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## Eschatological Expectations at the Turn of the Nineteenth-Twentieth Centuries: The End of the World is [Not] Nigh?

The term ‘eschatology’ was introduced into the dictionary of social sciences from the field of dogmatic theology, in which it referred to ‘the study of the Last Things, of the ultimate fate of the world and the human race’ [Trubetskoi 1995: 268]. In the context of historical research, the concept of ‘eschatology’ or ‘eschatological ideas’ has proved pertinent, above all, for the interpretation of radical social change in society during a period in which literature about the apocalypse was widespread. The scarcity of sources concerning the mood of the ‘silent majority’ has forced researchers to use literary examples of these apocalyptic essays in their analyses and, as a result, the quantitative analysis of these texts has come to be identified with a qualitative description of a given historical epoch or social group. An eschatological complexion is normally attributed to the end of the fifteenth century and to the second half of the seventeenth century. In the framework of this analytical paradigm, concepts like ‘an eschatological crisis’, ‘a surge of eschatological expectations’, ‘a peak of apocalyptic moods’ or just ‘eschatological expectations’ are synonymous. The history of eschatological expectations in Russia, in this context, can be seen as the history of eschatological crises.

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The phenomena of eschatological expectations is treated somewhat differently in works dedicated to the tradition of non-written, folk eschatology [Viola 1990; Belousov 1991; Vlasova 1998; Tarabukina 1998; Levkievskaya 1999; *Svyashchennoe Pisanie* 1999; Maslinsky 2000; Panchenko 2001; Akhmetova 2003]. With respect to published and archive materials from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the majority of authors have studied rumours about the end of the world not as evidence of the latest in a series of eschatological crises, but as examples of a particular type of folkloric text recurring over the course of several generations. The use of the concept of an 'eschatological crisis' in this context is problematic: if we suggest that eschatological narratives function in society uninterrupted, then it is not clear which criteria would define a period as one of eschatological crisis. And it is for this reason, we may suppose, that the majority of folklore studies which interpret peasant prophecies about recent times do not employ the concept of an 'eschatological crisis'.

An exception is Viola's article devoted to the 'eschatology' of the Russian peasant in the 1920s and 1930s. Viola characterises this period as one of an 'apocalyptic crisis' activated by 'dramatic social changes', and observed 'in those groups most seriously affected by such changes'<sup>1</sup> [Viola 1990: 749]. Viola's approach, it would seem, has been conditioned in many ways by the results of research into the so-called crisis cults [La Barre 1971; Lanternari 1974] of the indigenous peoples of America, Asia and Africa, the variants of which include, according to the standard argument, the cargo-cults of indigenous Melanesians, the ghost dance of the American Indians, and the mau mau of African tribes. Among the numerous models put forward to explain the rise of similar religious movements,<sup>2</sup> so-called 'acculturation', first coined by R. Linton in 1943, occupies a significant position. Subsequently, this variant has gained most currency, having become, as La Barre says, 'a kind of "anthropological explanation" of causality. In this view, some sort of "culture clash" is held responsible for engendering the crisis cult' [La Barre 1971: 20].

The fact that in various regions of the oecumene crisis cults are often accompanied by messianic and apocalyptic prophecies naturally compels us to turn to them in our search for parallels to the eschatology of Russian peasants. And if in the work of Lynne Viola such a juxtaposition is only implied, in the work of Aleksandr Panchenko it is markedly more explicit. According to his conclusions, 'the eschatological expectations of the Russian peasantry, having functioned during the twentieth century in the form of

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<sup>1</sup> I.e. forced collectivisation in the Russian village. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> See the list of terms used to designate these in [Lanternari 1974: 486–7].

narratives about “the last days,” are, to an essential degree, connected with [the] processes of acculturation, i.e., in a technological sense the influence of a more highly developed culture on a less developed culture. Such processes, which are accompanied by a change in social structure and reorganization of axiological systems, inevitably cause a specific social tension. It is often expressed by different messianic movements. A classical example of such movements concerns Melanesian “cargo-cults,” which became widespread in the first half of the twentieth century’ [Panchenko 2001: 19]. Nevertheless, the results which Viola and Panchenko achieve by adopting the same approach to their material, are different. Viola considers the eschatological expectation of the 1920s and 1930s as, basically, a crisis cult, or ‘nativistic movement’, to use Linton’s terminology [Linton 1943]. The social changes connected with post-revolutionary events are identified in her work as the direct causes of the apocalyptic surge in the Russian village. Panchenko, on the other hand, comes to the conclusion that acculturation in the general sense was the main and, for the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century at least, universal function of eschatological narratives. Although in each case an adaptation to social changes is being described, Viola’s interpretive stance presupposes the existence of ‘particularly significant’, ‘exclusive’ social changes — of precisely the kind which could precipitate an eschatological crisis. Panchenko’s view is that an eschatological narrative facilitates the process of acculturation and adaptation in general, which is to say enhances the effectiveness of the cultural interaction. If we attempt to develop this idea, we come to the following conclusion: that it is the eschatological narrative itself which enables us to identify *what*, in one or another group, is identified as an innovation that requires adaptation. Use of the terms ‘apocalyptic surge’ or ‘eschatological crisis’ is also possible from this position. But the crucial question which arises in this case is what, exactly, is adapted through an eschatological narrative in periods when rumours about the end of the world are particularly prevalent?

I realised the necessity of answering, or at least trying to answer, this question when I discovered materials relating to expectations of the end of the world at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. This period has never been considered a time of eschatological crisis in the Russian village. Panchenko includes evidence from this period together with texts written at the end of the twentieth century. M. N. Vlasova, who published a file from the Tenishev archive for 1899, sees in the peasant rumours about a comet that was actively discussed at the time a realisation of the universal concept of a comet as a harbinger of war and unhappiness. ‘The perception of the comet’ writes the author, ‘remains over the course of centuries essentially unchanged’ [Vlasova 1998: 386].

However, available materials give us reason to assert that the eschatological rumours of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries differ significantly from not only earlier, but also later such rumours. The majority of sources paint us a picture of a universal dissemination of rumours about the end of the world during this period. In this article I will try to analyse the contents, sources, and functions of such stories in the peasant community. I will also try to answer the question of the relevance of the concept of 'eschatological crisis' to the given socio-historical context.

Both published and archival materials provide evidence of the popularity at the turn of the century of rumours about the impending destruction of the world.<sup>1</sup> One brochure from the beginning of the twentieth century begins with the words: '*Yet another new end of the world! This time doomsday, or the end of the world, has been predicted by idle minds for the 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1912*' [No. 12: 1].<sup>2</sup> The enlightener, passing on widespread rumours, writes, '*And not only this coincidence,*<sup>3</sup> *they continue, indicates the proximity of the end, but everything surrounding us as well: everywhere there is war, distemper, popular uprisings, earthly kings are being banished, the people are suffering famine, rabble-rousers are everywhere seducing credulous hearts... The Antichrist is already among us, and is waiting for his day when he will rise before the troubled people and lead them into the nether world of hell, to eternal torment and suffering... Only recently, when the end of the world was forecast for the 1<sup>st</sup> of November in 1899, there were many unhappy misunderstandings and incidents. Among the trusting and ignorant masses there were Russians so naïve they believed all the gossip about the end of the world and began to prepare themselves for death. They sold all their property to cunning swindlers who acted successfully on the gullibility of their neighbours*' [No. 12: 2]. Judging by the manner of the author, he is addressing a readership well acquainted with the universal expectation of the end of the world. In just the same way one of the correspondents of Prince Tenishev writes about the rumours: 'In all the districts of the locality I am describing,<sup>4</sup> in September–October of this year rumours circulated among the peasants that in October (according to some on the 4<sup>th</sup>, others the 13<sup>th</sup>), would come the end of the world. These rumours were fairly varied' [TA: D. 1750. L. 7].

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<sup>1</sup> [Trunov 1869; Svetoprestavlenie 1882 (No. 21 in References, Section a), at end of article) Efimenko 1877; Ivanitsky 1890; Plyushchevsky-Plyushchik 1898; Suvorov 1899; Ivanov 1900; Dikarev 1895, 1896, 1900; Ivanov 1901; *Konets mira 25 marta 1912 goda* (No.12 in References, Section a), at end of article); *Poslovitsy* 1905; Bogatyrev 1916; Kostolovsky 1916; Smirnov 1916; Vlasova 1998; TA: D. 766, 798, 803, 806, 884, 1750].

<sup>2</sup> Here and forthwith numbers in brackets indicate number in References, Section a). [i.e. the list of brochures at the end of the article — Editor]

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the coincidence of Lady Day and Easter in 1912.

<sup>4</sup> This refers to the Danilovsky region in Yaroslavl province.

Such a publication of rumours about the end of the world was unusual at the turn of the century. The majority of publications of folklore from the period offered readers short or full-length recapitulations, presented as monologues, of what had supposedly originally been peasant dialogues. It was the wide variety of rumours the Tenishev correspondent turned his attention to, together with their striking capacity for fantasy, that made folk discussions so interesting for the lover of folklore. The well-known church publicist of the end of the nineteenth century A. Balov, compiled an idiosyncratic list of folk ‘versions of the destruction of the world’. This included ‘stars with tails’ which ‘will fall to the Earth, and the Earth will disintegrate’ or burn up; ‘fiery rain’; ‘a normal star’ which, when it falls will cause the Earth to ‘disintegrate into little pieces’ [TA: D. 1750. L. 7]. Other references of this kind that I have myself come across include ‘stone hail’, ‘sulphuric rain’, and ‘the planet’ which can attract all people to itself, knock the Earth off its course, or break off a small piece from it.

The majority of these retold rumours constitute literary re-workings of oral stories. The most assiduous correspondents tried to recreate the circumstances in which a conversation about the end of the world might happen in a peasant milieu to maximum effect. The resulting descriptions are strongly schematic in character, and recall scripts for dialogue, rather than their recordings. There is a characteristic example in the manuscript of V. Antipov, a village schoolmaster from Novgorod province. The allocation of roles in the dialogue he presents is clearly the author’s. One of these is an Old Believer, depicted in the terms typical for the time:

*Look at the times we live in! It’s the third year that there’s been no harvest — no bread and no hay. It’s God is punishing us: heaven only knows what goes on nowadays! Drinking, fighting, swearing, murder. Did this used to go on? No... we never gobbled tea nor chewed tobacco — we were scared even to think about it. But nowadays? Why, before a man’s even learnt to wipe his nose he’s gobbling up vodka, walking down the street with an accordion and with a roll-up in his teeth. It’s not for nothing that God says that before the end of the world three heroes will appear and conquer the whole world. The heroes are here and they are conquering the world. And you, don’t you know what these heroes are? Wine, tobacco and tea... All the listeners were stunned by the speech of the man: there was something prophetic about it... [TA: D. 803. L. 14ob. —15].*

In this instance V. Antipov appeals to the well-known ‘eschatology’ of the Old-Believers, about which much was written at that time.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eschatological moods among Old Believers were dealt with in a whole chapter of a book by Ya. A. Plyushchevsky-Plyushchik (1898); some of these materials were republished in the work of A. Belyaev [Belyaev 1898: 955–9].

Asceticism, the understanding of the world as the kingdom of the Antichrist, wine, tobacco and tea as the chief enemies of the human race — all these are traditional stereotypical descriptions of the Old Believers, which would have been well known to the enlightened public at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The appearance of such an Old Believer in a peasant conversation seems unlikely, and his words are highly likely to have been invented. The same impression is left by this extract from another manuscript:

*She [i.e. a certain old woman]<sup>2</sup> had bought material to make a new dress for the Feast of the Mother of God of Kazan (8<sup>th</sup> July), but after she heard the rumours about the stone hail, she decided to hurry up and make it, and just before Trinity she came to church in a new dress. ‘Hey, Marfa, you’ve got a new dress’ an old dear she knew said to her. ‘You know what [...] [following word illegible] Maryushka: I wanted to make it for the Mother of God of Kazan’s day, but they say that the end of the world might be coming at Trinity, so I thought I’d make it and wear it a little bit, and then it’ll do to die in! Whadda nightmare, so help us God!’ [TA: D. 766. L. 18].*

The names of the heroines of this story — Marfushka and Maryushka — would appear to have been consciously chosen by the compiler, and were intended to introduce into the text a specific Christian resonance.<sup>3</sup> V. Suvorov probably pursued the same goal. By inverting verbs in sentences, and using a specific rhythm in phrases created with extra linking words, he added to a folktale about the last times the characteristics of a biblical narrative: ‘*The sky will roll up like a tablecloth; this old earth will burn, but there will be a new one and on it God will create paradise. And twelve angels with metal switches will thrash Satan, as his squeals ring through the whole universe, and then will they cast him on to his crony’s bed*<sup>4</sup>. *And that bed is such, that now he is in terror of it: everything is in flames, and beaten into it are metal nails...*’<sup>5</sup> [Suvorov 1899: 394; emphasis added].

Materials from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the

<sup>1</sup> In my understanding, these stereotypes are current to this day. Compare: “‘The deep and radical pessimism” which A. A. Potebnya considered “a characteristic of those sections of the population, for whom belief, custom, and folk poetry in general’ held the greatest significance”, comprised the essence of old Believer culture’ [Belousov 1991: 9].

<sup>2</sup> Words in curly brackets in the quotes are those which are difficult to read in the manuscript.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to A. L. Lvov for bringing this parallel to my attention.

<sup>4</sup> The text refers to a subject widespread in Slavonic popular legends [SUS: 756 B], which held that a devil was afraid of ‘his crony’s bed’. ‘That bed is made for us, the devils, and for our relations and connections and gossips and cronies, and it is all of fire, and on wheels, and spins round and round’ [Afanasyev 1990: 140; № 27: 7].

<sup>5</sup> In this and subsequent quotations the spelling and punctuation of the author are preserved. [The English version attempts to suggest this non-standard style — Editor].

twentieth century were to a significant degree the products of literary endeavour, which forces us to look more critically at the very fact of their appearance. In this case I consider two conditions to be of particular importance.

Firstly, each of the journalists publishing versions of peasant rumours about the destruction of the world was pursuing a particular ideological aim. In one instance (Suvorov), this was to 'rehabilitate' the people as the bearers of genuine religiosity; in another — it was to demonstrate their 'greyness' and 'unenlightenedness'. At the end of the nineteenth century this last agenda was particularly common [see, for example, Von Geldern 1996]. Sometimes the enlightening manner of the author was openly homiletic (see e.g.: '*Taking as our authority holy writ, science, and everyday common sense, we boldly declare: Russian people, pay no heed to dark rumours, and remember that not a single hair will fall from the head of a man without God willing it*' [№ 12: 16]); sometimes it took the form of a gentle explanation made to simple-minded locals ('*Is it true that the Antichrist will soon appear, and that the last times will come?*' — *I was asked this question in March of this year by a peasant I know. 'Who told you that?', I asked. — 'It's what a soldier said, he read in a newspaper that a scientist has even written a book about it. Hasn't there been anything about visions in your newspaper?' — 'There hasn't been anything. What visions are you talking about?*' [Ivanov 1901: 134].<sup>1</sup> The memoirs of V. G. Korolenko serve as one of the clearest examples of this kind of opinion. Describing the events of August 1887, when many astronomers gathered in the environs of the town of Yurevets to observe the solar eclipse, he asks the rhetorical question: '*Oh, will that day soon come to holy Rus...*', he writes, '*the day when there will be no more ghosts, when will vanish distrust, enmity, and misunderstandings between those who gaze through telescopes and explore the sky, and those who only fall to the ground, and in scientific analysis see nothing but the outrage of a cruel god?*' [Korolenko 1954 (1887): 60].

Many authors envisaged their main task as directing public attention to the 'darkness of minds' which still existed at that time, even though 'our science has developed to a considerable degree' [No. 12: 9]. This, evidently, led to the constant references to phenomena which were, in the opinion of the author, incorrectly understood by the peasants, and which gave rise to rumours:

So, in the Rostov district a rumour appeared that some woman nun

<sup>1</sup> A further example: 'A group of schoolchildren, gathered together, began to talk about the last times and about the disasters which will happen to everyone, and at once everyone became depressed. When I [the teacher] began to persuade them this was not true they just said to me, 'How can you not believe it when they write about it — and how they write! All the punctuation marks are in the right places, which means that it's clever people writing it, so how can you not believe it?' [Smirnov 1916: 123].

had flown to the capital on a balloon, and had announced the birth of the Antichrist 'in the right place'.<sup>1</sup> They also said in that district that were kinds of balloons flying in the air which had the habit of suddenly falling on top of people and destroying them, leaving no trace. The source of this rumour was a balloon that was released by meteorologists, which was transformed [in the popular mind] into balloons which destroy people, which were linked to the end of the world and to the census-taking<sup>2</sup> [Plyushchevsky-Plyushchik 1898: 72].

The second point that I feel should be borne in mind is the popularity of astronomical discoveries and of astronomy itself among urban dwellers in the latter third of the nineteenth century. People wrote about comets during this period not only because they were discussed in the village, but also because they were a popular topic of conversation in the salons of the capital.

From the 1860s onwards, there were active efforts made to popularise astronomy [Lutsky 1982: 17]. This was largely initiated by Camille Flammarion, who had worked in the Paris Observatory and had published many books on popular astronomy [see Strazheva 1995]. In the 1860s and 1870s, he produced manuals to assist amateur scientists' independent observation of the sky, held national conferences on astronomy in Paris, and gave public lectures throughout Europe. Practically all his books were translated into Russian. Among them were: *Popular Astronomy* (1880, 1897, 1900, 1902, 1904, 1908, 1913); *On the Waves of Infinity. An Astronomic Fantasy* (1893, 1894); *Accessible Astronomy* (1889, 1892, 1894, 1900, 1903, 1904, 1908, 1914); *Doomsday. An Astronomical Novel* (1893), and the same entitled *The End of the World* (1893, 1894, 1895, 1905, 1908); *Astronomy for Ladies*, and the same entitled *Popular Lectures on Astronomy* (1905, 1906); and *The Fundamentals of Astronomy in an Accessible Account for Teachers and Self-education* (1909). When *Popular Astronomy*, or *Pictorial Astronomy* as it was then translated, came out, Flammarion became one of the most famous individuals in Russia [Shcherbakov 1933]. At the same time, public lectures were being given at Moscow University by the astronomer F. A. Bredikhin (on the theory of comet form), in St Petersburg by V. A. Struve, in Kharkov by Prof. T.F. Osipovsky, and in Kazan by N. M. Lobachevsky [Lutsky 1982]. In 1888, the Nizhy Novgorod group of amateur physicists and astronomers was formed, in 1890, the Russian Astronomical Society, and in 1908, the Moscow Association of Amateur Astronomers. Between 1888 and 1910, more than ten different societies and groups opened all over Russia bringing together amateur astronomers. Be-

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<sup>1</sup> I.e., had made a report of the occurrence to the secret police (this is a standard euphemism). [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> 1897 saw the first general census of the population of the Russian Empire. [Editor].

sides the professional observatories, so-called ‘popular observatories’ appeared, which were accessible to all: in Moscow and Kazan as early as the 1830s, and later in St Petersburg, at the turn of the century [Lutsky 1982: 64]. From the 1880s onwards, two private observatories operated in Moscow as advertising ploys. Built on the roofs of small shops which sold optical goods, they were free, and aroused much curiosity [Lutsky 1982: 75–6].

Of all astronomical phenomena, it was comets that represented the greatest interest for ordinary readers. All the latest discoveries in this sphere quickly became known to a wide public. In 1884 the Queen’s astronomer R. S. Ball gave a presentation on comets at the British Society in Montreal. In the same year, his speech was published in Russian in the Moscow newspaper *Russkie vedomosti* [Russian News], and as a separate brochure (1). In 1892, a book by Charles Blunt and Rudolf Falb, *Der Weltuntergang* [The Destruction of the World]<sup>1</sup> was published in Berlin, dedicated to the approach of a comet. On the basis of this a brochure was published in Łódź in 1899 entitled *Koniec swiata w dnin 13-ym Listopada 1899 r.* (The End of the World on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of November 1899). And in the same year, four Russian elaborations of the Polish book appeared with the title *The End of the World, 13 November 1899* (13, 14, 15, 16).<sup>2</sup> Many works by authoritative specialists like C. Flammarion and W. Bölsche were published simultaneously as free supplements to thick journals<sup>3</sup> — *Vokrug sveta* [Around the World], *Vestnik znaniya* [The Herald of Knowledge] and others. In the period from 1882–1912 several dozen different brochures dedicated to comets were published. The number of literary almanacs in which the word itself ‘comet’ is used attests to its popularity [*Kometa* 1881, 1894, 1895, 1905, 1906, 1910, 1911, 1912]. By way of comparison, in the preceding period there were only four analogous publications [*Kometa* 1830, 1851, 1858, *Kometa Biela* 1833]. This mass enthusiasm for comets reached its apotheosis in 1910, during which year several dozen books dedicated to the subject were published.

The works of academic specialists and the mass-market literature of the nineteenth century cannot easily, of course, be considered in the same terms.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite that fact that they were pursuing different

<sup>1</sup> This received a wide response in Europe, and Russia even before its translation [Milovidov 1899: 341, note 1)].

<sup>2</sup> The numbers in brackets give the numbers of the brochures by supplement.

<sup>3</sup> I.e. heavyweight political and/or literary monthly magazines, the standard reading of the Russian intelligentsia. The two titles mentioned had an emphasis on popular science. [Editor].

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that the difference between them was not always obvious. In 1909, for example, a Moscow club of amateur astronomers published the brochure *K pojavleniyu komety Galleya* [The Appearance of Halley’s Comet], the illustrations for which were provided by A. Vasnetsov, a former member of the club. Although the author believed the brochure to be of an academic nature, the number of its readers was clearly greater than the number of professionals in this sphere.

goals, the authors nonetheless devoted the same proportion of their attention to astronomy as a whole, and specifically to comets.

In this context, the appearance of publications of popular rumours about the comet becomes more understandable. On the basis of this evidence, the authors could show the significant gap which existed, in their opinion, between the new enlightened nation and the 'backward, uneducated' Russian people. The impression that the Russian village everywhere was gripped by rumours about the end of the world was, to a large degree, fabricated. Peasant tales of the end of the world existed both before and after this period [Trunov 1869]. The all-encompassing 'eschatological obsession' which penetrated all layers of society was more a journalistic invention than a phenomenon bearing any relation to people's behaviour. It was not the case that the Russian village was gripped by panic and terror at the impending end of the world, but rather that the publicists of this period wanted to create the impression that it was.

In rejecting the term 'eschatological crisis' in the given context, I by no means suggest that tales about comets and the end of the world did not have currency in this period. But these tales had, it is clear, widely differing forms, sources, and functions.

The fashion for astronomy and comets, which quickly caught on and became widespread in the major cities, did not pass Russian villages by. The barrier to information passing from the cities to the countryside was evidently not so great even in the past [Von Geldern 1996]. At the end of the nineteenth century, the number of seasonal workers going to the cities from the countryside increased significantly. After the reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century in the spheres of education and book publishing, there was, on the one hand, a leap forward in literacy, and on the other, a sudden increase in the number of available books [Brooks 1985: xiv; Reitblat 1991: 5]. Reading newspapers became regular practice in villages at the end of the nineteenth century, and the number of subscribers to journals increased [Brooks 1985: 28]. Information which originated in the towns travelled to the villages with almost lightening speed. At any rate, it is known that brochures which described the comet of 1899 were read in villages prior to the date that they gave for the comet's appearance. The relationship of the peasants to the 'enlightened discourse', and to information which came from the cities evidently underwent a significant change at the end of the nineteenth century. The chairman of the Nizhny-Novgorod club of amateur physicists and astronomers, S. V. Shcherbakov, recounted, for example, the story of a peasant from the Pavlovsk district of the Nizhny-Novgorod province, K. I. Kaplin-Teziko, who learnt French on his own in order to read the book of Camille Flammarion, took the journal *L'Astronomie*, and bought a 'refractor' for the study of

the night sky [Shcherbakov 1933: 183]. A village stargazer, ‘Anton-astronom’, who observed the stars from his own roof with the aid of homemade equipment is recalled by the writer Nikolai Leskov<sup>1</sup> [Leskov 1989: 114–15]. Of course, it is possible to regard these examples as exceptional. No matter how rarely, however, these events took place, and although it is unlikely that there were many peasants who bought expensive optical equipment, the discussion of astronomic discoveries was probably, at the end of the nineteenth century, just as commonplace for them as it was for urban dwellers. I will provide several examples from a dialogue retold by V. Antipov:

*‘I’ve heard’, began one of the crowd, ‘that before Judgement Day stones will fall from the sky in such great numbers as though rain. The Earth will catch fire and everything will burn...’*

*‘No, I heard it differently’, retorted another, ‘a planet won’t hit the Earth, but first there will be sulphurous rain, and then fiery, and the whole Earth will burn up. This will be the end of the world.’ A third claimed that if you dug a deep hole, 20 versts\* long, 15 wide, and 10 deep, then the planet would fall into the hole and nothing would happen. If the planet was flying higher than the earth, then the whole district would have to stand with long poles, and then it would be possible to push it away...’*

*‘In the town we were cobbling a street, and one merchant, he said to us’, began the fourth, ‘if a planet comes near to the earth and touches the mountains, then the earth will turn upside-down and we will fly to Tar-Tarary.’<sup>2</sup> The planet, the sun, and all the stars will fall to the ground. If they fall in a dry place, then they will smash and crush everything we have, and if they fall into the sea, then all the water will splash out and will drown us...’*

*‘But most likely of all, the planet will knock the earth off its path’. ‘What path?’ some people wondered. ‘Off this one: I was reading in one book, that the earth travels along a course, that is to say, its path; and so if a planet bumps into it, it will knock it off its course. The earth will wander meaninglessly through the world and will end up in some country where there’s no light, no sun. Then there will be darkness. And in the writings it’s written that before the end of the world there won’t be any light, but only darkness’ [TA: D. 803. L. 15–17].*

We should not, I think, allow the appearance of themes of ‘the end of the world’ to deceive us. The structure and stylistics of these texts align the themes more closely with popular scientific hypotheses

<sup>1</sup> Though Leskov was a fiction-writer, who drew extensively on his own imagination, he underlines in a note to this particular subject that he himself was once acquainted with this person.

<sup>2</sup> I.e. *Tartary*, a word borrowed into Russian from Greek, and signifying the underworld.

about the earth crashing into a comet than with traditional eschatological narratives. The subject of discussion here is not the realia of the everyday world interpreted as signs of the 'last times', but a potential catastrophe, which is in no way connected to people's behaviour. Frequently, popular versions repeat publications from cheap literature word for word. By way of example, we can see the contents page of one brochure about the comet: '*What will happen if Halley's comet crashes into the earth? What will happen if the tail is made up of poisonous gases? What is the fate of our planet if the tail consists of nitric protoxide?; What will befall us if the gases are oxides of carbon?; Scientific data about Halley's comet; What will happen if the tail of the comet is made of lumps of stone?; What will be the fate of the world if the tail consists of metal ores?*' (17).

Here we have one of the methods of 'appropriation' of urban discourse by the peasantry. The peasants use it for the same purposes as the publicists themselves: in order to demonstrate how 'enlightened' and 'informed' they are about current affairs.

Another way in which information was appropriated in the village was connected to the potential for turning it into a narrative within the bounds of generally accepted eschatological prophecy. In this sense, the tradition of descriptions of comets as harbingers of calamity and misfortune undoubtedly facilitated the dissemination of rumours about them. In contradistinction to the former type of debate, however, in the context of the eschatological narrative the comet is interpreted as a *sign* of the end of the world, and not a cause:

*Balloons and zeppelins are nothing other than the delusion of the Antichrist. He is carried by them through the air. The earth is not enough for him, so he's decided to seduce sinners from above in the air, and underwater. The world has not long left. In the writings it says that, they say, that before the end of the world there will be signs in the sky and on the earth. And now there have been these signs, when comets passed through the sky, the sun and the moon grew dark, and there are signs on the earth. The Antichrist has found the earth and covered it with nets (by which is understood telegraph wires). The whole world has been measured out in vershoks.\* The Antichrist has seduced people [Smirnov 1916: 123].*

In this kind of text there are usually direct appeals to the behaviour of people, while reports themselves can be taken as a particular type of indirect instruction to those seeking to change their behaviour. The two types of argument were not, of course, isolated from each other. And in this context their unification into one type seems appropriate. In the course of a single conversation it is likely that one peasant would interpret the tale of a comet as the latest news from the town, while others would see it as a prophecy. In the narration of a prayerful pilgrim, a tale about a comet might well take on the form of an eschatological narrative:

*In Petersburg, oh mother, on Eleon hill there is a tall tower, and on that tower there are four professors who dispute and gaze through a telescope at the heavens. The little father the tsar himself often goes to them, wishing to talk to them. Well these professors (in spring) even before Holy Week calculated by the heavenly stars that at Trinity or on St Nicholas's Day there would fall over our kingdom stone hail, and that each hailstone would weigh one and a half pounds. That's how we sinners shall be beaten, and doomsday will begin. In Petersburg, in all the churches there are services of thanksgiving, and Father John of Kronstadt wrote a letter to the abess, saying to prepare for death and to confess all sins. Oh mother! For its sins God is punishing the world* [TA. D. 766. L. 16].

But despite the common theme of the arguments of the first and second types, each represents a different method of appropriating new information which has come from the town. Each is the expression of a particular kind of discourse, and its use is connected to the intentions of the narrator.

By way of conclusion, it is possible to say that the period at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century was not characterised by a mass expectation of the end of the world, and the concept of an 'eschatological crisis' in this context is applicable only to the impression that the publicists of the period wished to create. The enthusiasm for astronomy and scientific discoveries led to a particular information boom, an echo of which is found in the village. The new information, which became accessible to the peasants, was assimilated by them in various ways, giving some the opportunity to 'connect' to urban science, and becoming for others a subject for interpretation in the context of eschatological narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Sloboda — a settlement on the fringes of a larger town. [Editor].

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- d. 884. Vytergor district, Olonets region. (A. Sanin, 1899)
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**Abbreviations**

- TA — Tenishev Archive (Archive of the Russian Ethnographic Museum)
- IOLEAE — Imperial Society of Lovers of Natural History, Archaeology, and Ethnography
- IRGO — Imperial Russian Geographic Society
- SEEFA — Slavonic and East European Association

*Translated by Emily Lygo*