible buildings and sacrifices, on assemblies and human feasts. He does not worship God on this mountain or in Jerusalem. He has God within himself. He worships in the true spirit at his pure altar within: his conscience. He weeps, not naturally with the eyes, but inwardly to the purifying of his soul. Going up to his inner Jerusalem his spirit rejoices. His soul, being spiritual, offers up the sacrifice of spiritual  
<sup>3</sup>  
praise.

When asked where they went to church Old Believers typically answered: “I am the church.” Pointing with their fingers to their chests, some would add: “Here in my heart is the true church. The true church is not found within timbers and wooden walls. It is found within ribs and human flesh.”

New Testament references to Christians being the temple of the Living God, to Christ dwelling in us, and to all believers being kings and priests became particularly meaningful to the Old Believers. Their slogan, one scholar wrote, could well have been Revelation 5:10: “You have made us kings and priests unto God, and we shall reign on the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

An Old Believer from Pskov wrote: “Melchizedek’s priest-hood exists among us today. Every believer is a priest.” In a tract *Against the Ritualists of The Church Hierarchy* another one wrote: “The spiritual sacramental priesthood of Christ belongs to every Christian—that is, to everyone who has become holy through the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

With every man a priest, the Old Believers (the Bespopovtsy) took a dim view of authoritarian church government. In a book they published in secret, *The Christian Teaching About The Keys* they explained how the keys Christ gave to Peter belong to the whole church, not just to its leaders. Nikifor Petrovich, an Old Believer, wrote in the early 1800’s:

We are all on the same level. We need no clergy. We have all received the same *cheirotinin* (laying on of hands). We make our confession to Christ in our hearts and receive our ablution directly from him.

In another writing from the Novgorod wilderness, the Old Believers gave their reasons for having nothing to do with the Russian state church:

The tsar has enslaved the church and when people speak of the church they mean the clergy, rather than the community of believers.

Communion, the Old Believers taught, is a daily constant experience, not just a service with bread and wine. “A man who lives by the sweat of his brow has

communion every day of his life,” they said. “And if a man loves Christ and his words, Christ will love him and come to live with him.”

Communion took place in any common activity, eating, drinking, or working, done in full awareness of Christ. A Russian official reported a conversation between an Orthodox priest and an Old Believer in the nineteenth century:

Old Believer (leading the way to his cabin): “Here you see my church.”

Priest: “And how to you take communion in this supposed church of yours?”

Old Believer (pointing at his rough table): “There we have our altar at which we take communion every day.”

Priest: “But how can you communicate at this table?”

Old Believer: “How? In what? Surely in the bread of Christ. Look at the bread Christ gave us today!”

## **The Saviour’s People**

Among the Bespopovtsy one group living deep in the Siberian taiga stood out for its radical Christocentrism. They spoke of themselves only as *Spasovtsy* (from *Spas* Saviour). They neither had nor desired duly ordained leaders, church buildings, written liturgies, or lists of saints. <sup>5</sup> They said, “Our hope is in the Saviour alone, and in these difficult and confusing times we cannot rely upon human opinion. We cannot argue about details nor involve ourselves in theological discussion. Christ alone is able to save us!” The Spasovtsy even accepted converts from other Christian groups without re-baptising them (a practice unique among Old Believers), because they believed that Christ Himself, not rituals, will save his own.

## **Old Believer Families**

Old Believer parents married their young people one to another, often in their early teens, in utmost simplicity. They asked the boy and the girl a few questions in the home and gave them their blessing. In some cases there was even less formality. This horrified the Orthodox. “You are living in sin,” they insisted. “How can you call yourselves married without having received the sacrament or



even having seen a priest?”

“How did Abraham and Sarah get married? Or the rest of the patriarchs?” the Old Believers asked in return. “Were their children illegitimate?”

Noting their lack of legal contract (and the fact that their wives easily could have deserted them) Russian scholars observed that Old Believer men treated their wives with special care. Their marriages seemed happier than ordinary. The Old Believers saw other reasons for that. A writing from the 1700s states:

The infidels (rich, high class, people) look on a woman as just another luxury to enjoy. They see only her beauty and lust after her. The religious people (poor Orthodox Russians) look at a woman as a beast of burden. They only put her to work and keep her to raise children. But for true believers the woman is the other half of the race. We must treat her with respect and reverence. We look at her inner beauty.

Even though many of them were happily married, Old Believers considered celibacy a higher calling, and recommended it if at all possible.<sup>6</sup>

## **Old Believer Communities**

Tsar Peter’s reforms included much more than the registration of individuals with their births and marriages. They included the partitioning of land into private property, the accurate surveying of claims, and the registration of deeds. All this, the Old Believers also took as the “work of Antichrist.”

Ever since early Slavic times Russian communities had held their land in common. All the boyars could claim was the right to production and labour. Land itself was seen as belonging to everyone, like air and water, and ultimately to God. The Old Believers, settling in Arctic regions and Siberia kept on thinking this way.

On virgin land, particularly along the Vyg river flowing north through the taiga between Arkhangelsk and Finland, they built rough log homes. In ever widening clearings they planted wheat and vegetables. Under the direction of Danilo Vikulin, Andrey Denisov and others, Old Believer communities on the Vyg River grew to include thousands of souls. They fished in Lake Onega. In the winter, when the Arctic Ocean froze, their hunters reached the islands of Spitzbergen and

Novaya Zemlya. For more than a hundred years they prospered like no one else in Arctic Russia before or since, until Tsar Nikolai I scattered them in 1855. Other Old Believer communities flourished in Siberia and among the Altai Mountains along the border of China.

In most of their communities the Old Believers held what was indispensable to all, in common. That included the land, the fisheries, pastures and salt deposits. Things for personal use (houses, furniture, tools, or animals) they bought or sold. Because the Antichrist's number, 666, is contained in the Russian word *employer*, they shrank back from hiring or working for wages. In one community, dependent on making leather boots, they arranged to have all who helped make them share the profit. In other communities they lived from a common purse.<sup>7</sup>

## The Stranniki

A hundred years after the founding of the Vygovsky communities, Yefim Pereyaslavsky, a convert from Poltava decided the Old Believers there had grown too comfortable. Taking on the rule of the Rechabites and John the Baptist, he called for a total forsaking of houses and lands. This began an exciting movement. All over Russia *Stranniki* (wanderers) began to appear, carrying nothing but bread, salt, and water.<sup>8</sup>

When they entered the *Strannitchestvo* (the wandering life) men and women gave up everything, including their family names. Even selling one's Bible to give the money to the poor was not considered extreme.

For practical reasons the Stranniki divided themselves between "house Christians," those who took care of houses and crops, and "road Christians," those who went about warning the unbelievers. The house Christians did not own their houses. At any point they would get up and leave them behind. Even while they lived in them, they lived without locks and anyone "from the road" was free to enter and go as they pleased. In some places, hidden in the forest, the Stranniki kept communities for the road Christians' children.

In many ways the Stranniki kept themselves even further from the world than the rest of the Old Believers. Because of the Antichrist's image (the tsar's likeness) on money, most of them refused to touch or carry it. They believed that praying for the Tsar, as required by Russian law, was the worst form of blasphemy (asking

God to save the Antichrist) and worthy of excommunication. Before they read from a Bible or sang from a hymnal they tore out the title page with the imprimatur carrying the tsar's name.

Thanks to their constant missionary activity the Stranniki gained followers all over Russia. Entire villages got converted and became communal hiding places. Secret entrances led to cellars, attics, closets, and compartments under staircases, in cupboards, behind the walls, among the eaves, or under the stove. In some "house Christian" villages, all buildings were connected by tunnels with hidden escape routes.

No less amazing than their hiding places was the communication system invented by the persecuted Stranniki. Moscow authorities knew that no matter what law they passed or pronouncement they made in the capital, news of it spread through all Russia by the "Stranniki grapevine" long before it arrived through official sources.

One of the Stranniki's most carefully guarded rules was not to die under a roof. All "home Christians" promised to take up the Strannitchestvo at some point and to die on the road was an honour.

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## **The Testimony of the Old Believers**

The Old Believers studied the Bible and taught their children from it. Some of them also wrote tracts and books. Timofey Bondarev wrote *A True and Faithful Way to Salvation* in the eighteenth century. Pavel, a monk who became an Old Believer wrote *The Royal Road*. In a book from the late 1700s *A Testimony From The Holy Writings* an anonymous Old Believer explained how the Anti-christ was a system, not just an individual. Men and women may indeed become "Antichrists" in their own way, but the real Anti-christ is the world--everything that opposes Christ.

The Old Believers published and distributed their books with great success. But even much more widely known than their writings was the testimony of their lives.

The Old Believers, even though many saw them as die-hard traditionalists, did not fear to make changes if necessary. In fact, they made such drastic changes in their way of worship and church structure that the Orthodox were horrified (it soon became apparent who had been "stuck on insignificant details"). Traditions that

reminded the Old Believers who they were and who they served (Christ) became yet more precious in the wilderness. At the same time they developed new traditions and adjusted others to fit their circumstances. This selective and highly creative—if unplanned—process did much to keep them civilised and together as a people.

The Old Believers wore colourful but very modest and old-fashioned clothes. The men wore loose shirts that fell over their pants. They never shaved nor trimmed their beards (not even when they had to pay the heavy “beard tax” introduced by Peter the Great.) From the least to the greatest, all women and girls wore large headscarves all the time. They sewed ample skirts and blouses for themselves, and in the winter bundled up in furs. During the day the Old Believers prayed many times, falling on their faces before Christ. If their contacts led them without their communities they avoided social intercourse (including eating) with others, but spoke freely of what they believed.

New things, particularly tobacco, but even potatoes and tomatoes (Eve’s apples), they looked at with distrust. <sup>10</sup> Because they refused to register deaths as well as births, many of them got buried at night in ploughed fields or in lonely forests with nothing to mark where they lay. But peculiarities notwithstanding, even their enemies knew they could trust them. Drunkenness, laziness, and begging among them was virtually unknown. Toward the middle of the nineteenth century a government inspector reported:

When I entered a peasant’s house and asked them what they believed they would often tell me quickly, “We are not Christians.”

“What are you then?” I would ask. “Infidels?”

“No,” they would tell me. “We believe in Christ but we belong to the church because we are worldly, frivolous people.”

“Why do you say you are not Christians if you believe in Christ?”

“Christians,” they would tell me, “Are those who stick to the old beliefs. They pray differently than we do, but we have no time to imitate them.”

## **What Became of The Old Believers**

Even though the Old Believers would not have a thing to do with it, tsarist officials taking a census calculated their number at over eight and one half million by 1859. Then, after the freeing of the serfs three years later (when muzhiks could move freely from place to place for the first time), thousands more united with the “nonconformity.”

Statistics show that during the 1860s twenty-five thousand people joined the Old Believers only in the Simbirsk (now Ulyanovsk) area. In 1867 half the population (five thousand people) of Petrovsk near Saratov joined them. In 1879 a reported eight thousand converts--from Orthodox, Muslim and indigenous pagan tribes--united themselves to Old Believer congregations in Orenburg and Perm. By 1880, they numbered around thirteen million altogether, and by the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 there may have been as many as twenty five million. Without a doubt, the attraction of Christian “nonconformity” pulled on the inner feelings of many seeking Russians.

Harassed—and fiercely persecuted at intervals—the Old Believers eventually gained a measure of freedom simply by their numbers. The tsars wearied of trying to subdue them, and to get rid of them all (a significant percentage of the population) looked impossible.

At the same time, what persecution could not do, inner de-cay and apostasy did to some degree. Two hundred and fifty years after the “year of the beast,” observers reported as many as one hundred and thirty different movements or groups among Old Believers. In a sense this was a strength as much as a weakness. Most of them did not think of themselves as a denomination. The Bespopovtsy and the Stranniki in particular had little use for officially ordained men, central authority, and organisational ties linking communities one with another. While communities in one place apostatized or got strange ideas, others improved and drew closer to Christ.

In 1905 a new constitution drawn up under Tsar Nikolai II finally stopped the Orthodox church from persecuting Old Believers. But with the communist dictator Yosef Stalin’s new registration laws in the 1930s, their troubles returned. This time even the north offered them no refuge and only a few escaped through China into Hong Kong where they startled British officials. Tall bearded men, their wives wrapped in colourful home-made skirts and scarves, with blond-haired children mini-replicas of themselves, they seemed to come walking straight out of the Middle Ages. From Hong Kong they found their way to Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Oregon and some to Alaska.

Wherever they settled, core groups and continual renewal movements among them have kept the Old Believers from losing themselves in the world. In free countries they have identified the Antichrist not so much with rulers and political systems as with televi-sion, movies, drugs, tobacco, shameless immodesty, and birth control.

Old Believers still refuse to shave or drink coffee. They do not use musical instruments and stand segregated to worship. They still resist legal involvement as much as they can. Most people see them as impossibly “legalistic” and opinionated Russians, some of the unhandiest people governments have to deal with. But their clear testimony *for Christ* and against the Antichrist, even in great weakness and sometimes error, inspired untold numbers in Russia. Without them, the story of all Russians who followed them on the narrow way (Spirit Christians, Stundists, and Evangelicals) would be unthinkable and things would have turned out differently even for the people Russians called . . .

1 One of the first books he had Russians print was a translation of Johann Arndt’s *Wahres Christenthum*.

2 Coneybeare, *Russian Dissenters* (remaining citations in this chapter from this work unless identified otherwise)

3 *Answers from the Shore Dwellers*

4 Frederick C. Coneybeare

5 For this reason people ordinarily called them *Nyetovtsy* (from *nyet no*).

6 Several Old Believer groups did not want their young people to marry because they had no ordained men to perform the ceremony. But the rest insisted that marriage was God’s first commandment to men and women, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). Therefore it is not subject to the rites of the church, but to the common desire of the couple involved and the consent of their parents.

7 Some Old Believer leaders, including Antip Yakovlev of Plyosovsk, Vasily and Ivan Petrov taught that all possessions should be held in common. They said: “The words *mine* and *yours* are curse words. They are the source of all evil in the world.” Considerable numbers joined them.

8 Usually known as “shore dwellers” because they lived along the Arctic Ocean.

9 If disaster or sickness struck a home Christian, he would still ask to be carried out, at least into the garden to die.

10 Catherine the Great introduced these vegetables to Russia.

## Nemtsy

Old Believers, meeting in secret during Tsar Peter's reign, could not have foreseen through whom their first respite from persecution would come. It came through connections made by the "Antichrist," Peter the Great, himself.

As a boy in Moscow, Peter had made friends with the *Nemtsy* (Germans) who lived outside the city. Years later, after he put away his first wife, he met an orphaned girl who had grown up in a German home. Her name was Marta.

A Lutheran pastor had found Marta when she was three years old. He and his wife had taken her into their home. They prayed much and read the Bible to her. Marta learned to talk German. But when she grew up, Peter saw her one evening and said: "I want that girl."

At first Marta was terrified. She knew that Peter's legitimate wife languished in the convent to which he had banished her. But Peter treated her well and the two became inseparable companions.

In 1703 Marta gave birth to her first child. Peter had her and the baby baptised <sup>1</sup> into the Orthodox church and the priest renamed her "Catherine." Nine years later Peter and Marta/Catherine got married, after which the Russians crowned her tsarina, Catherine I.

### True Christianity

In spite of her position the new tsarina never forgot what her kind Protestant stepfather had taught her. When she traveled with Peter to Germany she slipped, disguised as a common woman, into the school of one of his friends, August

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Francke, at Halle. She told August Hermann about Russia, her secret longing to serve God, and he met Peter.

A most unlikely match, Peter the Great, the dreaded "Antichrist" of Russia, and August Hermann Francke, the pietist teacher, liked one another immediately. They



respected one another and exchanged letters for as long as they lived.

August Hermann helped set up Russia's first high school in St. Petersburg. On the tsar's request he sent a director and teachers from Halle who translated for him Johann Arndt's *Wahres Christenthum* (True Christianity). The Lord used its message to transform innumerable lives.<sup>3</sup>

## **Another Catherine**

While Catherine I ruled Russia (following her husband, Peter the Great), more and more *nemets* moved into St. Petersburg and Moscow. Then, thirty five years after she died, a young woman from Stettin<sup>4</sup> in West Prussia—Catherine II—took her place on the throne.

Catherine II came to Russia a cheerful, round-faced, girl with blond hair. Only fourteen, the Russians brought her to marry their crown prince, also a *Nemets* (a German boy) named Peter. But the two decided at once they did not like each other.

Catherine made friends easily and liked Russia. She promptly learned the language. Peter hated everything about it. The match was impossible and they avoided one another's company whenever they could.

Bored and embarrassed Catherine sat in the palace with nothing to do but read. There she got into trouble. She had a baby and named him Paul. Two more babies followed but none of them had Peter for their father. After he became tsar, Catherine plotted against him. With the help of another man whom she liked, she had him captured and shot. Then she took charge of Russia.

## **Catherine the Great**

All Russia, all Europe—perhaps even Catherine herself—stepped back in surprise at what happened after her coronation festival in Moscow. With one of her lovers taking control of Poland she fought the Turks with another one, Grigory Potemkin, and won. Then she drove the Turks out of all of southern Russia.

In a few years, Catherine's empire, from Kamchatka to the Polish border, from the Arctic Ocean to Turkey, Persia, and China, had grown yet much larger than that of Tsar Peter the Great. People, in fact, began calling her "Catherine the Great."

Most Russians liked Catherine. Here and there she had to put down minor rebellions, but she made fair laws. She disapproved of serfdom (even though she could not stop it), torture, and persecution. “Everyone may do what the law does not forbid,” she said. “Officials must stop harassing the people. Only those laws made directly by the tsar (or tsarina) may be enforced, and the tsar cannot be under any law but God.”

Having grown up Lutheran, Catherine had nothing against the Old Believers and gave them freedom. Under her rule their communities along the Vyg river and throughout northern forests prospered undisturbed. The Spirit Christians prospered likewise, and within a year of coming to power, Catherine had made new laws permitting foreigners to settle in Russia with religious freedom.

### **More Nemtsy**

Desperate to find people who would settle on the great open plains she won back from the Turks, Catherine and her supporters did what they could. In Estonia the wife of a Russian official began buying illegitimate babies and hiring wet nurses to raise them for colonists. In Italy a Russian ambassador tried to get the Mafia to come. In England law enforcers got a letter from Grigory Potemkin asking them to send criminals to Russia instead of to Australia. But in the end, nothing worked better than Catherine’s plan to attract more nemtsy. Among the first to come were five surveyors, twenty-five single brothers, seventeen single sisters, a widower and four married couples from the Moravian Brothers’ community at Herrnhut in <sup>5</sup>upper Saxony.

The Moravians settled just south of Tsaritsyn on the Volga, near the site of the old Tatar camp at Saray Berke. On river flats unsuitable for grain but excellent for raising vegetables they built a new community and named it Sarepta. From there they hoped to reach the wandering Kalmyk people—Buddhists—who roamed the plains.

In Sarepta the Moravians held their things in common and worked hard, raising mustard seed and cotton. They made candles, and ran a sawmill. Gaily coloured cotton cloth, woven and sold at low prices, became popular among peasant women and girls all over Russia.

The Moravian settlers prospered, and large numbers of immigrants (mostly Lutherans and Roman Catholics) from southern Germany, Switzerland, and

Prussia followed them. These newer settlers built colonies along the lower Volga with names like Schaffhausen, Glarus, and Zürich. Then, from where no one expected, came another Christian community.

## **A Palace, a Count, and Three Plain Men**

Catherine the Great cut no corners, decorating her winter palace in St. Petersburg. She called artists from Italy and France. From all over Europe she called architects, sculptors, designers and painters to build a yet more elaborate palace complex, Tsarskoye Selo (Tsar's village) outside the city. "I have numberless rooms," she wrote to a friend, "and all of them are full of luxuries!" But one thing Catherine could not change: St. Petersburg's weather.

All winter terrible storms blew St. Petersburg full of snow. The Neva froze and its residents could do nothing but huddle around their fireplaces wishing to be warm. Then, all summer long great clouds of mosquitoes rose from surrounding swamps. Catherine got tired of it. She began to spend part of the year with one of her noblemen, Peter Aleksandrovich Rumyantsev, governor of Little Russia (Ukraine) in what she began to call her "summer palace" far to the south on the Desna River above Chernigov.

The Rumyantsev family owned much land. They called their estate Vyshenka. But the Count could not spend as much time on it as he would have liked. Large parts of the estate lay idle for, besides being governor, he was also a general in the army.

When a new war broke out with the Turks in 1770 Catherine sent Count Rumyantsev to command Russian troops in Turkish-held Walachia. There he met three nemtsy with beards and dressed in very simple home-made clothes. Their names were Hans Kleinsasser, Josef Müller, and Jörg Waldner.

The three men and the people with them, were part of a fuse that would ignite and explode in a great new light—another resurrection of the "underground church" in Russia.

## **Long Connections**

The fuse went back to Tsar Peter the Great's friend, August Hermann Francke, and his school at Halle.

Thanks to August Hermann and his promotion of Johann Arndt's book about true Christianity, seekers for the truth throughout German and Austrian lands began to read their Bibles and pray. Everywhere men and women wept for their sins and turned to Christ. One group of seekers, Roman Catholics in the Austrian province of Kärnten, began to meet in their homes to seek the Lord together. They decided to become Protestants, since that was what August Hermann Francke and Johann Arndt had been.

This brought persecution.

Catholic Austrians, urged on by Jesuits, drove the little group (two hundred and <sup>6</sup> seventy people) from Kärnten through Hungary into Transylvania. There the government tolerated Protestants. The Austrian empress, Maria Theresa, promised to give them land in Transylvania if they would swear allegiance to her. But the Kärnten seekers had problems. First, they did not believe they should swear. Second they did not like the Protestant (Lutheran) church they now became part of.

Protestants at close range did not seem at all like the books from Halle. For all their "piety" they looked to the Kärnten seekers like so many worldly people with religion in their mouths.

Was this the best one could expect? Was this living with Christ?

The more Matthias Hofer, Hans Kleinsasser, Jörg Waldner and the other new Christians from Kärnten became aware of Christ, the more they hoped not. Conscious of Christ, they could not live like the worldly Protestants nor remain in fellowship with them. "Come out from among them!" "Follow me!" The call of Christ struck them to the heart—then they met some strange people in a village called Alwinz (now Vintu de Jos, Romania).

Their contact began with the swearing problem. Since they would not swear the oath of allegiance they got no land in Transylvania. They had to work as day labourers and Jörg Waldner found employment in Alwinz. The people he met there were the last remnant of what had been the great Anabaptist movement of Austria, Moravia, and Hungary. They had dwindled from thousands on thousands in dozens of communities to nineteen people in one village. Even those, after centuries of persecution, had nearly lost what they believed.

At first the seekers from Kärnten merely found the Anabaptists, here called *Huttrische Brüder* (Hutterian Brothers) in-teresting. But the more they talked with them, and once the Alwinz brothers began to pull old books from their hiding places, their interest knew no bounds. Night after night the Kärnten people sat with the old men from Alwinz, asking questions, study-ing the Bible, reading by candle light from hand-written manu-scripts, and learning songs they had never heard before.

It caught like fire. “This is it!” the Kärnten families agreed. “This is the way of Christ! Let us walk in it!”

Even though the people at Alwinz had lost many of their distinctive practices, the “new Anabaptists” turned at once to complete separation from warfare and materialism, the baptism of believers, life in community, and more.

This brought persecution in earnest. Now the Protestants joined the Catholics in hating them, threatening to take their chil-dren, and throwing them in jail. In 1767 all of the Kärnten believers fled across the Carpathian Mountains into Turkish-held Walachia.

At least they thought it was Turkish-held. In actual fact Walachia (a Greek Orthodox state, now southern Romania) was in a state of anarchy. The Turks still tried to keep order but uncon-trollable bands of marauders rampaged the countryside. From the east it faced a Russian invasion.

The Kärnten believers settled first at Choregirle, near Bucharest, but disease and robberies drove them to Presetchain. From there repeated plunderings drove them into the hills and surrounding woods. In this condition Russian soldiers found them and their hearts were moved. The children were starving. A Russian commander gave them a yoke of oxen and a wagon and pointed them east. There, in the main camp near the Moldavian border, they sent their elder Hans Kleinsasser, their community steward, Josef Müller, and Jörg Waldner, their schoolteacher, to speak with the field marshal, Count Peter Aleksandrovich Rummyantsev.

## **East and West Meet**

Count Rummyantsev, having spent much time with Catherine the Great and her friends, spoke German fairly well. That was good, for the three Anabaptist brothers from Kärnten had much to explain.

“Are you Catholic?”

“No.”

“Are you Lutheran or Calvinist?”

“No.”

“Well, what do you believe?”

While the three men explained their walk with Christ, Count Rumyantsev remembered his vast empty estate on the Desna and a plan took shape in his mind.

“Would you like to farm?” he asked them. The men’s eyes lit up. They talked and plans progressed speedily, until by August 1, 1770, four months and six hundred kilometres (under friendly military escort) later, a new community of believers stood at Vyshenka, near Chernigov.

The brothers and sisters at Vyshenka set to work at once. Other Anabaptists, fleeing Moravia through Herrnhut in Germany (with passports issued by a

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Moravian friend, Ludwig von Zinzendorf) joined them. They farmed and set up a mill. They began to make pottery, hats, shoes, and furniture. Some worked with metal and others tanned hides. But every evening work stopped when they met to pray, to sing, and to read from the treasure of Anabaptist writings they had smuggled out of Austria.

Not far from Vyshenka sat the Old Believer community of Slisnov, also tolerated by Count Rumyantsev. In it the Waldners, the Kleinsassers, and others from Kärnten first received the bread and salt of Russian Christian hospitality. Even though they could talk little and their cultures differed much, the Old Believers and the Kärnten Anabaptists found fellowship in their common poverty and hope in Christ. In them the “underground” church of the east met the “underground” church of the west—and this was only the beginning.

8

For both communities their time in fresh air and sunlight would be short.

**Khortitsa**

Count Rumyantsev's happiness with his Anabaptist colony had direct and far-reaching consequences. By now a member of Catherine's imperial council (her inner circle of advisors) he took her, Grigory Potemkin, and other officials to see the brothers at Vyshenka. All of them liked what they saw and began to discuss what it could mean for the vast, empty steppes south of Kiev.

"What we need is more settlers like this," Count Rumyantsev declared. "And I know where to find them. In West Prussia!"

Catherine remembered them. In marshy lowlands along the Baltic Sea, not far from where she had grown up, she remembered seeing their flat, well-drained fields of wheat and rye. "You are right," she agreed. "And I know how to make them come. Because they will not fight they are always in trouble and pay heavy taxes to the Prussian government. Let us promise them freedom from military service and free land! They are good workers. They like to farm. You watch, I'll make them an offer they can't possibly refuse!"

True to her word, Catherine sent a message to Peter Epp, a Mennonite elder in Danzig. (People called the Anabaptists in the Netherlands and Prussia *Mennonites*, for Menno Simons.) She promised to give 65 dessyatins (182 acres) of land to every family that would move to Russia. She promised the Mennonites freedom from military service and permission to run their own churches and schools "forever."

Her message had its desired effect. Within two months, Jakob Höppner and Johann Bartsch, two West Prussian brothers met Grigory Potemkin in Dubrovna on the Dnepr to see the land. The following spring they met Count Rumyantsev, Catherine the Great, and a group of tsarist dignitaries at the Kremenchug fortress near Poltava. They gave Catherine a letter signed by a long list of Mennonites ready to come. All they yet needed to know was when and where.

Catherine decided to look at "Taurida" (the territory between Kiev and the Black Sea just reconquered from the Turks) herself.

Like a queen out of the Arabian nights she set out with Grigory Potemkin in a fleet of flower-decked boats and barges. Musicians played. Everywhere she travelled down the Dnepr people celebrated with their best foods and wine. To impress her even further, Grigory (it is said) erected portable villages along the way and hired people to stand before false house and shop fronts to wave. But the flotilla of

barges that followed less than two years later was not gaily decorated and no one waved from the shore.

Even the people were plain and poor.

Because of renewed fighting with the Turks and Tatars, the Mennonites who followed Catherine down the Dnepr could proceed no further than a squalid nomad camp at a place called Kichkas. They were very unhappy.

“What do you mean, great fertile plains?” they asked Jakob Höppner and Johann Bartsch. “All we can see is bare rocky land and hills. On top of that it is not empty. Who are these people here at Kichkas?”

Jakob and Johann tried to explain that the people who had swarmed around the Mennonite camp (taking what they could when no one looked) were not farmers but herdsmen who only appeared now and then. The Mennonites were not so sure. Some refused to build, but when fall came and no other options appeared they dug sod houses up from Kichkas (renamed Einlage) and at places they called Kronsweide, Neuenburg and Khortitsa-Rosenthal. This last and largest village became the centre of their colony.

Nothing went well. The Mennonites ran out of food and their clothes wore out. Their few animals began to die and to plough the unbroken grasslands was almost impossible. Grigory Potemkin's men brought them old rye flour to bake and make soup with. But it tasted horrible.

Worst of all, many of the settlers had fallen a long way from the spiritual life of their Anabaptist ancestors. No church leader had come with them. The men complained and quarrelled. Some set up a drinking place on the colony and in a fight one Mennonite got killed. When Jakob Höppner and Johann Bartsch tried to keep order the colonists (by now with an elder ordained through a letter from Prussia) excommunicated them and had Jakob put in jail.

## **Repentance**

In spite of their spiritual poverty, the Mennonites' crops eventually did better. More settlers came until six thousand lived in Khortitsa and along the Molochna (milk river) to the south. Every year the number of their farms and villages increased, yet material prosperity did nothing to satisfy the longings of those who saw their condition before God.



“We are lost!” Klaas Reimer, elder Peter Epp’s son-in-law, began to cry out. “Let us repent and find the way again!”

Throughout the Mennonite villages—particularly along the Molochna where Klaas Reimer lived—those who longed for peace read their Bibles and dug old Anabaptist books from their chests. For the first time in two hundred years men and women, even young people and children, read the Bible, the *Martyrs Mirror*,<sup>10</sup>

and Pieter Pietersz’ *Weg na Vreden-stadt* (Way to the City of Peace) as if their lives depended on it. Some saw visions and had remarkable dreams. Others spoke of the Antichrist. So desperately did many colonists seek deliverance that they<sup>11</sup>

wandered the streets crying out loud to God in the dead of winter. One boy prayed in the snow until he froze.

Repentance even though misguided or unbalanced brought with it a great fear of God, and to some people an awareness of Christ the King. Young people stopped drinking and playing cards. Foolish laughing and joking died away. Those who followed Klaas Reimer, Kornelius Janzen, Heinrich Wiebe and other awakened

leaders<sup>12</sup> returned to living with the barest necessities and dressing in the simplest clothes. They detached themselves from worldly things to walk with Christ—like their neighbours who worshipped around . . .

<sup>1</sup> Russian Orthodox priests were legally responsible for the naming of everyone they baptised. In the case of converts they gave new names.

<sup>2</sup> In this German town northwest of Leipzig, seat of the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg in which he was a theology professor, August Hermann Francke began a school for poor young people, an orphanage, a clinic, and a publishing house in the late 1600s.

<sup>3</sup> The book deeply moved Tikhon Zadonsky, quoted in chapter six.

<sup>4</sup> now Szczecin in Poland

<sup>5</sup> The Moravians were a pacifist Christian group with links in the early 1400s to the Waldenses and other nonconformed believers. They patterned their communities after the teachings of Christ. They loved and served Christ with unusual devotion and by the late 1700s they had carried the Gospel to nations around the world.

6 the northern part of modern Romania

7 A Czech-speaking brother from Herrnhut risked his life to visit the Anabaptists in Hungary and tell them of the new refuge on the Desna River in Russia. Many escaped, trying to get there, but many also fell into the hands of the authorities who hauled them back.

8 When Count Rumyantsev died his sons threatened to take over the Hutterite community and make them serfs. They moved first to Radichev, nearby, then to the southern Ukraine. But as official harassment increased both Hutterites and Old Believers had to leave Russia.

9 During the Seven Years' War, beginning in 1756, Count Rumyantsev as commander in chief of Russia's cavalry units had spent his winters in West Prussia.

10 Pieter Pietersz was the elder of Anabaptist congregations at De Rijp and Zaandam in the Netherlands where he wrote his book around 1625. He loved Christ and deplored disunity and worldliness in the church. His book is a description of life's journey to the heavenly Jerusalem where "unity of Spirit is found under palms of peace." It seems to have been known by and may have inspired John Bunyan who wrote a similar work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, fifty years later.

11 "*So dasz einige im Winter im Graben und Schnee lagen und laute Bußgebete sprachen,*" according to a contemporary report.

12 the fellowship that became known as the *Kleingemeinde* (little community)

## Bread and Salt

“Visit one another, practice bread and salt, practice charity, keep the commandments, pray to God,” a group of believers in Russia wrote in the <sup>1</sup> eighteenth century.

Why bread and salt?

Since Slavic times, Russians used bread and salt as symbols of hospitality—symbols standing for fellowship and peace. But to believers meeting in secret during times of persecution, they came to mean much more.

Christ said, “I am the bread of life.” He also said, “You are the salt of the earth.” Seeing bread and salt together spoke to Russian believers of fellowship between Christ and his people.

<sup>2</sup> Beyond this, they believed bread and salt were the least a person could live on. Bread (Christ) keeps one alive, and salt (Christianity sprinkled throughout the world) keeps one from spoiling. Many believers detached themselves so completely from this world’s things that they took to the road with nothing but a bag of dried bread and a pinch of salt. Even to those who did not go to that far, bread and salt stood for the self-denial, the suffering, and “otherworldliness” that is ours, in community with Christ.

### Spirit Christian Communities

While Old Believers spread through remote regions of Russia and colonies of <sup>3</sup>

Nemtsy appeared in the south, Spirit Christians in its central and most densely populated regions (around Tambov, Voronezh and Moscow) also increased. Like the Old Believers they called on the name of Christ, and like those who loved Christ among the Moravians, Hutterites, and Mennonites, their walk with him led them into serious-minded obedience to his teachings.

A wool merchant from Tambov, Ilaryon Pobirokhin, became a leader among the Spirit Christians in the late 1600s. He read much and kept his large family in order. Before his death in Siberian exile he wrote:

Be serious minded. Trust in God. Love God with all your heart. Actively work for the good of his holy congregation. Show respect and obey all his commandments. Follow the path of virtue. Shun enslaving habits. Be perceptive. Do everything in light of what comes after death. Do not allow opportunities to do good escape you. Think carefully before setting out to do anything new, and make no decisions in a hurry. Be prompt in meeting your obligations. Do not believe everything you hear. Do not tell others everything you know, but only what is necessary. If you are not sure about something, do not affirm it nor deny it. Investigate, so you may be discreet. Be temperate. Do not eat unless you are hungry. Do not drink unless you thirst, and that only in small quantities. Avoid drunkenness like you would avoid hell. Intemperance leads to sickness. Sickness brings death. Those who abstain from the unnecessary live in health and well-being.

Do not be arrogant, but meek. Keep more to silence than to much conversation. When someone is speaking, listen. When someone talks to you, pay attention. When someone gives you orders, carry them out. Do not boast. Do not be stubborn, quarrelsome or vain. Be friendly to all but flatter none. Be fair. Do not desire what belongs to others. Do not steal but work hard to produce everything you may need. In poverty ask for help. When it is given, accept it and be thankful. But return the things you borrow, and whatever you promise, fulfill.

Be courageous, and always ready to work. Leave off idleness and laziness. If you wish to start a project, count the cost in advance then stick to it without giving up. Do not lose heart in adversity. Do not let prosperity corrupt you. Be thrifty. Take note of what happens to those who do not persevere: they come to misfortune and sorrow. The faint-hearted sigh, lament, and wail, over things the patient forbear without murmuring. Be generous and kind to all. Give to the one who asks of you. As long as you have anything left, help the poor. If someone has hurt you, forgive him. If you have hurt anyone seek reconciliation. Do not hold grudges. Forgive the sinner. Let peacemakers do their work. If you love your fellowmen, you will be loved in return. Greet those you meet. Return the greeting of those who greet you. Answer those who ask questions. Give advice to those who want it. Comfort the sorrowful. Do not envy. Wish everyone well.

Serve everyone to the extent of your ability. If you only do good to others your friends will love you and your enemies will not be able to hate you with reason.

Always speak the truth. Do this and it will go well with you. Glory to God!<sup>4</sup>

Ilyarion's son-in-law, Semyon Ukleyn, worked as an itinerant tailor. In his travels he told many about Christ. On one occasion, with too large a group to arrest, he entered the city of Tambov, publicly calling on the whole city to repent. Isaya Kirilov, another zealous leader read the Gospels and taught the people. As a result of these men's work, large "underground" communities of Spirit Christians took shape in the 1700s.

## **Back to Christ**

Twelve years after the Mennonites' came to Russia, Spirit Christians also began to settle on great plains of the south. They established themselves—directly across the Molochna from what became the Mennonites' largest colony—in communities called Bogdanovka (gift of God), Spaskoye (Salvation), Troytskoye (the Trinity), Terpenye (patience), Tambovka, Rodianovka, Yefremovka, Goreloye, Kirilovka and others, south to the Black Sea.

"The cry of the Spirit Christians," a scholar who visited them in the 1800s remarked, "*is back to Christ.*" They lived by the Sermon on the Mount and counted twelve virtues as friends: *truth* that delivers us from death, *purity* that brings us to God, *love* that is where God is, *labour* that is good for body and soul, *obedience* the quickest way to salvation, *not judging* that brings us grace without effort, *reasonableness* the highest virtue, *mercy* of which Satan himself is afraid, *self-control* the work of Christ, *prayer and fasting* that unite us with God, *repentance* the highest commandment of Christ, and *thanksgiving* that pleases God and the angels.

## **Equals in Christ**

Nowhere did the Spirit Christians' obedience to Christ become more apparent than in their relationships one to another. With Christ, they objected to being masters over others. "The Spirit of God lives in man," they taught. "God has no separate existence or dwelling place apart from his Spirit. Therefore all men deserve the same honour: poor and rich, servant or master, lowly or high. All men have fallen and need a Saviour. We must serve them all, like Christ." This attitude led them into good relationships, not only with their Mennonite neighbours but with the pious among the Orthodox, the Old Believers, the Armenians—even the Turks and Tatars with whom they came into contact.

The Way, the Spirit Christians believed, did not belong only to them. All who

follow Christ in their hearts, whether they know him with their mouths and minds or not, will be saved. One of their members wrote in the nineteenth century:

The church consists of all whom God has separated from worldly society. These elect ones are not distinguished by any special symbols. They are not united in a distinct de-nomination with distinct doctrines and rites. Rather, the children of God are scattered all over the world and belong to all confessions. . . . The church is a society selected by God himself. It is uni-versal. It has no common external creed. . . . We must understand the Scriptures as representing what is inward and spiritual. We can only understand them if Christ lives within us.

Growing up in this atmosphere of equality and grace, Spirit Christian children honoured their elders but used no special titles. All who lived in their communities greeted one another by bowing “to the inestimably precious image of God that lives in all men.” A woman who visited them in the 1800s remarked:

Can you picture an old man of eighty and a boy of ten calling one another affectionate diminutives like Stepa, Viktorushka, Lusha, Dasha, etc.? That is exactly how they do. Fathers, mothers, wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, children of all ages address one another, and even strangers, with their given names. . . . At first it is impossible to know who is related to whom and how. Along with this they respect one another alike, the young the old, the old the young, the men the women, and the women the men. The men take no liberties they would not allow the women to take.

Spirit Christians respected all, but like the Quakers they refused to bare their heads to anyone.

## **Living Temples**

The Holy Trinity, Spirit Christians believed, lives within us. The Father is our inner sense of right and wrong—our con-science. The Son sets our consciences free. He is our light. The Spirit moves us to do what the light allows us to see. He is our will. To worship God is to stand in unobstructed fellowship with the Holy Trinity within us. Novitski, an Orthodox historian quoted a Spirit Christian:

I am the living temple of God. The altar and throne of God is within me. The

Holy Trinity is made flesh in me. I am the priest, the one who sacrifices, and the sacrifice itself, all at the same time. My heart is the altar. My will is the offering, and my soul is the priest.

Beyond this, Jesus Christ is my High priest. He makes me holy. So why should I yet need an outward clergy? The one in whom Christ works is chosen and ordained to the priest-hood by him.<sup>5</sup>

## Visible and Invisible

Spirit Christians believed salvation comes through baptism (baptism of the Holy

Ghost and fire), but most of them did not use water in connection with it. “Christ is our priest,” they said. “We are washed daily by his Word of truth. We are baptised (immersed) in the Holy Ghost and fire (persecution). Our communion is constant fellowship with others and with Christ. Our confession is to confess our faults one to another. Our fasting is more than abstain-ing from certain foods at certain times—it is to abstain from sin and sensual indulgence all the time.”<sup>6</sup>

With their rejection of visible sacraments Spirit Christians also rejected the use of ikons and the veneration of saints. They did not believe in the necessity of miraculous signs as Novitski reported one of them saying:

We believe that Christ does miracles and are living testimonies of it. We were dead in sin. We were blind and deaf. But he has raised us up. He has let us see his salvation, and hear his commandments. Beyond this we are not interested in miracles. We need no outward, bodily, miracles for our salva-tion, because we do not know Christ in an outward way. He is the inner Word and reveals himself to us in the innermost parts of our souls.

## Thrift and Order

Living to please Christ in the “inner man,” Spirit Christians avoided what they thought was for outward show or carnal pleasure. This certainly included wine and tobacco, but most of them abstained even from garlic and spices, and some from meat. “One can catch a glimpse of God in the kitchen as well as in meeting, on the

home table as well as on the table in the house of prayer.”<sup>7</sup> A Russian observer wrote in the 1800s:

They condemn luxuries in food or dress. In general they condemn what is expensive, saying: "If we insist on living in luxury and spend a great deal of money on ourselves, we only help to make our neighbours miserable. Every unneccessary thing we allow ourselves we take away from a brother who needs it. It is good to prosper, but let your prospering be for the benefit of all and not to satisfy your own greediness. Let the one who prospers find his greatest pleasure in contributing to the welfare of his brothers. If he does so, he will lead a simple life and not chase after luxuries."<sup>8</sup>

A reporter for a Russian Orthodox journal wrote in 1870:

The majority of the Molokans love to do good and try to detach themselves from anything that can corrupt a man. They condemn card playing and all games using money. They say that such games are a waste of time and teach greediness. They think competitive games gender strife and nothing, they think, is worse than playing and drinking at the same time. They believe nothing leads so directly to ruin and sin and shun both vices. On the other hand they think hard work is as necessary as daily bread and the breath of life. Even beyond supporting themselves it keeps them out of depravity and trouble. They look on hard work as a religious duty.

Filaret, the Orthodox bishop of Kiev, wrote in 1870:

The Molokans, the moment you meet them command your attention. They have a sensible look and way of talking. They are sober and mannerly. They hold to good morals. They are thrifty and work hard. They live in neat well-built villages. In everything they do around their homes they use good management and are especially known for their production of wool.

## **Order in Worship**

Spirit Christians gathered often (some daily) in their homes to read, sing, and pray around a bare table set with bread and salt. Even children read in these meetings, from the Scriptures, or repeated long portions by memory. The oldest men, like the rest in simple clothes and with un-trimmed beards, opened and closed the meetings. Women wore large headscarves and sat separate from the men. A report written in 1805 by Governor Kohovsky of Yekaterinoslav, describes a meeting in



a Molochna village:

The Spirit Christians meet often. . . . Any one of them may arrange a meeting at his house by inviting all the brothers and sisters. If such a meeting is held at the house of a poor brother who cannot provide food for those who have assembled, the others previously contribute the necessary food or else bring it with them. For at these meetings they serve a meal. <sup>9</sup> When they enter the meeting the men greet the men, and the women the women, by grasping each other's right hands, bowing three times and kissing each other. Then each one says a prayer. . . . During the meetings they pray one after another. They sing psalms together and explain the Word of God one to another. As almost all are illiterate, and therefore without books, all this is done from memory. They have no priests in the ordinary sense of the word because they acknowledge as priest the one just, holy, true Christ, uplifted above sinners, higher than the heavens. He is their sole teacher. For this reason they hear the Word of God from each other. Each one may express what he knows or feels for the benefit of his brothers. . . . At the end of the meeting they again kiss each other three times and return home. <sup>10</sup>

## **Order in the Congregation**

Visitors to Spirit Christian communities marvelled at their internal order and peace. That peace seemed all the more remarkable when they learned how it was kept. Governor Kohovsky wrote:

In their society there are no elders who rule or administrate, but rule and administration are by all and each. Written regulations or rules they also have none, and one might suppose that there ought therefore to be disagreement and disorder amongst them. Yet no such disorder has ever been noticed. Along the Molochna River from three to five families live peaceably together in every one of their large houses.

Where discipline became necessary the Spirit Christians still followed the instructions of Christ. Governor Kohovsky described it:

No punishments exist among the brothers. As soon as any brother thinks another has behaved improperly, he, according to the Gospel's instruction, reminds him that he is acting wrong. If the one in fault does not respond, he is admonished in the presence of two or three of the brothers. If he does not listen to them he is

invited to appear before the general assembly.

There have been cases, though very seldom, in which some of the brothers have left the society, doubtless in order to live at liberty according to their own unrestricted desire. It has even sometimes happened that wives have deserted their husbands. The husbands in such cases do not detain their wives but give them liberty, at the same time giving them what they need to live. Deserters may be reaccepted into their society if they completely repent and leave their immoral life.

## **Order in the Home**

The Spirit Christians had no rigid rules nor governing body for their community as a whole. But in their families they observed a careful order of headship. Governor Kohovsky wrote:

In their families, the weakness and dependence of the women, the inexperience of youth, and the education of the children, naturally makes another system necessary. In every family there must be an authority, and the father is that authority. His duty is to care for the needs of his family, to watch the conduct of the children, correct their faults, and teach them the law of God. When the father dies, his place is taken by the oldest one of the brothers, and in the case of his incapacity, his place is taken by the one most capable.

Spirit Christian fathers educated their children, not so much with books as by working with them, teaching them trades and drawing lessons from nature. At a very young age children learned to sing and memorise Scriptures. They learned to read and write and listened to old men tell stories on long winter evenings. But schools, their parents believed, were unnecessary and wrong. Governor Kohovsky wrote:

The education of children among the Spirit Christians is most simple and uniform. As soon as a child begins to speak and understand, his parents begin to teach him to sing and pray and to tell him something out of the Holy Writings. In this way they continue to instruct him in Christian doctrine. When the children have learned a few prayers and psalms they accompany their parents to the meetings, take their turn in reciting what they have learned and sing psalms with the rest. Not only the parents but every Spirit Christian regards it as his duty to teach every child something useful whenever he has the opportunity to do so, and to keep him from evil whenever he has occasion.

Thanks to such an education, the attitude of the parents is passed by degrees into the children. Their ways of thinking take deep root and the tendency towards good is most strongly encouraged by good examples. It is said, and indeed seems quite natural, that among a number of children one can distinguish the Spirit Christians' children from the rest like ears of wheat among oats.

Like the Old Believers the Spirit Christians had no way of getting legally married. Fathers simply took their daughters by the hand and presented them to young men they wished to marry with the words: "Here, take my daughter for your wife according to God's law. Take her with you to your father's house." The parents of both the boy and the girl (usually in their early teens) would give them their blessing, and as in all meetings they would sing and pray around bread and salt. A Spirit Christian wrote in the 1800s:

Man and wife must be united in love. Their union must be an inner, spiritual, one. He who loves his wife, loves himself. The man who treats his wife roughly in word or deed sins against the Lord's command. How could love and harmony exist between people who quarrel? Without love and harmony a wife cannot be a helper for her husband. She sinks to being nothing more than a slave for carnal cohabitation. Degraded to the level of a non-reasoning animal, the spirit and image of God in her is dishonoured and lost. Unless a man and woman are united by a bond of affection their union is fornication and adultery. <sup>11</sup>

In a nineteenth century description of their beliefs a Spirit Christian wrote:

Among us a woman is not a beast of burden but a helper and a support. She is a companion and friend. <sup>12</sup>

## **War and Government**

The historian Novitski wrote: "Most likely it was only a lack of opportunity and resources that prevented these dissenters (the Spirit Christians) from re-enacting the horrible mutinies and bloody disputes which characterized the rising of the similar sect of Anabaptists in Westphalia." But nothing could have been further from the truth.

The Spirit Christians believed it their first duty to love all men. “To kill a man’s body is to break down a temple of God,” they believed, and died rather than take up arms. They rejected participation in government, patriotism, and warfare outright. A tsarist official described in his diary how some of them responded to military conscription in 1818:

In the morning the commandant told me that five peasants belonging to a landowner in Tambov had been sent to Georgia. These men had been sent for soldiers, but they would not serve. They had been flogged several times and made to run the gauntlet, but they would submit readily to the cruelest tortures, even to death, rather than serve in the army. “Let us go,” they said, “and leave us alone. We will not hurt anyone. All men are equal and the Tsar is a man like us. Why should we listen to him? Why should we ex-pose our lives to danger to kill those in battle who have done us no harm? You can cut us to pieces but we will not be soldiers. He who has compassion on us may give us what he wants to, but as for government rations,<sup>13</sup> we have not received them before and we do not want them<sup>14</sup> now.

The Spirit Christian leader, Siluan Kolesnikov, wrote, “We should submit to worldly authorities, not only to the good and gentle, but to the perverse. We should obey them even when they mistreat and persecute us.” But when obeying authorities meant hurting others, the Spirit Christians withstood them firmly. A document they wrote at Yekaterinoslav in the Ukraine states:

Society is full of evil people motivated by jealousy and terrible passions. Such people could not exist by themselves for they would exterminate one another. For this reason the wisest among them have set up authorities to curb disorder. Up to this point, worldly authorities are beneficent and ordained by God. God wants them to exist for the good of the human race.

But Christ said. “I am not of the world.” We who follow him shun evil not because we fear the punishment of worldly authority, but because we are born again. We want to live like Jesus said. He changed our wills and freed us from the bondage of man-made laws. He gave us his Holy Spirit and created in us a new heart. He freed us to live above God’s laws and do what pleases him, totally<sup>15</sup> without constraint.

## Fire and Light

Enemies of the Spirit Christians (church and government officials who feared their rapid spread) began a wave of persecution against them in 1792. They ordered the registration of all their meeting places and tried to stop them from making converts—in spite of an admission made by one of their own historians:

The Spirit Christians are not interested in conflict with the authorities. Their desire is to create a just and sensible community. Their morals make them stick out from the surrounding population like ears of wheat stick out from the weeds. Even the places where they live look tidy and well-cared-for, in part because of the way they help one another. In their teaching and conduct they emphasise brotherly love above all else. Friendliness is their outstanding characteristic.<sup>16</sup>

A provincial governor who described the Spirit Christians as “monsters and breakers of the general peace,” wrote:

Those infected with the movement merit no mercy. . . . They are all the more dangerous because of their exemplary conduct. They avoid drunkenness and idleness. They work hard to support their families and lead moral lives.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of his serious mistrust of them, Novitski also wrote:

They are sober, hardworking and hospitable. Their houses and clothes are clean and simple. They spend all their time working in their fields and taking care of animals.

Such a way of life could not go unnoticed, and from their new colonies on the Molochna River the Spirit Christians sent messengers to visit those who expressed interest in them. Novitski wrote:

They believe themselves children of God and think God has called them to teach one another. They are quick to give to the poor. They think they must share with others what God gives them, everyone according to his ability. . . . Along with this they have carried their propaganda with incredible zeal all over the south of Russia. They have gained crowds of followers in the governments of

Yekaterinoslav, Kharkov, Tambov and in the country of the Don Cossacks. In the Caucasus they have showed their face and they have over-run Saratov, Voronezh, and Kursk. From the centre of Russia they have made their way north to Finland, the islands in the White Sea and Arkhangelsk. In the east they have gone as far as Siberia and Kamchatka. Wherever they go it is not the rich but the poor and humble, the peas-ants and workers that welcome their teaching. The educated do not know them and it is rare even for a merchant to join them.

Village priests soon feared the Spirit Christians because “every one of them is familiar with the Gospel and overwhelms an adversary in discussion with citations [18](#) from it.” In the mid-1800s an Orthodox scholar wrote:

More than once I have seen the priests roundly defeated in their arguments by Spirit Christians. When this happens, many leave the church and join the heretics. Neither should we think the heretics keep themselves to acquaintance with the Scriptures. Many of them buy books and read them eagerly to find arguments in support of their teaching.” [19](#)

In 1799 a new law banished the Spirit Christians to mines in the Ural Mountains “so that those who reject God-ordained authority on the earth may feel and know that there is still a power, put in place by God, to defend those who do right and to restrain and punish evildoers like themselves.” But neither the law nor persecution could stop them and by 1800 “crowds of them, preaching openly in the marketplace” were reported in Astrakhan on the mouth of the Volga.

## **Spirit Wrestlers**

Most Spirit Christians along the Molochna River lived in semi-communal villages. [20](#)

Every seven years they used the lot to redivide their farmland. Older men and women among them made sure that everyone worked and had enough: at least a one-room house, food for the day, bedding, and clothes. But around three thousand of the Molochna settlers, led by a converted soldier, Savely Kapustin, began to live in communities that operated from a common purse.

An Orthodox priest first called them *Dukhobortsy* (Spirit wrestlers). He accused them of wrestling *against* the Spirit. But like they had adopted the earlier

nickname Molokan—saying they desired to drink the sincere milk of the Word—they now adopted this one. “Let us wrestle with Christ against spiritual wickedness in high places,” they said.

Savely and the Dukhobors held their land in common and stored their harvest in large communal granaries. Living together in the love of Christ they refused even to kill animals and stopped eating meat or wearing clothes of wool or leather.

Anyone could leave at any time <sup>21</sup> (even the wives and children of resident members) but so joyful had their community become that hardly anyone took advantage of it.

Like Russian believers through centuries before them, the Spirit Christians learned what it takes to survive persecution. They discovered the great strength that comes through submitting one to another and sharing everything in Christian community. Doing this, they flourished in adversity and blossomed out during a strange time of . . .

1 Coneybeare, *Russian Dissenters* (citations in this chapter from this work unless identified otherwise)

2 Russian believers took literally the Scripture quoted by Christ: “Man shall not live by bread alone.” But they thought it was possible to live on bread and salt.

3 This generic term came to include the Molokans, the Dukhobors, Communist Christians and other similar groups. In many ways they resembled the Old Believers. But the Spirit Christians were yet further removed from Eastern Orthodoxy and closer to the Quakers and Anabaptists in practice.

4 *Instructions for Life*, translated by Eli A. Popov, Grand Forks, British Columbia.

5 *National Memorials*

6 Exceptions were the communities in the lower Don region. They baptized with water and celebrated communion with ordinary bread and wine.

7 The testimony of a Molokan brother in California, 1982.

8 Kostomarov, quoted by Coneybeare

[9](#) At fellowship meals after meetings, four courses—tea and sweets, borscht or lapsha, lamb or chicken, fruits in season—were served if available. During every course someone spoke or read, and every course ended with a song.

[10](#) translated by Vladimir Chertkov in *Christian Martyrdom in Russia*, 1897

[11](#) Kostomarov

[12](#) *Description of Beliefs and Teachings of the Molokans*

[13](#) benefits paid to families who had sons in the army

[14](#) quoted by Lev Tolstoy in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*

[15](#) cited in Coneybeare, *Russian Dissenters*

[16](#) Shapov, 1867

[17](#) Kohovsky, quoted by Coneybeare

[18](#) Novitski

[19](#) S. Atav

[20](#) A practice they continued when they settled the Valle de Guadalupe, in Baja California, in 1904.

[21](#) only on foot and taking with them only what they could carry



## Mysteries and Miracles

Catherine the Great, after she had Russia's twenty-nine provinces in peace and on the way to prosperity, settled down in Tsarskoye Selo to enjoy the last years of her reign. Like King Solomon, she denied herself no pleasures. A plump grandmotherly woman with twinkling eyes she owned some of the world's largest collections of art and sculpture. Around her palaces she laid out parks and pools. Several hundred servants scurried about at her command and her court became a virtual "harem" of handsome boys she picked up on her trips through the empire. Only one boy she could not stand: her homely son Paul.

Paul was short, with a pug nose and little round eyes far apart. He looked simple. But his son Aleksandr was a different story. Tall, fair-haired, open-faced, and intelligent, even if somewhat shy, he was Catherine the Great's golden boy. She raised him in her palace and made plans for him to become tsar in her place.

Paul would not hear of it. As soon as Catherine died he assumed control and shocked everyone by leading Russia into conflict with western Europe, making plans to send an army to India, and sending all who opposed him into Siberia. Russians saw him as a bloodthirsty maniac, an Ivan the Terrible in the making, and with his son Aleksandr's consent a group of conspirators broke into his apartment in the Mikhailovsky palace on the night of March 23, 1801. They shot Paul and crowned Aleksandr tsar the following day.

### **Tsar With a Guilty Conscience**

Aleksandr, only twenty-three years old, was very unhappy. With his capable grandmother and his father both dead, he did not feel ready to rule Russia. Neither had the conspirators told him they would kill his father. He felt terrible about it. But now what? Should he arrest the murderers? He knew if he did they would turn on him and say, "You were part of it!"

At first Aleksandr tried to overcome his guilt by making Russia happy. He stopped the persecution of Spirit Christians and Old Believers at once. He made good laws, promoted public schools, built teachers' colleges, and put his childhood playmate Aleksandr (Sasha) Golitsyn in charge of religious affairs.

Sasha protested. “What do I know about religion!” he cried when he heard the news. (He had been a page in Catherine the Great’s court and had lived a loose life.) But Aleksandr could not have made a better choice and Russia still lives with its effects.

Sasha, for all his worldly ways, believed in doing things thoroughly. He felt the least he could do to fit himself for his new post as Oberprokurator was to read the Bible. The more he read, the more it spoke to an unmet need in his soul. Then he began to pray. But a strange shadow had fallen over St. Petersburg.

## **A White Dove**

Several years before his untimely death, Tsar Paul had heard of an exiled starets in Siberia who claimed to be Catherine the Great’s murdered husband, Peter. It made him curious. He would have loved to meet his “father” and called the old man to his palace.

That the starets (who believed in the transmigration of spirits) was not Peter, soon became apparent. His real name was Kondratiy Selivanov and he came from central Russia. But Paul believed him a harmless “holy man” and in spite of his sentence allowed him to live in the city.

Now Sasha discovered him.

Kondratiy Selivanov deeply impressed Sasha. Kind and soft-spoken, he shared his wisdom with humility. He healed people emotionally as well as physically and Sasha remembered his friend, young Tsar Aleksandr’s torment with guilt. “Why don’t you go see the starets?” he asked the tsar after several visits of his own. “Perhaps he can help you.”

Aleksandr took his advice. Like Sasha, he was moved by the starets’s warm humility and Kondratiy became secretly famous.

A wealthy St. Petersburg family, the Nenasteyevs, took him into their home where night after night, fur-clad, carriage-driven guests came silently to sit around him--as many as three hundred at a time. Sasha kept coming. So did Tsar Aleksandr. The cheerful starets had words of advice and comfort for all. But who, exactly, was he?

Sasha felt responsible to find out.

The records showed that Kondratiy Selivanov had grown up among the “People of God,” the *Khlysty*, in central Russia. Then he had changed his beliefs, fallen into the hands of the authorities and come to Siberia.

The People of God Sasha discovered had roots in the Russian province of Murom where a peasant, Danilo Filipov, had been their leader two hundred years earlier. Like Sasha himself, Danilo had been a sincere seeker. He fasted and prayed until one day, standing on a bank above the Volga he sensed a change in his inner being. His heart grew warm. A tingling sensation flowed through his limbs and in a rush of emotion he cried out, “The Holy Spirit has come upon me! My sins are forgiven!”

Danilo began at once to share his experience with others. He taught people that reading the Bible helps only the unconverted. For the truly born again, in whom Christ the Word lives, it is no longer necessary. When asked which religious texts were better, those of the Old Believers or Nikon’s, Danilo said, “Neither of the two are good. There is only one good and necessary book: The Golden Book, The Living Book, The Dove’s Book--That is, the Holy Spirit Himself.” To demonstrate this he put a copy of both the Old Believers’ and Nikon’s texts along with a Slavonic Bible into a bag with heavy stones and threw it into the Volga.

Shortly after Danilo’s “conversion” another peasant from Murom, Ivan Suslov, joined him and the “Spirit of Christ” fell on him. Then a woman got converted and received the “Spirit of Mary” and others received the Spirit of Peter, of John, of Timothy . . . any of the apostles and saints of the early church.

The People of God drew crowds in Murom and throughout central Russia. In their meetings (held at night for fear of the authorities) they sang and listened to powerful speakers until they fell into trances, shouted, leaped, whirled about, or spoke in unknown tongues. Whoever had the Spirit of Christ they believed was

Christ, and most “ships” had at least one woman whom they identified as having the Spirit of Mary.

The Spirit is light and the body a veil that hides it, the People of God believed. The less one has to do with the body, the brighter the Spirit shines. “Walking in the light” is to walk free from the works of the flesh.

With this teaching, Kondratiy Selivanov had grown up in Orel, southwest of

Moscow. But he had a problem. A serious-minded youth, it distressed him that he could not overcome the desires of his flesh. The more he tried to subdue them, the stronger they seemed to become. Then he learned what a friend of his, Andrey Blokhin (who had a similar problem), had done. He had castrated himself. Was this the answer? Andrey convinced Kondratiy that it was, and when Kondratiy could not muster the courage to do it himself, Andrey did it for him.

Martin Rodyonov, another young friend learned of it and followed their example. So did Aleksandr Shilov, a boy from Tula who became a powerful promoter of this “real way to holiness.” To him, and to the other young men, the Gospel suddenly became clear. Castration was Christ’s “baptism of fire,” the only way to “flee youthful lusts.” It was what John did to Christ in the Jordan when the white dove came down and what Christ did to all his disciples except Judas who “kept the bag” and betrayed him.

Calling themselves *Belye Golubi* (white dove people) Kondratiy , Aleksandr and their friends found their way through Russia, converting thousands of men and <sup>3</sup> women to their ways.

Now Kondratiy was in St. Petersburg.

### **Another Antichrist**

To what extent Sasha Golitsyn became a follower of the Belye Golubi we may never know. <sup>4</sup> But his life remained permanently changed. He gave away his private wealth. Even though he had much to do he visited the sick, incognito, in the evenings. Still single, he never again showed the slightest interest in marriage and became a thoughtful, serious, and active promoter of Christ--even more so after he met Yekaterina Tatarinova.

Sasha met Yekaterina, the wife of a Russian officer, in Kondratiy Selivanov’s <sup>5</sup> meetings. She was from Courland (Latvia). Her husband had left her. Her only child had died. Her Lutheran faith had failed to meet her needs and she, like Sasha and the tsar, had become an anxious seeker for the truth. What Kondratiy Selivanov said spoke to her, but when she learned of bodily mutilations she drew back in horror. “This is of the devil!” she declared. “God did not give us bodies to destroy. The life that we now live *in the flesh* we may live by faith in the Son of God, and if the Spirit of Christ who raised Jesus from the dead lives in us, our

bodies may also live without condemnation.”

It made sense. Sasha and the tsar stopped seeing Kondratiy and began to meet with others in Yekaterina’s house. They turned from the “Spirit teachings” of the Belye Golubi to studying the New Testament. But the time for quiet evenings at home was past.

Napoleon had crowned himself emperor of France.

The Russians feared Napoleon. He came east. He boldly planned to take over Europe--all the world perhaps--and frightful reports of his victories reached St. Petersburg.

Was Napoleon the *real* Antichrist? Many Russians suspected it, and by the fall of 1805 Aleksandr found himself swept with ninety thousand soldiers toward the Austrian front. They (Russians and Austrians) met Napoleon’s army on December

6

2, at Austerlitz in Moravia. Hoofbeats, smoke, the roar of cannon, terrible screams of dying horses and men--if only that day had been a dream. But it was not, and Aleksandr found no words to express the horror he came to feel for war. By the end of the day twenty-four thousand soldiers lay sprawled out dead on rye and potato fields and eleven thousand had fallen into French hands.

## **Fire of City and Soul**

On June 24, 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia with six hundred thousand men. At Borodino, a hundred kilometres (125 km) west of Moscow, they met the Russians. From six in the morning until late at night they fought under cannon fire until the Russians suddenly retreated, lit Moscow, and melted into forests north and east to Siberia.

This time they really baffled the “Antichrist.” On entering the burned out, empty city, Napoleon could do nothing but set up camp and begin looking for Russians to conquer. Winter came on. French soldiers got hungry. They shivered with coats too light for the Russian cold, wrapped their feet in rags and sat around campfires to keep from freezing. Even then, many turned sick and died while far to the north, in St. Petersburg, another fire had begun to burn.

“The flames of Moscow lit my soul,” Aleksandr described it later. With Sasha Golitsyn and others who wanted to know Christ he now spent his evenings

studying his Bible, and the writings of men like Nil Sorsky, Tikhon Zadonsky, and Johann Arndt, in earnest. What was God saying?

All over Russia people wanted to know. On December 6, 1812--the day Napoleon left Russia at Vilna on a horse-drawn sleigh--Aleksandr signed the charter for a Russian Bible Society. He put Sasha Golitsyn, the Oberprokuror, in charge of it and translators promptly began to work on Scriptures in modern Russian and sixteen other languages used throughout the tsar's domain.

### **Admonition at Heilbronn**

To sign a peace treaty and decide what to do with Napoleon after his first defeat, Aleksandr traveled to Paris and Vienna. There, in the Heilbronn palace, a woman insisted on meeting him. Her name was Juliane.

Juliane von Vietinghoff spoke Russian well. Born into a noble family in the Latvian city of Riga, she had decided to follow Christ after a shoemaker (a Moravian brother) spoke to her while measuring her feet. Loving Christ she had abandoned her worldly ways. She had sold her clothes, her jewels, and her pieces of art and given the money to the poor. Then, sensing a call from God, she determined to speak to Tsar Aleksandr and tell him to stop war.

The admonition could not have come at a more crucial time, or struck Aleksandr deeper. At Heilbronn negotiating generals coolly repeated round figures--seventy five thousand had died at Borodino alone--but Alexander cried in his heart for every young man who had lost his life in senseless combat. In his mind's eye he could see their mothers wringing their hands and crying to God in straw-thatched houses, their fathers alone with the work, and the children whose big brothers would never come back.

Juliane did not need to tell him that war was the devil's feast. He already knew it and joined her wholeheartedly in denouncing it to all, and calling Europe to repentance.

The generals looked at him strangely. Many said nothing to him but whispered among themselves, "Has the tsar gone mad? Is he bewitched? Who is this woman with whom he speaks so much?"

### **Made Equals By God**

Napoleon returned. On June 18, 1815 German and British troops defeated him at Waterloo, but Aleksandr's mind was elsewhere. Juliane, the Baroness von Krüdener, had accompanied him and his troupe back to St. Petersburg. Now, in the Christian fellowship around Sasha Golitsyn, she and the tsar discussed Russia's future.

"The holding of private property is wrong," Juliane firmly believed. "Among Christians there shall be no rich nor poor. Government is not Christian. Christians cannot punish others, nor go to war."

Knowing the teaching of Christ, the tsar could only agree. But how? And where? In a flash he remembered the communities of "bread and salt" in Little Russia.

On the third week of May, in 1818, a messenger appeared at the door of the Mennonite elder David Hübert in the village of Lindenau on the Molochna. "The tsar," the messenger said, "will come to your house for breakfast next week."

Aleksandr arrived with nineteen carriages (the department of state would not have it otherwise). Entering Lindenau he saw that the Mennonites had swept the village street and sprinkled it with sand. Four hundred boys on horseback--boys whom he knew had never held guns--came to meet him and their plainly dressed families stood among fruit trees and plots of vegetables alongside the street to watch him pass.

At the elder's house they asked him to sit at the end of the table, but Aleksandr refused. Taking the elder's wife he had her sit there and took a chair on the side. "We are all just human," he explained, "and God has made us equals."

Besides the Mennonites Aleksandr also visited Dukhobor community farms and Molokan villages along the Molochna.

## **Mystery at Taganrog**

After his visit to the south, Aleksandr's struggle to know Christ and his Kingdom of Heaven intensified. How could a statesman and ruler, the *tsar of Russia*, live like Christ? How could he, short of forsaking his office completely, live by the Sermon on the Mount?

In 1824 Juliane von Krüdener, tired of waiting on him, left for the Crimea to found a Christian community based on the example of Acts 2 and 4. She died on

arrival. A year later, Aleksandr and his German wife--the tsarina Yelizaveta--set out for Taganrog, a Russian outpost on the dismal, windy, shore of the Sea of Azov.

They spent two pleasant months together. They talked things over and drew closer one to another than they had ever been. Then Aleksandr made a short trip to the Crimea and on his return, suddenly died as well.

His coffin did not reach St. Petersburg until months later. It was sealed, and they placed it in the Petropavlovsky fortress on the Neva.

Thirty-five years later a monk at the Alekseyevich monastery at Tomsk, in Siberia, recorded the death of a strange pilgrim, Fedor Kuzmich. In a marginal note he added: "This man bore an exact resemblance to Tsar Aleksandr I of Russia."

In 1917 when the Bolsheviks took over the Petropavlovsky fortress and opened that tsar's coffin, they found it empty.

## **Nikolai**

After Aleksandr, his younger brother Nikolai became tsar.

Things changed.

Nikolai had no use for pacifism nor Christian community. Even though he had grown up with Sasha Golitsyn, he threw him out of office and closed the Bible Society. He made all religious meetings, apart from state registered services in official buildings, illegal. Level headed, cruel, and conservative, his slogan was,

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"One tsar, one faith, one people." That meant himself, the Orthodox church and all Russians.

By Tsar Nikolai's time the Russian state church had sunk even deeper into corruption and legalism. Its priests lived with their wives and children in poverty. Many of them drank. Church rules called for the keeping of fast days and strict penance. Worship services lasted for hours. But many remained ignorant and lived careless lives. They could no longer understand Cyril and Methodius' Slavonic, and the Gospel lost its meaning.

Rather than trying like his brother to end this unhappy darkness, Tsar Nikolai



determined to keep Russia “Russian.” He set up official censoring of the mail, a secret police force, and harsh religious tribunals to keep people from thinking disloyal thoughts. To escape him, those left of the Spirit Christians in Central Russia (the Tambov, Voronezh, Saratov area) travelled on foot or with horse-drawn wagons down a new military road toward Persia. There, in the Caucasus, they hoped to find greater freedom around Tiflis (later Tbilisi) and the new town of Vladikavkaz. They farmed, milled grain, and once more, due to thrift and godliness, prospered by making cheese.

In southern Russia the Mennonites also prospered. But with material gain came ever greater spiritual loss. From their neighbours, some Mennonites had learned much more than just the wearing of peasant clothes, how to cook borsht, and embroider colourful flowers on their headscarves. They learned how to distill peach leaves and wild cherry stones in copper stills to make vodka. They learned how to farm on the fertile steppes and some became wealthy while others suffered miserable want. Even the Hutterites on the Desna above Chernigov gave up their community of goods and turned spiritually cold. But far away--in the Netherlands and northern Germany--the Lord Christ had set in motion events that would turn Russia’s communities of bread and salt into . . .

1 The People of God called their secret congregations “ships.”

2 To believe in the “transmigration of souls” was for many Russians not a new idea. The Khlysty of Danilo Filipov’s time based some of their beliefs on the revelations of “christ” Averyan who lived during Ivan the Terrible’s reign. Averyan, in turn referred to “christ” Yemelyan who lived in the fourteenth century. In all probability, this sect’s history dates back to early Christian (Manichean, Gnostic) heresies.

3 who mutilated their breasts

4 That other influential members of the tsar’s court, like Kamerherr Yelyansky, “went the whole way” is an established fact.

5 her name before marriage was Katherine Buxhöwden

6 the site of the first Anabaptist “Bruderhof” community

7 *Pravoslaviye, Samoderzhaviye, i Narodnost* (Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Peoplehood)

## Salt and Light

Rumbling eastward, a cloud of dust rising behind them, no one could have guessed what a long train of wagons on the road from Lemberg through Zhitomir and Kiev would bring to Russia in 1835.

An old man sat beside the driver of the lead wagon. His beard was long and white. Like the rest of his companions on the wagon train he wore dark peasant clothes. But his eyes were bright, and he looked eagerly ahead to settling along the Molochna River plains.

Wilhelm Lange had not always been a Mennonite. In his youth, the idea of settling with a group of defenseless people on Europe's far eastern frontier would have seemed absurd. Only now that he knew Christ it no longer seemed absurd. His group's defenselessness (refusal to bear arms), in fact, was the reason for going there.

As a young Protestant in the emperor's service, Wilhelm had arrived in a German Mennonite community. He had come to assist in a government takeover of Christian schools. But the takeover happened in reverse. The small congregation's refusal to fight back, their simple services and congregational singing, their putting to practice of Christ's Gospel in daily life, had so impressed him that he sought Christ himself and became converted. Now he was a Mennonite elder, and to escape forced conscription into the army he had brought his congregation to Russia.

### A Field of Grace

Unlike the Mennonites who had settled in Russia earlier, Wilhelm Lange's group found good land at once and named their village Gnadenfeld (Field of Grace). There, under Wilhelm's far-sighted leadership and the grace of Christ, they lived up to the name they had chosen. Among all the Molochna villages, Gnadenfeld stood out for its warm spirit of love, its hospitality, and the zeal with which its inhabitants sought to follow Christ. German settlers, Spirit Christians, Russian Orthodox and Jewish neighbours--even the families of wandering Naga tribes who visited there--sensed something different. And with time, that noticeable

difference in Gnadenfeld worked through the Molochna villages like the pinch of yeast its women added to their bread dough on Saturday mornings.

## **New Books and New Hopes**

The villagers of Gnadenfeld liked to read. They set up a good school, and before long a lending library. Besides this, through close connections to the Moravian Brothers' community at Herrnhut in Germany, they stayed up-to-date with what Christians published in other countries. Among the books they received in the mid 1800s were several written by a Christian eye-doctor: Hans Heinrich Jung-Stilling.

In Hans Heinrich's books he wrote about the last days and the Antichrist. He wrote about Christ's reign on the earth, suggesting how it might begin in the east with a coronation ceremony at the foot of Mount Ararat. Hans Heinrich wrote gripping stories and the villagers of Gnadenfeld, even though they took some of their contents with a grain of salt, enjoyed reading them. The books turned their thoughts to Christ and his coming kingdom. . . . Then their neighbours along the Molochna River discovered them and drastic events took place.

After Hans Heinrich's books began to circulate in Russian,<sup>1</sup> a young Spirit Christian from the other side of the river, Anakey Ignatovich Borisov, read *The Triumph of The Christian Faith* and found his life transformed. "Christ is coming back!" he announced to his Molokan brothers and sisters. "And the Spirit says we should prepare to meet him in the east, at Ararat." Anakey's joyful message did not only grip and motivate a large number of Molokans. Many of their Old Believer and Orthodox neighbours joined them in a fast spreading Spiritual awakening.

Orthodox authorities tried to crush the awakening at once. They arrested Anakey and walked him in chains to Siberia. But he rejoiced to suffer for Christ and when his sentence expired he re-turned to the Molochna settlements. Convinced that his family and friends stood in need of further awakening he called them to meetings in his home where they prayed until the "Spirit fell" and humble Molokan brothers and sisters suddenly began to prophesy in unknown tongues. They began to leap and praise God. So great was the emotion that the neighbours heard and came running to see what had happened.

Then other things began to happen.

The new Molokan brothers--people called them *Pryguny* (jumpers) in contrast to the remaining *Postoyanye* (constants)--faced tremendous opposition from state authorities. Mass arrests began. Several entire villages of Pryguny had to march under armed guard to exile to Siberia. Policemen flogged the men until some remained crippled for life, or died.

But the Pryguny could not be suppressed. Their movement spread as they gathered for meetings in cellars or in the woods. They fasted and prayed much. Through prophecy they reestablished Biblical feasts: the Passover to celebrate the triumph of Christ, Pentecost to remember the coming of the Spirit, *Pamyat Trub* (the

2  
blowing of trumpets) in September to welcome Christ back to earth, and *Sudniy Dyen*, the day of forgiveness. On this day, every brother and sister in the congregation would approach every other member in turn, asking (while kneeling before them) whether any offence or hard feeling remained unsettled between them. Reconciliation followed and believers forgave one another in the name of Christ. At the end of the day they would hold a love feast, and for a week following—*Kusha*, the feast of tabernacles—they would remain together to pray and offer praise to God.

In 1842, Tsar Nikolai put a new law into effect that classed all Spirit Christians (both groups of Molokans and the Dukhobors) among “the most harmful sects.” By 1849, in a determined effort to remove them from the Molochna region, tsarist soldiers marched their leaders in chains (Anakey was in his eighties) and several thousand men, women and children on foot, east into the mountains of Armenia. It took all summer to walk a thousand miles. A large number of the children died, but hope and joy filled their hearts as every step took them eastward. Would Christ come in person to meet them there?

Whatever the case, in heaven or on earth, they longed for nothing more than to meet him.

### **“The Time Is Short, Oh Man Be Wise!”**

The Molochna colonies, after the Spirit Christians left, became quieter. But much hidden longing to know Christ remained—especially among the Mennonites.

After Wilhelm Lange died in 1841, the villagers of Gnadenfeld continued to meet for prayer and Bible study in their homes. More and more seekers from surrounding villages joined them. As they became aware of Christ their lives changed and even though their opponents called them *die Mährische* (Moravians),

or *die Fromme* (the pious ones) and “cracked horsewhips around their ears when they passed them on the street,”<sup>3</sup> the believers increased in strength and numbers.

Tobias Voth from Gnadenfeld, a schoolteacher and the brother who organized the lending library, began to hold Bible studies for young people in his home. One of the young men who decided there to “know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified”<sup>4</sup> was Bernhard Harder.

Bernhard came from a family that drank and fought. His father died when he was twelve. But after “joyfully and eagerly” accepting the call to become a Mennonite minister he raised fourteen children while working six months every year (during the summer) and traveling six months (during the winter) to call others to repentance and new life. “With great zeal and a thundering voice,” wrote a biographer, “Bernhard Harder opposed everything he thought to be ungodly, but most of all he protested the formalism that threatened the life of the church. Moved by love for the Saviour and lost sinners, he tried to reach his hearers through their eyes and their ears. When he preached he preached with his entire being. His enthusiasm and clear convictions made his sermons particularly effective.”<sup>5</sup>

Bernhard also wrote poetry, including the words for what became one of the best-loved hymns of the Mennonites in Russia, *Die Zeit ist kurz, o Mensch sei Weise*:

The time is short, oh man be wise! Use every moment for gain! You will only pass here once. Leave good tracks behind you. You cannot keep one hour. Before you notice it has fled. Wisdom counsels: “Persevere!” A high reward awaits the true.

The fool wastes his time eating, drinking, telling jokes and resting. The wise man works and wins. He fills the time with doing good. Therefore, Christ, teach me how to give my years to you alone. Teach me how, from now to death, to sow what will produce in life to come!

## **Christ the Key**

While Molokans and Mennonites found their way to Christ in the Molochna villages the Spirit began to awaken the nearby German settlement of

Neuhoffnung. In 1845 the Neuhoffnung settlers welcomed a shy but sincere young man, Eduard Wüst, who had come from Germany to be their pastor. Little did they expect what he would tell them but his very first message, preached on the last Sunday in September, set a pattern. Eduard began by saying:

Here lies the Bible. You want me to teach you from this word, full of holy truth. A voice from heaven calls me to do so. But how shall I go about it? Where will I find the key to the Holy Scriptures?

I find it in Jesus Christ, crucified for your sins and mine.

You are not getting a well-educated pastor. But I have learned in the Holy Spirit's school that the man without a living relationship to Christ is lost. . . . I know Jesus Christ as the one who frees sinners from the grip of Hell. I know him as the one who frees them from the wrath of Satan, who looks for them when they are lost in the world, and who gives rest and peace to the burdened down.

Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light. He is the bread of life and those who find him never go hungry. This Jesus I will speak about and I want to bring you to where you see him too. . . .

Those of you who are greedy and materialistic, I will point to Christ hanging naked on the cross for your sins. I will lead you vain ones and honour seekers to Pilate's hall where Christ stands among soldiers, dressed with a purple robe and a crown of thorns on his head to atone for your pride. You who are sensual I will lead to Christ on the cross, dying, his blood running out, to atone for your lusts. This word of the cross I will speak to sinners so that they may stop sinning and turn to Christ. . . .

I do not come only to warn, but also to comfort. Our comfort is in Christ who was tempted in every way like we are. He emptied himself out and took on the form of a ser-vant. He entered through suffering into the joy of his king-dom. Look at him! Follow him! And you will be more than conquerors.

Christ is our wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemp-tion. I want you to see him! I want to engrave him on your hearts with preaching and prayer. For what use is the Christ of the Bible to us, if we do not have him in our hearts? The heart is where this treasure, this gift from heaven, belongs. . . . How is your inner relationship to Christ? This is the issue—whether we have Christ living within or not.

I am an enemy of Christianity only in outward form and name. Therefore I tell you: Do more than just listen. Do what the Word says and stop deceiving yourselves!

I expect this will make trouble. A man's enemies will be those of his own household. Christ can have no half-heartedness. Either we go with him or we do not. Cursed is the one who tries to add a third option. Every one of you is either a sheep or a goat. You are either on the narrow way or the broad. You are either for God or money, Christ or Belial, life or death, heaven or hell!

What I speak will separate you along these lines. Do not try to bridge the gap! Do not try, for the sake of comfort and respectability to find some middle road! If you want to be friends both of Christ and the world, I tell you already, you will not like what I say. But I did not come from Germany to Russia to please you. I came to preach Christ!

What Eduard predicted began to happen at once. Some of the Neuhoffnung settlers (German Pietists) had never separated themselves very far from the world. Rich and poor people lived among them. Some had grown lukewarm and careless. Others made much of religious experience but neglected obedience to Christ. When Eduard spoke clearly about these things the majority of the Neuhoffnung Pietists disowned him. But with those who did not he found warm fellowship and support among the Mennonites of Gnadenfeld.

## **More Seekers and Struggles**

The Spirit of Christ moved among the Molochna settlers, both Russians and Germans, in the mid 1800s. But Christ, merciful to all who seek him, did not limit his attention to them. Far to the north, between Chernigov and Bryansk, the small Hutterite community founded by immigrants from Austria, entered its own time of testing and renewal.

After Count Rumyantsev died his sons had threatened to take over the Hutterites' houses and fields at Vyshenka and make them serfs. Quickly before that happened they had moved to government land at Radicheva, nearby, and rebuilt their community. A visiting tsarist official reported on that settlement before 1817:

The brotherhood's houses are situated on a piece of land 490 feet square. It is surrounded by a fruit bush hedge with an entrance gate. They regard themselves as one family. The building where the members live and practice various

handicrafts has six brick and two wooden wings of one story, built rather low. There are several small houses on the place as well. The roofs of the main building are high-pitched, and corridors have been built through the attics with small cells, or rooms, opening on either side. This is where they have their dwelling quarters, each married couple with their own room. There are no stoves. In each room there is a bed, a table, and two chairs. The couples use them only for sleeping or for short stretches of time.

Similar but larger rooms for sleep and rest are provided for the unmarried men from fifteen years old and upward, who have finished their school studies and received baptism. There are twelve to sixteen men in each room and a bed for every two of them. The older girls also have separate sleeping accommodation. In addition to the bedrooms there is still enough space in the attic to dry the laundry.

For worship services they set aside a separate room with-out any pictures of saints or crucifixes. Here they meet on Sundays and church holidays and also gather for prayer every evening before they go to supper. . . . During the service they sing appropriate songs, and the sisters are especially well-taught in singing.

The brothers' way of life appears to be humble and unassuming. They are well-mannered, friendly, eager to do their duty, hospitable, and ready to help in every way.

In winter, they go to bed at nine and to work at five o'clock in the morning. In both seasons, various members in turn have the duty of telling people when it is time for bed or for work. In summer, because of the increased workload, the people get up earlier and go to bed later. Visitors to the community are guests of the whole brotherhood, in whose name the elder offers them hospitality.

In this way, the community has lived and prospered in peace from the time they settled here, honouring God and the tsar and earning for themselves an admirable reputation. Their worked land and meadows are fertile and productive. Cattle raising is done on a large scale, using good Hungarian stock. . . . The brothers keep bees too, but are mainly occupied in their own trades and crafts, including the cultivation of garden crops. . . . On the Jessman river, some sixteen kilometres from the settlement, they own a mill with three sets of millstones. Felt hats are made in the community, and carpentry, turnery, tailoring, weaving, pottery, blacksmithing and lock-making are carried on as well, to produce no small quantity of goods for sale. There is, in addition, a workshop for making winter wagons and summer wagons, harrows, ploughs, cleaning machines, spinning wheels, etc., and a tannery that provides sole and Russian leather.



For a number of years the Hutterite community at Radicheva prospered in sunny harmony like the tsarist official described. But little disagreements eventually led to division among them, and thirty families moved to Khortitsa to live with the Mennonites in 1818. The following spring the smith at Radicheva made a large iron hoop for a barrel. Fresh out of the forge, when the hoop was still red hot he rolled it out the door. It touched the reed thatch and the smithy went up in flames. All the community buildings followed and the brothers and sisters stood with their families, penniless among the ruins.

Those who had gone to Khortitsa felt sorry for them and returned to help rebuild the houses. But peace and prosperity did not return. The community broke up and everyone began to farm scattered government lands in the Radicheva district.

Johannes Waldner, the elder, who had escaped as a boy from Kärnten in Austria through Transylvania and Walachia to Vyshenka could not shed enough tears for what happened to the community. Left to their own designs, the brothers hired themselves out as day labourers and craftsmen. Too busy to teach their children, the oncoming generation grew up like the Russian peasants around them, illiterate. They kept their Bibles and their wealth of hand--written Anabaptist books, but they could no longer read them. The hard years of Tsar Nikolai's rule came upon them and dressed in rags, they suffered hunger and disease. Those who still lived in the communal dwellings ate poor food and for lack of space had their children sleep as many as half a dozen to a bed, no longer caring about boys and girls being mixed together.

After more than twenty years of this sad condition two Hutterite brothers, Benjamin Decker and David Hofer decided to go for help. Something had to be done! Everyone longed to return to the good ways they had known, but in Radicheva it seemed impossible. Taking a young man, Jakob Walter, with them to care for their horses and wagon, the two men set out on the long journey through Kiev and Kherson to Odessa on the Black Sea.

They asked the tsarist colonial administration for a place to settle together. But no one paid them much attention. "Go talk with the Mennonites," they said. "They might know what to do with you."

Desperate enough to take the suggestion, the Hutterite men turned east and found their way after days of travel through Jewish and Russian villages to the Molochna River colonies. There they found land to rent between Mennonite and Molokan villages on the eastern bank of the river. In the fall of 1842 all who remained at

Radicheva followed them to this place and they called it Huttertal.

Quickly before snow fell, the Hutterites built sod houses. The following spring the Mennonites helped them make bricks and settle in neat tile-roofed buildings. They showed the Hutterites how to plant fruit trees and gardens, and how to raise the best hay and grain. In the middle of Huttertal the Mennonites built them a well-lit village school.

The Hutterites kept their old German way of dressing and speaking. They stayed with simple tastes and discouraged their young people from having too much to do with the world. But for the first time in years they worked with joy in peaceful surroundings. Their effort paid off and within two years they founded Johannesruh, another village on the Molochna even more attractive than the first.

## **The End of the Fuse**

By the mid 1800s the Spirit of Christ had drawn all strands of a long fuse together in southern Russia. Spirit Christians (both Molokans and Dukhobors), the new Pryguny movement, awakened Mennonites, Pietists, and Hutterites, all lived among a fast growing Orthodox and Old Believer population along the Molochna River. The only thing yet missing was a spark to trigger . . .

1 Believers in the city of St. Petersburg translated them.

2 A love feast in connection with this day anticipated the “marriage supper of the Lamb.”

3 From a contemporary report: *“Diese mußten es sich sogar gefallen lassen daß sie auf der Straße beim Vorbeifahren, Peitshenhiebe um die Ohren bekamen.”*

4 That this Scripture (1 Cor. 2:2) became the unofficial slogan of the renewal movement in Russia may reflect the influence of Ludwig Hofacker, who had made it his personal resolve and whose sermons many colonists read.

5 Cornelius Krahn, *Mennonite Encyclopedia*

6 One of four villages founded near the Molochna Mennonite colony by the independent *Evangelische Brüdergemeinde* of Württemberg, in 1833. They had come east after reading Hans Hermann Jung-Stilling’s books and hoped to go on to Ararat to meet Christ. But tribal wars in that region had detained them.

[1](#) *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren: Volume II (Das Klein Geschichtsbuch)*

## An Explosion

Late at night, the spark lit up a room in a German settler's house on the Molochna. Several families from the "awakened" village of Gnadenfeld. A few Bible students. A German Pietist preacher. . . . All it took for the Spirit of Christ to begin shaking southern Russia and to draw hundreds of thousands of people into a new awareness of his presence was a group of believers to gather in a clandestine communion service.

Because they loved Christ the *Stundisten* of the Molochna village of Elisabeththal (those who met for prayer and Bible study in their homes) desired to break bread and drink wine together every week, like the early Christians. They asked the elder of their Mennonite congregation for permission to do so, but he did not give it. Then they had more questions. "Is it right for us to hold back from obeying what the Spirit of Christ tells us because of the commandments of men? What about Acts 5:29?"

Finally, in unanimous agreement, the Stundists decided to do what was right no matter what happened. They met at the Kornelius Wiens home in Elisabeththal, broke a common loaf of bread and passed a cup of wine to all.

Within hours, word of what happened began to spread.

### Brotherly Community

As soon as the Molochna colony leaders learned of the meeting at Elisabeththal they called for the Stundists and forbade them ever to hold unauthorised communions again. Reading Hebrews 13:17 and other similar Scriptures they tried to show them from the Bible that only "properly ordained" elders may serve the bread and wine. They also warned the believers that should they persist in their error, the church would not only ex-communicate them. They would turn them over to the civil authorities (the *volost*) and the Russian police.

The Stundists could not turn back.

They kept on having communion services and committed themselves one to

another in a new *Brüdergemeinde* (brotherly community) after the pattern of Herrnhut, the first Anabaptists, and the Lord's church in Jerusalem.

## In the Ban, but Joyful

Not only did the colony leaders deliver the new brotherhood unto Satan. They delivered it to the civil authorities, "for its promptest suppression with whatever means necessary to curb its spread and to exterminate it entirely." After this, all

<sup>1</sup>  
who belonged to it could no longer buy or sell from their neighbours. Stores closed down. Factories and mills came to a standstill (for the dismissal of labourers or managers), and growing numbers on both the Molochna and Khortitsa colonies found themselves in jail, doing forced labour, or threatened with exile to Siberia.

Local authorities refused to give passports or marriage licenses to the believers, forcing them to travel illegally and to register their children as illegitimate. On some occasions, when new converts headed to the river for baptism, angry villagers drove them away with sticks. But opposition only fanned the awakening.

On March 18, 1862, the first nineteen converts on the Khortitsa colony followed Abram Unger and his wife to the Dnepr. Not far from the village of Einlage (across from Zaporozhye) they made a hole in the ice and Abram baptized them one by one. A fisherman saw them and reported them to the authorities. Shortly afterward the colony volost imposed a ten o'clock curfew and published a notice:

Mennonites these people no longer want to be, and by their actions they prove they no longer belong to us. They fear no admonition or warning for they believe themselves to be born again and to follow the Spirit of God. Therefore we must resort to police force to keep these dangerous people in bounds. Village leaders shall most emphatically forbid them to gather in homes or to try to convert others. They shall be commanded to disperse and if they fail to obey, they must be arrested and conducted by force back to where they belong. After ten o'clock no one is to be about on the streets. In the villages of Einlage and Khortitsa guards shall be placed on the streets to make sure this is carried out. The volost asks all to withdraw themselves from these sectarians and do no business with them whatsoever. Perhaps through this means, and through the application of police <sup>2</sup> methods, these erring ones can be brought back to their senses.

Secret meetings continued.

So did arrests. Men, partially drunk to keep up their courage, fell on believers anywhere, but usually at night to avoid a riot. When they dragged Wilhelm Janzen, a Khortitsa resident before his village court to face the question why he disobeyed the law he answered, "I must obey God before men!"

In a rage, the village leader jumped on him, ripped off his shirt (tearing it to pieces in the process) and laid him out for a flogging. He took the rod himself and whipped him as hard as he could. Then, without returning his coat, the court (among whom sat Wilhelm's brother) locked him up in an unheated cell.

The jailer threw him a chunk of firewood saying, "There you have something to sit on!" But Wilhelm could not sit for his wounds. All night long, his teeth chattering in the cold he paced about to keep from freezing while the presence of Christ came to him with such shining clarity that he remained speechless with wonder and joy.

Several months later a large group of believers fell into the hands of the volost who locked them up in the Khortitsa colony jail, covering its windows to keep onlookers from conversing with them. From Khortitsa they took them to Chornyglas. Along the way and at the Chornyglas jail curious onlookers crowded around them to hear their songs and testimonies.

In jail seven weeks, the prisoners made the most of their opportunity to tell the people of Chornyglas and the soldiers who guarded them about Christ.

## One Faith, One Baptism

On the evening of March 26, 1860, the son of a believing family learned (spying on a meeting of the Molochna volost) that they planned to arrest Jakob Claaszen of Liebenau. He rushed at once to inform him. Jakob was a leader among the Stundists.

Without telling his wife where he went (for her safety in case of interrogation) Jakob fled that night on horseback. For one hundred and seventy five miles up the Dnepr, he fled to Kharkov and caught a ride from there to Moscow on a mail

3  
wagon.

Jakob knew his way around. He had travelled by train from Moscow to St. Petersburg before (on school business) and made his way straight to officials he knew in the Oberprokurator's office. They received him kindly. "You want to have a new church on the colonies? That is alright," they said. "But who are your leaders? One cannot register a church with no one in charge."

Jakob was delighted. He hurried back to the Ukraine and called the brothers together. They chose Jakob Becker and Heinrich Hübert—a quiet pleasant-tempered student of Tobias Voth—as elders, and in Khortitsa Abram Unger. The Ober-prokurator registered their church as the *Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde*

4

(Mennonite Brethren), and the new group got permission to settle in the Kuban river valley between the Black and Caspian Seas.

For the German Stundists this worked well. Local authorities now had to leave them alone and they could meet freely whenever they wanted. But their new elder, Heinrich Hübert, had a maid.

From a Russian village just north of Liebenau, Yelizaveta Kasyanova had known the Hieberts for years. From them she had learned German, and in a *Stunde* (Bible study meeting) at their place she had come to believe in Christ.

Not only did Yelizaveta become a faithful believer. She spoke to her family and to her friends among the Russian young people about Christ. More and more seekers began to meet in her home. But Yelizaveta's father was a rough man and opposed her. When she asked Heinrich Hübert to baptise her, he beat her "until her body streamed with blood." Then, to get her away from the Hüberts, he sent her to work

5

for an un-converted family in the village of Gnadenheim.

In the meantime, in the village of Volovskaya not far from Khortitsa, Gerhard Wieler met regularly with a Russian man and baptised him. Word got around. A

6

headline in an Odessa paper read, "Mennonites Illegally Baptise Two Russians." The man fled to Turkey, but the Stunden in Volovskaya continued.

In 1869, as the brothers Abram Unger, Jakob Koslovsky, and Johann Friesen got ready to baptise a group of converts in the Dnepr, a Russian seeker spotted them from a distance and came running. "Baptise me too!" he cried. "Who will baptise me if you don't?" Abram could not refuse. He baptised Yefim Tsybmal and what followed surpassed everyone's expectations.

## Explosion Upon Explosion

Yefim lived at Karlovka, near Yelizavetgrad. In his village he had been meeting secretly with ten other families who studied the Bible and prayed. Returning from his baptism at Khortitsa he told them of Christ's promise: "He who believes and is baptised will be saved." Several men, including Tryfon Khlystev, Fyodor Golumbovsky and Grigory Voronov asked Yefim to baptise them too. Maxim Kravchenko with many others followed. Within a year Yefim baptised Ivan Ryaboshapka, a serious-minded peasant from the village of Lyubomirka.

Ivan left his farm for long periods and travelled from village to village, calling men and women to repent. In marketplaces he read the Scriptures to crowds that gathered around him. He also baptised and within a year he met Mikhail Ratushny a peasant from Osovna between the Dnepr River and Odessa.

Mikhail, a young farmer, and his wife had studied the Scriptures with their friends in Osovna and the neighbouring vil-lage of Ignatovka. Karl Bonekemper, son of a warm-hearted Prot-estant pastor, had studied with them. Their lives had changed. Their drinking, stealing, and fighting stopped. Not wishing to offend their Orthodox neighbours the believers in the two villages had taken their ikons and left them quietly in the home of the priest. But they had not heard of committing themselves to Christ in believers' baptism. Now, when Mikhail learned of it through Ivan he was overjoyed and asked Ivan to baptise him before he hurried home.

Among the hundreds of Russians Mikhail baptised in turn, was Gerasim Balaban, a peasant from Chaplinka close to Kiev. Through Gerasim the movement spread north and west. But be-fore that took place more began to happen at Sofiyevka, three kilometres from the Mennonite village of Friedensfeld on the Molochna.

## Repentance and New Joy

Pyotr Lysenko, a farm labourer who could barely read, found Christ at Sofiyevka. His father opposed him and threw him, with his young wife, out of the house. But Pyotr did not turn back. Believing villagers (both from Friedensfeld and Sofiyevka) helped him build another house. An awakened Mennonite baptised him and he began to walk the streets of Russian villages shouting for all to hear: "Turn from your sins! Turn to Christ!" Curious people followed him to the place where he would lead them to hold a meeting. Ever growing crowds fell on their knees,



cried to God, and asked for believers' baptism (always done, as in the Russian Orthodox church, by immersion).

From Sofiyevka the Stundist movement (the word *Stundist* itself came into common use among Russians), spread south and east. Andrey Stoyalov baptised wherever he went. Young believers travelling with wheat harvesting crews spread it from Kherson and Kiev through Poltava, Chernigov, Minsk, Mogilev, Orel and Tver. Seekers of all descriptions—Lutheran and Catholic colonists, Old Believers, Don Cossacks, Dukhobors, Orthodox people from all over southern Russia, even some Muslims and Jews—became one in faith and one in baptism with Christ.

Within ten years the movement numbered thousands of souls.

## One in Christ

While Russian and German villagers drawn by the Spirit of Christ entered the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom came to Hutterite colonists along the Molochna River as well.

For years the settlers at Huttertal and Johannesruh had watched with dismay how Molochna colony authorities (Mennonites who had grown spiritually cold) flogged people and put them in jail. "How can you, who refuse to go to war, do this one to another?" they asked.

In answer, the authorities took the Hutterites' young people and scattered them throughout the Molochna villages. With harsh words and rough treatment they hoped to "rid them of silly ideas" and accustom them to the real world. But the young people cried at night and Jakob Walter, their elder at Huttertal, made a trip to the volost office to intercede for them. Unconverted Mennonite officials told him to go home and be quiet or else they would arrest him and send him to Yekaterinoslav. Another old Hutterite brother who tried to speak to the volost authorities got a rough answer: "There you stand with your beard down to your

navel and it seems your wits have grown whiskers too! What you say is not true!" <sup>7</sup>

This conflict did nothing but convince many Hutterites that the way their ancestors had chosen in Austria was indeed the way of Christ. Self denial, the giving up of private property, and nonconformity to the world began to make sense to them like never before—all the more so, as they turned to Anabaptist writings they had with them and began to read with joy and tears how believers in Christ had lived

before them. On October 20, 1848 Hutterite leaders signing their names Yakov Walter, Igor Waldner, Ivan, Igor, and Mikhail Gofer, Daryus Walter and Andrey Stahl sent a letter to the tsarist colonial office in Odessa:

Many years ago our forefathers founded a Christian community in accordance with the words of our Saviour and his apostles in the Holy Scripture. A house of brotherly community was built and all lived together there. The whole community was like one family. The old, crippled, sick, and weak, the widows and orphans were given a home and were provided by the community with clothing and what-ever they needed. After many years had passed like this, in brotherly love, some grew dissatisfied, bringing about a change of location for the church. When communal living was abandoned we moved to the Molochna River in the Aleksandrovsky district of Tavrichesky (Taurida) province. . . . Now we are sorry we did not persist in brotherly community of goods.<sup>8</sup>

The Hutterite elders explained their dissatisfaction with the internal government of the Molochna colonies and in another letter gave their reasons for returning to brotherly community:

We recognise in the depth of our hearts that the more time passes, the further we stray from the true way that Christ trod before us, the way we deserted over thirty years ago. Therefore we have decided with God's help to seek again what we have lost. . . . Christ says, "No man can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money." When one master says, "Renounce everything you have," and another master says, "Keep everything you have," we have to follow one or the other.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, after several years of inner conflict, thirty-three Hutterite families moved to a Russian woman's estate near Orechov, a hundred kilometres north of the Molochna River, and founded a new colony they named Hutterdorf. Not everything worked as they had hoped. After a few years their attempt at setting up an Anabaptist community farm collapsed. But the dream did not die, and a young man who worked in the smith's shop—Michel Waldner—had a literal dream.

To the shock of those with him, Michel suddenly fainted. Not sure whether he was dead or alive his companions did what they could to bring him to, but he remained unconscious until he awoke with a desire to talk to Jakob Hofer, a Servant of the Word (Hutterite leader) living in the village. "While I was unconscious I saw an

angel,” he told Jakob Hofer. “The angel showed me the host of the redeemed in heaven. They stood in an indescribably beautiful place, praising God. Then he showed me the lost in hell and asked me: Where are those who did not join Noah in the ark?”

Jakob thought about the words and wondered: “Does God want us to return to the ark of brotherly community?” The Hutterdorf colonists, after a period of time, chose Michel to be his assistant leader and the two men discussed the issue further. An anonymous brother wrote what happened:

Finally they came together to pray and said to one another before their prayer: “Whoever will finish his prayer first will stand up and confirm the other with laying on of hands into the membership of the church community. . . . Then they fell onto their knees and prayed very seriously to God that he would help them and grant them his grace to accomplish their undertaking. Jakob Hofer was the first to finish his prayer. He rose up and with the laying on of hands, he accepted Michel Waldner into the membership of the church community. Then Jakob Hofer knelt down and Michel Waldner, with laying on of hands, accepted him. All this happened with the help of God and the support of our dear Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him shall be alone the praise, the honour, and the glory.

After this they accepted their wives and sisters into the church community, and in this way the fellowship of the Holy Spirit was re-established. They brought their goods together and began to go out and preach and teach about the true way. God gave them blessings so that the church community grew and increased.<sup>10</sup>

People called the Hutterdorf villagers who joined Jakob and Michel the *Schmiedeleut* (the “smith people,” because of Michel’s work). A year later, many of the remaining villagers under the leadership of Darius Walter formed another community. They gathered--in friendly fellowship with the first group--at the other end of the village and people called them the *Dariusleut*.

As in days gone by, the brothers and sisters met for daily prayer meetings, and worked and ate together with great joy. The older sisters taught the little children, and the boys worked with groups of men in the fields. Everyone got assigned jobs, and every job had its overseer. Within a few years the Hutterite communities in the Orechov district prospered like they never had before.

## Community in the Caucasus

The Lord Christ who kindly helped the Hutterites in Russia to rediscover his way, helped their Spirit Christian neighbours to find it too.

In 1849, Tsar Nikolai's officials had driven most of the Spirit Christians from the Molochna colonies into the Caucasus. There they settled around Delizan and Kars in Armenia, and around Tiflis between snow capped ranges that end at the Caspian [11](#) Sea.

The Spirit Christians' new home could not have been more drastically unlike the steppes they had known before. Finding their way up rocky trails more than six thousand feet from the valley floor at Tiflis, they followed their guides to the land the government gave them in the Mokrye Gory (wet mountains) of the Muslim and bandit-plagued region. Without money, they built the barest one-room houses with mud and sticks at villages they called Voskresenovka, Nikitino, Troytskoye, Spaskova, and other beautiful Christian names they had used on the Molochna. Molokans and Dukhobors settled close together, and the latter also built large communities at Yelizavetpol and Akhalkalaki in what is now the northeastern corner of Turkey.

Most of this new land was too wet and cold for raising grain. Cattle thieves fell on their herds and the Spirit Christians lived in greatest discomfort and poverty. But the light of the Resurrection had never shone brighter among them. So moved were their neighbours by their nonresistant testimony that hundreds of them joined Spirit Christian congregations. The entire Armenian village of Karakalla got converted and joined the Molokan Prynuny.

Six years after the Prynuny arrived in Armenia, their leader and prophet Anakey Ignatovich Borisov died. He was one hundred and five years old and had suffered sixty-two arrests for preaching the Gospel. After his death other leaders like Fyodor Ossipevich, author of the *Book of Zion* and *The Mirror of The Soul*, took his place. Fyodor, like all Spirit Christians, felt strongly about suffering for what one believed and not fighting back. He wrote:

Our beloved ancestors, with tearful prayers and holy love called us, their followers, to promise to fear God by uphold-ing what we believe with firmness. At the same time, they called on us to be ready to suffer, even unto death, knowing that suffering itself is a gift from God. Living unwaveringly in this manner, let us instruct our children and grand-children from generation to

<sup>12</sup>  
generation.

Fyodor wrote at length about the Ten Commandments and what they mean in light of the teaching of Christ. He preached and took the message of Christ to many places, until the authorities exiled him again—to Rumania. On his way across the Black Sea his ship sank in a storm.

In 1852 a nine-year-old Molokan boy, Yefim Gerasimovich Klubnikin, greeted one of the brothers from the village of Nikitino with a joyful prophecy. That brother, Maksim Gavrilovich Rudometkin began to invite the believers to his house for prayer. There were more remarkable visions—one of them seen by a whole group of people at once. And in 1855 Yefim, who had turned twelve, fell unconscious for eight days. When he awoke he described in detail how troubles would soon come upon them, and how a great migration of the Spirit Christians

<sup>13</sup>  
would take place.

Within a few years the trouble came. Tsarist authorities, alarmed by the rapid growth of Spirit Christian communities in the Caucasus turned to floggings, exile, and once more to persecution of their leaders. In 1858 they arrested Maksim Gavrilovich and walked him in chains to Solovets on the Arctic Ocean. It took him a year and half to get there. For nine years they held him in a subterranean dungeon on bread and water. Then, seeing they could not break him, they gave him an ordinary cell.

In Solovets, Maksim wrote songs and a major part of the *Book of Spirit and Life*, still treasured by Spirit Christian believers. In it he outlined how Christians should live in *obshina* (community of goods), and be totally defenseless. He wrote:

After the rule of the Hebrews with its harsh discipline was over, God Almighty showed himself to us in his only begot-ten Son, Jesus Christ. This put an end to the old, natural, dynasty of the house of David. Through Christ, God gave us a new law and the right way to believe. God now wants the righteous to live always without a sword or weapon and to use no iron rod but the word of God and the Spirit of his wisdom to repel our adversaries.

Little did Maksim know, at the time he wrote this, how the Spirit of Christ would move others to discover the same truth.

## A Soldier and a Sick Boy

In 1853 fighting broke out between Russia and Turkey. France and England got involved (both wanted to keep Russia from conquering Turkey) and all armies met at Sevastopol on the Crimean peninsula.

Bitter fighting and a siege of the city lasted eleven months. In Turkish barracks at Constantinople, where the “lady with the lamp” (Florence Nightingale) made her rounds among the wounded, a young Englishman lay dying. At least he thought he would die, and terrible scenes came up before his eyes.

Nothing had prepared Granville Waldgrave, growing up among cricket players and fashionable parties in his upper class English home, for the dirt, the brutality and terror of war. Even though he was twenty-two, and certainly as British boys thought, “too old to cry,” he could not live with what he saw when he closed his eyes. He saw other boys, Russians, scrambling over the rocks above the Black Sea, yelling what he could not understand but what sounded like prayers to God as they fell, one by one, swatted down like so many flies by British bullets.

In Britain, God-fearing parents had told their sons to pray before they sailed for the Crimean War. Protestant clergymen had blessed them. Victoria, the Bible-loving queen herself, had praised them for their bravery and patriotism and wished them God-speed. But this, Granville felt certain, was not God’s work. It was hell.

Granville had grown up saying his prayers, but never had he prayed in desperation like now. “Lord,” he cried in his heart, amid the groans of suffering men in the night, “if you give me life I will come back to Russia with your Gospel instead of a gun!”

Christ heard his prayer and Granville kept his promise.

For twenty years following his return to England Granville met every week to

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break bread and worship Christ with the “Brethren.” His noble birth earned for him the title of Lord Radstock and he became the owner of a large estate. But Russia did not leave him. He prayed without ceasing for the day the door would open for him to go back.

In the meantime a boy named Mikhail turned sick in St. Petersburg.

Mikhail's father, Grigory Chertkov, was a high-ranking general in the tsar's army. His mother, Yelena, was a vain woman, with her heart on fine clothes and jewelry. But they found Mikhail a good tutor—one of the St. Petersburg believers who had quietly continued during Tsar Nikolai's reign what Sasha Golitsyn and the seekers who gathered around Tsar Aleksandr I had begun. The tutor spoke to Mikhail about Christ, and the suffering boy discovered his healing presence. From that time on, he invited everyone who came to see him to let go of the world and discover him too.

So happily did Mikhail die, and so clear was his vision of Christ and life to come, that his mother and a number of her fashionable friends began to meet for prayer and serious considerations. One of them, the wife of a diplomat, met Granville Waldgrave (Lord Radstock) in a meeting in Paris.

It did not take long for the woman from St. Petersburg and the man from England to discover their common longing. She was as anxious to have him come as he was anxious to go, and with the necessary invitation and legal work in order Granville arrived in Russia, in March, 1874.

Not only did Yelena Chertkova welcome Granville into her home. She invited her sister and her husband, Vasily Alexandrovich Pashkov (one of Russia's wealthiest men), and many of her friends to meet the visitor from England. Granville did not lose the opportunity. At a luncheon served in the Chertkov dining room he began to talk with Vasily about Christ and discovered that for all his money, the man had an unmet need in his life. He longed for something totally different from what St. Petersburg society had to offer, and in Russian fashion, when he made his decision he did not go half way.

Even Granville was startled.

Vasily Pashkov, the millionaire, began to live like Christ. His business, his position, his money, his reputation, nothing mattered. He spoke of Christ to everyone, high or low. He left the army and started giving away fantastic amounts of money to open boarding houses and workshops for the poor, to print literature and to distribute Bibles. By this time Nikolai, "the tsar who froze Russia," had died and Aleksandr II, a less reactionary ruler had taken his place. The Bible

Society had resumed its work and Vasily Pashkov, Count Bobrinsky (the minister of transportation), Baron Modest Modestovich Korf, the Countess Lieven (wife of the tsar's master of ceremonies) and other St. Petersburg seekers arranged

for Granville Waldgrave to speak in their homes.

The meetings were not spectacular. Granville was not a dramatic speaker, let alone in Russian. But they broke bread every week and fine parlours took on the atmosphere of his birth as stable boys and barons, cook's helpers and ladies of the tsar's court knelt in quietness and tears in his presence together. In "Brethren" fashion, they chose no clergy but allowed everyone to participate as he felt led.

Attendance in meetings at the Pashkov home grew rapidly from a dozen to five, six and seven hundred people or more.

## Bible Peddlers

During the time the Lord Christ accomplished so much in Russia he also reached [16](#) down and touched a young Nestorian Christian with his Spirit, in Persia. The young man's name was Yakov. After he became aware of Christ he set out to find his brother who had left home.

Yakov Delyakov travelled north through the Caucasus and took the new railroad from Baku on the Caspian Sea to Rostov. He found his brother, by now a drunkard and married to a Russian woman. But something else he found excited him more. Wherever he went and talked about Christ he found open doors.

Someone told Yakov about the Bible Society in St. Peters-burg. He wrote and made his first order. So many Bibles did he ask for that Vasily Pashkov became personally interested in his case and "hired" him to distribute Bibles full time.

That distribution involved ingenuity.

Russian law did not allow Yakov to travel about as an evangelist. So with Vasily Pashkov's help he bought a horse and wagon, loaded it with pots, pans, and household goods, and set out as a peddler. While offering his wares he took every opportunity to speak of Christ, and if people showed interest, he pulled out a Bible and offered it too.

The results were immediate. Everywhere people discovered Christ and Yakov began to hold meetings. But no result of his travels brought him greater pleasure



than his discovery of the Spirit Christians. Whenever he met them, particularly those of the Postoyanye—the “constant” Molokans of whom many remained in regions other than the Caucasus—Yakov felt innerly drawn to them. He admired

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their quiet ways, grounded on conviction. Their thrift and industry spoke to him. Beyond that, the interest was mutual. The Molokan brothers, after the unrest created among them by some prophets who claimed “Spirit manifestations,” had misgivings about following an “inner light” too far and taking the Scriptures too lightly. A renewed and very serious interest in the Scriptures led them to welcome Yakov Delyakov with open arms. Relationships between them grew even warmer after Yakov married a Molokan widow whose son, Ivan Zhidkov, became his helper and successor in the work.

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Like Yakov Delyakov—*Kasha Yagub* as people knew him in his older years—two other men distributed Bibles in Russia with Vasily Pashkov’s help.

The first, calling himself Ivan Vasilevich, spoke Russian with an accent. On his passport his name read John Melville and he came from Scotland. The second one, Martin Kalweit, came from East Prussia. Born into a Protestant family, he had

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found Christ and a German missionary baptised him on confession of faith at Kaunas in Russian held Lithuania in 1858.

No sooner did Martin Kalweit commit himself to Christ in baptism than he offered to distribute Bibles through the Baltic countries and Russia. Like Yakov Delyakov, he moved about as a tradesman, and like Yakov he found the Spirit Christians.

Thanks to Yakov’s work among them, the Molokan brothers of Russian Georgia—by the time Martin Kalweit arrived with his wife and children to live among them—were well informed and kindly disposed to the Bible Society. But they had not heard of believers’ baptism.

In Tiflis Martin Kalweit came to know a Molokan tea merchant named Nikita Isayevich Voronin. They became friends. The more they spoke of the way of Christ, the more his Spirit drew them together. Finally Nikita told Martin: “Baptise me!” and Martin could not refuse.

They went out at night. In a small stream flowing into the Kura River Martin baptised Nikita and many other baptisms followed. A major part of the “constant”

Molokans in Georgia joined their fellowship and people began calling them “New Molokans.” Among themselves they preferred the name “Evangelical Christians.”

## Oil Makes Light

Slow, wavering songs, women in long dresses and with their heads covered, old men with untrimmed beards, bread and salt, umilenie—as untold numbers of Spirit Christians, Old Believers, and converts from the Orthodox church became one in spirit with Anabaptists, Pietists, and the Brethren at St. Petersburg, Christ’s Church in Russia revived. And with that revival, as always, came persecution.

An old Russian proverb says: “The pressing of olives makes oil, and oil makes light.” Nothing could better describe what happened to Russia’s believers in the last half of the 1800s.

After holding great meetings on the Molochna Mennonite colony and in St. Petersburg, the Stundists attracted the Ober-prokurator’s attention and many got arrested. A few believers, like Vasily Pashkov and Modest Korf, got sent out of Russia. The rest returned to functioning “underground.” In the south Ivan Ryaboshapka got arrested. Heinrich Hübert, suspected of having baptised his maid (actually another man, Abram Dueck, had done it but Heinrich would not tell) spent a year in jail. Groups of newly converted villagers who handed in their

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ikons fell prey to savage arrests, interrogations, and floggings. Tsarist officials

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stamped their passports with the word Stundist, “so that no one will accept them for work or lodging, and life in Russia will become too costly for them.”

The fact that Russian believers questioned the state church (and by way of implication, the state itself) troubled the Ober-prokurator. But nothing perhaps, troubled him more than to see how they not only survived, but flourished, under persecution. Whoever joined them, it seemed, learned how to read. Their immorality and drinking came to an end. They picked up the garbage, cut the weeds around their yards and even their crops and gardens (for the care they received) grew better. The wives of evangelical believers looked happier than others and their children more orderly. Such a movement, the Oberprokurator feared, would continue to spread until it resulted in the downfall of Russian “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and peoplehood.”

But those who refused to conform to the world because their minds had gotten transformed, rejoiced in the Kingdom of Heaven. Among them was a boy

called . . .

1 Even at public sales, auctioneers refused to take the believers' bids.

2 *Zirkular des Khortitzaer Gebietsamtes erlassen am 28. Februar, 1862*

3 When the men came to arrest Jakob Claaszen and found him gone they were enraged and the other villagers harassed his wife and family. An old man who met one of the little Claaszen boys on the street frightened him by asking: “*Na, du tjliena fromme Diewel, wua es dien Foda?*” (Well, you pious little devil, where is your Dad?).

4 Even though the new group in Russia resembled the Moravian *Brüdergemeinde* from whom they took their name, they remained distinctly Anabaptist (nonresistant, nonconformed, practicing believers' baptism, etc.)

5 There she prayed much. The woman for whom she worked found her in prayer one day and recognised her own need. Both she and her husband got converted, followed by the bar tender of Gnadenheim and many others in the village.

6 Even though the Oberprokurator had given the Mennonite believers freedom to baptise converts among themselves, to baptise or even meet to study the Bible with members of the Russian Orthodox church was a serious offence, punishable with exile to Siberia, or worse.

7 By this time most Mennonites were shaving off their beards and made fun of the Hutterites whom they called *die Bärtige* (the bearded ones). Huttertal and Johannesruh appear in official Molochna records as *die bärtige Nummer* (villages of the “bearded numbers”).

8 *Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren: Volume II*

9 *ibid.*

10 *ibid.*

11 The three areas are now in Armenia, Turkey, and Georgia.

12 *Book of Spirit and Life*

13 His prophecy reached fulfillment when the Molokans moved to Mexico, California,

and Arizona in the early 1900s.

[14](#) a British renewal group often called “Plymouth Brethren” from one of their first meeting places

[15](#) The Bible in modern Russian was completed and published in 1876.

[16](#) For well over a thousand years the Nestorians, a Christian sect from the fourth century, had survived in Zoroastrian and Muslim Persia.

[17](#) Frederick C. Coneybear who travelled in Russia during the 1800s wrote: “In the Caucasus I have passed through many Molokan villages in early spring and in late autumn. Their dwellings are usually of wood, but sometimes of stone, often built in gardens surrounded by walls. Everything is neat and clean, and everywhere an air of sobriety and quiet industry prevails. It is a pleasure to see their stalwart tidy wives sitting outside their houses in the sun, working at their sewing, the snow still around their feet at the close of winter, which in the highlands between Tiflis and Yerevan is severe.”

[18](#) Father Jacob

[19](#) of the Baptist Church

[20](#) to avoid charges of desecration

[21](#) So much a part of Russian vocabulary did this German term become that even a train station in the Ukraine got the name *Stunde*. When Yakov K. Dukhonchenko asked its residents a century later (during communist times) the reason for the name, they told him, “A long time ago some people called Stundisten lived here. They lived in peace and loved one another.”

# 14

## Ivan

At first they seemed unreal—blue mountains emerging from the haze above the southern horizon. Never had Stepan, twenty-year-old Molokan believer in a linen shirt, leading a horse and cart with his young wife, his mother and her sister, seen mountains. Let alone snow-capped mountains! But the road from Saratov on the Volga had been long. The spring of 1862 had turned to early summer and their destiny, Vladikavkaz at the foot of the Caucasian Mountains, lay just ahead.

Stepan Prokhanov with his family was only a small part of the Spirit Christian migration to the south and east during the mid 1800s. Like those from the Molochna River colonies they left most of their belongings behind. But the Prokhanovs did not come from the Molochna. They came from Saratov, one of the earliest regions affected by the Spirit Christian movement. And to the older women on the cart and Stepan—serious-minded and willing to work—the prospect of settling in a new land where they hoped the tsar would leave them alone, looked bright.

In reality, it was not a new land.

### Caucasia

Cyrus, in the prophet Daniel's time, already knew the Caucasus—a great mountain barrier between the Black and Caspian Seas. He knew its hidden valleys and the mountain tribes who lived there. To Alexander the Great and his Greek voyagers it was Colchis, land of the Golden Fleece. Early Christians settled there (in Armenia and Georgia). Mohammed's missionaries reached the Azerbaijan city of Bakir on the Caspian Sea, and now, since the time of Tsar Peter the Great and Turkish threats from the south, the kingdoms of the Caucasus had looked to Russia for protection and trade.

Only three years before the arrival of the Prokhanovs and their Spirit Christian friends, the Russian army had driven four hundred thousand Cherkessian Muslims from the Caucasus south into Turkey. Now large tracts of land lay empty and Tsar Nikolai let undesirable residents from Central Russia and the Ukraine (Molokans, Dukhobors, Mennonite Brethren, and Old Believers) settle there. He ordered a

good road built from the Volga River to the Caucasus and at the foot of Mount Kazbek, his engineers laid out the new city of Vladikavkaz.

## **A New Home and Son**

Hundreds of Molokan refugees settled, like Stepan Prokhanov, on the outskirts of Vladikavkaz. Some of them milked cows and made cheese. Some owned shops along its wide acacia-lined streets. Stepan himself kept bees, tended fruit trees and built a mill on the banks of the Terek River, rushing down from the mountains. And here in Vladikavkaz, on April 17, 1869, he and his wife blessed a new son and named him Ivan.

Ten days after his birth, Ivan suddenly died. They called the elders. They set out the bread and salt, and prepared to read from the Scriptures and pray over the infant's grave. But when the elders came, a strange thing happened. The baby opened its eyes. Was it still alive? Or again?

"Surely this child has a special call from God," the elders said. "The devil tried to kill him, but Christ has rescued him from the grave!"

## **A Nonconformist Legacy**

Already as a preschooler Ivan Prokhanov learned to sing Molokan hymns and read the Bible. With his parents he attended meetings where the brothers and sisters spent most of their time in prayer. But as much as the meetings, or more, long evenings with his family shaped his life. He wrote later:

I will never forget those summer evenings when we sat out-of-doors around the table with a samovar of tea. Father, the two grandmothers (one of them actually my great-aunt) and Gavrilich, an old man who lived with us, would tell stories and we listened to them with glowing eyes and trembling hearts.

The stories about the suffering of the innocent spoke to me. . . . My father told how he was left an orphan as a child. Both grandmothers told of the Molokans' sufferings in the province of Saratov where they were arrested and imprisoned themselves. The thought that such good and innocent people should suffer at the hands of the wicked struck me with wonder.

I considered the grandmothers saintly women, and the stories of their sufferings meant all the more in light of what happened to me. At the primary school we

attended all the students knew my brother and I were nonconformists—Molokans—and were often unfriendly to us. They joked about us and hurled insults at us. Sometimes on the street they took after us with sticks, shouting, “Molokans! Noncon-formists!” But this did not discourage me nor make me ashamed of what we believed. On the contrary, I sensed that it somehow made me a participant of that holy multi-tude who have suffered through the ages for Christ and the truth. To comfort my brother Aleksandr I used to say, “Don’t be afraid Sasha. The One in us is greater than the one in them!”

Close to Stepan Prokhanov’s mill, stood the regional jail. Already as a small boy, Ivan accompanied his father on visits to the prisoners. His father brought them food and money if they needed it. He admonished the wicked, and encouraged the Spirit Christians, Evangelicals, and Old Believers who passed through on their way to exile. Ivan himself became so used to the prison that he made visits to it on his own.

The example of his father in helping the afflicted, and what took place when Ivan was six years old, stayed with him for the rest of his life.

## **Examples and Commitments**

When Ivan was six Nikita Voronin, the tea merchant from Tiflis, came on a visit. Everyone of the Molokan community in Vladikavkaz welcomed him. But what Nikita came to tell, surprised them very much. He said a great number of the Spirit Christians at Tiflis had gotten baptised.

Stepan Prokhanov and the believers around him did not react with displeasure. They looked instead, to the example of Christ, and studied the Scriptures. Then, convinced that Nikita had done the right thing, many of them (including the Prokhanovs) asked for baptism too.

The example of Christ in the Scriptures guided the Molo-kans in all areas of life. Already in grade school Ivan learned the blessings of following it and the terrible things that happen where it is ignored.

Walking home from school one evening, Ivan and his brother saw a *bosyak* (vagrant) on the street. The bosyak was asking a wealthy man on horseback for a kopek with which to find lodg-ing for the night. “Why should I give you money?” the wealthy man responded roughly. “No doubt you would spend it on drink. I will not give you anything.”

The boys watched as the bosyak, his hand outstretched, tottered down the snowy street to a deserted market area. The next morning they found him, a frozen hulk, in a scale shed. About this experience, Ivan wrote:

Since that time I have understood the words of Christ: “Give to him who asks of you,” in an unconditional way.

So easily we shrug off requests for help by pointing to the errors and sins of those who ask. If we, like God, could know the hearts of men, this might be alright. But since we are not like God, our knowledge of man is limited in the extreme, and we err so easily in refusing to help one really in need (one who may perish through our neglect), we dare not turn anyone down. We must “give to him who asks.”

If some of those who receive our help abuse it, the responsibility rests with them, and by helping all we avoid the risk of failing to help the one who really needs it.

If, however, we judge those who ask for help and give to some while refusing to give to others, we may err both ways—by giving to those who will abuse it and by refusing to give to those who are really in need. So the only wise thing to do is obey Christ who says: “Give to him who asks.”

Of course we must decide how much help to give—in proportion to the need and according to our ability.

Even though the Molokans taught against arming themselves and taking part in war, Stepan Prokhanov kept a hunting rifle in his house. On one occasion Ivan took it with him on a walk along the Terek. He saw a bird sitting on a tall stalk of grass and shot it. Hurrying to pick it up he saw what led him to write:

The bird lay on the ground, still alive but with blood on its wings. Its eyes were closing and it was dying. I cannot describe what I felt. The word “murderer” flashed into my mind and I blushed from the shame of a crime committed. An inner voice asked me: “Why have you stopped this life which brought glory to its Creator?” I trembled, and prayed in despair.

When the bird died I buried it in the sand. I did it without thinking why, but now I understand my action. I did it from the instinct to hide the evidence of my crime from the shin-ing sun, the blue sky, and heaven above. But nothing, of course,



was hidden. I vowed then and there, never to go hunting again. I vowed never to take another gun into my hands.

Since that time I have hated everything connected with the taking of life.

Several years later, when Ivan was seventeen, he almost broke that vow.

## **Loving Christ**

As a young teenager, in high school, Ivan began to pay attention for the first time to something totally other than Molokan thought. Tsar Nikolai's long rule had ended and his son's milder rule let the books of modern thinkers from Germany, Artur Schopenhauer, Eduard von Hartmann and Ludwig Feuerbach become popular in Russia. Many whom Ivan knew, both students and faculty at the high school, had declared themselves "nihilists" (from *nihil*, "nothing") and revolted against the established order of the state, the church and the home.

The nihilists were the "hippies" of late nineteenth century Russia. They scoffed at the idea that man is immortal, that God exists apart from human imagination, or that human beings have souls. They wore their hair long, dressed in the sloppiest clothes they could find, and threw rules of propriety and morals to the wind.

Ivan's closest friends, including a boy called Grigory Korsh, were would-be nihilists. Even though their parents hindered them as much as they could, they met in the evenings, and Ivan began to meet with them.

Grigory was the high school nihilist leader. He read the most and had connections. One evening he said, "Watch me over-come life by death!" To the horror of the boys he pulled a bottle of cyanide from his pocket and lifted it to his mouth. Ivan jumped on him and knocked it to the floor. But this experience, combined with his own struggle to overcome sin, led him into a period of dark depression.

Stepan noticed it, and acting on impulse in November, 1886, he hid the hunting rifle that hung in his son's room.

That evening Ivan came home late. His face would have frightened his parents. Beyond what had become his ordinary gloominess, his eyes looked wild. He lit the lamp to take down the gun. But it was gone—and he found a paper lying on the stand beside his bed. In his father's Cyrillic script (he wrote with a large but

careful hand) he read: “Do you love Jesus Christ?”

For a moment Ivan stood, unable to move.

Then he began to cry and reached for his Bible.

Even though he knew exactly where to turn, Christ’s words, “I am the way, the truth and the life. . .” had never come home before. He called his father. His mother came too. They prayed, wept, and rejoiced together, and on January 17, 1887 the New Molokans held another baptism at a bend in the Terek.

Ivan threw himself with all he had into the service of Christ. He returned at once to Grigory Korsh (who had made another unsuccessful attempt at suicide) to tell him of his conversion. At first his friends laughed at him. But before long they saw he was in earnest and took him seriously.

In meetings on the day of Resurrection (Sunday), he began teaching the children and gave his first message to the whole assembly of believers on Christ’s promise:

<sup>[1](#)</sup>  
“Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.”

Several months later he graduated from high school and left for St. Petersburg to study engineering. There he found . . .

<sup>[1](#)</sup> In Spirit Christian meetings everyone was expected to speak. Older men led out in congregational matters, but there was no “clergy.”

## Christ in Camouflage

In the shadow of St. Petersburg's golden-domed churches, in back streets among its palaces, bridges, and squares, Ivan Prokhanov soon made contact with fellow believers. But he learned, just as soon, that his contacts had to remain discreet.

Tsar Nikolai's son had led Russia with an easy hand. Then a terrorist bomb took his life and a grandson, Aleksandr III became tsar. He made a tall man with little black spectacles on the end of his nose—Konstantin Pobedonostsev—his Oberprokuror. People called Konstantin the “Grand Inquisitor.” Like the new tsar he hated democracy and did all he could to keep Russia, the tsar, and Orthodoxy together.

It seemed only too familiar. By the time Ivan reached St. Petersburg, believers all over Russia had returned to meeting in utmost secrecy. Because their mail got censored, they reopened clandestine means of communication and everyone, everywhere, watched what they said. Spies abounded, even at secret meetings.

Ivan did not study long at the National Institute of Technology until he learned what one should not do. As much as mentioning “the working class” (a socialist term) or “repression” could lead to interrogation and arrest. One after another, Ivan saw his companions disappear from class and terrible stories circulated about what happened to them at the Petropavlovsky and Schlies-selburgsky fortresses. But like in grade school at Vladikavkaz, he counted it an honour to identify with the suffering followers of Christ.

### Meetings in The Night

While street lamps came on along the Nevsky Prospekt, and jingling bells warned of swiftly passing sleighs with ladies almost invisible in furs on their back seats, Ivan found his way through St. Petersburg to the houses of his friends. Every Friday night they met at a different place. Every Saturday they informed the believers of the city where to meet on the Day of the Resurrection—a different time and a different place every week, to confuse those who tried to spy on them.

In the workshops of city craftsmen and in hidden rooms of palaces along the Morskaya Canal, they entered cautiously to meetings where they broke bread and shared the wine of communion. Sometimes they met in the coachman's quarters of the palace of the Countess Shuvalov. It stood on the corner of the Moyka and Zymnia Kanavka streets in a beautiful part of the city. The coachman was a believer and the countess herself came to the meetings. At other times they met in government buildings, off hours. Ivan wrote:

Especially do I remember one meeting we arranged in a basement room occupied by a concierge in a military school. One approached the room through long dark corridors that made me think of the catacombs. The concierge stood at the entrance of the first corridor. The visitors came one by one, careful that no one should see them. The concierge passed only those he knew or who came with the recommendation of a known brother. In total silence he led us (perhaps twenty-five people) to his room. We did not sing for fear of being heard. After the meeting was over we all left one by one, with the same precautions.

The meetings were not safe. Everyone who attended did so at the risk of prison, torture, and banishment to Siberia. But no matter what it might cost, the St. Petersburg believers kept on making contacts and more and more seekers became part of their fellowship.

## **Escape**

Ivan was not in St. Petersburg long before he heard and saw evidence of mass migrations from Russia to foreign lands. Aleksandr III and Konstantin Pobedonostsev believed in letting those go whom they did not trust. "Good riddance of bad rubbish," they reasoned. And many who failed to trust them—Old Believers, Spirit Christians, Hutterites and Mennonites—only too gladly took the opportunity. Thousands found their way to Western Europe, North and South America. Others, no doubt remembering Hans Heinrich Jung-Stilling's books, moved east into Tatar lands and Siberia.<sup>1</sup>

## **Back "Underground"**

Those who could not escape Konstantin Pobedonostsev's long arm for lack of funds and legal permission to travel could do nothing but stay behind and suffer—like Vasily Pavlov.

Converted as a young man at Tiflis (he worked for the Nikita Voronin, the tea merchant) Vasily was only married a few years when tsarist officials exiled him to the Ural Mountains. His wife could follow him but they lived in miserable poverty. Four years later, on his return to Tiflis, the same officials asked him to sign a document declaring he would stop preaching and baptising. He refused. Much against the authorities' wishes, a crowd of relatives and friends gathered at the train station to see him off—this time to exile in the Kirgiz steppes south of the Aral Sea.

Once more Vasily's wife and children followed him. But conditions were bad. She died of cholera. So did three of the children. One of his two remaining sons drowned in the Amu Darya River and Vasily took it as a sign that God wanted him to spend his life as an itinerant evangelist.

Hundreds of those to whom he preached got sent in turn—in box cars with no sanitary facilities, poorly fed, in chains, and with half-shaven heads—to Siberian and Armenian prison camps. Their leaving brought unspeakable hardship to the families they left behind. But nothing, perhaps, struck terror to the hearts of believing parents like the threat of having their children put out for adoption or placed in monasteries. A believing woman from near Yekaterinoslav in the Ukraine, described an arrest:

In the morning, people began to get together in our village. They came from all the surrounding villages and khutors. Some came in wagons and others with sleds because it had already snowed. Policemen came on foot and on horseback. We were surprised and started to ask what was going on. "They are going to take away the Stundists' children," they told us. A commotion began in the houses of all believers that had children. They arrested some of the men—Grigory Cherdak, Yevstakhy Likhogray, Grigory Volochay and others—and took them to the police office. . . .

"Now you Stundists," began the priest who awaited them there, "up to now, as your shepherds, we have used words to persuade you to return to Orthodoxy. But from now on we will use force. We have received notice from the governor to "reconvert the Stundists using every means necessary." You must give us a signature that you are returning to the Orthodox Church. Anyone who does not comply will have his children taken away. Come now! Sign!"

Not one of the men obeyed.

"Go on," said the priest to the officers.

The men knew where the priest was sending them, but could do nothing about it for they were under guard.

A turmoil began throughout the village. A crowd of people with sticks in their hands, accompanied by police, went in turn to all the houses where baptised believers lived and took away the children, giving them to whoever wanted them. The children screamed and ran bare-footed through the snow from one street to another. They hid themselves in haystacks, but were found, put on sleds and taken to the administration office where the police sorted out who would be given to whom.

The children of my husband's brother ran to us, bare-footed and without their over clothes. They wanted my husband to protect them. A crowd was chasing after them. My husband let the children into the house, but went out himself to face the people. "Sign your agreement that you are returning to the Orthodox church," said the village police-man.

My husband refused.

Then the policemen asked for the children. "I cannot give them up," my husband said, and called to me, "Close the door!" I did so and put the hook down while he stood out-side to keep people from breaking it down. But they knocked him over, tied him up, and left him on the ground.

"Open up!" the policeman shouted to me.

"I will not," I replied, holding the hook down with my hands.

"Break the door!" screamed the policeman. The people pushed and shook until the hook broke and several men burst into the room, shouting. I trembled with fear.

"Where are the children?" asked the policemen.

"You will have to look for them," I said.

They hunted everywhere but could not find them. "Where have you hidden them?" they shouted, grabbing me by the arms.

The children had hidden themselves under the stove and in the attic. I could see I would have to give them up. I called them but they cried and would not come out.

I had a hard time persuading them. The boys were nine and seven years old, the sons of Grigory Kuchugurny, and someone from Tarasovka got them. Grigory's wife, Darya, was sick in bed with another boy, two years old. For a long time she would not let him go, but they tore him out of her arms. She got worse and died two weeks later.

## **New Friends and Yury**

Among the villagers many turned to Christ, in spite of per-secution, and were baptised. But Ivan found most of the boys at college afraid, or else unwilling, to speak of religion. Two excep-tions, Pavel Zavtschenko and Fyodor Sakharov began to meet with him to study the Bible and pray. Several other students from believing homes joined them and Ivan became friends with Heinrich Fast, a young Mennonite from the Molochna who had taken a position in St. Petersburg as tutor to the son of a tsarist officer. Heinrich and his new wife, Olga, attended the meetings. Olga was an intelligent woman and Ivan enjoyed visiting with both of them. But no one fascinated him more than her brother Yury, who had brought her to Christ.

Yury Gorynovich, the son of a Ukrainian priest, had been a nihilist. With his friends he had let his hair grow long and lived a wild life. They got into socialist terrorism, and while still in high school, Yury fell into the hands of the police.

His mother and father came to see him in jail. They cried and pled with him to cooperate with the police who had told him if he would inform on the rest of his group they would let him go free. Finally Yury consented and told the police what they wanted to know.

A short time later some of his friends took him for a walk. In a lonely place in a park they struck him down and poured sulphuric acid over his face. Thinking him dead they let him lie, beyond recognition. But he was not dead.

Someone found him and carried him to a hospital. Yury never knew the details. All he remembered was coming to, weeks later, missing both eyes, his nose, one ear, and part of his mouth. His right arm was paralyzed.

They sent him to St. Petersburg to a hospital for the incurably diseased. There he lay, so frightfully disfigured that no one could stand to look at him. He pled with the doctors to let him take poison but they did not give him any. Then Vasily Pashkov came.

Vasily regularly visited hospitals. Many were glad to see him, but Yury, in his slurred speech without lips, cursed him. He cursed God, himself, his parents, his friends—everything he knew or could think of, and the doctors who kept him alive.

Vasily did not insist. But his heart went out to the young man and he prayed for him. Within a few weeks a nurse from the hospital sent him a message to come again. Yury wanted to see him.

Vasily hurried back. It turned out that Yury had heard Stundists singing in an adjoining cell while in a Ukrainian prison. A seed had been planted. Vasily had watered it, and now it began to sprout.

Yury repented with all his heart, thanking God for what had happened to him. He left the hospital (always wearing a mask that totally covered his face) got married to a Christian girl and before the tsar's assassination they started a home for blind children, sponsored by Vasily Pashkov.

Yury told his family members and friends about Christ. But nothing convinced more people of his conversion than when his “murderers” came to trial and he publicly asked the court to let them go free. “Let my suffering suffice for them,” he said. “All I want for them is to find Christ and become as happy as I.”

## **Beseda**

During St. Petersburg's short summer, the believers met in woods and open fields around the city. In spite of the danger, crowds came to worship and baptisms usually followed. Ivan often spoke at these meetings but the day the police found them and broke up their assembly his friend Sergey Alekseyev was leading out. They arrested Sergey and sent him to a prison camp for eight years. After that he got five years more.

Ivan felt sorry for Sergey and his family. He felt sorry for believers in scattered fellowships throughout Russia, many of them brutally separated one from another and needing the prayers and encouragement of others. Then, while doing an exam at the college in 1889 an idea came to him: “Why not have an informative church periodical?”

The very idea of a periodical for the “underground” church, most would have said, was laughable. For nonconformed believers to publish anything at all, let alone a periodical, was illegal. But Ivan began to think. When he returned home on



vacation in May, he discussed it with his brother Aleksandr.

Aleksandr (they still called him Sasha at home), had become a genius in his own right. He loved to invent things and in no time had a curious-looking hectograph machine ready to use.

Ivan typed up the first articles. Local believers, using Bible pseudonyms,

<sup>3</sup>

contributed. The excitement—even of seeing the clandestine copier hidden in the boys' bedroom—was catching. But the reception of the first issue of *Beseda* (Conversations) far exceeded their highest hopes.

The boys sent it out in registered envelopes and carefully worded its contents not to reveal who sent it. They mailed it to Mikhail Ratushny, Gerasim Balaban and other Stundist leaders in the Ukraine. They mailed it to the congregations founded by Yakov Delyakov, the Mennonite colonies, and all the believers they knew of throughout central Russia, Siberia and the vast northern regions.

Everywhere, word came trickling back through secret channels of its joyful reception. Believers everywhere wept as they read reports—even though with camouflaged names and details—of others who suffered and stood for Christ. The articles spoke of nothing but hope and imminent victory.

No doubt many of the papers got intercepted. At best there was only one for every region, and they got passed on in secret from one family to another and from one village to the next. But after the first issue everyone knew that *Beseda* had to continue. In the fall, when Ivan returned to St. Petersburg, he found no one more excited about the new periodical than Heinrich and Olga Fast. They offered to help him with it and he moved in with them.

## **Meeting With a Tolstovets**

After his third year of study in St. Petersburg, Ivan did a summer assignment as a railroad engineer in southern Russia. He enjoyed the work but got laid up with malaria at Novorossysk. There a *tolstovets* (disciple of Lev Tolstoy) came to see him.

For several hours Ivan and the Tolstovets, a boy called Viktor Alekhin, talked about Christ's example and what to do with it. In one way Ivan felt Viktor (who wore rough clothes and boots and spoke like a peasant, in spite of his education)

was mistaken. Following Christ involves more than rejecting wealth and power and identifying with the poor. But on the other hand Ivan sensed that this, Christ's radical otherworldliness, had indeed been the way of Russia's believers through a thousand years. It was what transformed their faith from a bare concept into shining reality, mysterious to the established and comfortable but well-known to those who suffer.

The more he thought about Christ and his church, the better Ivan understood what Aleksey Khomyakov wrote about:

The church is a collection of men (all without distinction of clergy and laymen), who have become bound together by love. . . . It is not a matter of which church, who's church, or whether the church has the correct authority. Rather we must know where the church is. The church is in the heart and in the community of the humble poor.<sup>4</sup>

Ivan also thought much about a poem Fyodor Tyutchev had written:

Land of long patience, country of the Russian people with your poor villages and nature parsimonious in her gifts,

Never can the foreigner's proud glance fathom the fire that burns so mysteriously beneath your poverty.

Bowed under the load of the cross, the King of Heaven in the linen shirt of a lowly peasant has journeyed over you from one end to the other, bestowing on you his blessing.

The church of the poor. A mysterious, unquenchable, fire of faith. Christ in a peasant's disguise. Committed to walking with him, Ivan returned to St. Petersburg, and after his graduation to central Russia, where he learned about . . .

<sup>1</sup> Among those who moved east was a group led by Klaas Epp, a Mennonite from Saratov, and Abram Peters from the Molochna River settlement. In long wagon trains they travelled through Uralsk and Chimkent to Kaplanbek on the mouth of the Syr Darya, and from there to the Khanate of Khiva. Many died on the perilous two thousand kilometre journey. Those who did not, passed through terrible times of turmoil and deception. But the Lord Christ was kind to them and the settlements they established survived.

[2](#) In this case an order came, after a month, to return the children. But others were not so fortunate. Count Lev Tolstoy wrote a letter to the Oberprokuror and Tsar Aleksandr III, protesting this inhumane breaking up of families.

[3](#) Ivan chose Zacchaeus for his own pseudonym, in spite (or perhaps because) of the fact that he had grown well over six feet tall.

[4](#) Zernov, Nicolas: *Three Russian Prophets*

## The Kingdom Within

While Granville Waldgrave tossed and turned, sick to death and seeing nightmares after the attack on Sevastopol, a boy his age saw the same nightmares on the other side of the line. His name was Lev Tolstoy and he was sick too.

Like Granville, Lev grew up among the wealthy and privileged. Born on Yasnaya Polyana, an estate not far from Tula, his earliest memories were of strolling the park-like grounds with long-skirted governesses while serfs at work among the gardens lifted their caps when he spoke to them in passing. He learned to swim and ride horses. But no amount of wealth could keep his family together.

Lev's mother died when he was two, and his father, Nikolai Tolstoy, seven years later. The aunt responsible for him died when he was thirteen and he moved to Kazan.

In Kazan on the Volga both Lev and his life changed. His brothers introduced him, as a young teenager, to what they knew of manhood: wine, women, and gambling. At sixteen he entered the university, got bad grades, and was soon taking treatment for venereal disease. After three years he dropped out, moved in with friends at Moscow and took to partying and seeing gypsies night after night. "I am living like a beast," he wrote in his diary and disgust at his own behaviour finally drove him into the army.

In 1851 Lev joined his older brother Nikolai, fighting Muslims with Russian troops in the Caucasus. The mountain fighting was tough--ambushes and quick attacks. In one struggle Lev narrowly escaped capture. In another, a flying grenade whizzed past his ear. After three years he found himself at Sevastopol, surrounded by "blood, suffering, and death," and sick of war.

### Money and Power

Nothing struck Lev as a greater tragedy than the lives of the soldiers around him. He saw their simple sincerity. They wanted to be good and have friends. They did heroic things one for another. But wars--and the politicians who plan but do not fight them--he came to see as unspeakably unheroic and evil.

Stories Lev wrote of the fighting at Sevastopol got accepted in a St. Petersburg paper and struck a responsive chord throughout Russia. He wrote more. Literary societies competed to gain him as a member. But he did not need nor want their acceptance. In 1857 he travelled through Germany, England, and France. In Paris he saw an opponent of the state on a guillotine. No sooner did the blade drop and the head fall into a bucket than something else fell into place in his life:

Money and power are the devils of the human race.

## **A Horse Story**

On his return to Russia Lev wrote *Kholstomer*, a story written from the viewpoint of a highly principled horse comparing his situation to that of the ridiculous humans who depended on him. He also wrote a few other stories before turning his back on wickedness in high places and settling down to live among the Russian farm workers he had always known and loved at Yasnaya Polyana.<sup>1</sup>

Lev began a school for the farm workers' children. The joy he discovered among them--little boys and girls, curious, eagerly discussing great things, dressed in linen shirts, full skirts and brightly flowered head scarves like their parents--was mutual. They loved him for a teacher and he wrote simple attractive textbooks for them.

In his early thirties Lev met Sofya, the daughter of Heinrich Behrs, a Moscow doctor. When she was eighteen and he thirty-four they married and began to rebuild the old house at Yasnaya Polyana. (A man to whom Lev had lost a high-staked game of cards in his youth, had carried most of it away, piece by piece.) Then he dug into farming. Soil and crop management fascinated him and the Tolstoy estate, with what became its ninety-six acres of vegetable gardens and orchards, began to produce like never before. Lev kept bees and experimented with fruit trees while Sofya bore him thirteen children (eight of whom reached maturity) in fifteen years.

The story might have ended here, had not Lev's urge to serve his fellow Russians through "irresistible education" driven him to write *Voyna i mir* (War and Peace) the novel that became one of the two or three most famous in world literature.

It took Lev seven years to write it. But after its publication he became a famous and wealthy man. Immediately after this, he wrote *Anna Karenina*.

## Conflict

With their older children needing to study, and--in Sofya's estimation--needing to meet the right people in the right kind of society, the Tolstoys moved to Moscow in 1881. They moved with their servants and staff into a small estate on the outskirts of the city, but Lev was not happy. From their new house he heard factory whistles calling shifts of bleary-eyed, shuffling multitudes--mothers and children among them--to work at bad hours. While the wealthy frisked about Moscow in furs and perfumed gowns, snuggling up in dimly lit theatres or feasting and dancing in lavish homes, the poor worked. And earned little.

Posing as a census-taker, Lev began to tramp the back streets of Moscow taking notes on how people lived. He found many sick and some who had not eaten for days. Everywhere he found filth, drunkenness, corruption (including child prostitution) and despair. His frustration and guilt--worsened by coming back every night to his own comfortable home--resulted in another book: *What then shall we do?*

## Conversion

On top of the guilt he felt for his wealth and privilege, Lev felt hopelessly guilty for his personal sins. So dark and stormy had his struggle become at one point that he lived with lingering temptations to suicide. Then his farm workers at Yasnaya Polyana helped him. They said, "If you are unhappy turn to the Lord and stop living for yourself." Everywhere he heard this among them, the older men making the simple comment, and the young men nodding agreement.

The Lord. Who was he?

Walking through the woods Lev turned to Jesus Christ and experienced his own "resurrection."

"Joyful waves of life welled up inside me," he wrote later, "Everything came alive and took on new meaning."

Along with Christ came a simple understanding: "If one life changes, the world changes with it."

It was simple but electrifying. Suddenly Lev understood what Christ had done. He did not force anyone or anything to change. He simply changed himself, and

untold millions followed.

*Pravda* (the true way of life) Lev suddenly knew, is within everyone's reach. No matter how wicked we are, or how bad our situation, we know good and evil. Good is God. It is the Gospel. It is Christ. Living in its constant awareness our lives become transformed.

After his conversion Lev began every day with a walk he called his morning prayer. But his life did not become "pious" like many westerners would have expected. In true Russian fashion he threw himself into the kind of Christianity symbolised in bread and salt.

"Works of charity will not solve the world's problems," Lev now believed. "They are comparable to a man sitting on a tired worn-out horse who tries to lighten the beast's burden by removing a few coins from his pocket when the essential thing is to dismount." The solution is personal. Every man, every woman must change, one by one. And the change, Lev well knew, would have to start with him. "I take part in crime," he wrote, "as long as I have extra food and someone else has none." So he gave his extra food away.

Everyone should do what he can, Lev believed, and depend as little as possible on the labour of others. He divided his day into four parts. Before breakfast he worked hard--shovelling snow, sawing or splitting firewood to carry to the ten stoves in his house, or hauling water to the kitchen in a barrel on a sled. He began to wear peasant clothes (the linen shirt tied with a cord belt, over loose home-made trousers) and took to ploughing with oxen, cutting hay with a scythe or hauling manure at Yasnaya Polyana.

From breakfast to lunch he wrote. From lunch to the evening meal he worked with his hands, sometimes making leather boots. After that he spent time with his family. Sofya played the piano and he played chess with the boys.

Lev stopped drinking and smoking and wrote a tract against both: *Why Do Men Stupefy Themselves?* In a move toward the Spirit Christians, many of whose beliefs and practices he adopted, he stopped drinking coffee (an imported luxury) and became a vegetarian.

Private property, Lev came to feel, was wrong. He fully intended to give Yasnaya Polyana with everything on it to the people who had worked there for generations.

But his wife interfered and he ended up deeding the estate to her and the children.

## **New Friends and Critics**

Among the teachings of Christ, Lev found none more enlightening than his command in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not resist evil.” Having seen the corruption of war and political violence it made perfect sense to him. He wrote on the subject and in the discussion that ensued he heard not only from Spirit Christians delighted with his new position, but from Mennonites and Quakers as well. He read with great interest a letter from the son of William Lloyd Garrison (the nonresistant anti-slavery prophet of America), the testimony of Petr Chelcicky (forerunner of the Moravian Brethren) and a tract on nonresistance written by a Mennonite minister, Daniel Musser of Pennsylvania. In trips to the Ukraine, Lev made friends with both Spirit Christian and Mennonite colonists. The community of goods among the Dukhobors, the Molokan Pryguny and the Hutterite brothers who had returned to it, fascinated him in particular.

But Lev drew more than friendly response.

Most people who wrote to him, or about him, thought him crazy. Theodore Roosevelt, an American politician, called him a genius “with a complete inability to face facts” and described his writings as “revolting, appealing only to decadents.”

Frederic William Farrar, dean of Canterbury and author of *The Life of Christ* (a best seller through thirty editions) wrote that he did not think it necessary to “forsake all the ordinary conditions of life and take up the position of a common laborer” to follow Christ. To that he added:

With few and rare exceptions all Christians from the days of the Apostles down to our own, have come to the firm conclusion that it was the object of Christ to lay down great eternal principles, but not to disturb the bases and revolutionise the institutions of human society that rest on divine sanctions as well as on inevitable conditions. Were it my object to prove how untenable is the doctrine of community of goods taught by Count Tolstoy . . . something that can only be interpreted on historical principles in accordance to the whole method of the teaching of Jesus, it would require an ampler canvas than I have here at my

disposal.



“What a pity,” remarked Lev Tolstoy on reading this, “that Mr. Farrar’s canvas was not more ample!” In reply he wrote:

Without exception the criticisms of educated Christians are like this. Apparently they understand the danger of their position. Their only escape lies in the hope of overawing people with their church authority, the antiquity of their tradition, or the sanctity of their office. Using these they try to draw people away from reading the Gospels for themselves and forming their own conclusions. They can do this quite successfully, for how would it occur to anyone that what has been repeated from century to century with such earnestness and solemnity by so many important church officials is all a big lie, all an evil deception on their part to hang on to the money they must have to live luxuriously on the necks of other men. Yet it is a deception, and such a poor one, that the only way of keeping it up

[4](#)

consists in overawing people by their earnest and conscientious words.

Robert G. Ingersoll, another important American, dismissed Lev Tolstoy’s newest books with the comment: “Christ’s teaching is of no use to us anymore. It is incompatible with our industrial age.”

To this Lev replied:

Robert Ingersoll has expressed with perfect directness and simplicity how refined and cultured people now look at Christ’s teachings. They consider the existence of this industrial age a sacred fact that should not and cannot be changed. It is just as though drunkards when advised how they could be brought to habits of sobriety should answer that the advice is incompatible with their habit of taking alcohol.

With the ever increasing circulation of his books, hundreds of people from all over the world came to see Lev Tolstoy. The extension table in their dining room, even though it seated fifty, could not always accommodate the guests. And some like Vladimir Chertkov--son of Yelena Chertkova and brother to Mikhail, the sick boy whose testimony brought many to Christ in St. Petersburg--actually moved in with the Tolstoys.

Vladimir Chertkov became one of Lev Tolstoy’s closest disciples and his

secretary. He was also a friend to Ivan and Fyodor who on a trip to the Caucasus visited Yasnaya Polyana together.

## **Mushrooms and a Manuscript**

Ivan Prokhanov described his visit:

In Tula we hired a cab to take us to Yasnaya Polyana. Among the trees on the estate grounds we first saw the white house and a group of ladies playing lawn tennis. Then we saw an old man with rough features, gray hair and a beard, walking toward the veranda. On his head he had a large white cap. He was dressed in a linen shirt, grey trousers and rough boots, looking like a gardener. But we recognized him as Count Tolstoy. He carried a walking stick and was eating a piece of dry bread.

When the Count saw us he came to meet us, and we introduced ourselves to him. He wondered from which school we came and asked us: “Would you like to walk with me on a trail through the woods?” Of course we eagerly agreed and explained our reason for coming: “We want to be Christ’s disciples and would like to hear what you say about following him.”

After our conversation Count Tolstoy asked us whether we preferred to go with him to look for mushrooms or to read the manuscript of his new book, *Tsarstvo bozhiye vnutri vas* (The Kingdom of God is Within You). We preferred to see the manuscript so he climbed through a window into his room, got his copy, gave it to us, and went to the woods with a basket to gather mushrooms.

In the manuscript Ivan and Fyodor came face to face at once with the reason why people stop short of walking with Christ.

## **Hypocrisy**

People do not walk with Christ, Lev Tolstoy explained, because they convince themselves they are what they ought to be. A greedy man, a great landowner, “sends some soup and stockings by his wife or children to a few old widows” and convinces himself he is generous. The man who grows rich from the labour of the poor convinces himself he is doing it for their good. The church leader whose ego and control grows more oppressive by the day convinces himself he defends the truth. The rebel steals and lies convinces himself he does so for the sake of justice. Lev wrote:

We have come to where we are because of our disunity. Our disunity comes from not following the truth that is one, but falsehoods that are many. The only way to bring us all together is to all come to the truth. The more sincerely we struggle for the truth the closer we come to inner unity.

But how can we find unity in the truth or even come close to it, if we fear to come out in the open with the truth we already know--if we say there is no need to do so, and keep on pretending to regard as truth what we know is false?

If today's hypocrisy will continue, if men do not profess the truth they know, but continue to feign belief in what they do not believe and venerate what they do not respect, their condition will remain the same, or even grow worse.

## **Fear**

People stop short of following Christ because they fear the unknown. Lev Tolstoy shared an account from a friend:

A doctor, a psychiatrist, told me how one summer day when he left the asylum the lunatics accompanied him to the street door. "Come for a walk in town with me," the doctor suggested to them. The lunatics agreed, and a small band followed him. But the further they walked down the street where healthy people moved freely about, the more timid they became, and pressed closer and closer to him, making it hard for him to walk. Before long they began to beg the doctor to take them back to the asylum, to their meaningless but customary way of life, to their keepers, to blows, strait jackets, and solitary cells.

This is how men of today huddle in terror and draw back to their irrational manner of life, their factories, law courts, prisons, executions, and wars, when Christ calls them to liberty, to the free and sensible life of the coming age.

To shrink back from following Christ because we do not know where he will take us, Lev Tolstoy said, is as logical as an explorer refusing to enter new territory for lack of a detailed map.

## **A Cup Already Full**

People do not walk with Christ because they think they are already "Christian"

and know all about the Gospel. Lev wrote:

Even in these days when the Gospel has penetrated the darkest corners, Christ's teaching is not understood in its true, simple, and direct sense. This would be inexplicable if there were not several causes to account for it.

One of these causes is that believers and unbelievers alike are firmly persuaded that they have understood Christ's teaching a long time, that they understand it so completely, beyond doubt, and conclusively that it can have no other significance than the one they have given it. They believe this because their false interpretations and misunderstandings of the Gospel have been around for such a long time. Even the strongest current of water cannot add a drop to a cup that is already full.

## **Inertia**

"We all sense the great difference between how things are and how they ought to be," Lev Tolstoy wrote, "but everything is set up to keep things going the way they do." Society operates on a great law of inertia. People keep doing what is wrong even though they know it is wrong, because they all believe change would bring trouble. That is why ordinary people, when they hear Christ's words, think not how to obey them but how to get around them.

To portray the "social inertia" he saw, Lev Tolstoy described a group of soldiers on a train from Moscow to Ryazan.

A nobleman had decided to cut down a patch of woods, but his peasants refused to help him. Their crops had failed and they were starving. On top of that it was fall and they depended on this patch of woods for their winter's heating supply. The nobleman, with high connections in St. Petersburg, had called for troops. Now they came--and Lev Tolstoy happened to meet their train at the Tula station. He wrote:

The train I saw on the 9th of September going with soldiers, guns, cartridges, and rods, to confirm the rich landowner's possession of the woods he had taken from the starving peasants (the woods they needed badly and he did not need at all) was striking proof of how men can do things directly opposed to their principles and their conscience without perceiving it.

The special train consisted of one first-class car for the governor, the officials,

and officers, and several luggage cars crammed full of soldiers. The latter, smart young fellows in their clean new uniforms, stood about in groups or sat swinging their legs in the wide open doorways of the luggage cars. Some were smoking, nudging each other, joking, grinning, and laughing. Others were munching sunflower seeds and spitting out the husks with an air of dignity. Some of them ran along the platform to drink water from a tub, and when they met the officers they slackened their pace, made their stupid gesture of salutation, raising their hands to their heads with serious faces as though they were doing something of the greatest importance. They kept their eyes on them till they had passed, then set off running still! more merrily, stamping their heels on the platform, laughing and chattering after the manner of healthy, good-natured young fellows, travelling in lively company.

They were going to assist at the murder of their fathers or grandfathers just as if going on a party of pleasure, or at any rate on some quite ordinary business.

At the same time Lev Tolstoy observed the soldiers, he saw their authorities:

The governor sat at a table eating something while he chatted tranquilly about the weather with some acquaintances he had met, and on all sides officers bustling noisily about in red uniforms trimmed with gold. One sat finishing his bottle of beer. Another stood at the buffet eating a cake and brushing the crumbs off his uniform before he threw his money down with a self-confident air. Another sauntered before the carriages of our train, staring at the faces of the women.

All these men on their way to murder or to torture the famishing and defenseless ones who provide them their sustenance had the air of men who knew very well that they were doing their duty, and some were even proud, they “gloried” in their work.

How can this be?

All these people are within half an hour of reaching the place where, in order to provide a wealthy young man with three thousand rubles stolen from a whole community of famishing peasants, they may be forced to commit the most horrible acts one can conceive, to murder or torture innocent people, their brothers. And they see the place and time approaching with untroubled serenity.

How can this be?

I know all these men. If I don't know them personally, I know their characters

pretty nearly, their past, and their way of thinking. They certainly all have mothers, some of them wives and children. They are certainly for the most part good, kind, even tender-hearted fellows, who hate every sort of cruelty, not to speak of murder. Many of them would not kill or hurt an animal. Moreover they are all professed Christians and regard violence directed against the defenseless as base and disgraceful.

Lev Tolstoy felt deeply the tragedy of well-meaning people caught in wrong situations not of their own making. But he also recognised that everyone, finally, is responsible for what he does:

A man cannot be placed against his will in a situation opposed to his conscience. . . . If you find yourself in such a position it is not because anyone has forced you into it, but because you wish it.

For this reason, if what you do disagrees with what you believe and your heart tells you, you must ask yourself--if you keep on doing it and justifying yourself--whether you are doing what you ought to do.

## **The Crowd**

Multitudes do not walk with Christ simply because no one has made a start in doing so. Everyone waits on everyone else and thinking everything must be done together. About this, Lev wrote:

The idea is promoted that men should not walk on their own legs where they want and ought to go, but that a kind of floor under their feet will be moved somehow, so that on it they can reach where they ought to go without using their legs. For this reason all their efforts ought to be directed, not to going so far as their strength allows in the direction they ought to go, but to standing still and constructing such a floor. . . .

Men in their present condition are like a swarm of bees hanging in a cluster from a branch. The position of bees on the branch is temporary, and must inevitably be changed. They must start off and find themselves a habitation. Every one of the bees knows this, and desires to change her own and the others' position, but no one of them can do it until the rest of them do it. They cannot all start off at once, because one hangs on to another and hinders her from separating from the swarm. Therefore they just continue to hang.

It would seem that the bees could never escape from their position, just as it seems that worldly men, caught in the toils of their wrong conception of life, can never escape. And there would be no escape for the bees, if every one of them was not a living, separate creature, endowed with wings of its own. Similarly there would be no escape for men, if every one of us were not a living being capable of seeing life like Christ saw it.

If no bee tried to fly, no others would stir themselves, and the swarm would never move. In the same way if no man tried (without waiting for other people) to live like Christ told us to live, humanity would never change. But only let one bee spread her wings, start off, and fly away, and after her another, and another, and the clinging, inert cluster becomes a freely flying swarm of bees. In the same way, let one man look at life as Christ taught him to see it, and after him let another and another do the same, and the spell of wickedness upon them will be broken.

Men seem to think that to set the whole world free like this takes too long and they must find some other way to set everyone free at once. That is as if the bees who wanted to fly away would think it took too long to wait for all the swarm to start one by one, and as if they thought they had to find some way for every bee to spread her wings at the same time and fly at once to where the whole swarm wanted to go. But that is not possible. Until a first, a second, a third, a hundredth bee spreads her wings and flies on its own accord, the swarm will not take off and find a new life. Till every man makes the teaching of Christ his own and begins to live in accord with it, there can be no solution of the problem of human life, and no discovery of a better way.

## **Wickedness**

After discovering the Sermon on the Mount, Lev rejected violence. He came to see that mob action and coercion lead to violence, and that all three are wicked.

Good people mistreat one another simply because “everyone else does it,” he wrote. No one remembers who started it and no one takes it upon himself to stop it. “Social wickedness is like a wicker basket, all woven together. One cannot tell where anything starts or anything ends. We all know it is made of individual reeds but we cannot tell where they come from nor where they go.” Because of this, Lev concluded, societies as a whole become guilty for the violence and injustice they tolerate. “Even the bystanders are guilty for not saying anything.”

## **Submission**

Wickedness, Lev came to see, is tightly bound to submission. Men, too cowardly to act on what they believe and know, find societies just as cowardly and irresponsible to submit to. They hope submission will make up for their lack of moral sincerity.

At the same time, authorities out to advance themselves at the expense of the helpless, wickedly appeal to religious sentiment to get what they want. "Submitting to us," they tell the people, "is submitting to God. If we all work together (that is, if *you* do as *we* say) everyone will be the better for it." But that is a lie. Submission itself can be the basest wickedness and sooner or later, someone must rise to challenge it.

"What drives us to the false conclusion that the existing order is unchanging and that we must therefore support it," Lev asked, "when it is so obvious that the only thing making it unchanging is our continual support?" He fervently hoped that more individuals would soon dare to disobey false authorities to walk with Christ. "Finally conscience does speak and it must speak. Surely some soldier will be the first one to drop his gun and say, 'I will not shoot!'" Referring again to the soldiers on the way to Ryazan, he wrote:

It is true, they have all passed through that terrible, skilful education, elaborated through centuries, that kills all initiative in a man. They are so trained to mechanical obedience that at the word of command: "Fire! All the line! Fire!" and so on, their guns will rise of themselves and the habitual movements will be performed. But "Fire!" now does not mean shooting into the sand like in military school. It means firing on their broken-down, exploited fathers and brothers whom they see in the crowd, with women and children shouting and waving their arms. Here they are--one with his scanty beard and patched coat and plaited shoes of reed, just like the father left at home in Kazan or Tambov province, one with gray beard and bent back, leaning on a staff like the old grandfather, one a young fellow in boots and a red shirt, just as he was himself a year ago--he, the soldier who must fire upon him. There, too, a woman in reed shoes and *panyova* (kerchief), like his mother left at home.

Is it possible they must fire on them? No one knows just what each soldier will do at the last minute. . . .

## **Christ's Greatest Opponent: The Church**

The success of Christian churches, Lev Tolstoy believed, has not been in bringing Christ to the people. It has been in obscuring Christ:



“Strange as it may seem, churches have always been institutions not only alien in spirit to Christ’s teaching, but even directly antagonistic to it. . . . With good

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reason have all or almost all so-called sects of Christians recognised the church as the scarlet woman foretold in the Apocalypse. With good reason is the history of the church the history of the greatest cruelties and horrors. . . .

Churches are not, as many people suppose, institutions with Christian principles as their basis that have just strayed somewhat from the correct path. As bodies asserting their own infallibility they are institutions opposed to Christianity. Such churches and Christianity not only have nothing in common. They represent two principles fundamentally opposed and antagonistic to one another. One represents pride, violence, self-assertion, stagnation and death, the other, meekness, penitence, humility, progress, and life.

Proud churches that have become Christ’s enemies call the friends of Christ heretics. Lev wrote:

Strange as it may seem to us who have been brought up in the erroneous view of the Church as a Christian institution, and in contempt for heresy, the fact remains that only in what was called heresy has any true movement, that is, true Christianity, existed. And that only as long as those movements did not petrify into the fixed forms of a church as well.

Heresy is the obverse side of the Church. Wherever there is a church, there must be the conception of heresy. A church is a body of men who assert that they are in possession of infallible truth. Heresy is the opinion of the men who do not admit the infallibility of the church’s truth.

Heresy makes its appearance in the church. It is the effort to break through its petrified authority. All striving after a living understanding of Christ’s teaching has been done by heretics. . . . It could not be otherwise.

Not only do churches call true believers heretics. They promote heresy (the heresy of division) themselves. Lev wrote:

While believers were agreed among themselves and the body was one, it had no

need to declare itself a church. It was only when believers split into opposing parties, renouncing one another, that it seemed necessary to each party to confirm their own truth by ascribing to themselves infallibility. The conception of one church only arose when there were two sides divided and disputing, who each called the other side heresy, and recognised their own side only as the infallible church.

Not only have churches never bound men together. They have always been one of the principal causes of division between men--of their hatred for one another, of wars, battles, inquisitions, massacres of St. Bartholomew, and so on. And certainly, churches have never served as mediators between men and God. Such mediation is not wanted, and was forbidden by Christ who revealed his teaching directly to every man.

Not the least of the church's wiles against the Gospel is its maintenance of un-Christ-like traditions. Lev Tolstoy wrote:

Far from revealing Christ, churches obscure him from the sight of man by setting up dead forms in his place. . . . To expect to know what Christ taught by looking at churches who only keep outward forms of Christianity is like expecting a deaf man to know how music sounds from watching the musicians' movements."

### **The Church's Greatest Opponent: Christ**

The Gospel, if left to itself, will undo the church. Lev wrote:

A man has only to buy a Gospel for three kopeks and read its plain words to be thoroughly convinced that the church leaders who call themselves teachers in opposition to Christ's commands, and dispute among themselves, constitute no kind of authority, and that what the churchmen teach us is not Christianity.

Let the church stop its work of hypnotising the masses and deceiving children, even for the briefest interval of time, and men would begin to understand Christ's teaching. But this understanding will be the end of the churches and all their influence. For this reason they will not for an instant relax their zeal in hypnotising grown-up people and deceiving children. This is their work: To keep themselves going (and this they believe their religious duty) the churches continue to force misconceptions of Christ's teaching on men, and do what they can to prevent the majority of people from understanding what he said.

The churches cannot but persecute and refuse to recognise all true understanding of Christ's words. They try to hide this fact, but in vain, for every step forward in following Christ is a step toward their destruction.

## **An Incomplete Understanding**

“The less men understand what they are talking about,” wrote Lev Tolstoy, “the more confidently and unhesitatingly they pass judgment on it.”

Everything we understand from the Bible, he believed, is partial. But only true followers of Christ will admit that:

The follower of Christ does not claim for himself nor for any other that he understands Christ's teaching fully and fulfils all of it. Still less does he claim it for any group of people.

To whatever degree of understanding and perfection the follower of Christ may have come, he always feels his imperfection and strives toward understanding and living out the teachings more completely. To claim that one (or the group to which one belongs) is in possession of the perfect understanding and fulfilment of Christ's word, is to renounce the spirit of Christ himself.

## **False Authority**

The easiest way to get around Christ, Lev Tolstoy believed, is to make claims of antiquity and authority. But much authority (for as ancient and well established as it may be) is totally false. He illustrated this with the story of a Molokan boy before a military tribunal:

At a table before the zertzal--the symbol of the Tsar's authority--in the seat of honour under the life-size portrait of the Tsar, sit dignified old officials, wearing decorations, conversing freely and easily, writing notes, summoning men before them, and giving orders. Here, wearing a cross on his breast, near them, is a prosperous-looking old priest in a silken cassock, with long gray hair flowing onto his cope, before a lectern adorned with a cross and a Gospel bound in gold.

They summon Ivan Petrov. A young man comes in, wretchedly, shabbily dressed, and in terror, the muscles of his face working, his eyes bright and restless, and in a broken voice, hardly above a whisper, he says: “I . . . by Christ's law . . . as a Christian . . . I cannot.”

“What is he muttering?” asks the president, frowning impatiently and raising his eyes from his book to listen.

“Speak louder,” the colonel with shining epaulets shouts at him.

“I . . . I as a Christian . . .” And at last it appears that the young man refuses to serve in the army because he is a Christian.

“Don’t talk nonsense. Stand to be measured. Doctor, may I trouble you to measure him. He is alright?”

“Yes.”

“Reverend father, administer the oath to him.”

No one is the least disturbed by what the poor scared young man is muttering. They do not even pay attention to it. “They all mutter something, but we’ve no time to listen to it. We have to enrol so many.”

The recruit tries to say something still: “It’s opposed to the law of Christ.”

“Go along! Go along! We know without your help what is opposed to the law and what’s not, and you soothe his mind, reverend father, soothe him. Next: Vasily Nikitin.”

And they lead the trembling youth away. And it does not strike anyone--the guards, or Vasily Nikitin whom they are bringing in, or any of the spectators of this scene, that these inarticulate words of the young man, suppressed at once by the authorities, contain the truth, and that the loud, solemnly uttered sentences of the calm, self-confident official and the priest are a lie and a deception.

## **Conviction**

No matter how cruelly false authorities oppress it, Lev Tolstoy believed that as long as some people walked with Christ, conviction for truth would survive. He wrote:

They may subject the follower of Christ to all manner of external violence. They may deprive him of bodily freedom. But they cannot force him, by any danger or threat of harm, to perform an act against his conscience.

They cannot compel him to do this, because the deprivations and sufferings which form such a powerful weapon against other men have not the least power to compel him.

Deprivations and sufferings take from other men the happiness for which they live. But far from disturbing the happiness of the follower of Christ, they only make him more conscious of doing God's will. . . . Therefore the Christian, who is subject only to inner divine law, not only refuses to obey external laws when they disagree with the divine law of love (as is usually the case with state obligations), he cannot even recognise the duty of obedience to anyone or anything whatever. He cannot recognise the duty of what others call "allegiance."

## **Allegiance**

For the follower of Christ the oath of allegiance to any government whatever--the act on which men build political states--is to renounce Christ. Everyone renounces Christ who promises unconditional, ongoing, obedience to human laws, made or to be made. The follower of Christ, in contrast, commits himself only to obeying in every circumstance the divine law of love within him.

The follower of Christ not only stops short of promising allegiance to any other man (because he does not know what that allegiance will require of him), he cannot promise to do anything definite at a certain time, or to abstain from doing anything for a certain time. He never knows in advance what Christ's law of love may suddenly require of him. To obey that high law is the purpose of his being! alive. If he would make any other unconditional commitment to the laws of men he would plainly show that the law in his heart is not the only one in his life.

For a follower of Christ to promise obedience to men, or the laws of men, is just as though a workman bound to one employer would promise to carry out the orders of others. One cannot serve two masters.

The follower of Christ is independent of human authority, because he acknowledges God's authority alone. His law, revealed by Christ, he recognises in himself, and voluntarily obeys it.

## **Patriotism**

Patriotism, Lev Tolstoy believed, is a terrible farce. It moves men to loyalty to something that does not exist. He wrote:

In countries that have a state religion, they teach children the senseless blasphemies of church catechisms, together with the duty to obey their superiors. In republican states they teach them the savage superstition of patriotism and the same pretended obedience to governing authorities.

Even if we must suffer, it is better to get sent into exile or prison for the cause of common sense and right than to suffer for defending such foolishness and wrong. It is better to run the risk of banishment, prison, or execution, than to choose to live in bondage to the wicked. It is better to suffer for right than to be destroyed by victorious enemies, and stupidly tortured and killed by them in fighting for a cannon, a piece of land of no use to anyone, or for a senseless rag called a banner.

## Signs of Spring

Lev Tolstoy's fascination with coming to life from death (as portrayed in his book *Voskresenye*, "Resurrection") involved far more than what most Russians thought. He wrote:

There are times when a higher truth, revealed at first to a few persons, gradually gains ground until it has taken hold of such a number of persons that the old public opinion, founded on a lesser order of truth, begins to totter and the new is ready to take its place, but has not yet been firmly established. It is like the spring, this time of transition, when the old order of ideas has not quite broken up and the new has not quite gained a footing. Men begin to criticize their actions in the light of the new truth, but in the meantime they continue to follow, through inertia and tradition, what once represented the highest point of their understanding.

These men are in an abnormal, wavering condition, feeling the necessity of following the new ideal, yet not bold enough to break with the old established traditions.

Such is the attitude in regard to truth, Lev Tolstoy believed, of most who profess to believe in Christ. But he felt certain that great changes, either for better or worse, would soon come:

No one can stand still when the earth is shaking under his feet. If we do not go forward we must go back. And strange and terrible to say, the cultivated men of our time, the leaders of thought, are in reality drawing society back with their

subtle reasonings--not back to paganism even, but to a state of primitive barbarism.

## **The Dare**

Most people simply have not dared to follow Christ. "Everyone waits on everyone else," Lev Tolstoy wrote, "but let us accept the truth that surrounds us on every side and forces itself upon us. Let us stop lying and pretending that we do not see this truth and we would find at once that hundreds, thousands, millions of men are in the same position as we--that they see the truth we do, and dread as we do to stand alone in recognising it. Like us they are only waiting for others to recognise it too! !

Only let men cease to be hypocrites and we would see at once that what holds us in bondage, and is represented to us as something stable, necessary, and ordained of God, is already tottering and is only propped up by the falsehood of hypocrisy with which we, and others like us, support it."

We fear to let go of what we have because we do not know what we will get. We fear to walk with Christ because we do not know where he will take us. But regarding fear, Lev Tolstoy wrote:

If Columbus had thought like this he would never have weighed anchor. It was madness to set out to sea, not knowing the route, on an ocean no one had sailed, to reach a land whose existence was doubtful. But by this madness he discovered a new world."

## **The Seed Was The Word**

After several hours spent at Yasnaya Polyana, Ivan and Fyodor felt like their heads were spinning. Lev Tolstoy returned with the mushrooms he had picked and they ate together before the boys set out, in evening sunlight streaming through the poplar trees, for Tula. They questioned some of what they had heard and read, but Ivan wrote:

After our conversation with Lev Tolstoy I became more firmly convinced that the salvation of the world is in the simple teaching of Christ--not in parts of his teaching but in his teaching as a whole. I became convinced that salvation is not in the highest and most clever interpretation of what Christ said, but in his

teachings themselves. I became convinced that the wonderful content of the Gospel will be understood not by philosophers but as it is revealed to humble childlike hearts by the Holy Spirit--and it struck me as never before that the teachings of Christ cannot be separated from the example of his life as a man.

Thanks to the teaching of Christ as it came through Lev Tolstoy, Russia's "underground" church became stronger than ever. Communities took shape in out-of-the-way places. Untold numbers began to eat and dress simply, and to work in harmony with God's creation. The Spirit Christians in particular (both Molokans and Dukhobors), took seriously his call to walk in the way of peace. With Christ, and those among them who got baptised in his name (the Evangelical Christians), they dared withstand every false authority--of church, government, or society--to claim the promise of . . .

1 This name means "lit up clearing in the woods."

2 Sofya also got legal rights to all the books he had written and began ambitious publishing projects, using the money to maintain a lifestyle Lev no longer supported.

3 Quoted by Lev Tolstoy in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*

4 All citations in this chapter from *The Kingdom of God is Within You*

5 He used the term "the church" in its Russian-Byzantine sense of referring to the official national religion. Old Believers, Spirit Christians, and other "sects" were not considered part of "the church."



## A Rainbow

A world without politics, without international boundaries, without violence, without poverty. Why not?

Cannot all men see how unnecessary these things are? Cannot all men see how greed is the reason they exist, and how much better we could live if no man claimed anything as his own?

The questions Lev Tolstoy planted in Russia caused serious people everywhere to ask serious questions. One of them was a young military officer named Pyotr.

A son of Prince Aleksey Kropotkin, Pyotr had served as a page in the tsar's court at St. Petersburg before he began service in Siberia. There he had much time to think and observe. Everywhere he saw misery, cruelty, and injustice. He saw how the Russian church and government oppressed the poor. Then he saw the lives of exiled Christians and became fascinated with them—the Bespopovtsy (priestless Old Believers) in particular. “Who needs priests?” he began to ask himself. “Or for that matter, anyone to tell him what to do or believe? Anyone to stand between him and God, or between him and his conscience?”

The longer Pyotr thought about human beings, all on one level before God, the more the lifting up of any kind of authority seemed wrong. Even God, when he walked among men as Jesus Christ, did not lift himself up above the rest.

In his careful way, Pyotr began to research society as far back as one can go. Everywhere he saw that Charles Darwin's “survival of the fittest” theory was a lie. Societies (and consequently life, both animal and human) have only survived where co-operation, not individual advancement, was a priority. Pyotr made notes on the Russian communities he came across, not only of the nonconformists, but of the ordinary peasant villages, of primitive tribes, and of communal societies among nomads. “Cooperation, not conflict, must become our goal,” he wrote. And after a trip to Switzerland where he visited a watch-makers' commune in the Jura Mountains, he concluded, “Our hope lies not in correct nor powerful government.

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All forms of government and coercion are evil. Our hope lies in decentralized, nonpolitical, cooperative societies after the example of Christ and his disciples

where everyone may develop his creative faculties without the interference of rulers, priests, or soldiers.”

“Scientific anarchy,” he named his understanding of the Gospel and promptly landed in jail.

For two years, tsarist officials kept Pyotr Kropotkin in strictest confinement. Then, in a daring plot his friends and secret supporters in high places helped him escape. In exile he wrote *Words of a Rebel*, *Mutual Aid* (his masterpiece), and *Conquest of Bread*.

## Shared Lives at Vertograd

Just out of college, Ivan Prokhanov faced the same questions as Pyotr Kropotkin. He drew similar conclusions and for a short time the Lord allowed him to put them in practice.

A wealthy woman, the widow of the poet and social reformer Nikolai Alekseyevich Nekrasov, and two of her nieces joined the St. Petersburg

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fellowship. For years she had been a friend of Lev Tolstoy, and with Fyodor Sakharov and others, she shared Ivan’s enthusiasm for living like the Christians described in Acts two and four. Then a door opened.

Through his Mennonite friends in St. Petersburg Ivan learned of a tract of land for

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sale at Vertograd in the Crimea. After serious discussion and prayer the Nekrasovs, Fyodor with his new wife, and Ivan settled there. Ivan wrote:

We let the account of the early Christians guide us and tried to live according to the example of the Apostles: “No one said that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.” At Vertograd all we had belonged to everyone. Our spirits strangely rose as this knowledge—even as persons we belonged to others—grew upon us. In a sense we lost our “selves,” our freedom, and individuality. But as we did this in accordance with the early Christians’ example and with Jesus’ teaching on self denial (Matt. 16:24) great joy filled our hearts and we were in the brightest spiritual state imaginable, all the time.

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From the beginning, a stream of visitors converged upon the Vertograd

community. Some stayed and much work got accomplished between daily meetings for worship and prayer. But renewed persecution, and Ivan's return to the Caucasus after his father got arrested, forced everyone to leave. Under threat of arrest, Ivan himself left Russia secretly, through Finland, in the winter of 1895.

## A Weed Flowing Upstream

While Ivan traveled west, Lev Tolstoy, taking a break from his writing projects at Yasnaya Polyana, traveled north. There, in Russian prison camps, he saw with his own eyes what he had heard of torture, starvation, and forced labour under inhuman conditions. For hardened criminals this would have been bad enough. But to Lev's consternation, he found many of the prisoners humble, innocent people—like Maksim Gavrilovich Rudometkin of the Molokan Pryguny, who had survived nine years in the dungeon at Solovets on the White Sea.

Lev and Maksim talked to one another. They discovered their common beliefs about voluntary poverty and nonviolence. For the first time in years Maksim could talk freely with someone who understood him and when the time came for the two men to part it was hard. But good news came soon. Through Lev's influence Maksim got transferred to a somewhat better prison at Suzdal, in Central Russia.

In the north, Lev Tolstoy also met a Dukhobor leader in exile: Pyotr Vasilyevich Verigin, of an old Spirit Christian family from the Molochna River. A man over six feet tall with black hair and a full beard, Pyotr impressed Lev Tolstoy with his sincerity and common sense. "We are like the *plakun trava*," Pyotr told him. "No matter what they do to us we will keep on going the direction we have chosen. We will follow Christ."

Lev Tolstoy knew at once what Pyotr meant. The Russians had a legend about the *plakun trava*, a weed that floats against the current, upstream. "You are right," he answered. "And if you keep on doing so, more will follow until the world turns around and goes the other way."

In his places of exile in Shenkursk and Kola, Pyotr Vasilyevich, not only read Lev Tolstoy's books with interest, particularly *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. He wrote instructive letters to his family and fellow believers in Armenia. He encouraged them in brotherly community, urging them to overcome the last remnants of selfish ambition, and to stop hiring non-members to work for them. "Whatever those labourers produce, they deserve to take home with them," he

said. “If you make a profit on their labour the accusation of James 5:4 stands against you. If you do not make a profit on their labour, why hire them at all?”

Pyotr also wrote about self denial and abstaining from foods:

All creatures get their life from the same power that gives life to man. Why should they not have the same right to live? To destroy those creatures for the sake of gluttony is reprehensible. . . . Drinking alcoholic beverages and smoking tobacco is not only unnatural for a Christian, but is also unnatural for any man. . . . In the Gospel it is said: “Do not live oneself up to drinking wine because it leads to dissolution.” And about smoking tobacco and the harm it does, I have no need to explain. It is one of the lowest levels to which a man can fall.<sup>6</sup>

But by far the most of Pyotr Vasilyevich’s instructions had to do with alternative military service. During Aleksandr III’s rule the Mennonites and Spirit Christians who remained in Russia gradually agreed (against their true desire) to do Red Cross or forestry duty instead of going to war. They might not have disliked it as much had their boys not been forced to wear uniforms and carry guns, even though it was said they did not have to use them.

Pyotr Vasilyevich wrote:

In his teaching, Christ condemned and destroyed the basis for military duty. That is how I understand the life and teaching of Christ. And I believe that we as Christians should refuse military service altogether. I find it my responsibility to tell you that you should refuse to serve as soldiers and take no part in any military actions, even if it they are non-combatant. Whatever weapons you have acquired while drifting away from Christ’s teaching—rifles, revolvers, swords, daggers—should be gathered in one place and, as a sign of non-resistance to evil by evil means, and to obey the commandment “You shall not kill” they should be destroyed by burning.

The Spirit Christians in the Caucasus took Pyotr’s counsel seriously—and suffered the consequences.

On April 2, 1895, on a Day of Resurrection, a young believer in noncombatant service, Matvey Lebedov, refused to parade as commanded. Ten boys serving with him, immediately dropped their guns and followed his example. Their officer was

furious. “We will show you who is in charge,” he screamed at them. “Go fetch the *rosgi!*”

The *rosgi*, bundles of prickly acacia rods appeared at once, and the soldiers laid Matvey face down on the ground without his shirt. Working in rhythm, one man on either side, they flogged him fifty times, until bits of flesh flew with the blood. Then they threw him into an unheated cell for the night.

The next boy, Mikhail Sherbinin, they flogged the same way, but like Matvey he showed no sign of weakening. The officer, rapidly losing face, grew desperate. “Flog him on the other side, the brute!” he shouted. The soldiers turned him face up and gave him another fifty lashes. But Mikhail would not give up. The officer, in blind rage, threw him against a nearby gymnasium horse, breaking his ribs. Then they hurled him into a cell where he got a high fever and died.

The other boys suffered likewise, but the Spirit Christian communities sensed more clearly than ever the challenge to let the light of Christ shine above the darkness of war and violence. On June 28, 1895 believers gathered from every direction to a high place above the village of Orlovka in the Caucasus. It was the time of the yearly love feast but everyone sensed that this gathering would be unusual. From all the villages men and boys brought the guns and other weapons they had acquired. On top of the hill they piled them up and covered them with twenty wagon loads of wood and coal, soaked in five hundred litres of kerosene.

At the stroke of midnight, with more than two thousand believers standing in a circle around the “mountain of arms” they threw a burning torch onto the pile and a great flame roared up amid the sound of victory songs and joyful prayers to Christ.

The fire, strategically placed, lit the summer night, and could be seen from many hours’ travel in every direction.

The Spirit Christians had made their point and retribution was immediate.

## **Persecuted But Not Forsaken**

After the burning of arms at Orlovka (and shortly afterward at two other locations) tsarist troops arrested five thousand Spirit Christians. On horseback, Cossack soldiers swept into their villages, rounded them up, and drove them into exile.

The Spirit Christians sang as they left all their earthly possessions behind:

For your sake, Lord, we enter the narrow gate.

We leave our worldly lives, our fathers and our mothers.

We leave our brothers and sisters, our people and tribes.

We bear hardness and persecution, scorn and slander.

We are hungry and thirsty. We walk with nothing,

For your sake Lord.

The Cossacks tried to drown out the Spirit Christians' singing with obscene songs of their own. Wherever they could they captured more and mistreated them. One of their many victims who described to Lev Tolstoy's investigators what happened, Aksenya Strelayeva, said:

Four of us women were walking from Spaskoye to Bogdanovka when a hundred Cossacks overtook us. They brought us to the village and led us one by one into the yard of the coach house. There they stripped us (throwing our skirts over our shoulders) and flogged our bare bodies. In the yard stood some Cossacks and many other people. They flogged us so, you could not count the strokes. Two of them held us and four flogged. Three of us stood through it but one they dragged about so that she could not stand. We received many insults.

An old woman, Anna Posnyakov said:

The soldiers came to us during the day—twenty of them. They called my son Vasya, twenty-four years old, into the yard . . . and brought a whip. After they had flogged him three times they raised him up and when they saw he was still breathing they flogged him more. When they stopped he was barely alive. His whole body was jerking. Then they flung him into the coach house.

At midnight they came to arrest my other son. We said, "We are all the same. Arrest us all! We will not let him alone." Two of the women in our house had

little children whom they took up in their arms. . . . The soldiers almost strangled the children by trying to tear us from them. Then they dragged my son and us along with him. . . . They also flogged Vasya Kolesnikov until his boots filled with blood.

Even unconverted Russians looked on in dismay. A military officer stationed in the Caucasus wrote on March 7, 1897:

Having heard that some Dukhobors were being transferred from the Elisavetpol prison to that of Nukhin, I went out to meet them at the military post. I shall never forget how they looked. Along the high road, muddy with the melting snow, moved a crowd of well-grown healthy men in sturdy clothes. They slung their sacks and coats in soldier-fashion over their shoulders. Their faces were calm and good-tempered, their movements measured, and their conversation peaceful.

Surrounded by an escort of soldiers with rifles, there were thirty-six of them, for the most part middle-aged men, though some were quite old and grey, and others young beardless boys. The expanse of steppe and fields which for a long time they had not set eyes on, the bright sunshine, the open air, and the sight of other men and of free life evidently had a cheering effect on the captives. The stifling city prison was forgotten for the moment and each was glad merely to breathe fully and freely, to stretch his cramped limbs, to enjoy the new scene, with the walls of the prison court no longer around him.

It was just this that went through my heart as I looked at them. . . . Other bystanders also stared at the captives in astonishment and consternation, for everyone in that part of Russia knows the Dukhobors well. "Why are they taking these people to prison?" they asked one another. "What have they done? What is their crime? . . . I took leave of them and returned home pensive and sorrowful.

All told, tsarist authorities banished four hundred families to swampy lowlands along the Black Sea, or to Yakutsk in Siberia, seven thousand kilometres away. Under torture and brutal mistreatment, many of them perished within a year. But they did not lose faith and the Lord Christ in whom they trusted did not forsake them. Through the efforts of Pyotr Kropotkin (who had visited Russian Mennonites in Canada) Vladimir Chertkov, and English Quakers, more than seven thousand five hundred Spirit Christians got permission to leave Russia and made their way through British Cyprus to Canada. Lev Tolstoy paid for their way with the sale to the rights of his newest book, *Resurrection*, printed in England.<sup>7</sup>

## Cast Down But Not Destroyed

Tsar Nikolai II (married to Queen Victoria's granddaughter) censured *Resurrection* and made it illegal to distribute it in Russia. The Orthodox church excommunicated Lev Tolstoy for his criticism of "God-ordained authority." But Lev remained serene. He had "left the church" at his conversion years before, not bothering to discuss it with church officials because he neither saw them as "officials" nor what they represented as "the church." He wrote: "I believe in God whom I understand as Spirit, as Love, as the Source of all. I believe He is in me and I in Him."

At the same time, as repression grew worse, the numbers of believers mushroomed. Ten years after the burning of arms in the Caucasus nearly a million Spirit Christians lived in that region alone. In secret they circulated the *Book of Spirit and Life* written by Maksim Gavrilovich Rudometkin (presumed to have died in jail at Suzdal) and other Pryguny leaders. Like Pyotr Vasilyevich's writings, it encouraged believers to free themselves from violence, even senseless violence against animals, and called them to live in brotherly community.

## An Ingathering

Along with a rapidly growing number of Spirit Christians and disciples of Lev Tolstoy, the Stundists flourished "underground." Particularly true was this of southern Russia (the Ukraine), where Adolf Abramovich Reimer grew up in a village along the Molochna River.

Adolf and his family belonged to the Mennonite *Brüdergemeinde*. His mother was a daughter of Martin Kalweit, the converted Lutheran who brought believers' baptism to the Molokans in the Caucasus. And like the children of many other believers, Adolf grew up knowing poverty and persecution. People still made fun of Stundists and all the more so if they were poor enough to collect match boxes along the street, like he did, to turn in at the store for one kopek.

Adolf did not worry. As a child he had learned to love the Kingdom of Heaven. By the time he was fifteen the elders had baptised him and he preached regularly in a Ukrainian village not far from Halbstadt, where he lived. Then he taught school in the village of Tiege and married Sara Goosen.

Soon after their wedding Adolf held his first baptism. Four Ukrainian boys and a



girl had turned to Christ. To evade the police, they hurried to a creek behind Tiege in the middle of the night. They celebrated communion with bread and wine and before five in the morning everyone hurried home.

Through such activities the “underground” church kept on spreading, with no central organization and in political unrest and fear, throughout Russia. Not the least among what hastened its spread was the Trans-Siberian Railroad, opened between Chelyabinsk and Vladivostok (9,288 kilometres) in 1905.

## **An Ingathering**

A foreign critic laughed at the railroad, “rusty streaks of iron through the vastness of nothing to the extremities of nowhere.” But to Russian believers it opened the way to far more communication than had ever been possible. Large numbers of Siberian Old Believers became baptised. Molokans from the Caucasus found their way east along the railroad, to the Amur River. Mennonites from Khortitsa and Molochna also settled along the railroad in remote farming colonies, and some of them thought of a unique way to bring the Scriptures to the people.

Russian law could not censure the Bible. Neither could it class an honest sale “propaganda.” So in all mills along the Trans-Siberian railroad owned by Mennonite Stundists or people friendly toward them, they placed Russian New Testaments to sell for ten kopeks. It was impossible to keep the racks full.

Travelling messengers, like Jakob Kroeker (whom his parents dedicated to the work of Christ after he ran into the blade of a scythe on their south Russian farm), Pavel Pavlov (Vasily Pavlov’s only surviving son), Martin Thielman, Mikhail Timoshenko and others, travelled thousands of kilometres every year. Wherever they went, more came to Christ and received baptism for remission of sins.

## **Raduga**

Back in St. Petersburg Ivan Prokhanov (now with a wife and two children) still found time to write hymns. Along with other hymns he adapted from “underground” sources he published them in a small book he called *Gusli* (The Harps). Along with this he and the St. Petersburg believers kept publishing *Beseda*, the newsletter that eventually became *Khristianin* (The Christian) under a clearly stated purpose: “We will publish nothing but Christ. . . . *Khristianin* is to be a call to Russia’s millions to come directly to Christ, the only mediator between men and God. It is a call to break down walls between men by bringing them to

God's community in Christ." Heinrich Braun, Ivan's friend from college got involved and before long, the owners of a print shop at Halbstadt on the Molochna.

The Molochna printers, putting out a German paper called *Friedensstimme* (Voice of Peace) had become interested in doing work in Russian. Ivan saw an open door and the St. Petersburg believers met with those from Halbstadt to establish a Christian publishing company. More books and papers appeared at once.

When the question of a name for the new publishing work came up, Ivan looked about the group—baptised Molokans, Mennonites, and Russians of widely varied backgrounds but one belief in Christ—and said, "Let us call it *Raduga* (The Rainbow)." Everyone understood, and in the light of unity in Christ, the Russian believers went out to meet . . .

1 Pyotr Kropotkin, believing prisons to be "nothing but schools of crime" advocated correction, not by force but the power of persuasion and example. He believed children should learn not so much from books as by observing and doing, especially outdoors.

2 Lev Tolstoy published his first works in Nikolai Nekrasov's paper.

3 A Mennonite group, influenced by the "Temple Movement," had decided to emigrate to Palestine and put their property up for sale.

4 Hans Brandenburg, in his book *The Meek and The Mighty* wrote: "Ivan Prokhanov . . . wanted to show Russian intellectuals who were influenced by socialist thought, by means of an example, that a voluntary communism based on the gospel was not impossible. This is reminiscent of the *Bruderhöfe* that came into being in Germany and later abroad through Dr. Eberhard Arnold."

5 His escape involved ten weeks of hiding in a secret room in a Helsinki castle, waiting for the harbour ice to break. He spent his time writing and composing tunes.

6 Cited in an anonymous tract, *About Verigin's Tomb*, Grand Forks, British Columbia.

7 This was a slight adjustment of his decision--made at the time of his conversion--not to receive any more royalties or payment for what he wrote.

8 Under constant persecution, some Molokan families began to escape Russia on foot, through Turkey and Iran, to Panama, Mexico, and the United States. They carried

Maksim Gavrilovich's original writings with them, baked into a loaf of bread, and founded the first *obshina* (Molokan community farm) in the United States. After publicly burning a gun in downtown Phoenix and suffering much for their nonresistant stand during World War I, the Molokans became recognized there as a "Historic Peace Church." They have kept their simple Russian-language worship services and their plain clothes--the rubashka, the kosinka (head covering for women), etc--for meetings, and keep to some degree their traditions about food. But they have declined in numbers. In recent years there has been a revival of the Molokan movement in the Molochna River area of the Ukraine.

## The Lion and The Bear

On November 20, 1910, Lev Tolstoy died as he would have liked—a Russian believer “on the road.”

Conflict between his and Sofya’s ways of life had grown until he quietly left the house before daybreak, on a cold morning in the fall. His daughter Aleksandra and one disciple (a doctor) left with him. He put a note of apology on the table and wished Sofya well.

That Lev Tolstoy had become one of the world’s most famous men no one any longer denied. Messages of support, after his excommunication, had poured in from every country to where his books in French, English, German—all major European and even African and Oriental languages had gone. Thomas Edison had sent him a phonograph to record him reading *I Cannot be Silent!* Literally millions of books and tracts either quoted him or consisted entirely of what he wrote. Russia censors saw to it that most of his later writings did not get circulated, except in the “underground,” but a journalist commented: “We have two tsars, Nikolai II and Lev Tolstoy. The difference is that Nikolai cannot do a thing with Tolstoy and Tolstoy is all the time shaking Nikolai’s throne.”

All over the world, lives were being changed.<sup>1</sup> But Lev Tolstoy felt his work was done and all he longed for was “the desert,” a place where he could be quiet and disappear. With this, he longed to return to his Christian roots and talk with a starets: the old celibate, Yosef, at Optina. But he did not get there.

On the train from Tula to Ryazan where he had watched the soldiers years before, Lev turned sick. The doctor said he had lung infection (pneumonia) and advised him to get off at the Astapovo station. A railroad official gave him a bed where he died a week later.

### A New Age

By the time Lev Tolstoy died, the evangelical movement in Russia (Stundists,

baptised Molokans, Christians according to the Gospel) had grown very large, both “above” and “underground.” Yet as it grew, it became apparent that not all of it was evangelical nor directed by the Spirit of Christ.

Aleksey Shchetinin, the son of a Caucasian peasant became converted in the early years of Tsar Nikolai II’s rule. He met with believers in the Caucasus and tried, for several years, to live what he believed was a pure moral life. But like Kondratiy Selivanov of the Belye Golubi he found the struggle with his passions overwhelming and began to look for a way out.

He found it, not in castration, but in “holy passionlessness.” Only when a man is incapable of sinning morally, Aleksey came to believe, does the white dove of the Holy Spirit alight on him. And it stays with a man, only until his capacity returns.

The immersion of baptism is not in water, Aleksey concluded. Nor is it a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Baptism is immersion in sin, and takes place over and over. Every time a person “goes under” in sin, and recognises it, God’s grace saves him. A group of followers gathered around him and spread quickly through Russia. They called themselves the *Novyi Vek* (people of the New Age) and by 1910 Aleksey lived in St. Petersburg to direct the movement there.

The Novyi Vek lived for a day or more in unlimited debauchery. Then, for as long as they could, they lived “in the Spirit,” praying, worshipping God, fasting, and helping the poor. They trusted in their own visions and prophecies and professed the gift of healing. One of them, a man from Siberia named Grigory Yefimovich, became especially known for his healing powers.

Grigory had gotten converted at eighteen. A year later he married and lived with his wife until they had four children. But his search for the truth and his struggle with himself did not end. For some time he felt total continency was the only way for him to please God. He travelled to Mount Athos in Greece and to Jerusalem. But it did not work. Then, on his return to Russia he met the Novyi Vek.

Recognised by now as a starets (even though he was not old) Grigory became the friend of an Orthodox bishop in St. Petersburg and through him got a call to a place he never expected to see: the bedroom of Tsar Nikolai’s only son.

## **Trouble for Everyone**

The tsarevich, a six-year-old named Aleksey, was a special child. The first son

born to a reigning tsar since the 1600s, he had haemophilia. When he started to bleed, nothing it seemed would stop it, and his mother—a lonely woman, not well liked at court but passionately fond of him—would turn hysterical. Tsar Nikolai, in tears himself, now consented during a bad bleeding spell to call for Grigory. He came and stopped the bleeding.

The relief of the royal family knew no bounds. Was this the cure to Aleksey's problem? The hope of the Romanov dynasty? Grigory Yefimovich assured them that it was, and that the child's life depended on him. But relatives of the royal family, and all St. Petersburg society looked on with horror.

“The man is evil!” they whispered among themselves. “He is a sot, too filthy for words to describe!” *Rasputin*, “the debauched one,” they began to call him. But Nikolai and his wife would not hear of it. Discontentment led to rebellion, and when war broke out with Germany in 1914, the situation grew serious.

Grigory “Rasputin” did not like the St. Petersburg believers and the more his influence grew the more complicated their situation became. In 1913 they were able to begin a full term Bible School with Ivan Prokhanov and Adolf Reimer as teachers. Nineteen students enrolled: Latvians, Mennonites, Georgians, Ossetians, Ukrainians, and one Byelorussian. But its days were numbered.

After Tsar Nikolai left for the front and put his wife, with Rasputin as her closest advisor, in charge of Russia tougher laws against refusal to bear arms sent believers to Siberia, to jail, or to the firing squad. *Khristianin* and all other Raduga projects got shut down. When Adolf Reimer's wife Sara wrote a letter to her mother on the Molochna, describing the disorder in Petrograd (St. Petersburg's new name since the beginning of the war) and expressed her joyful hope for the prompt coming of the *großer König* (Great King) Rasputin's men intercepted it. They took what she wrote as a reference to Kaiser Wilhelm and threw the Reimers into jail. Ivan Prokhanov also faced a court hearing, but a new development kept it from happening.

Prince Feliks Yusupov, the young husband of Tsar Nikolai's niece, and a number of his friends believed the time had come to save Russia. On the evening of December 16, 1916 they invited Rasputin to Prince Feliks's home for a friendly visit. They served him poisoned tea cakes and wine. But Rasputin did not die. Only the glitter in his eyes told that he knew what they had done. Frightened, Prince Feliks drew his revolver and shot him. Instead of dying, Rasputin lunged for the prince with a terrible cry and chased him outside. On the courtyard other conspirators shot Rasputin, but the bullets seemed to have no effect. In desperation

the men fell on him, tied him up and pushed him through a hole in the ice on the Moyka Canal.

Aleksandra, fearing the worst for the tsarevich, went wild with grief. But her own days were numbered.

## Revolution

For two months following Rasputin's murder, the people of Petrograd lived in fear and hunger, until on March 8, 1917, thousands poured into the streets crying, "Bread! We want bread!" Tsarist officials ordered troops to fire on the people, but they refused to obey and Petrograd fell into the hands of Bolshevik revolutionaries. Tsar Nikolai abdicated his throne and the Bolshevik (later *communist*) leader, Lenin, took charge.

Workers' *soviets*--communal organizations somewhat patterned after Pyotr Kropotkin's ideals--took over factories, schools, and stores. But they did so in a violent godless way, and all of Russia's problems continued or got worse. The hungry wanted food. The poor wanted jobs, and peasants shouting "peace, land, and bread" (the Bolshevik slogan) went wild. Terrible looting and murders took place in Russian cities day and night.

## Freedom

With Tsar Nikolai's fall, Orthodoxy as a state religion ended and Russians, for the first time in their history, rejoiced in complete religious freedom.<sup>2</sup> In St. Petersburg, believers rented the Ternichevsky Hall, with seating room for a thousand. But it could not nearly hold the multitudes who came. After a few weeks Ivan Prokhanov led a crowd, singing, from there to the Chineselli Circus<sup>3</sup> where he spoke to three thousand people. Even that did not suffice and they began to meet at the Marine Horse Drill hall in the city. It held ten thousand people.

Those who believed, like Lev Tolstoy, in the reality of the Kingdom of Christ also rejoiced in Russia's "new day." Since 1909 a two-story building on Newspaper Lane in Moscow had served as their meeting place. It housed a vegetarian restaurant, a library, a large meeting room, and a publishing house. After the Revolution every one of its rooms buzzed with activity. Lev Tolstoy's writings, censored for years, now appeared in cheap Russian editions. Everywhere young

people helped to collate, staple, and pack them. Shipped to all provinces of Russia, with the periodicals *Renewal of Life* and *True Freedom*, their influence changed thousands of lives.

Immediately following the Revolution “Societies of True Freedom” (groups of seekers committed to living like Christ) sprang up in Kiev, Tsaritsyn, Vitebsk, Vladimir, and other places throughout Russia. Those who belonged to them did not worry about particulars of Christian theology. They had no time for issues of “orthodoxy” or sectarian disputes. Only conscious of their inner call to walk with Christ and with one another they sought to bring all Russians back to living in peace with creation and Christ in simple community. When fighting broke out again in October, 1917, members of these “Tolstoyan” societies risked their lives to rush out among the soldiers of both sides with the tract, *Brothers, Stop Killing One Another!*

## **Conviction on Trial**

Evangelical Christians, Molokans, Mennonites, and Tolstovets all hoped for a speedy end to the revolution and the opportunity to live in peace. They all wondered: Would the Bolsheviks be more kindly disposed to Christ’s defenseless example? Lenin, it was said, spoke well of Lev Tolstoy.

They got their answer promptly. Five young believers fell before Bolshevik firing squads for refusing military service. In another case, three who said they could not fight were ordered to dig their graves. The Bolsheviks then took them out individually. They stood the first boy to the wall. “This is your last chance,” they said. “Change your mind now or we will shoot.”

The boy calmly told them, “Go ahead. I will die but I will not kill.”

The Bolsheviks told him. “Alright, if you are that convinced you may fill up your grave and go free.” Then they brought the second boy.

“Look,” they told him. “Here we buried your companion. Shall we bury you too? Now is your chance to decide.”

With the calmness of the first he also stood for what he believed. They told him to fill up his grave and go. Then the third one came. When he saw the mounds of earth above what he supposed were the dead bodies of his companions he began to waver. “Perhaps I will serve in the army,” he told the officials.



“Then you are a hypocrite,” they shouted at him. “You believe what you do only as long as it suits. We have no use for the likes of you!” They shot the third boy and filled his grave themselves.

For some time Lev Tolstoy’s best known disciples (Vladimir Chertkov, Ivan Gorbunov-Posadov, and others) could influence the Bolshevik government to make it easier for believers to get conscientious objector status. But by 1920 around one hundred Christian boys had fallen to the firing squad for not bearing arms, and the true nature of Russia’s new government had become apparent.

## **A Trip in War**

From their home near the Ministry of the Interior in Petrograd, Ivan and Anna Prokhanov heard shooting nearly every night (usually from between one and two in the morning) as revolutionary tribunals executed people in groups of a hundred or more. Within its first year, Russia’s Communist government officially executed one million eight hundred thousand people, including the tsar and his family. Then, under threat of death himself, Ivan decided to send his wife and sons, Yaroslav and Vsevolod, to the south.

They left on the train for Moscow and Kharkov on May 13, 1919. Yaroslav was seventeen and Vsevolod fifteen. From Kharkov they took another train to Aleksandrovsk (Zaporozhye) and the Molochna River colonies.

Everything had changed. Heavy shelling during World War I had destroyed factories and farms. Fields stood empty in the spring with no grain to plant nor horses to plow them—nor young men left to work. In the cities old people and children in rags sat among emaciated corpses, calling for bread. Worse yet, by the time the Prokhanovs reached Alexandertal on the Molochna colony (where the Adolf and Sara Reimer lived) the whole region was in the throes of civil war.

From the south White (tsarist) troops fought the Red (communist) army, and bands of anarchists attacked wherever they could. The Molochna villages, in a terrible state of destruction and famine, teemed with soldiers. Adolf and Sara Reimer welcomed the Prokhanovs but they had never seen Adolf so busy, or so earnest about his calling. “The time is ripe,” he told them. “There is a great harvest. We must work fast for the night is coming!”

Every Lord’s day Adolf spoke two, three, or four times. He spoke to distressed and thoroughly confused colonists. He spoke in peasant villages and in army

camps. When the White front moved back over the Molochna he got permission from a general to speak to over a thousand soldiers at once, many of them standing to listen in tears. Then when the Red army approached he got permission to speak to them too. A contemporary reported that he gave the soldiers “the simple Gospel of Christ the Crucified One.”

On the Molochna, Anna Prokhanov and her sons learned about another group of believing young people: the “tent evangelists”: Andrey Ivanovich Enns (a soldier who had gotten converted), Sergey Yushkevich (a Latvian), Yakov Dyck from the Crimea, Yekaterina Fehderau, Rosina Rosenberg (a converted Jewish girl), Luise Hübert Sukkau, Vladimir Golitsyn, and Danilo Astakhov.

After the revolution these young Christians had conducted street meetings in Moscow and visited military camps. Red Cross workers had given them five tents and they now travelled from village to village, holding meetings to call men and women everywhere to Christ. With the help of a youth group from the Molochna village of Rückenau they set up a tent at Panyutino, a railway junction northwest of the colonies. Large numbers of Russians, Germans, and even Jewish settlers from the area came to their meetings night after night. But the Prokhanovs could not attend.

Amid the hunger and disease at Alexandertal, Yaroslav had turned deathly sick. With many prayers Anna watched him pull through. When the front moved back over the colony and the White army was again in control, they escaped by train to Rostov on the Don, and from there south to the Caucasus.

The escaped just in time.

The White army soon lost control and the anarchists, under a young man named Nestor Makhno, took over with a vengeance. Flying a black flag they rode from village to village plundering, raping, and killing without mercy. Two months after Anna and the boys left, they fell on Dubovka (Eichenfeld). A number of Mennonites from this village had taken up arms to defend themselves, but a great longing to return to Christ had overcome them. They had called for the “tent evangelists” and the anarchists found them in their schoolhouse, having a meeting after dark.

For a little while the Anarchists listened to Yakov Dyck speaking. Then they locked him into a room with Sergey Yushkevich, Vladimir Golitsyn, and three other men. They told the women to make them a big meal. After they had eaten

they called the men out to the barn one by one. Their bodies were found, recognizable only by their clothes. Eighty three people, including Regina Rosenberg and Luise Hübert Sukkau, lost their lives in Dubovka that night. Danilo Astakhov was one of the few men that escaped.

## **Murder and Chaos**

On their arrival at Vladikavkaz, Anna and the boys found the Caucasus in no better shape than the Ukraine. Muslim mountain tribes, forbidden before the revolution to have guns, had taken to fighting and plundering again. Long before they reached the city they saw the ruins of burned buildings and farms grown up in weeds. When they got there it was dark. They had eaten nothing. After his sickness, Yaroslav was a “walking skeleton” and the boys suspected that Anna herself felt sicker than what she let on. They arrived at their grandmother’s house (Stepan Prokhanov had died nine years earlier) and Anna lived until three in the morning. It was July 30, 1919.

They held a quiet funeral among their Molokan relatives and friends. The boys traveled further, across the mountains to Tiflis, to other relatives. There Red soldiers shot Martin Kalweit when he came to speak to them. They also shot his son-in-law Abram Reimer and grandson Jakob Reimer. Adolf, his other grandson, died from typhus in Kiev where he and Sara had gone to minister to four large congregations of believers. Adolf’s last words were, “Lord Jesus, how simple is your Gospel, and your grace how large!<sup>4</sup>

## **Petrograd**

The winter of 1919-1920 was cold but little snow fell. In Petrograd Ivan slept all winter without heat in a small rented apartment. He slept with his boots, overcoat, and fur cap to keep from freezing. He considered himself fortunate to have dry bread and tea made from frozen carrots to eat once a day. Twice he fell unconscious while speaking to believers in a meeting, but to remain in Christ awareness had never been easier and the Kingdom of Heaven grew rapidly.

At the close of 1919 a group of “Stundist” leaders managed to hold a meeting in Petrograd. Not many could come. The fighting had drawn so close they heard volleys of cannon throughout the day and, with a curfew at six, those who attended simply spent the evening in prayer and slept on the floor in the room. At this meeting the brothers drew up a statement on their feeling about war:

Because the shedding of human blood for any civil or military reason is a crime against our consciences and against the teaching and spirit of the Holy Scriptures, and because it is impossible for Christians to carry arms or to make them for military purposes, or to study military affairs . . . we believe it our sacred duty to openly refuse military service in all its forms.

Committed to walking with Christ—the King David Christ who, though he may have to suffer for a time and flee, overcomes the lion, the bear, and all giants that arise—Russia’s believers walked bravely on toward a . . .

1 Outstanding among them the life of Mohandas K. Gandhi, a young East Indian lawyer in South Africa.

2 The new Bolshevik law stated: “Freedom of religious and anti-religious propaganda is guaranteed to every citizen of the republic.”

3 The title of his message was “Spiritual Resurrection.”

4 “*Herr Jesus, wie ist dein Evangelium so einfach, und deine Gnade so groß!*”

## Red Sky at Sundown

Do you remember, my quiet one, our long walks through the forest—through the forest of that dying August? The silvery trunks of the birch trees stretched up like palms, with their gold-green crowns fresh-dipped in blood pressed close to the red and purple aspens. And the fine-textured hazels branching over the surface of the land like green gauze. A holy solemnity breathed beneath the vaulted arches of that cathedral.

Do you remember our deep-searching conversations, my distant but always present friend? The Holy Spirit, and the teachings of Christ against what is opposite to them—that was what interested us most. And we walked along through the cornfield near that forbidden grove, intoxicated by the blazing sunset, rejoicing that the question had been settled, that we had both arrived separately at the same conclusion. Then our thoughts flowed like the blazing streams of the firmament and we caught each thought with half a word. The roots of our hair tingled with an inspired, cold, yet flaming rapture. Shivers ran up our spines.

Do you remember, my like-minded brother, the bulrushes in the black creeks? We stood silently on the steep bank and listened to the mysterious whispers of the evening. An unspeakable, exultant secret grew in our souls. Yet we did not say a word about it, speaking to one another only by our silence. And then . . .

Now it is winter outside. I am working beside a lamp and the evening light in the window is blue and grand, like Death. And as if faced by death I am tracing the whole past once more; once more I am stirred by an otherworldly joy.<sup>1</sup>

Pavel Aleksandrovich Florensky, the young Russian who wrote this introduction to an article sent to a friend was one among many who saw a red sky in the 1920's. One among many to ponder spiritually inspiring times in the past, imminent death, and the joy of eternal life. And after he wrote this, Pavel was one among untold millions to disappear in the Gulag, "his identity a nameless number, on a list that later got mislaid."

Yet for the time being, during the 1920s, Russian believers did what they could.

## **Go!**

By 1921 foreign relief organizations had come to the rescue of Russia's starving millions. Lenin introduced a new economic policy and for a time it appeared that the revolution had indeed brought changes for the better.

Seeing nothing but open doors, the believers in Petrograd (after Lenin's death, the city became Leningrad) mailed out fifteen thousand monthly copies of *Khristianin* and their Bible School grew to accommodate over two hundred students at a time. For lack of teachers no more could be accepted and those who came could only stay one year to make room for more.

In the years following the first graduation in 1922, four hundred and twenty students who completed their classes at the Bible School went out as full time evangelists. But the Russians' hunger for the truth was so great that far more than "trained missionaries" had to do the work. Andrey Petrovich Sukkau of Samara in the Saratov region was one of them.

## **Boots from Jesus**

Andrey attended a Mennonite school for seven years as a child. He married young and began to farm. But when he met Christ it became clear to him what he needed to do. He sold his farm and set out with his wife and children to bring the message of Christ to the villagers. Wearing a rubashka and cord belt he learned how to thatch straw and plaster mud walls with his hands. From the Saratov region he worked his way through peasant villages in Orenburg and Tashkent, to the city of Ufa, and eastward through Siberia.

Everywhere he went, Andrey found the people so anxious about their salvation they made it hard to work among them. In low-ceilinged stuffy rooms, packed to where people sat on the furniture and in the windows, he often spoke about Christ until ten in the evening, only to have them beg with tears to keep on longer. Even at midnight or two in the morning they sometimes begged him to keep on to the break of day.

On Days of the Resurrection he normally spoke to crowds of villagers in the morning, to young people in the afternoon and during the night he got "Nicodemus" calls.

On a cold day (38 degrees below zero) in Siberia a messenger brought Andrey a

telegram calling him to come at once to a far distant village. A congregation of believers had fallen into disunity and wanted Andrey to come and restore peace. He hesitated. The cold was murderous, and he had only poor clothes. “Lord Jesus,” he caught himself praying, “If you want me to go, please send me a pair of felt boots.”

The next morning, still undecided what he should do, he saw a horse and sleigh coming down the snow-covered street. A man he did not know called out, “Is this where Andrey Petrovich lives? Someone has sent him this pair of boots.”

Andrey was ashamed, not so much for what sounded like a selfish prayer, as for how much its direct answer startled him. He went at once to the village and after three days of common fasting and prayer the division was healed.

## **The North**

Evangelical believers came to know far northern Russia through an unusual “accident.” An itinerant carpenter, a German speaking Baptist, who used his trade to spread the Gospel, had his wallet stolen while traveling east on the Trans-Siberian railroad in the fall of 1917. After that he went to sleep and missed the station where he had planned to get off. Without money and not knowing where to go he wandered into a large village.

It was the Lord’s day. A group of refugees from Volhynia (Russian territory taken by Austria-Hungary during the World War) had camped in the village and some believers were holding a service among them. In the service, the carpenter met a newly married man, Ivan Peters.

While stooking grain the week before, Ivan and his wife had discussed what they should do. “Should we leave our work on the farm and go out among the people?” they wondered. “If so, when should we start, and where?”

Their answer came from the carpenter. He told them about people in the far north to whom the Gospel of Christ had never come. With Ivan’s sister Yelena, a young man named Vanya Kehler, and several others, the Peters set out for the east. This is the story in their own words:

Our brothers accompanied us to the train station with prayers and singing on May 24, 1918. It was during the revolution, and some bridges in the Ural mountains had been bombed out. Soldiers at Zlatoust held up our train for two weeks until

we could proceed to Chelyabinsk. After a night in the train under constant bombardment as we crossed the front into territory held by the tsarist army we travelled on again and came to Tomsk. Here we met with believers. They gave us copies of the Gospels in Russian and helped us get passage on a river steamer.

The steamer headed north to the Narym region. In Tomsk we had learned that a believer lived about 450 verst north of the city. We asked the Lord where we should get off the steamer, and soon discovered that the believer's brother was on board with us. He told us exactly how to get to the man's house. The believer and his wife received us with great joy. They told us about the Ostyaks that live on the smaller tributaries of the Ob River. It was time for the yearly market and many of them had come on rafts with their families, to trade animal pelts and fish for flour and clothes.

At this place we bought a large covered raft and loaded our family with all our belongings onto it. None of us had any navigating experience and we needed to learn how to steer with a rudder. This voyage was especially hard because of the plague of mosquitos. The mosquitos came upon us in thick black clouds. At first we tried to slap them and chase them off, but we soon became weak and tired, especially the children. We travelled on the raft four days and nights until we got to the Ostyak camp of Sayspayevo.

No one took us in. They were afraid of us because the authorities had warned them that we might be criminals on the loose. So we had to sleep among the mosquitos on the raft, moored to the side of the river. But the next day, when they cast a big net into the water they let us help to pull it in and freely shared the fish they caught.

After that we found a place to stay. Semyon, an Ostyak fisherman and hunter, lived with his young family in a larger house. One half of the house was not done. We offered to finish it for him for the privilege of staying there for the winter.

In the name of Christ we took up the work and the fear of the people was soon overcome. We began to love one another. They came to trust us so completely that when they left for several weeks to gather hay they let us use the whole house. They learned to love the truth and were soon singing Christian songs with us.

In one of the biggest houses at Sayspayevo we began to hold regular meetings. A group of children let themselves be convinced to learn how to read and write. But it was bad to live here with our family because of the immorality. After nine months at this place some of us felt we should move further north into the taiga. We built ourselves a wooden house without nails or glass, for such could not be



found here. We put cow stomachs over the windows. From this place we travelled through the entire region, on horseback, on foot and on snowshoes in the winter. In the summer we travelled much by raft. Vanya Kehler and I did most of this traveling while the rest stayed at home.

We worked among both Russians and Ostyaks in the region, giving the few Gospels we had to those who loved the truth and who could read. The first joy in our work came with the conversion of a Russian neighbour who could read and who studied the Bible. His two grown daughters also got converted. But their mother was against them and persecuted them shamelessly.

Both in the Narym and Surgut regions we also found Old Believers who got banished to Siberia over the last three hundred years. They live in isolated places along the tributaries of the Ob river, far removed from roads and civilization. They hold the old traditions, such as not eating with outsiders and keeping their dishes clean. They spend much time in prayer and fasting and there are many good-living people among them. They work hard, raising cattle, tending bees, and farming, so that many of them live comfortably. A number of them have gotten baptized and are serving as witnesses for Christ among their own people.

For two years we stayed in the Narym region without hearing from anyone. No letters nor supplies came here from the outside, so we soon depended on the work of our hands. The great change from living on the steppes to living in the virgin forest required much learning and experiment. We began to earn our living by cutting lumber into boards and making furniture. Most people tanned leather and made their own footwear, so we also became tanners and shoemakers. The Lord gave grace for everything. Since no cloth found its way into this place, the people plant their own flax and make their own linen. My wife and sister learned how to make linen sheets and clothing for the family. Many times until late the whirring of their spinning wheels could be heard in front of the fireplace. We had no lights for lack of oil. Besides the spinning, my wife also taught our children how to read and write.

When the Ostyaks left on long periods to fish or hunt for cedar nuts we went with them. We worked all day. Then in the evening large crowds would gather around a fire. We would sing and I would speak to them. Some of them would stay until late at night to learn more about Christ. We made smoke with rotten wood to keep off the mosquitos. Dressed only in linen clothes during the cedar nut harvest, or during the ice fishing when it was thirty or forty degrees below zero, these meetings took place every night.

After five years the Lord enabled us to make a long trip. We travelled around one thousand five hundred verst in seventy two days. Many we met heard the Gospel for the first time. Some asked us to write down the words of Christ. They could

not read but they said traders come through sometimes and could read the words for them.

On our trip we met difficulties not only through the wickedness of some, but also the great swamps and the snow. We found our way through the forest along the Chezhabka and Vasyugan rivers. Our only horse had to haul our tents and supplies through the deep unbroken snow. We walked either ahead or behind him. But when we came to the Ob river we could both sit on the sleigh and ride along on the ice, if the cold did not keep us from it.

After traveling a thousand verst we came to some believers who had heard of Christ through a shoemaker from the Chumensh region. The meeting gave us great joy. We stayed here ten days and fasted and prayed together. One brother who had lived in a comfortable two story house, but who had given it up to live in the north and work among the people decided to join us with his own horse and sleigh. He accompanied us for the remaining five hundred verst and stayed with us for some time at our home.

When we came back the women told us that someone wanted to buy our house. He wanted to pay us with grain which was worth much. So we took it and bought a raft capable of holding 300 pud. By May 2, 1923, with the Lord's help, we had a roof built over the raft. We loaded our family and belongings, the supplies we needed, some sheep and chickens onto it. Before we left we had numerous meetings with all the Christians. Some begged us to stay, but we told them: "You have already heard the Gospel, and others need to hear it too." So, after five years in the Narym region we travelled north along the Parabel and Ob rivers until we came into the Surgutsky region.

The water after the spring breakup was higher than it had been for thirty years. For long distances the forest stood in water. The trip took a month and ten days. Storms from the north caused high waves and the river carried many houses with it. On such days we had to tie our raft in a sheltered place among the trees. But one storm caught us unawares. We could not stop when it got dark and were carried along at the mercy of the waves so high they threatened to tip our raft over. God helped us where no human hand could come to our rescue, and after traveling five hundred verst we came to Aleksandrovska where we decided to settle. During the first days at our new home we made a vegetable garden because it was already high time to plant. Then we visited the believers within a radius of about fifty verst and invited them to our first meeting at Melipulsky where we held communion.

Fifty verst north of Aleksandrovo my wife and I and a single sister stayed for some time in an Ostyak camp not far from the village of Lower Pasyol. We stayed with a young woman that could read Russian, in a tiny, very smoky house,

heated by a small stove and that had only two small windows and a door. Her ninety year old grandparents lived with her. The old man still made sleighs, and the old woman spent her time spinning nettle fibres into fish nets.

The Ostyaks are peace loving people. In the Narym region most of them have joined the Old Believers. But in Surgut and elsewhere they still worship a god they call Torim and live in constant fear. They also worship the water god Yukur, and the forest god Lunkur. They offer horses to their gods, hanging the horse's hide in some out-of-the-way place on a tree, and eating its flesh together. Deep in the forest they make wooden enclosures in which they set up carved statues, and make offerings to them. But they freely say: "Our gods do not help us. Who knows whether your God would do any more?"

These people line their fur or leather boots with soft grass instead of wearing stockings. They use soft pieces of Cheremucha bark for handkerchiefs. Instead of diapers they dry white rotted wood and stamp it into powder. They pack their babies into wooden boxes filled with this wood powder, and wrap them up, somewhat.

It did not take long until the young woman, a gentle and quiet person, loved Christ very much. She read the Gospels and translated them for her people. She learned how to sing Christian songs and we gave her a copy of the Gospels and a small songbook to keep. She greatly appreciated these gifts.

Our work in the Pasyol area was not fruitless. The Lord brought about an awakening and the number of those who believed rose to more than twenty. From that place we travelled two hundred verst to Surgut and another forty verst to the west to bring the Gospel to other villages and Ostyak camps. We walked long distances on foot because our horse could not pull us. On some days it was forty or forty five degrees below zero. But the Lord was good to us. In the old Russian town of Surgut it took two weeks for us to get permission to have a public meeting. First we had to consent to hold a debate, but after prayer and fasting the Lord opened the door for us and we had large meetings. The whole town was stirred and numerous people dug a Bible or a copy of the Gospels out of some chest to see whether what we said was true. We found a believing sister living in this town.

Other people we met here were the Tungus, who belong to the Mongolian race. They worship spirits and even the devil, yet one learns to love them. They come from the east, from the Yesey river, following their reindeer herds from swamp to swamp. They live in leather tents all year and survive from hunting and fishing. North of Surgut, up toward the Arctic Ocean live the Samoyeds and the Siryans.

During the time of high water in the spring of 1924 we traveled on our raft to visit the new Christians two hundred verst north on the Ob river. On this trip the Lord blessed us with a great catch of fish. We salted the fish and packed them into wooden crates we made for the purpose. Then the Lord answered our prayers and the first steamer that came by took us and our salted fish to Tobolsk. From there we travelled on a smaller steamer to Tyumen where the believers welcomed us. We sold our fish and were able to pay for our train fare to Orenburg. There we had a happy reunion with the brothers but our sixteen-year-old daughter died on this trip. Now we are back in the north and pray that the Lord would yet awaken many.

Why should thousands, even millions, die without having seen the Light? Has the grace of God become scarce? No, there is a scarcity of messengers, of the knowledge of God's plan of salvation, of true love and compassion, and of a longing for Christ's coming again. Dear brothers and sisters, shall not the tribes of the north rise on the day of judgment and accuse us for not having been more prompt in obeying the call of Christ?

It is our responsibility, those of us who are the people of God in Russia, to work as long as it is day. Let us work in holy zeal to pay off our debt to our unbelieving neighbours so that we may go out with free consciences to meet Christ on the great day when he comes again!

The words you have just read are the last known record of Ivan Peters. He sent this letter south to Slavgorod in Siberia in the fall of 1925, but the "sky was red" and like Andrey Petrovich Sukkau and innumerable others he disappeared into the twilight of the Siberian winter leaving no trace behind him.

## **Pieces Together**

While the Peters struggled to build the Kingdom of Heaven in the far north, those who desired to build it in central Russia faced no lesser obstacles.

Central Russia, after its Revolution and Civil War, lay in shambles. But in joyful contrast to its devastation, Boris Mazurin, Yefim Serzhanov, a Zavadsky family, two girls from Ryazan, and a handful of others discovered new life at Shestakovka, near Moscow, in 1921. Like Lev Tolstoy, they believed in peace and life together. Like him they wanted to live simply. And that, under the circumstances, was not difficult.

The "Tolstoyan" community at Shestakovka began in a huddle of abandoned

buildings. Without tools, without seeds, without money, and nothing to start farming with than a team of seventeen-year-old horses and a dilapidated military cart the future could have looked grim. It did look grim, in fact, to everyone but the serious-minded, dedicated young people who set out to turn the teachings of Jesus Christ into action.

The Shestakovka people began by dismantling an old log building, cutting it up for firewood, and trading it on the streets of Moscow for food and supplies. From this they went to raising vegetables, cutting hay, and eventually selling milk to a government hospital. The community prospered at once. Within a few years dozens of others like it took shape and soviet officials noted with alarm how they surpassed in every way—in production, in morale, and in self sufficiency—what their collective farms had accomplished.

## **Yevangelsk**

What soviet officials watched with growing uneasiness, Ivan Prokhanov saw with unbounded delight. Travelling through Russia he visited new communities and house churches everywhere—in the Don region, in the Caucasus, and in the far south along the border with Iran. “Everywhere,” he reported, “I heard people praying in their own language. They confessed that they had been robbers, immoral sinners or atheists. But everywhere they rejoiced for having found Christ.” In Odessa and Kiev, congregations of believing Jews took shape. And in Turkestan, Christian believers were asked to speak in mosques.

Only one thing troubled Ivan. Hundreds of new believers lived and sought to bring up their families in Russian cities. With this in mind, and remembering what had begun to happen at Vertograd, he wrote:

I feared it would be impossible for believers to realise the Christian way of life in the cities, with their many vices and irregularities and their fixed way of doing things. Perhaps some time the Holy Spirit will enable us to fully conquer and reshape these cells of the old life, but in the beginning it seemed to me that a suitable place should be found where our ideal of a new life could be realised in the form of a standard city, with standard villages and standard agricultural and industrial enterprises.

In a careful plan to be published in *Khristianin*, Ivan (making use of his skills as an engineer) described what he had in mind: a new city for believers in Russia. He

proposed to call it *Yevangelsk*, City of the Gospel, or for its novel plan, City of the Sun.

From a large round park, over a mile in diameter, the streets of Yevangelsk were to radiate like sunbeams through surrounding urban and agricultural areas. Its only law was to be the Sermon on the Mount. Its only residents, members of the evangelical Church. Along the wide streets of Yevangelsk, bordered with fruit trees and many flowers, hospitals, schools, meetinghouses and dwelling places—all neat but modest, and none more showy than the rest—would stand. No firearms, no guns of any kind should ever enter Yevangelsk. Its people would live from the industry of their own hands, sharing what they produced, and in the land around it, believers would farm. If Christ would truly remain in the centre of the city, and the life of its society would revolve around him, their example would lead to more and more Christian cities throughout Russia and, Ivan believed, throughout the world.

Some Soviet officials, remembering Pyotr Kropotkin and perhaps feeling a touch of remorse for their bloody revolution, showed interest in Yevangelsk. They had already allowed a group of Molokans, returning from America, to begin an *obshina* in Central Russia. And since the idea did not seem incompatible with their ideals they even suggested a site for Yevangelsk at the foot of the Altai Mountains near the border between Siberia and Mongolia.

In August, 1927, Ivan left with great anticipation for Siberia. He met crowds of believers in every city along the way: Kazan, Yekaterinburg (later Sverdlovsk), Chelyabinsk, Omsk, Novonikolayevsk (later Novosibirsk) and Barnaul. Everywhere the believers rejoiced with him as he showed them the officially approved plans for Yevangelsk. From Barnaul two brothers accompanied him south to great empty plains at the foot of the mountains where the Katun River flows into the Biya. There, with the brothers and local Soviet officials at his side

he dedicated the centre of the great Sun City to Christ and planted three oak trees. 2

It was September 11, 1927. Ivan felt lightheaded. Was this the greatest moment of Christianity in Russia? The beginning of a new dispensation for Christ's Kingdom? But the sun, a ball of red, was going down.

## **A New Law**

Not nearly all Soviet officials felt pleased about Yevangelsk and the fast-growing Christian community interest in Russia. They were not afraid of it being

“visionary” or “impractical.” They were afraid it would work!

In a few years nonconformed believers had grown to perhaps five hundred thousand baptised members. (Some thought more.) All over Russia, they had become a familiar sight—neatly but modestly dressed families, women with their heads covered and bright-eyed well-trained children, singing on the streets, holding open air meetings or passing out literature. They did not drink or smoke. They lived frugal lives and worked hard.

“Are these people already doing what enlightened atheism is to accomplish?” Russians began to wonder. Particularly the “League of the Militant Godless” and the head of the Communist party, Yosef Stalin, looked at nonconformed Christianity with alarm. Then, on April 8, 1929, the Communist party passed a new law to govern religion.

Under the new law, Muslims, Christians, and Jews could meet as “religious societies” and the state would provide them with buildings—only after twenty or more people had applied and the local soviet had given its approval. Unregistered meeting places would be closed down. Minors could no longer be baptised nor subjected to religious propaganda. Pastors and teachers could speak only in the registered building of the congregation to which they belonged.

Sixteen of Leningrad’s seventeen evangelical meeting places closed down at once. Food and ration cards for ministers were withdrawn. Raduga fell into state hands and got closed down. All evangelism became illegal. And as in times that Russians remembered only too well, streams of people flowed east and north into prison camps in Siberia.

After the Communist takeover several million people (including twenty-five thousand Mennonites) had emigrated from Russia. Now emigration was impossible. People simply became “un-people” as they disappeared into the Gulag (the prison camp system) and their relatives feared to speak of them lest they get in trouble and sent off too.

Tens of thousands of believers died in the camps. Working unreasonable hours, without proper food or clothes, taking turns to lie on one another to keep warm in concrete rooms without toilets or beds, the camps were meant to kill. Separated parents and children usually did not hear from one another again.

During the dry years of 1932 and 1933 some Spirit Christians escaped on foot, by

night, into Persia. From there they walked the full length of Turkey, found their way from Constantinople to Argentina, and walked across the Andes to Chile. But most could not escape. Perhaps as many as seven million people starved to death in the drought, but the Soviet government refused to admit a state of famine or accept relief from the outside.

On October 6, 1935 Ivan Prokhanov died in exile, in Berlin.

## **Purged**

After Sergey Kirov a Communist leader got assassinated in the mid 1930s, a great purge began. Yosef Stalin's officials arrested, interrogated, tortured and sent to prison camps perhaps as many as twenty-five million people. In some camps officials shot a dozen, or as many as thirty people a day, to keep the rest fearful. Possibly ten million died—among them train loads of people set loose in far northern meadows “to graze”—while those at home applauded (out of fear) the end of the “enemies of the people.”

Children learned to spy on parents, husbands and wives on each other. Some who dared keep Bibles hidden did so with the knowledge of no one else in the house. Ten or twelve-year sentences for “religious offence” were rare. Believers usually got twenty-five years in the Gulag, and that was a death sentence. Even to pray silently before a meal could bring it upon one.

After a Mennonite funeral on the Molochna where an ex-minister dared to speak to the family about God in their back bedroom (a legal activity), he was reported by a neighbour for having left the door open a crack for others to hear. Neighbours reported one another if they heard a snatch from a Christian song. Only in registered meeting places could God be mentioned, and those in most Russian towns had disappeared.

Then things got worse.

## **Another War**

On June 22, 1941, Adolf Hitler's army invaded Russia. During the first two days the Germans shot down two thousand Soviet planes. They sprayed retreating troops with machine gun fire, and under incessant bombing, city after city fell.

A man named Willi used to help us on the farm, when I was a little boy, in



Canada. He had been a Nazi soldier and we listened to him with wide eyes when he told stories: “After weeks of bombing, Kiev fell. We moved rapidly ahead. The Crimea fell, then we got to the Volga. In our first year in Russia we lost one million two hundred and fifty thousand men, but the Russians lost many more. At first we had it good. We went from farm to farm. When they had dinner ready we shot the people, stacked up the bodies, and sat on them to eat their food. Then we got to Stalingrad. . . .”

Willi saw, from one point of view, what all Russians had to see during the second World War. By 1941 the Germans had cut off supplies from Leningrad. Perhaps a

3

million died from starvation in that city alone. Then, as tanks rolled in from Axis-controlled Poland and Austria-Hungary, Stalin ordered the evacuation of the German colonists from the Ukraine. Soldiers hustled six hundred and fifty thousand people, Lutherans, Catholics, and Mennonites east to Siberia and Kazakhstan.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of young men from Tolstoyan communities still existing in Siberia lost their lives for refusing to carry guns. But the tide turned at Stalingrad.

Where the Moravians had planted their peach trees and mustard fields at the

4

Sarepta colony, the city now called Stalingrad had become an industrial metropolis. Not only the Red army, but its factory workers, women and children struggled to defend it against the Germans. The battle lasted seven months, until General Friedrich Paulus (disobeying Hitler) surrendered in February 1943 and the Germans, like Napoleon years before, began a hasty retreat. Winter roads were bad. They suffered from hunger and disease. With them, in open train cars, on foot, or in long caravans of skinny horses pulling wagons, the Germans who remained in the Ukraine (including the Khortitsa and Molochna colonists) fled west.

Stalin’s troops caught up with most of those who survived, and sent them to Siberia.

On April 30, 1945, Adolf Hitler committed suicide and Germany fell. Russia had not fallen, but its suffering was comparable. Newspapers said twenty million Russians had died in the war. The number was too large to comprehend. The people were stunned. Silent among the ruins.

For many there was no way to turn, but to Christ . . .

1 *The Pillar and Ground Of Truth*

2 The Russian city of Biysk now stands on this location.

3 The siege of Leningrad lasted nine hundred days—the longest siege in modern history.

4 Volgograd today

## Risen and Forever alive

Seeing the signs of spring after long, snowy, winters, no Russian could doubt that life springs from death. Tikhon Zadonsky wrote:

Winter comes, the earth is covered with snow, lakes, rivers and marshes freeze, opening highways on water that one needs no bridges to cross. This is the Lord's kindness. He serves our need. Let us bless the maker of snow .

But winter passes and spring comes! All nature that died in the cold comes back to life. Let us bless the Lord of Resurrection! Spring breaks out. Spring opens up a treasurehouse of gifts from heaven. The sun shines and it gets warm. Delightful scents fill the air. The womb of the earth brings forth life. The fruit of seeds and roots appears for the benefit of all. The grass, fields of wheat, and the woods put on new garments of green. They adorn themselves with flowers and the fragrance of life. Springs flow again and rushing streams gladden our ears as well as our eyes. The singing of birds, a great harmony of all voices, rises about us. Cattle, out of the barn, spread through the meadows to rejoice in what the Lord sets before them. They frolic and feast to thank him for his mercy. All things under heaven change. All become new! All living things, both plants and animals, shine with the beauty of the one who made them.

In the winter every tree looks alike under snow. In the spring, they break out in different blossoms and leaves. So with us when we will arise. Now it is hard to know who is good or evil, but in the Resurrection all will be clear. Like trees getting leaves in spring the goodness concealed in the hearts of the saints will show in their bodies. Their bodies will awaken in glorious vestments. They will be like the body of Christ. But just like dead grass and branches stay dead and ugly, so sinners will stay dead. Whatever we were inside will be known.

Now is not the time to praise or judge men. It is time to look forward to the Resurrection promised by God. Then the bodies of the faithful who have slept like seeds from the beginning of the world, will sprout. They will arise and clothe themselves with beauty. The Lord will crown them (marry them). They will radiate like brides and blossom with the promise of bearing much fruit. Corruption will put on incorruption. Looking to this, let us sow in faith and hope so we may reap with unending joy!

Christ the victor over hell, cold, and darkness, brought life out of death in Russia. At the beginning of Stalin's purges there were several hundred thousand nonconformed believers in the Soviet Union. Ten years later there were half as many. Forty years later there were five million, or more.

## **From Darkness to Dawn**

By 1952, when Yosef Stalin died, Russia had gotten deeply involved in a "Cold War" with western non-Communist countries. Communication with the West, already bad during Stalin's rule, further disrupted by the war, now became unthinkable for most Russians who simply "disappeared" from Western sight behind what some began calling the "Iron Curtain." But isolation for Russians was nothing new, and in their silent suffering unknown to the rest of the world, more and more found Christ.

One generation in Russia, during Stalin's rule, had grown up virtually without seeing or hearing about the Bible. But deep in the "underground" a seed remained to sprout after his death in a springtime of revival.

Little by little the news began to leak out. Here and there someone pulled a Bible from its hiding place. Neighbours learned of it and came walking long distances from surrounding villages to hear it read. In the dark, crowded into small houses where someone read in hushed tones by candle light, they marvelled at the simple, beautiful words of Christ.

Walter Sawatsky describes what happened in one Siberian village as typical:

A young man had spent the winter working in Vorkuta on the Arctic Circle in order to collect the extra salary paid for working under severe climatic conditions. In Vorkuta he encountered believers who had just experienced a dramatic awakening. The young man heard the preaching and was converted. Before returning to his home in the spring, he managed to obtain a Bible. Although no announcement was made on the day he returned to the village of Waldheim, that evening curious neighbours gathered in his home until all three rooms were packed to overflowing. Young Jacob rose to his feet, opened his Bible, and laboriously read a few verses. Closing the book, he managed another two or three halting sentences that scarcely hinted at a sermon. Then, his thoughts exhausted, he suddenly fell to his knees and uttered a simple but staggering prayer: "Lord, I pray to you that each person gathered here will be converted tonight. Amen."

In the silence that followed, a woman from the adjoining room pushed her way through to young Jacob and asked him tearfully, “Help me to pray.” Without further ado he dropped to his knees again and she began calling out to God to be merciful to her, a terrible sinner. Within a few seconds all in the house were on their knees and screaming to God for mercy. Jacob found himself calming the people and telling them that God could hear them without their screams.

Jacob’s prayer was answered literally. In fact, herdsman in the pasture heard the shouting, came to see, and stayed to experience their personal conversion. Others ran home to awaken relatives with the words, “Come quickly, the entire village is getting converted tonight.”<sup>1</sup>

Soviet restrictions could not curb the power of the evangelical revival. From Siberia to Kazakhstan to central Russia, the Ukraine and Moldavia the movement spread like a fire. Unordained evangelists speaking the words of Christ and people praying simple prayers rediscovered forgiveness from sins. But with the joy it brought came the trial of persecution.

### **More of The Antichrist?**

During World War II, when Stalin relaxed his pressure on Russia’s churches to win their co-operation against the Germans, he allowed (or perhaps forced, as many believe) the evangelical leaders who remained, or whom he had just released from jail, to meet in Moscow. Among them were leaders both of the “Evangelical Christians,” the group to which Ivan Prokhanov had belonged, and Baptists. Beginning with Martin Kalweit, Baptist missionaries from Germany had been active in Russia before the revolution with good results. Now, in this remarkable meeting, the two groups merged to become the “Evangelical Christian Baptists.” The Stalinist government provided them with an office, a large central meeting place in Moscow, and the necessary funds to re-establish their publishing work and eventually a minister’s training school. The “Christians According to the Gospel” joined the union and so, eventually, did most of what was left of the Mennonites.

This new government supported union of churches, together with a suddenly rehabilitated Orthodox church, flourished. Stalin’s officials helped congregations to register and install legally approved pastors and regional leaders. Throughout Russia thousands of meeting places (many of them Orthodox churches) opened their doors again.

For some time, spiritual revival and this new church organisation seemed to go hand in hand. But a significant minority of believers did not trust it. Small congregations throughout Russia either failed to get their registration or else did not want it. Then, when Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, attempted to check the revival and church authorities co-operated with him, it suddenly seemed like Russia had slipped back three hundred years—to Nikon, Tsar Aleksey, and the “year of the beast.”

In 1960 the state-recognised leaders of the Evangelical Christian Baptist church sent a letter from Moscow to all congregations admonishing people to comply with the 1929 laws forbidding the religious education or baptism of minors. The letter discouraged “unhealthy missionary tendencies” and counselled leaders to “terminate decisively” the drive to make new members by keeping baptisms to a minimum. It stressed the duty of Christians to support their rulers and stated that obedience to these instructions would be the “measuring stick of loyalty” to the church and to the government.

Reaction to the letter was immediate and as deep as Russia itself. Thousands of believers, from old men with beards to young parents and teenagers, responded with holy zeal. The clash was total. Those who left the “church” considered its leaders agents of Antichrist. Those leaders in turn said nothing as Soviet police closed down hundreds of meeting places, beat up the faithful, set dogs on them as they worshiped, took their children, banished their leaders, or interrogated, imprisoned, and tortured them to death.

Yet even greater than this wave of persecution, in which Nikolai Khmara died, was the wave of joy that came with it.

## **Back Into The “Underground”**

On August 13, 1961 a group of brothers met in secret in the village of Uzlovaya near Tula. They began to co-ordinate the work of the unregistered, illegal, and consequently “underground” groups of evangelical believers in the Soviet Union. In a few years that movement involved more than three thousand secret congregations.

It all came back. To descendants of the Spirit Christians, Old Believers, and Stundists, it seemed more than familiar. Somehow, it seemed right and brought with it a strange kind of joy.

Playing cat and mouse with the police, believers met in basements, in barns, and in the woods by night. They gathered like their grandparents, in small houses in rural areas. The “Stranniki grapevine” revived and top secrets flashed—no one said how—from one end of the Soviet Union to the other. More than this, they published literature. A leader in the movement, Gennadi Kryuchkov described how they did it before a Soviet court:

The method of doing it is very simple—I knew it while I was still a child. You take gelatine, glycerine and glue, mix them together and pour the solution on glass. Then you make an impression. Any boy or girl who wants to do something for God can do it. There are dozens of believers using this method to publish literature . . .

Some believers used ingenuity even further. With the wringer rollers off washing machines and bicycle parts they made real printing presses. One of them, designed for quick disappearances, fit into five suitcases for transport. Young people stripped bark from trees to make ink and entire congregations helped to buy small quantities of paper in bookstores, to avoid detection. On thick stationery (the only thing available) one secret press the believers called *Khristianin* produced a newsletter for the “underground” congregations—along with the Gospels, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Ivan Prokhanov’s hymnals, and forty thousand New Testaments laboriously stitched together and bound by hand.

One of a steadily growing number of imprisoned believers, N. P. Khrapov, wrote in the mid 1960s:

Now blood flows again, Siberia is another Coliseum. . . . Long ago they used to build churches over the martyrs’ graves. And what have persecutions given us now? Everywhere new congregations stand as a result of them!<sup>2</sup>

## **Called to Walk on Thorns**

During the 1980s, while harassment of believers in the Soviet Union continued, a friend sent me a recording. It sounded strange in the peaceful Russian Mennonite village in Mexico where we lived. Someone had secretly recorded a meeting broken up by the police and a house search in Siberia. One heard the believers singing, a high-pitched wavering Russian song, while the police kept interrupting, barking orders on a megaphone, telling them to disperse at once. During the house

search one heard the same shouted commands, the sound of furniture moving, scuffling, rumbling and when they began twisting arms to extort information a child began to cry.

The crying of the child (his father had already spent years in a prison camp and his mother got arrested shortly afterward) quickly rose to unmasked screams of terror—continuing on and on, but gradually weakening among the babble of angry voices, loud knocks, and excited conversation as he grew hoarse.

The cries of this child raised serious questions for me—and for Christians throughout “the West.”

Were they necessary?

Is it ever *necessary* to refuse to conform and bring such suffering upon one’s companion and little ones? Could not the Christians of the Soviet Union have made the few “minor adjustments” necessary to avoid it? (Most Evangelical Christian Baptists did, and lived through the post-war Communist period undisturbed.) On the other hand, is it *necessary* to live in peace like the rest? Must we live where the “right” to our personal freedom and to believe what we choose is guaranteed?

How do Christians best point the world to Christ—by identifying with the world as far as possible, or by standing in stark contrast to the world even in “nonessentials”?

As I saw how my fellow Christians in the west faced the predicament of Russia’s believers—some with sentimentalism and scandalous fund-raising propaganda, and others with cool scepticism, thinking they were probably “fanatical”—it became obvious that we had no clear answer to this question ourselves. Yet our survival as Christians may depend on it.

[3](#)

In 1966 a leader of the unregistered “underground” believers, Georgy Vins, stood on trial in Moscow. After two grueling days of standing in court and suffering interrogation most of the night he finished his final address (guaranteed to him under Soviet law) with a poem:

Not for robbery, nor for gold



Do we stand before you.

Today here, as in Pilate's day,

Christ our Saviour is being judged.

Once again abuse resounds,

Again slander and falsehood prevail.

Yet he stands silent, sorrowfully

Looking down on us poor sinners.

He hears the sorry threats.

He sees the trepidation of those

Whose hands have gathered tears,

Of children, wives and mothers.

Forgetful of history's lessons,

They burn with desire to punish

Freedom of conscience and of faith

And the right to serve the Lord.

No! You cannot kill the freedom of belief,

Or imprison Christ in jail!

The example of his victory

Will live in hearts he saves!

A silent guard binds round

The friends of Christ with steel ring,  
But Christ himself inspires us  
To stand serene before this court.  
No rebel call has passed our lips,  
No children offered as a sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>  
We preach salvation constantly,  
Our message leads to holy thoughts.  
We call upon the Church of Christ  
To tread the path of thorns.  
We call men to a heavenly goal,  
We challenge perfidy and lies.  
And so we stand before you  
Or rather, have been forced to come.  
So you may learn the ways of God:  
That sons of his stay true to Him.  
Fresh trials now and persecution  
Will serve alone to strengthen faith,  
And witness God's eternal truth  
To generations still to come.

With Georgy Vins, numberless believers in Russia stood on trial for their faith

after persecution increased in the 1960s. Like him, they discovered the shock and loneliness of having the whole world turn against them—even “respectable” friends, relatives, and Christian churches. They learned how it feels to be considered “fools for Christ’s sake.” But they knew the secret of the Old Believer Avvakum, of Matvey Dalmatov, the Shore Dwellers, Nil Sorsky, the Strigolniki, and Nikolai Svyatosha, and like them walked . . .

1 *Soviet Evangelicals* (reference to be completed)

2 N. P. Khrapov spent a total of twenty-six years in jail. This is an excerpt from his song: “Greetings! Radiant people of Christ!”

3 During the trial, at which he suffered constant mockery and abuse, his mother stood outside on the steps of the court building, praying for him. From Blagoveschensk on the Amur River east of Mongolia, she was a sister of Pyotr Sharikov, tortured to death for his Christian beliefs in 1938. Her father also spent years in prison. Her husband, Pyotr Vins, with whom she lived in exile several years, had died alone--of starvation--in a prison camp on Siberia’s Magadan coast, two thousand kilometres northeast of Japan. Her father-in-law, Jakob Wiens, (Georgy’s grandfather) had grown up among the *Brüdergemeinde* at Blumenau on the Molochna.

4 Shortly before this, the Soviet paper *Izvestiia* published the story of a woman who murdered a child in ritual sacrifice as a result of the “fanaticism” inspired by the evangelical believers.

## The Pilgrim's Way

Thirty years before the Bolshevik revolution a monk in the Mikhailovsky monastery in Kazan came across a strange manuscript, *Stories Told by a Pilgrim*, and published it. The stories, told by an unidentified Pilgrim, had been written (with what seemed like numerous later additions) by someone to whom he had told them in the Siberian city of Irkutsk.

The Pilgrim had come from the government of Orel, south of Moscow. Orphaned as a child he had gone to live with his older brother at his grandfather's inn. His grandfather could read and studied the Bible every day, but his brother was a rebellious boy and got into drinking. One night when the two of them lay sleeping on the back of the clay stove his brother pushed him off and he broke his arm.

The arm shrivelled up and he lost the use of his hand. Seeing that he would never work like other men, his grandfather made special effort to teach him what he could from the Bible. After the accident, his older brother left, so before his grandfather died he became heir to the inn. His grandfather had found a young girl to be his wife and they lived happily in the fear of the Lord.

No sooner did the grandfather die however, than the older brother broke into the inn, stole the money, and lit it to cover up his tracks. Crippled and penniless, the Pilgrim then had to depend on his wife's sewing and knitting for support. Many days, with nothing else to do, he would sit beside her and read from the Bible while she sewed by hand. Both of them would cry and seek God. They fasted often. They went to church and kissed the ikons. Every night they would fall on their faces, not once but hundreds of times, to pray. "Yet we did it," the Pilgrim wrote later, "like clowns going through the motions because we did not know the Lord in our hearts."

After two years his wife turned sick and died. Not knowing what to do, the Pilgrim took dry bread in his bag and set off on foot for Kiev to visit the graves of the sufferers: Boris and Gleb.

Along the way, and wandering from there eastward, he asked many how he should come to really know Christ. Some told him one thing, some another. One evening

he met an old man, a starets, who told him about the Jesus Prayer. From that time onward, things began to change.

As he prayed the Jesus Prayer throughout the day, the Pilgrim from Orel discovered what it means to “live in repentance.” He discovered the indescribable joy, the change of perspective, and the heavenly light that comes in constant awareness of Christ. He told the man from Irkutsk:

And this is how I go about now, never ceasing to call on the name of Jesus. At times I walk as much as forty verst a day, but I do not feel like I am walking at all. I am only aware of Christ. When the cold comes through to me I begin to pray more earnestly and I get warm all over. When hunger overcomes me I call more often on the name of Jesus and I forget my wish for food. When I turn sick and rheumatic pains afflict my back and legs, I fix my thoughts on Christ and do not notice the pain. If anyone does me harm I have only to remember Christ for the injury and anger to pass away and for me to forget it all.

The Pilgrim described his experiences on the roads of Russia. He told of breaking through the ice on a cold rainy morning, of meeting a wolf, of sleeping in a guardhouse one night when runaway horses crashed with the tongue of a wagon into a window and scared the guard’s wife out of her mind, of false accusation, of robbers, beggars, sickness, and experiences on the way with soldiers, the wealthy and a lonely hermit in the woods. In all these things he said:

I would sometimes feel as though my heart was a fountain flowing over with joy, such lightness, freedom and consolation were in it. Sometimes I felt a burning love for Jesus and for all God’s creatures. Sometimes my eyes overflowed with tears of thankfulness to God for his mercy to me, a sinner. Sometimes my understanding that had been so limited was given so much light that I could easily understand and concentrate on things that up to now I had not thought about at all. The sense of a warm gladness in my heart spread through my whole being until God’s presence everywhere became real to me. By calling on the name of Jesus I was overwhelmed with joy and now I know the meaning of the words, “The Kingdom of God is within you!”

From details in the story of the Pilgrim from Orel, it appears that he lived in the time of Tsar Nikolai I, probably before the Crimean War. But his story did not become widely known until the twentieth century. Then, in the context of what happened during and after Communism it gradually became clear that the

Pilgrim's story is the story of all who believed in Russia and discovered the secret of . . .

## Survival

Some years ago a Mennonite church in Costa Rica called on me to interpret for a visiting minister from Russia. All afternoon we travelled across the mountain to where they lived. Deep down in the tropics, on Costa Rica's eastern lowlands we found them, a crowd gathered in a meetinghouse among pineapple and cassava fields. From all directions they had come: women carrying babies and leading children along muddy, deeply rutted roads, young people and campesinos in their best shirts, German colonists whose own ancestors came from the Ukraine, and brothers of North American Amish or Mennonite background.

From half a dozen congregations they gathered to hear an Evangelical Christian Baptist from Kazakhstan speak. They listened carefully. While translating the brother's words from German to Spanish I watched the audience, crowded to the back of the large auditorium and with people standing at the doors, absorb the message. I saw the light in their eyes as the brother described Siberia (few Costa Rican Mennonites have seen snow) and realised that strange things are happening today.

East meets west. North meets south. The Cold War is over and with easier travel, more telephones and amateur radios, FAX machines, email, the net . . . we Christians around the world find it easier than ever to know about and learn from one another.

But do we?

My feeling is that we have all been eager to teach but slow to learn.

In the first chapter of this book I wrote that Nikolai Khmara, being dead, still speaks. Now I am ready to suggest what he and untold numbers of Russians like him, have to say:

**We must flee from the world, not from sorrow and pain.**

From the time Russia began, at Kiev, its government, social life, and state religion

have given serious believers only one option: flight. That option they have used over and over.

But the more I learn about Russia's believers, the more I have come to see that they did not flee to save their bodies. They fled to save their souls. Many times that flight did not involve geography at all.

Jesus Christ fled the fashion, commerce, and politics of his day. Sometimes he did it literally (going to the desert to pray). But usually he did it only in his mind and in his actions. He refused to pay attention to what the world believed important. He turned his back on wealth and fame. But when they seized him and took him to the cross he faced it calmly, even though he could have escaped.

In the same way, believers in Russia turned their backs on what was easy and pleasant, and willingly faced hardship and death. Doing this, the church survived!

### **“Things” are traps.**

At a language institute where I used to teach college-level students I learned much about clothes. Every day I saw new outfits. No sooner did the buzzer go than bags appeared from under chairs. Students rushed by twos and threes to the bathroom to try on brand name jeans or tee shirts to go with major league caps and air pump tennis shoes. Now we are in the United States. It is Christmas season. An eighty page gift catalogue lies on my desk—spiral sliced boneless honey glazed ham, monogrammed glass beer steins, a musical copper stove with lids on kettles that lift as it plays *My Favourite Things*, gold prayer cross pendants, chocolate cherry fudge logs . . . while untold millions go hungry and a hurricane has just devastated the Caribbean.

What, in our western world, has happened to self-denial?

Everything is for sale, more often than not “on special.” Every day's mail brings more gaudy fliers and bills. Shopping centres get larger and more numerous, and everyone, it seems, has more money to spend.

What does the brother, with his house paid, a steady income, and a comfortable savings account decide when he goes to buy a car? Does he buy the car he needs or the car he wants? Does he even stop to consider whether he needs a car or not?

Does it occur to the overweight sister with a credit card in her purse, a vehicle at



her disposal, and time to go shopping, to deny herself of a tray of sugared donuts?

What does the youth in the sports department, with a wad of cash in his pocket (after all, he earned it!), think he needs?

Trapped in money and things! If we think like the world, buy like the world, and entertain ourselves like the world—would it be unfair if God let us spend eternity with the world?

Unlike Russia's believers, we in the west seem to think it our "inalienable right" not to have to give up things—neither good things nor bad.

Giving up a spouse after divorce and remarriage—unthinkable! Give up owning a car—You must be crazy! Give up a television set, a computer, a trip to Yellowstone, electricity in the house . . . If I would go on like this someone might throw this book away. The very idea that something good can (and perhaps should) be given up for Christ seems laughable, or even heretical, to many Christians in America. But Matvey Semyonovich Dalmatov, Yefim Pereyaslavsky, the "road Christians," and others like them even gave up their lives for Christ, and the church survived!

### **The way of the world, not the way of Christ, is crazy.**

Every so often while writing this book I would almost lose heart, thinking, "This is so crazy no one will read it. Or if they do they will reject it outright." But something in the "craziness" of the Old Believers and Lev Tolstoy began to speak to me. What is crazy, Old Believers sitting to fish through the ice near the Arctic Circle for refusing to get a birth certificate, or two hundred million Americans sitting—with the end of time and creation upon them—watching Donald Duck on TV?

Until recently I taught at a private high school in San José, Costa Rica.<sup>1</sup> My students taught me what is "normal" in the 1990s. One day I came to a class early. The other teacher had not finished and I listened to a row of fourteen and fifteen-year-olds giving reports on different contraceptives, how to use them and how great a risk of pregnancy each one involves. Virtually all students by that time had experience in using them and talked about it. We had several "*unión libre*" couples in class, and occasionally a maternity dropout. This, they told me, is "normal."

During the World Cup soccer games (France 98) our school was a madhouse. Ears propped on hands more than likely concealed Walkman wires. Boys shaved their heads to look like Ronaldo or died their hair yellow. Wherever I went—to and from work on the bus, even from my preschoolers playing on the back patio—I heard the Ricky Martin song. Crowds pushed up to store windows with TV displays and for goals made by certain teams one had to hold one's ears for the screaming, the roars, and the honking of horns as pedestrians went wild, embracing one another, throwing girls into the air, or even trying to lift cars in the euphoria. This, they told me, is “normal.” Even something to laugh about.

A woman we know left her church to join a more “Spiritual” one. A reason she likes the new church better is that she can wear jeans to services (in her former setting she had to wear a dress). She can also cut her hair, wear ear rings, and paint her face. All this, she assures us, is “normal” among Christians today, but to wear a big head scarf with tassles, high shoes, and a black apron like she used to—why, that would be *crazy!*

Russia's believers never thought the world was normal. Neither did they think it crazy to act, look, or think in a radically different way for Christ, and the church survived!

### **Christ's demands are not fanatical.**

The world's idea of *things*, and of what is “normal,” has always made Christ, who <sup>2</sup> asks us to give up everything (like he did), look fanatical. But what impresses me is not the “fanaticism” of those who give up *things* to find eternal life. It is the narrow-mindedness and fanaticism of those who feel threatened by Christ's example and crucify him again and again.

The early Christians refused to put a pinch of incense on pagan altars. For preferring to die rather than co-operate in such trivial formality, people called them “fanatics.” They threw them into arenas with lions and bears and hung their wives by one foot from trees.

Who was “fanatical”? Who made the most out of trivia?

The border between the spiritual kingdom of Christ and the material kingdom of the world seldom runs along the lines of major issues. It runs through what most people find possible to dismiss as “nonessentials.” For the Old Believers that was

how to spell Jesus, or whether to report births and deaths. For the Molokans it was whether to keep state holidays. For many in this century it was whether one should be officially registered to hold meetings.

But in all their history some of Russia's believers refused to bow to outside pressure, even in "nonessentials," and the church survived!

### **Resisting the world's way brings persecution.**

The way of Christ constantly puts the antichristian world into perspective. It also bothers the world.

If our way of life does not bother the world, is it not that we have become just like it?

Christ and his followers, because they have always resisted the world's way, have always suffered persecution. The world's intolerance of nonconformity, pitted against Christ's intolerance of worldliness, has never allowed for a middle ground. Resisting the world and suffering persecution go hand in hand. That is true nonconformity.

True nonconformity (not just the wearing of a distinctive uniform) invites the wrath of everyone: the world's government, the world's church, or whoever's conscience gets pricked by it. Russia's believers did not fear to prick the consciences of others, and the church survived!

### **Christ lives only with the nonconformed.**

In the west, we handle the issue of nonconformity in two ways. The majority of us, unlike Christ, shy away from visible nonconformity, thinking it must come from legalism or a Pharisaical "holier than thou" attitude. We rationalise what the world does as somehow compatible with the Gospel—making it "Christian" for the immoral to continue in second marriages, the proud to live in style, and the greedy to keep on making money as fast as they can. Nonconformity, some of us think, is a matter of the heart.

The rest of us, unlike Christ, standardise nonconformity by drawing up lists of rules on what to eat, what to wear, or exactly how to make our living. We think Christians must come to a certain "balanced position"—not close enough to the world to be "liberal" yet not so far away as to be "fanatical." To see someone else

not quite where we are makes us uncomfortable, as if a more nonconformed lifestyle somehow threatened us, or our freedom in Christ.

In this area, Russia's believers may have the most to tell us. To them, no degree of nonconformity looked dangerous and they did not limit it in any way. They thought the opportunity should exist for everyone to go as far in following Christ as he wants to. One cannot go overbalance, they believed, in following him.

If that meant living on bread and salt, sleeping on the road, or wearing nothing but a long grey robe with a twine around one's middle, it was alright. Those who did not go that far (for family or other reasons) did not feel threatened. Instead, they looked up to those who reached higher levels of self denial, and the church survived!

### **Being different is not enough. We must be like Christ.**

We western individuals find it hard to decide on issues of nonconformity. As groups we find it even harder. The world keeps changing and nonconformity—if it is true nonconformity—must keep changing with it. We also change. That makes everything relative, we think, and hard to decide. Yet everything must and will get decided!

Russia's believers from Nikolai Svyatosha to Nikolai Khmara decided how to be nonconformed by deciding to *conform to Christ*. Doing this, the church survived!

### **Nonconformity begins with an awareness of Christ.**

Nil Sorsky already knew that we become *detached* from the world's things to the degree that we *attach* ourselves to Christ. He also knew that this takes place in constant awareness of his presence. Wherever we are, while fully aware of Christ we will not do, nor say, nor think what is wrong.

In 1968, at a meeting of the Poustinniki among their abandoned farms and spruce trees at Combermere in northeastern Ontario, a question arose: "What if the Lord would want us to live in the city? Could we do that and remain as close to Christ as here in the woods?" Yekaterina, the woman whose memories of old Russia inspired the community's founding, wrote in answer:

Suppose you were married and began expecting a child. Would you stop cooking

for your husband? Would you stop doing the laundry and the cleaning, or stop going to meetings . . . ? No. You would go about your daily business. The only difference between you and everyone else would be that you were carrying a child. Your womb would be a Poustinia for the child, and you would carry him wherever you go.

Now you are carrying Christ, and bring his presence with you. . . . You have, as it were, a *poustinia within you*. It is as if within you there was a little log cabin in which you and Christ were very close. In this attitude you go about your business.

God forbid that everyone should become a recluse or a hermit! That is not what it means to be a poustinik. . . . It means that within yourselves you have made a room, a log cabin, a secluded space. You have built it by prayer—the Jesus Prayer perhaps. . . . And because you are aware of Christ . . . you can bring him to the street, and among people, in a very special and powerful way.

Quietness, and the Spirit of Christ living in a “log cabin within.” If as much as one noisy, active, western Christian can be brought into heavenly silence through the message of the Russian believers described in this book, they will not have lived their lives in vain.

Smallness and silence before Christ the King. A repentant attitude. This is umilenie. This is koinonia. And awareness of Christ—beginning with such a simple thing as calling on the name of the Lord—will not stop until it becomes an awareness of the infinite. Then it is eternal life. A secret. A great mystery, hidden from the wise and prudent. But Russia’s believers discovered it—*Gospodi Iisuse*

[3](#)

*Khriste, syne Bozhii, pomilui nas greshnykh!* —to survive Yosif Stalin, the Bolsheviks, Rasputin and Pobedonostsev, Tsar Nikolai I, Peter the Great, Ivan the Terrible . . . the Antichrist.

To survive we need more than to follow the example of Christ. We need to walk with him. If we learn how to do this, our church will survive too.

[1](#) A Roman Catholic school.

[2](#) Luke 14: 33, “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”

[3](#) Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us!

## Note on Names

For security and other reasons, Russian Christians often used initials or did not mention the names of the people they wrote about. Some used pseudonyms. This was the best thing to do in their time. But it was not the best for this story. It will be hard enough for readers to keep a clear picture of who did what, without having to deal with unnamed or partially named characters. I only wrote about real people, but where names were missing I have supplied them, as follows. Should anyone who reads the story know what the real names of these people were, please contact the publisher. The names or parts of names I supplied appear in italics:

*Danilo Astachov*

*Fyodor Sakharov*

*Grigory Korsh*

*Olga Braun*

*Sergey Yushkevich*

*Viktor Alekhin*

*Vladimir Golitsyn*

*Yelizaveta Kasyanova*

*Yury Gorynovich*

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