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Response to Steve Smith, 'Heavenly Letters and Tales of the Forest'

Steve Smith's study of the persistence of magical belief throughout the decade of the 1930s is an important and illuminating examination of an area of Russian culture that has long remained obscure. Peasant superstition in the Soviet Union has long been viewed in terms that have reflected the Bolsheviks' own views on the subject. Evidence of peasant superstition in the 1930s and 1940s was considered interesting primarily as evidence of the obduracy and ignorance of the peasantry, testimony to the enormous obstacles confronting the Bolsheviks in their task of transforming and enlightening the country. Steve's paper presents the memorates or *bylichki* and heavenly letters in a novel light, and problematises their status as simply instances of a pre-modern worldview with which the modern and secular forces of the Soviet state had to contend. In his account, a paradox emerges, in that the secular forces unleashed by the regime actually served to reinvigorate the very forms of magical belief that the programme of modernisation was intended to eliminate.

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Invoking Shchepanskaya's notion of a '*crisis network*' serves to configure the persistence of mag-

ical beliefs in much more intriguing and subtly differentiated ways than the traditional view of persistent peasant 'backwardness' suggests. Rather than reading such beliefs merely as an expression of peasant bewilderment and anxiety at the monumental forces about to be unleashed by the Bolsheviks on the eve of collectivisation and the immediate prelude to the dreadful conflict of the Second World War, Steve emphasises the communicative reality of these forms, setting them in the context of the way in which particular sections of rural society actively sought to make sense of the world around them. Steve's argument is astute in its insistence that the invocation of a magical world view helped politically marginalised and dispossessed communities come to terms with the distinctly modern forces of the technologically advanced and interventionist states of the twentieth century, which persistently threatened the stability and peace of the rural order. The two genres of the heavenly letter and the memorate each sought to supersede these terrifying secular forces that lay beyond the practical control of the rural population by discursively subordinating them to a power that held sway above everything.

How might the investigation be usefully broadened? One area of the analysis worth exploring in slightly greater detail is the wider discursive universe within which this magical belief found expression. In the account put forward here, the persistence of magical belief is seen primarily in terms of the response of elements of a disenfranchised and politically powerless rural population to the social disorder (or its imminent prospect of renewal) engendered by the upheavals of Revolution, Civil War, Collectivisation, threat of invasion etc. These then were the factors which re-energised 'traditional' or pre-modern understandings of the social among certain sections of the population. Steve does, of course, note the impact of the increasingly apocalyptic view of the Soviet state held by large numbers of Orthodox who refused to accept Patriarch Sergei's reconciliation with the state in 1927. Indeed, it would be interesting in this connection to explore any similarities between the apocalyptic predictions of the Orthodox believers after 1927 and the injunctions and prophecies contained within the heavenly letters that Steve describes. Yet it might also be fruitful to explore the relationship between the discourse of that state itself on the one hand, and the beliefs of its 'less enlightened' citizens on the other.

Indeed, perhaps we should be wary of drawing too firm a distinction between the '*supernatural reality of the magical world*' and the secular forces of the state. The notion of prophecy, and particularly the power to foresee a devastating and decisive conflict, was not foreign to Bolshevik political culture. There is something almost prosaic about the expression of foreboding, whether in the heavenly letters or in the memorates, at the prospect of conflicts which had been endlessly discussed and predicted in the pages of the Soviet press.

The disquiet and fear expressed in the heavenly letters from 1929 and 1930 had been preceded by the Party's attacks on the kulak threat in the countryside, which became increasingly shrill at the Fifteenth Party Congress, and following Stalin's infamous trip to Siberia in January 1928, during which he accused the rich peasants of hoarding grain. Similarly, the apocalyptic mood of the *bylichki* was expressed in the context of a campaign in the Soviet press which tirelessly predicted a titanic conflict between fascism and communism from Hitler's accession to power right up until the Party's *volte face* on the issue in 1939. It would be interesting further to explore the degree to which the Party's own eschatological discourse of the coming confrontation between the forces of good (socialism) and evil (capitalism/kulaks/fascism) sustained an atmosphere in which the sense of foreboding and anxiety transmitted in the heavenly letters and the *bylichki* could acquire such popular resonance.

One area of Steve's analysis that remains perhaps problematic is the speculation that a decline in peasant participation in politics with the demise of the Socialist Revolutionaries foreclosed on possibility of responses to imminent crises with narratives of individual action. The article still posits a fundamental polarity between secularism and magical belief which may not have functioned in the minds of peasants engaging in the dissemination of heavenly letters or indeed the *bylichki*. Eschatology of some sort had long been central to the revolutionary experience of large numbers of Russian workers and peasants. Mark Steinberg [Steinberg 1994: 214] and Jay Bergman [Bergman 1990: 248] have observed that religious imagery, language and values often co-existed with social activism and a this-worldly secular concern with politics among Russian workers. Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitsky [Figes, Kolonitskii 1999: 162–4] have examined the ways in which the political culture of 1917 was informed by a Manichean understanding of the forces of good and evil battling for the destiny of Russia. The Bolsheviks clearly sustained this dichotomy in their own representation of the revolutionary struggle against both the remnants of the old order with the Soviet Union and the continued threats posed by the capitalist West.

Support for the revolution was frequently entwined with a millenarian conviction that what stood between the imperfections of the present and the utopia of the future was something akin to a Last Judgement, in which the evil agents of capital both within and beyond the borders of the Soviet Union would be defeated. Once in power, the regime clearly encouraged this apocalyptic mood in the daily reports in the press, which stressed the inevitable and fast approaching conflict in a bid both to maintain social order and to mobilise national and human resources. Greater attention to this broader eschatological discourse might call into question the explanation that seeks to attribute the resurgence of magical belief in part

to the suppression of other forms of peasant expression, such as the secular idiom of Socialist Revolutionary politics.

The system's appropriation of this magical worldview was essential to the definition of its own mission. Bolshevik salvation lay in the subjugation of all other autonomous will-based action to its own. Steve's comments about the ways that the dysfunctionalities of the system caused irrationality to persist might be supplemented by a narrative of secularisation and modernisation, not just in the sense of the elimination of pre-revolutionary superstition — loosely understood — but also in the sense of the apprehension, subordination and ultimately elimination of the 'spirits' which dominated the Bolsheviks own cognitive universe — kulaks, wreckers, Trotskyists etc. It would be interesting in this regard to see whether the folk idiom of these two genres, the heavenly letter and the memorate, revealed any points of intersection with the party's own discursive universe of demons and mysterious forces, which may well have served an essentially similar function of maintaining communicative links between communities in the face of adversity and uncertainty.

It is from this perspective that the understanding of the 'forces of modernisation' as engines of secularisation in the early Soviet period might seem somewhat problematic. Could one not object that the representation of the Soviet modernisation drive and its long-term goals were themselves predicated not so much upon a refutation of a magical world and a magical worldview, but rather on their vigorous assertion — even if this was contrived with the ultimate aim of a symbolic destruction of the forces within both? A repackaged, and one might even say reinvigorated, magical worldview, was central to the Soviet Union's *raison d'état* in the 1920s and 1930s. The modern host of witches, spirits and demons — i.e. the Trotskyists, kulaks and Nepmen — formed part of the urgent discussions on the need for rapid modernisation, both because of the threats they posed within the country, and because of their links to the great Satan of capital without. Their existence justified in the most urgent terms the need for urbanisation, education, industrialisation etc. — the principal features of Soviet modernisation. That is not to attribute a crude functionalism to their presence in Soviet spiritual — one hesitates to use the term — culture, but rather to suggest that the relationship between the magical and the material, the superstitious and the secular, in Soviet culture generally may have gone beyond one of cognitive dissonance; the two worlds actually reinforced each other's legitimacy and necessity.

In her recent discussion of resistance, Lynne Viola warned against uncritically applying the Bolsheviks' own definition of resistance to the study of social phenomena of which they disapproved [Viola 2002]. Steve is right to err on the side of caution in attributing an explicitly

political nature to the heavenly letters and the *bylichki*, although he does come close to making such a claim when he avers that they '*could potentially create conditions for collective action*'. Yet the regime clearly took an interest in both the memorates and the heavenly letters, even if their specific content was understood not to pose a direct challenge to the supremacy of the Party. So whilst their content was usually understood to signify '*the fathomless ignorance of the common people*', the nature of the two genres sheds light on forms of communication that the regime undoubtedly found disturbing. Steve is certainly right to stress the significance of the fact that both rumours and the heavenly letters '*travelled horizontally*'. What is then common to rumours and the spread of chain letters is their autonomy, their independence from the intervention and influence of the state. In discussing the state's views on different emotions observed among its citizens, Sheila Fitzpatrick has recently observed that expressions of personal distress seemed to provoke little in the way of alarm or indeed attention from the security services but that individuals' showing sympathy with others in distress was a serious cause for concern [Fitzpatrick 2003]. It seems, then — and this is of course an expression of the desire to subordinate all external autonomy — that the regime was particularly jittery in confrontation with emotional and intellectual traffic over which it could not exert any substantial control. Such fears were also clearly manifest in its own language, which repeatedly referred to oppositionist currents and the influence of NEP elements as a contagion, an epidemic that threatened to overwhelm the party [Beer 2002]. It would be interesting in this connection further to explore the Party's own understanding of the spread of superstition and the threats it posed to the enlightened elements in Soviet society. Was superstition considered undesirable or even dangerous in an undifferentiated sense, or did certain forms of magical belief and practice — regarded as actively involving others — elicit greater alarm? Also, did the Party understand secularism, rationality and atheism, once inculcated, to be largely robust, or did they rather see them as fragile fruits of Soviet modernisation, which could easily and swiftly be destroyed by the persistent power of magical belief?

It would be interesting to consider whether peasant reactions to famine in the 1890s and at the turn of the twentieth century, or to rumours of the outbreak of the First World War, had included a similar upsurge in the reporting of *bylichki* and heavenly letters. Was there something qualitatively distinct about the incidence of these phenomena in the late 1920s and the late 1930s that would enable us to speak of an intensification of residual elements in peasant spiritual culture? Or would it be more accurate to speak of a continuity across 1917, but one which was at various times, for example during the Civil War, either overlooked by the information gathering agencies of the regime or indeed supplemented by a more active engagement in secular politics? The

answer to this question would have important consequences for the degree to which a functionalist explanation of their appearance in 1929 and 1940 is persuasive. The apparent increase in the incidence of both genres notably occurred at moments of profound anxiety for the regime itself: in the midst of the grain crisis, and when the Party was readying itself for its assault on the village, and on the eve of the German invasion, when even optimists within the Kremlin could not definitively rule out the possibility that the Soviet Union would indeed be sucked into the conflict. In this regard it is not unreasonable to speculate that the reason for the increase in (reports of) magical belief might be the intensified attentiveness of the regime, as much as the reinvigoration of particular beliefs and practices among the rural population.

The preceding suggestions concern further lines of inquiry which might expand the scope of a much larger study, and they in no way detract from the strengths of this article. Russian peasants under Stalin have traditionally been represented as subordinate (albeit sometimes ingenious and resourceful) agents in the hugely uneven contest with the forces of the state [Fitzpatrick 1994; Viola 1996]. Steve's study of magical belief shows how peasants responded to the upheavals of life in the 1930s with acts of interpretation and communication that cannot be neatly accommodated in conceptual categories such as 'support' and 'acquiescence', 'dissent' and 'resistance'. In this account, peasant agency is understood to reside not merely in practical acts of circumvention and opposition but also in attempts actively to impose a structure of meaning on the chaos of the social world.

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