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Heavenly Letters and Tales of the Forest: 'Superstition' against Bolshevism¹

Introduction

The Bolsheviks came to power in 1917 determined to inculcate scientific rationality in a Russian people they considered to be steeped in religion and superstition. The Bolsheviks were inheritors of an Enlightenment tradition that saw religion as oppressive and reason as liberating. In the course of the nineteenth-century, this tradition became fused with a materialist epistemology that found a receptive audience in the Russian intelligentsia. Despite mounting challenges to Enlightenment confidence in the essential rationality and virtue of man towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Bolsheviks maintained into the twentieth century the intelligentsia's commitment to liberating the *narod* from religious and 'superstitious' prejudice, and to raising its cultural level through the propagation of science. The inculcation of a

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materialist world-view through education, propaganda, the printed word, the promotion of modern agriculture, and health care was a key item on their political agenda.

Historians, in general, have been reluctant to concede the extent to which the 'superstitious' world-view of the Russian people was already eroding from the late nineteenth century. Historiographical fashion lays heavy stress on the 'traditionalism' of the peasantry. In part, this arises from the fact that ethnographers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on whose work historians rely for knowledge of popular belief and practice, assumed a fundamental difference between themselves and their subjects: seeing in the peasants the embodiment of a 'tradition' marked, in particular, by traces of a pagan, pre-Christian past. Yet there is plenty of evidence that the mental world of the peasants — at least of the younger generation, of men more than women, of migrants more than non-migrants — was changing rather rapidly under the impact of economic, social, political and cultural forces, ranging from the emancipation of the serfs, the expansion of a market in agricultural produce, migration to the cities, military service, the growth of schooling, the penetration of forms of commercial culture, new religious movements and the like [Figs 1996: 92–4; Fitzpatrick 1994: 35–7; Young 1995: ch. 3].

To be sure, the extent of change should not be exaggerated. In the face of poverty, sickness and sudden disaster, magical ways of thinking continued to thrive. Demonic evil was thought to intervene constantly in daily life, and peasants sought to manipulate occult powers and agents to their advantage. Moreover, peasants did not differentiate clearly between the realms of religion and magic: both were part of the symbolic system through which they made sense of and coped with the insecurity of their condition. Nevertheless, the authority of traditional ways of thinking was slowly in decline, encouraging individuals to become more reflective about their beliefs and practices. By the twentieth century, one could find in many villages a minority of skeptics who, while not necessarily hostile to Christianity, were critical of 'traditional' beliefs and values.

All in all, terms such as 'traditional' and 'modern' must be used with caution: the resources of peasant culture were manifold and contradictory, eminently capable of absorbing new elements; of combining old and new elements in syncretic forms that were perfectly rational in their own terms even if they made little sense to outsiders; of revitalising older elements that had lain dormant in order to cope with new tasks. Different groups within rural society, moreover, displayed contrasting attitudes. In late 1924, the ethnographer, I. Taradin, asked the inhabitants of Rovenki — a large settlement of 16,571 people in Voronezh province, among whom there were just

134 members of the Komsomol — whether they believed that prayers could rectify harvest failure. Thirty-six per cent were of the opinion that they could; 20% said that they did not know; and 44% said that they could not [Taradin 1926: 110]. Members of this last group of 44%, incidentally, were probably less certain in their views than their negative reply might suggest, since we know that many were able comfortably to combine ‘scientific’ orientations with magical ways of thinking. Many peasants practised *perestrahovka* (hedging bets) by, for example, visiting doctors or medical assistants when they thought they could be useful (and when they could afford them), but consulting the *znakhar* or *znakharka* when they thought their illness was supernaturally caused.¹

In this context of slow and uneven ‘modernisation’ of orientations towards the natural and social world, it is counter-intuitive to suggest that the advent of the Bolsheviks to power may actually have halted, or even reversed this process. However, in the early 1920s, the ethnographer, V. G. Tan-Bogoraz, reflecting on the consequences of the peasant-driven process of land redistribution, argued that the revolution had had an ‘archaising’ effect upon rural society [Bogoraz 1924: 16]. Moshe Lewin, among other western historians, subsequently took up this theme [Lewin 1985: 18]. It is only since the opening of archives in post-Communist Russia, however, that the full extent to which the Russian Revolution may have reconstituted ‘archaic’ beliefs and practices has become fully evident.

The present paper examines the emergence of what might be considered an ‘archaising’ element in popular politics in the late 1920s. The dominant idiom of popular politics, at least from the 1905 Revolution, had been secular — largely socialist in one form or another. From the late 1920s, however, there is evidence that secular politics began to lose some ground and that a religious idiom of political protest became more significant. A key element in this new religiously-inspired politics was belief in the Antichrist, and in recent years a number of scholars have discussed this.² Belief in the Antichrist had, of course, a long pedigree in peasant culture, especially among Old Believers; but from the early 1920s, it appears gradually to have increased its circulation, as small groups such as the Fedorovtsy in the southern belt of the Central Agricultural Region, Ermoshkin’s community in Umetskii district in Tambov in 1925, ‘true’ (*istinnye*) believers in the Tatar and Mordovian autonomous regions, the Evlampievtsy in Bryansk, the Erofeevtsy in Vologda, the Skrytniki and Vasilyevtsy in Ivanovo province, began

¹ Similarly, William Husband talks of ‘hedging of cosmological bets’ by party officials: [Husband 2000: 129].

² Lynne Viola was the first Western scholar to reveal the extent and morphology of belief in the Antichrist, principally during the period of forced collectivisation: [Viola 1996: ch. 2]. See also [Paert 2001: 171-93], and the ongoing work of Claudio Ingerflom.

to prophesy that the end of the world was nigh [Shkarovsky n. d.].¹ The apparent increase in a form of political thinking that might, superficially, be considered 'archaic' raises the question of whether the revival of belief in the Antichrist should be construed as evidence of the resilience of tradition or as a new configuration of belief stimulated by the socio-economic, political and cultural circumstances created by the Bolshevik revolution. Irina Paert, for example, has questioned whether the discourse in the late 1920s was identical to 'traditional' Antichrist belief, and has argued that belief in the Antichrist was understood in different ways [Paert 2000].

This paper engages that debate by examining two genres of popular culture that, like belief in the Antichrist, may be seen as evidence of the revival of a religiously inspired politics, indeed of a way of thinking that some scholars might at best consider merely 'sub-political'. The first genre is represented by a spate of chain letters, known as 'heavenly letters', which promised divine protection against imminent disaster if the receiver copied the letter and duly sent it on to others. The second is represented by tales in which people claimed to have met a white, or naked, woman in a forest, who also forecast disaster to come. Neither genre has received the attention of historians: partly because information about them was virtually non-existent, prior to the opening of the archives of the former Soviet Union, but partly because they do not fit easily with present-day interest in popular resistance to Communist power, or with current conceptions of what constitutes politics.

While I do not suggest that heavenly letters and tales of the woman in the forest were typical of peasant political thinking in the 1930s, they undoubtedly had a substantial resonance in rural communities, and they challenge a notion of politics that looks solely at the material issues that set peasants at odds with the Communist state. Both genres were couched in an apocalyptic idiom — in the original sense of 'apocalyptic', meaning an unveiling of that which is hidden, rather than more narrowly in the sense of the scenario set forth in the Book of Revelation — although, unlike the rumors calling on people to resist forced collectivisation that Lynne Viola has examined, neither directly invoked the Antichrist nor called on peasants to rise up against the regime. Nevertheless, they inspired alarm in the Bolshevik authorities, who believed that they were evidence of the unfathomable 'darkness' of the common people, and left them vulnerable — particularly because of their message that the last times were at hand — to mobilisation by counter-revolutionary forces.

¹ Belief in the Antichrist was probably on the increase even before 1917. John of Kronstadt, for example, condemned Lev Tolstoy as the forerunner of the Antichrist, and some of his followers, the Ioannites, sold their property and lived in communities, led by prophets, preparing for the Last Days [Kizenko 2000: 230, 249].

'Heavenly Letters' (nebesnye pisma)

In 1928 A. Ya. Maurer wrote from Leningrad to the editorial board of the journal, *Bezbozhnik*, organ of the Union of Militant Godless:

Religious leaders in the village of Kazakovtsy under the Lugovskoi village soviet in Seredkinskii district [in Pskov province] are distributing "letters from the Virgin". The same two heroes figure in all these letters — namely, two shepherds, Semen and Nikolai — and the letters are said to be written in the same "letters of gold". The "Holy Spirit" has descended from the cross and ordered the two shepherds to attend "God's temple" conscientiously. Last year similar letters were circulated by kulaks in Strugo-Krasnenskii district. The Seredkinskii district council of the Union of Militant Godless must vigilantly watch the work of these "divine chancelleries", taking note of the fact that the chairman of the Kazakovtsy collective farm, Vöitlus, Citizen Rudolf Karachenson, along with his wife, has also received the letter directly from the "kulak" Virgin.¹

Such 'letters from the Virgin', or 'heavenly letters', as they were more commonly known, had circulated in Russia for centuries. Indeed they had been a feature of messianic movements throughout medieval Europe.² Modern examples can be found in Germany (*Himmelsbriefen*), and Philadelphia in the USA in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³ Heavenly letters purported to be sent either by the Virgin or by Christ himself to exhort recipients urgently to mend their ways and to devote their lives to God. Recipients were told to transcribe the letter a number of times and to send a copy on to someone else (thus the disparaging reference to 'divine chancelleries' (*bozhya kantselyariya*) in the report from Leningrad). If recipients complied, they were promised divine protection against the horrors that were to come. One such letter, sent in January 1929 to the editorial board of *Bezbozhnik* from the village of Lyadinki in Luzhskii circuit of Leningrad province, as an example of letters that 'currently have the widest circulation', was said to have originated in 1902 and foretold a major world war. Recipients were told that if they copied the letter and ceased to work on Saturday evenings (the eve of the Sabbath), they would be protected from the catastrophes that war was about to bring.⁴ Incidentally, the command not to work on the Sabbath or on the eve of the Sabbath was a standard feature of these letters.⁵

The alarm which the letters could induce in a community derived not only from the warnings they contained about the horrors that lay

¹ GARF, f. R-5407 op.2 d.69, l.29.

² See the letter circulated by Italian flagellants in southern Germany in 1261–2 [Cohn 1961: 127].

³ For a useful discussion, see <http://www.silcom.com/barnowl/chain-letter/evolution.html>

⁴ GARF, f. R-5407 op. 2 d.172, ll. 11–12

⁵ See the Magdeburg *Himmelsbrief* of 1783: <http://www.silcom.com/barnowl/chain-letter/evolution.html>

in store, but also from the threats they contained about the misfortunes that would afflict those who failed or refused to copy the letter. In Lukoyanov district in Nizhny Novgorod province in February 1929, one peasant, who had received a letter during the spring sowing, failed to copy it nine times. In the words of the sceptical reporter: *'By coincidence, his child fell ill and this alarmed the populace. The women rushed around in search of anybody literate. Little children thrust the "secret" letters at those they met. In the course of a week, the village was filled with priestly "charters" that found a market also in neighbouring farmsteads.'*¹

Proof of the celestial origin of the letters was the fact that they were usually said to be written in *'golden letters'* or *'golden capitals'* and that they were generally found behind icons. As transcriptions of the words of the Virgin or of Jesus himself, heavenly letters are texts that purport, in the words of Aleksandr Panchenko, to be *'direct speech'* from the celestial realm. He thus brackets them generically with ecstatic prophecy, *klikushestvo*, speaking in tongues and abracadabra [Panchenko 2002: 341]. The aforementioned letter in Lyadinki was *'written in golden letters by Jesus Christ himself'* and said to have been found *'in Kievo-Pecherskaya monastery behind an icon of the Blessed Virgin'*.² Many heavenly letters also make ostentatious reference to their foreign provenance. A letter that circulated in the Biisk circuit (okrug) of Siberia in March 1929 claimed to be from England, and one circulating in the Kamenskii circuit of Siberia bore the stamp of a German business firm on its letterhead.³ Shepherds were privileged recipients of such letters, as an example from Ryazan province in 1930 attests:

*In Zakharovskii and Ryazhskii districts a "holy letter" has appeared to a 12-year-old shepherd supposedly by means of Our Lord's Transfiguration. The letter was seized by OGPU organs in Zakharovskii district and is now with the Ryazan OGPU. Such letters have found their way into schools.*⁴

A letter circulating in Utkul station in Biisk circuit in Siberia was said to have been given to two shepherd boys by the Saviour himself.⁵ In Russian popular culture shepherds were liminal figures — personages, in the classification of the ethnographer T. V. Shchepanskaya [1992: 101–26], who were associated with the *'culture of the road'* rather than with the settled *'culture of the village'*. To that extent, they were susceptible to communication with sacred (or demonic) forces.

¹ GARF, f. R-5407 op.2 d.176, ll.3-4.

² GARF, f. R-5407 op.2 d.172, ll.11-12.

³ GARF, f. R-5407 op.2 d.126, ll.41-43; [Viola 1996: 63].

⁴ GARF, f. R-5407 op.1 d.60, l.30 (ob).

⁵ GARF, f. R-5407 op.2 d.172, l.14.

The vouchsafing of letters to shepherds also echoes the Nativity story. Outside Russia, shepherds figure in narratives of Marian apparitions, such as the appearance of Mary to three children tending their flocks outside Fatima in Portugal in 1917, but Marian apparitions seem never to have been authorised by the Russian Orthodox Church in the same way as they were by the Roman Catholic Church. However, there are reports in the Bezbozhnik archive of peasants claiming to have seen images of the Virgin on eggs and even on a chimney.

The letter, extracts of which are reproduced in Appendix One, was transcribed in January 1929 by schoolchildren in the village of Verkhne-Krasnovo in the Myslenskii district of southern Siberia. Typical of its incoherence is the fact that the author claims the letter was found in the earth of Mount Canaan *'in Greece'*, but later appears to suggest that it contains the words of a voice heard during a service in a church in Jerusalem (the uncertainty as to its precise meaning derives from its rampant illiteracy). The letter foretells imminent war and requests the reader to copy it nine times and to send it on to others. The transcriber will then have all their sins forgiven — *'though they be as countless as the stars in the sky or grains of sand on the beach'* — and will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In true evangelical spirit, it is the poor, in particular, to whom the blessings of the letter are directed. Those who refuse to heed the call to copy the letter are threatened with terrible retribution. In Kharkov, the letter tells us, the daughter of a man who ignored the letter was killed by thunder three days later.

Like so many other examples, the letter promises, crucially, to offer protection from the dangers of forthcoming war. Both in formal and substantive terms it thus has the magic function of a talisman. Though it may appear from the section of the letter extracted in the appendix that belief in the letter's authenticity is enough to guarantee invulnerability, it is clear, especially from later parts of the letter that are not reproduced, that it is the letter as a physical object — once transcribed — that will act as an amulet protecting the transcriber not only against war-related adversity but also against a range of ills, including thunder, lightning, fire, flood, and misfortunes that may befall one's bride.¹ The writer stresses that in the war to come, the letter will provide protection against enemy bullets, *'whether silver, steel or lead'*, if the transcriber wears it or carries it on his rifle. Again, this is a standard trope of heavenly letters found, for example, in the Count Philip *Himmelsbrief* of 1895. We know, moreover, that during the First World War Russian soldiers sometimes did carry heavenly letters on their rifles [Panchenko 2002: 345].

¹ Cf. Albert Baiburin's discussion of traditional views of the word as a physical entity above. [Editor].

The letter provides a fascinating example of the genre, since it is rife with grammatical mistakes and spelling errors and is almost certainly the work of someone whose literacy has been hard-won. At the same time, it is likely that the errors also reflect the rapidity and carelessness with which the letter has been transcribed. Noteworthy is the influence of the Orthodox liturgy on the form of the letter: it contains many formulae taken from prayers: *'In the name of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Amen'*; *'Christ suffered, died, was buried and rose again'*; *'Now and forever more, Amen'*. Noteworthy, too, is the fact that the letter is exceedingly repetitive, even though its repetitions only serve to multiply its contradictions. Initially, for example, it is suggested that the letter first appeared in March 1921; but later, in a section not reproduced in the appendix, it is claimed that it was, in fact, a reappearance of a letter whose golden letters had first appeared in the sky in 1172 but which disappeared when someone tried to grasp it, only to reappear in 1799.¹ Such repetitions make the letter redolent of an oral communication, which is somewhat surprising since, customarily, verbatim transcription was *de rigueur* in the case of sacred texts, whereas improvisation was acceptable when, for example, copying spells [Turulov and Chernetsov 2002: 66].

It is conventional to distinguish heavenly letters from what Panchenko calls *'good fortune letters'*, i.e. more mundane chain letters that require the recipient to transcribe the letter and to send it on in order to gain good luck. Panchenko [2002: 343], rightly argues that the communicative function of both types of letter is the same: it is the magical act of rewriting and sending the text that is all-important; but he suggests that heavenly letters have a distinctive structure as well as function. He argues [Panchenko 2002: 344–5] that heavenly letters always begin with a prayer or ritualistic formula, such as *'Free us from all evil and give us days of joy and happiness'*, followed by a story about the miraculous appearance of the letter and a description of its magic powers. Lynda Dégh offers a somewhat more elaborate analysis and implies that chain letters of all types have essentially the same structure: they begin with an admonition to pray, trust the Lord, or to kiss someone as an expression of love; they state that it was started by a specific person, often of foreign origin, and that copying will bring luck; they offer a happy story that describes how one or two people who forwarded the letter were rewarded with instant wealth and happiness; they offer an unhappy story about those who broke the chain; and, finally, they deliver an instruction to copy the letter so many times and a promise of good luck [Dégh 2001: 189–90]. Our letter does not rigidly adhere to this formula, although all of the elements described by Panchenko and Dégh are present. One particular feature is that within the larger narrative are

¹ GARF f. R-5407 op.2 d.178, l.3.

embedded anecdotes, or mini-narratives, that attest to the effectiveness of the letter and to the dangers of not taking it seriously.

Typical of all heavenly letters is an obsession with numerology. Often recipients are required to copy the letter nine times. Curiously, in spite of its fascination with dates, the letter in Appendix One is rather unconcerned to stress the number of times the letter must be transcribed. But other examples are neurotically insistent that the correct number be observed: if you copy this letter seven times on seven sheets of paper and send it to seven believers you will be forgiven forty-nine of your sins (seven, it may be noted, is a number particularly associated with the Revelation of St John). This letter is more concerned with unlucky days of the month — especially the 13th and 17th days — warning that children born on those days will die or that couples married on those days will remain infertile. The month of March, it claims, is particularly inauspicious, since it is the month when Judas Iscariot was born.

There is no reference in the letter to the Antichrist; yet like the genre of which it is part, its tone is eschatological. It contains a reference to the Last Judgement *'I will punish you with lightning and I will go to the Last Judgement on two sharp sabres; to avoid punishment I say to you, young and old, go to god's temple and pray'*¹ And towards the end, the letter invokes fire-and-brimstone imagery: *'Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, I summon (you) against emperors, kings and princes, there will be bloodshed among those who have been living like misers and I will drive over you like lightning and black birds will be let loose upon you and they will begin to cry and will spread an epidemic that will harm eight harvests.'*² Some instances of heavenly letters, however, refer to the Antichrist specifically. According to a report, a letter circulating in the village of Ovsyannikovo in Biisk during May 1929 claimed: *'that the last times had arrived on earth and the Antichrist was already here. Whoever transcribed the letter ten times and circulated it among believers would go to heaven and be saved from the Antichrist.'*³ However, the letter extracted in the appendix construes the imminent war in rather worldly terms, referring back to the war scare of 1927. In that respect, it has something in common with the secular rumours that circulated about a coming war. In addition, the letter looks back specifically to 1921, a year of barely imaginable devastation and famine, unaware of the trauma of collectivisation that was to be unleashed at the end of the year in which these Siberian schoolchildren were busily copying it.

¹ GARF f. R-5407 op.2 d.178, l.14.

² GARF f. R-5407 op.2 d.178, l.15. Here I take the Russian *karachei* to be a garbling of *korolei*, and *khleb* [literally 'grain'] as 'harvest'.

³ GARF f. R-5407 op.2 d.241, l.29.

Memorates (*bylichki*) about Travellers in the Forest

In 1941, Emelyan Yaroslavsky, chair of the Anti-Religious Commission of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party since February 1923, and one of Stalin's most loyal henchmen, noted in the journal, *Antireligioznik*: 'In 1939–40 in many provinces of the RSFSR, a rumour circulated that a driver going by car through a forest had seen a naked woman who foretold war, famine and other disasters for the people'.¹ The following account by a female activist in the Union of Militant Godless describes one version of the 'rumour' Yaroslavsky had in mind, which circulated in Ekaterinburg in 1940:

I begin to question Katya Zhuravlyova and she begins to tell me her tale: In her neighbourhood there lives a driver. He went by car to a nearby village. He had gone about eight kilometres when his car suddenly stopped. He couldn't understand what was the matter. He checked and there was petrol in the engine, and the engine seemed to be working normally. He looked ahead and was terribly shocked to see in front of him a naked woman. He couldn't say a word, but the woman said to him: "Continue, and tomorrow at this same time and in this same place bring a metre of black material and a metre of white material". He returned and told us about the incident. The next day, he took with him the material and some other people, anxious in case they should get there and she would not appear. He went and his car suddenly stopped. He looked to where the naked woman had been, only to see that day a beautiful young woman, dressed in velvet and silk and wearing rings. In a word, a woman he might well have fancied. She asked him if he had brought the material. He gave her the white material and she tore it into shreds and threw them in the air. Then a miracle happened, for instead of bits of material a harvest of wheat was sown. She explained that this meant that there would be an abundant harvest. She then took the black material, shook it and suddenly a pool of blood appeared. He was unable to ask what this meant, but she explained that the abundant harvest would be of no use to anyone, since a world war was going to kill everyone. I asked Katya the address of the driver, and also asked her why she was so upset. Of course, I talked to her in the appropriate manner, and I should add that I reported it to the NKVD. In the past this story circulated in different variants and this new variant appeared in July 1940 in Nizhnyaya Salda.²

As the reporter states, this was a variant of a rather well-known folktale about a woman in white [*belaya zhenshchina*], who appears in the forest and foretells death or some other calamity. Although Yaroslavsky calls these stories 'rumours', they are in fact examples

¹ *Antireligioznik*. 1941. No. 5. P. 5.

² Tsentr Dokumentatsii Obshchestvennykh Organizatsii Sverdlovskoi Oblasti [TsD00S0] f.9 op.35 d.207. I thank Dr Irina Paert for generously providing me with this reference.

of *bylichki*, or what folklorists call ‘memorates’. In earlier versions of the tale that circulated in the Soviet Union the woman is usually clothed in white. The following example circulated in September 1928 in Poshekhonye-Volodarsk county in Yaroslavl province:

Several peasant men were going along the road through the forest to the town of Poshekhonye-Volodarsk when they saw a sack of unmilled rye. They were surprised since they wondered who could have brought rye into the forest. They tried to drag it away only to find amid the grain a coffin and inside the coffin blood. They continued for several sazhen, feeling very afraid [document illegible] [when] suddenly they met a woman who asked them what they had seen. After they told her, the woman was transformed into the Virgin Mary and she said that this was a sign from God: the rye foretold hunger, the coffin and blood foretold war. She then vanished. This “agitation” seized the entire volost.¹

Another Soviet variant of the tale also identifies the woman (in this instance, an old woman) as the Virgin and features the same grain (a ‘filled sack’ in this variant) and coffin. This circulated in 1928 in Cherepovets circuit of Leningrad province:

Some peasants were driving from the railway station in Chebsara with goods for the local consumer cooperative. The road passed through a wood. As they were driving along they suddenly saw on the road a sack full of they knew not what. They were totally unable to lift the sack from its position, so they continued their journey. Having gone some distance further, upon the road they saw a coffin, which they were too afraid to go up to. Terrified, they resumed their journey. Further along the road, they spied an old woman in the bushes, dressed in rags, with tears in her eyes. The peasants became even more frightened. Later, again on the road they suddenly met an old man. The terrified peasants could not utter a word. But the old man asked them what they had seen along the way and the peasants told him everything. Then the old man explained that the sack signified famine, that the coffin signified a bloody war and that the old woman was Our Lady the Healer. The terrified peasants then returned to the village.²

These laconic *bylichki* belong, in the words of Linda Ivanits [1992: 127], ‘to the type of oral prose that is distinguished from the folktale (*skazka*) by: a) the belief of the storyteller and the audience in the truth of what is recounted; and b) the secondary position that artistic criteria play in the act of narration’. She suggests that the memorate is usually a short, specific account ‘often of an “eyewitness” or a single encounter with some supernatural force’ [1992: 128]. She follows scholarly orthodoxy in suggesting that memorates are fundamentally dissim-

¹ GARF f. R-5407 op.2 d.48, l.12. *Volost* refers to an administrative division (later *raion*) of approx 200–250 square kilometres. [Editor].

² GARF f. R-5407 op.2, d.42, l.32.

ilar from the *skazka*, defined by Vladimir Propp as a 'made-up story' [Harvey 1999: 4]. Not all scholars, however, believe that the distinction between a fictional tale and a tale based on personal experience is so clear-cut. Over time, they argue, memorates and folktales influence one another, and the same personages may appear in both genres, albeit with different functions [Razumova 1993; Kostyukhin 1998: 8–17].¹

The scholarly debate is relevant to our purposes, since the *bylichki* about the travelers in the forest bear such a close relationship to the traditional tale about the 'white woman'. Strictly speaking, the latter is a legend, rather than a *skazka*; but crucially, in contrast to memorates, it does not claim to be based on first-hand experience. The tale exists in many variants. In one that circulated in eastern Siberia in the early twentieth century, the woman in white asks the traveller, as in the Ekaterinburg example above, to buy white material for her, the ominous significance of which she subsequently explains [Vlasova 2000: 36–8]. If the structural elements of the traditional tale and the *bylichki* are fairly consistent, however, the formal content is variable. In a small number of instances, for example, the 'white woman' is actually a man. Insofar as the man appears in the forest, dressed in white, and foretells imminent war and disaster, however, the tale may still be considered a variant of the 'white woman' legend.² In one transgendered version of the *bylichka*, moreover, the man in the forest is naked rather than dressed in white:

*In the village of Lapusha in Trubchevskii uezd in Orel before Christmas 1884 a monk travelling to Briansk saw a naked man running after him. The monk stopped and asked him what he wanted. The naked man made the sign of the cross and asked him to buy some bast shoes for him in the town. When the monk asked how he should find him, the naked man answered that they would meet again. Upon his return, the monk did indeed meet the man in the same place and gave him the shoes. The naked man then said: "Stand on the left shoe", which the monk duly did. "What do you see?" "I see many coffins". "Now stand on the right. What do you see?" "I see grass growing to the height of a man". "Just so. This means that the harvest in 1885 will be splendid but there will be nobody to harvest or eat it." With these words, the naked man vanished. The tale was reported by a priest who had heard it directly from the monk.*³

Prior to the Soviet period, it is unclear how far the 'white woman'

¹ The case that the distinction between memorates and folktales is blurred was made as far back as the 1930s [Granberg 1935: 120–7].

² See the version from the Tersk shore of the White Sea in Murmansk in [Vlasova 2000: 38].

³ *Rebus*. 1885. No. 15. P. 148. My thanks to Julia Mannherz for this reference.

invariably appeared in the legends fully clothed; it is quite possible that her nakedness is an innovation of the 1930s (given that in the examples of the *bylichki* from the late 1920s, cited above, she is still clothed). However, just as plausibly, the significant innovation of the Soviet era may be the construal of the woman as the Virgin Mary — as in the second and third examples cited above — since traditional versions of the legend imply that the white woman is a returnee from the grave, a water nymph, or a witch, rather than a heavenly apparition.¹ Despite the important variations, however, the 1940 memorates are structurally similar to legends of the woman in white, because of the structural function of the omens — white material as a portent of a good harvest, black material of war; the sack or pile of grain as a portent of hunger; the coffin of war — and of the woman (occasionally, the man) as explicator of their portentous import.

It is noteworthy that the topos of all variants of the legend and the *bylichka* is the forest. In Russian culture the forest is a mysterious place that inspires respect and fear. A place of silence and darkness, a place that can terrify when the wind rages or a wolf howls, it is home to the unclean force [*nechistaya sila*] and thus a potential danger zone for mortals [Conte 1997: 102]. E. V. Pomerantseva maintains that it is precisely the revelation of the supernatural within the course of quotidian life that is the defining characteristic of the *bylichka* [Pomeryantseva 1975: 22]. For N. A. Krinichnaya [2001: 11], too, the memorate is defined as a ‘*mythical tale, based on belief in the possibility of incarnating other-worldly, mythic beings in a sacred time and space (chronotope) and on belief in their capacity to pass out of “that” world into “this”, and, alternately, in the possibility of human beings penetrating the spirit world.*’ The world of the forest is thus central to the chronotope of these memorates, since it is a place where the natural and supernatural worlds intersect. Equally, the otherworldly dimension of the memorates is underscored by the fact that they centre on the figure of the traveller, a person who has been taken out of the normal space/time of the village. Like shepherds, travellers are liminal figures, in that they have left the security of the settled community and entered a zone of indeterminacy, where they are liable to encounter the spirit world [Shchepanskaya 1992: 103]. In traditional versions of the tale of the white woman, the traveller goes on foot, but as Yaroslavsky mentions, in Soviet versions the travellers drive through the forest. Whether on foot or by transport, however, these are protagonists are ‘on the road’ and thus exposed to the workings of the supernatural.

That the tales had the capacity to inspire fear in those who heard them is evident from the reports already cited. In the Ekaterinburg exam-

¹ In one version of the tale, the white woman is described as an ‘*evil hag*’ [*zlobnaya yagishcha*] [Grushko and Medvedev 2001: 36].

ple, the reporter seeks to reassure Katya, teller of the tale, in the 'appropriate manner' [*sootvetstvuyushchim obrazom*]. (Perhaps she assured her that the Soviet Union would not get involved in the war that had broken out in western Europe?). In the second example, we are told that the tale terrified an entire volost; while in the third example, the reporter claims: 'Interesting fairy tales are being concocted by kulaks and priests which are terrifying the dark populace of the village. Old men and women believe these tales and spread them rapidly around the village.'¹ That so many were terrified was doubtless due to the fact that they adhered so closely to the well-known tale of the 'white woman', in which the woman was known to be a supernatural portent of disaster. Hunger, of course, was all too familiar to listeners who had endured the civil war and forced collectivisation. And the threat of an impending war — whether in 1928 (following the war scare of 1927) or in 1940, when Hitler rampaged through Europe — could not be taken lightly. Because of their fear-inducing quality, T. B. Shchepanskaya [1995 b: 119, 110–76] is almost certainly correct to suggest that the circulation of such memorates intensified at times of 'disruption to the normal course of things'.

Folklorists might classify these memorates as *Wandersagen* — migrating stories — in which essentially the same plot elements are repeated in different personal accounts. Exactly how the stories migrated in the Soviet period we do not know. Shchepanskaya's concept of 'crisis network', although developed for the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is suggestive. She argues that stories such as ours customarily circulated in a network of communication that linked (mainly female) pilgrims to keepers of rural shrines and to 'professional' wanderers (*stranniki*) and beggars, which she calls a 'crisis network'. Peasant women went on pilgrimage because they had made a vow to do so [*po obetu*] when they were ill or beset by some other misfortune. They contributed their personal story of misfortune or of cure to the 'crisis network', and shrine keepers and professional wanderers, in turn, expanded its circulation, contributing stories of their own about miracles or holy and unholy places. Because these stories circulate 'on the road', Shchepanskaya associates them with the 'unclean force' (perhaps more than their content warrants). Crucially, she suggests that it is while circulating in the 'crisis network' that these stories may connect with more eschatological narratives and rumours, such as the Soviet scholar, K. V. Chistov, associated with peasant 'social-utopian' thinking [Chistov 1967]. *In extremis*, when insecurity becomes pervasive, communities may respond to messages circulating in the 'crisis network' by recognising a 'professional' of the road as a prophet.

¹ GARF f. R-5407 op. 2 d. 42, l.32.

It would be inappropriate mechanically to apply Shchepanskaya's model to the Soviet Union in the 1930s, not least because pilgrimage was severely curtailed in this period.¹ Nevertheless, on the basis of her independent study of the circulation of apocalyptic rumours in the early 1930s, Lynne Viola concludes that '*women seemed the natural carriers of rumor, especially apocalyptic rumors, given their greater religiosity and the social and work activities that placed them in close contact with one another. Similarly, marginal figures such as wandering pilgrims, beggars and yurodivye appeared as logical transmitters of rumour, given their geographical mobility*' [Viola 1996: 61]. This suggests that a '*crisis network*', akin to but not identical with that described by Shchepanskaya, may have been the medium through which our particular '*crisis messages*' — the memorates of the travellers in the forest — circulated. And it would not be far-fetched to suggest that just as the '*traveller*' in the memorates '*modernises*' from being a walker to a driver, so truck drivers come to occupy the role of professionals of the road, who extend the range of circulation of the stories across a much wider geographical space, and at a much faster speed, than had been possible when the means of circulation was literally pedestrian.

Reflections

Without denying that heavenly letters and tales of the traveller had long generic pedigrees, partially independent of the social and political environment in which they circulated, the argument of this article is that their increased incidence of circulation was linked to the onset of socio-economic crisis in the late 1920s and to fears of world war in the 1940. One should perhaps understand the term '*crisis*' in the Chinese sense, where the word — *weiji* — consists of the characters for '*opportunity*' and '*threat*'. I suggest this because such evidence as we have — and it may be distorted by variation in the effectiveness of official information-gathering — suggests that the period when these texts and tales achieved their maximum impact coincided not with that of massive social dislocation itself — violent collectivisation or Nazi invasion — but with the period *just prior* to the onset of disaster — i.e. to the period when a threat loomed, yet when it still seemed possible to avert it. Lynne Viola suggests that the apoca-

¹ According to the 1929 law on religious associations, pilgrimages could only take place with the permission of the authorities. Paert [2000: 183] shows that Old Believer pilgrimage was severely curtailed in the 1930s. However, the authorities were never able completely to stamp it out, and it revived during the war years when state policy towards the Church relaxed. Shkarovsky cites a Soviet description of pilgrims to the mosaic of Christ Crucified in Lenin-grad's Church of the Saviour on the Blood [*Spas na Krovi*] in the 1950s. '*The women always standing there would talk about miracles and about signs, and about various strange things that had gone on by "Christ the Crucified", including "the groans of those being slaughtered"*': <http://www.catacomb.org.ua/rubro5/R05-07.htm>

lyptic rumours she has analysed served both as a warning to peasants not to join the kolkhoz and as an ideology, a 'call to arms' to peasants to resist once collectivisation was in full swing [Viola 1996: 56, 55]. The heavenly letters and memorates can, I think, be interpreted as warnings, but not as 'calls to arms', and this is underscored by their timing. The increase in the number of heavenly letters appears to coincide with the period of the crisis in grain marketings, rather than with the period of violent collectivisation itself.¹ The first heavenly letter cited above, for example, does relate to a collective farm — one that, to judge by its name, *Võitlus* ('Struggle'), was probably formed by Estonians — but one that predates the onset of mass collectivisation in the winter of 1929–30. Similarly, one of the memorates of the traveller in the forest is said explicitly to have circulated in 1928 'in connection with our grain difficulties in the Prisheksinskii district of Cherepovets circuit.'² Also relevant to the sense of impending crisis is the religious policy of the regime. An upsurge in eschatological religious discourse that identified the Bolsheviks as the Antichrist and the Orthodox Church as the Whore of Babylon occurred as early as 1927, after the new Patriarch Sergii made a declaration of loyalty to the Soviet Motherland in May, causing the Josephites (*Iosifyane*) and others to break with the Moscow Patriarchate.

Before rushing to interpret these narratives as politics, we should attend to their social function. In their classic account of the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann [1966: 154] suggest that '*The most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation*'. In the Soviet Union from the late 1920s, the communicative processes that maintain 'normal' reality became severely disrupted, and the texts and stories here analysed may be seen as attempts by groups within rural society to use religious and folkloric idioms to vent anxiety and to put meaning on the pervasive uncertainty of the times. This was possible because a majority of peasants — but not necessarily peasants in toto — believed that the natural and the supernatural worlds were intimately intertwined. As stories exchanged between people, our texts and tales served to promote communication in world where spontaneous, customary communication was threatened: thanks to the appearance of a sacred text in the world, the transcribers of heavenly letters sought to overcome the disruption of communicative networks, by creating a new sacralised reality — a 'chain' of believer-correspondents. Similarly, by sharing 'knowledge' vouchsafed by the naked woman, people prepared one another for the trials to come.

The extent to which such sharing of texts and stories served to

¹ This is not to deny that such letters circulated prior to this period as well as after the Second World War. On the latter era, see [Zubkova 1998: 69].

² GARF f. R-5407 op.2 d.42, l.32.

assuage anxiety is unclear. The heavenly letters promise divine protection to transcribers, and thus perhaps do allay anxiety. The *bylichki* perform a more ambivalent function: on the one hand, the familiar narrative idiom enables those who can read its symbolic language the chance to ready themselves; on the other, they generalise and intensify anxiety through the 'crisis network', creating a situation that, in Shchepanskaya's view [1995 a: 211–40], is ripe for the appearance of a prophet who will mobilise the participants in the network by stamping his charismatic authority upon them. Yet it may be the simple act of sharing a narrative — however troubling — that is crucial. Writing about British soldiers in the First World War, Paul Fussell [1975: 161] argued that in situations of danger, when hunger for information is greatest and access to information cut off, 'standards of plausibility' change; and 'false bad news' may be 'better than the absence of narrative. Even a pessimistic, terrifying story is preferable to unmediated actuality'.

Lynne Viola [1996: 46] has acutely characterised apocalyptic rumours as '*mental projections of a disturbed political world... A map of normally hidden and remote terrain of peasant attitudes*'. This is a fruitful perspective to bring to bear on our narratives, which are suffused with a mood of apocalypticism. The letters and at least some of the stories claim to be about God speaking directly to believers at a time of grave crisis, informing and preparing them for the disasters to come, explaining the deeper significance of the wrenching changes that are taking place. The purpose of the letters, but not the memorates, is to urge people to return to God, sometimes in quite concrete ways, such as by not working on the Sabbath or by observing the feasts of the liturgical calendar.¹

These are not millennial genres in the strict sense, for though they articulate a sense of imminent last times, they do not invoke the Second Coming of Jesus, or descry the shape of the Kingdom and the millennium that the saints will enjoy. Even reference to the Antichrist — the central personage in the rumours analysed by Viola — is limited, although eschatological symbols of famine, sword, fire and plague are common enough. The 'truth' of these texts and stories lies less in their capacity to project some concrete vision than in their capacity to suggest a supernatural reality far greater than the quotidian reality of state-induced violence and war, to disclose a transcendental meaning to history — a meaning foreordained by God — one far more significant than the projects of worldly leaders. In a situation of acute uncertainty and imminent threat, the supernatural loomed above the earthly world, came to seem massively more real, came to impose itself on believers as a force bidding them to enter it.

¹ GARF f.R-5407 op.2 d.172, ll.11–12; f. R-5407 op.2 d.126, ll.41–41ob.

Insofar as they provide a political interpretation of events — and I am sceptical that this is their principal purpose — they do so through allegory, substituting religious and mythological metaphors for the political reality of Bolshevik society, discerning the hand of providence in a transcendental struggle between good and evil.

In constructing stories about how the supernatural has overtaken the quotidian world, they draw upon religious, legendary, magical resources within popular culture that may have been in abeyance, 'residual' to that culture, as secularisation made steady strides from the last quarter of the nineteenth century.¹ But the Bolshevik conception of these as 'leftovers' [*perezhitki*] is not particularly helpful, since they are better seen as a product of the 'modernising' revolution itself. The narratives re-energise 'residual' elements in new ways: most obviously, the surge in the circulation of heavenly letters reflects the fact that far more people within the village are now literate. More people than ever before can thus draw upon the magic that is intrinsic to the act of rewriting of a sacred text. And — to the especial alarm of the authorities — schoolchildren, cast in the official narrative as the vanguard of Communist progress, appear to be a key vector in their increased circulation. Similarly, with the network of female pilgrims battered if not destroyed, it seems that male drivers — members of the proletariat without a doubt — have become important circulators of memorates: so that while these narratives draw on 'traditional' oral forms, they nevertheless circulate by means, across sites, and among groups, that are distinctly 'modern'.

How far may one see these narratives as 'political'? Panchenko aligns magic letters with a sectarian religious tradition that he construes as largely quietist; Shchepanskaya aligns *bylichki* — at least once they are galvanised through a crisis network — with the 'social-utopian' tradition anatomised by Chistov. It is not clear that the political potentiality of the two genres can be firmly differentiated. The Soviet context, inevitably, tended to politicise both genres. Because public discourse was so tightly controlled, texts and stories that put into circulation sentiments of which the authorities disapproved were ipso facto political; and the retailing of such narratives ipso facto challenged the regime's monopoly of news and information. Moreover, the fact that they travelled horizontally — rather than top-down, like official information — was a further reason for concern on the part of the authorities. Ever vigilant to their subversive potential, the authorities filed reports about them that they

¹ Despite alluding to a modernisation paradigm, I question the view — proffered, for example, by Aleksei Beglov in his recent important dissertation [2004] — that eschatological thinking can be seen as a reaction to a secular process of modernisation whose roots go back to the emancipation of the serfs. I prefer to see the revival of eschatology as a conjunctural rather than a structural phenomenon, and am concerned to emphasise the contradictory potentials of peasant culture.

received under headings such as ‘*anti-Soviet activity of priests and kulaks*’; ‘*exploitation by the priesthood and kulak hirelings of the inadequate work of party and social organisations in the sphere of anti-religious propaganda*’ or ‘*subversive activity of priests and sectarians*’.¹ The authorities struggled to link these narratives to something tangible — to counter-revolutionary organisations, to anti-collectivisation riots or to the money-making activities of priests and kulaks. But as allegories, couched in a supernatural idiom, they were hard to pin down. Failing to find much that directly challenged the political order, the authorities tended to throw up their hands in exasperation, dismissing the texts and stories as evidence of the fathomless ignorance of the common people endlessly liable to exploitation by anti-Soviet elements.

Yet the authorities were not wrong to believe that such narratives carried a potential for political subversion. At a minimum, they offered a bleak and fearful perspective on reality; they called into question the legitimacy of the regime; they created forms of communicative solidarity over which the regime had little control; and, in some instances, the texts and stories did advocate resistance to Soviet authority. In Rechitskii district in Gomel, for example, sacred scrolls were discovered in a baked loaf of bread that called on the peasants not to sell grain to the government at 65 kopecks a pud [Brovkin 1998: 99]. In September 1923 in Ust-Kulom county in the Komi autonomous republic, a ‘*newspaper*’ (sic!) was said to have fallen from heaven written in golden letters that prophesied that there would be no harvest because the communists did not believe in God and were closing churches [Dobronozhenko 1995: 65].

Nevertheless, in general, heavenly letters and *bylichki* engendered action that was essentially individual in nature, even if the mood of apocalypticism they generated could potentially create conditions for collective action. Neither genre — in contrast to Viola’s apocalyptic rumours — was principally concerned with earthly realities. Rather they sought to remind people that a greater, supernatural reality was poised to overwhelm the earthly world, and that those who could read and heed the signs of its presence could escape the famine, war and chaos to come. The heavenly letters and the tales of the traveller were principally concerned to urge people to prepare for the Last Times through prayer and stricter religious observance, rather than call them to arms for a chiliastic struggle between good and evil.

Viola sees the peasant vision of the apocalypse as encapsulating the ‘*culture clash*’ between the world of peasants and the world of state. I would see the world of the peasants as more differentiated than that formulation suggests. Even if such a dichotomous culture clash was

¹ GARF f. R-5407 op.2 d.,172, l.11–12.

constructed in the particular circumstances of collectivisation, it was a conjunctural rather than a structural phenomenon. The myth of Antichrist, for example, acquired resonance not because it was a constant, still less a central, element in an enduring peasant culture, but because it helped, as Viola shows, to cement solidarity in the village in the concatenation of circumstances of the late 1920s.

The argument offered in this paper, therefore, should not be construed as indicating the undifferentiated and persisting adherence of a majority of peasants to a magical world-view. Peasant society had been changing quite rapidly since 1861, and by the 1920s, there were groups inside the village — likely to be young and male, literate, possibly with service in the Red Army — who responded enthusiastically to the message of science and rationality propagated by the Bolsheviki. The paradox is that the Bolsheviki, in their rush to establish a modern Communist society, set in train, both directly and indirectly, forces that marginalised politics couched in a secular, this-worldly idiom and revitalised religious and mythological idioms that claimed to connect with a transcendental reality oriented toward eschatological salvation. This was a situation directly of the Bolsheviki's own making, first of all because they systematically eliminated the most popular 'secular' form of peasant politics in the shape of the Socialist Revolutionaries. One may speculate that the relative absence of apocalypticism in peasant uprisings against the Bolsheviki during the civil war was due to the fact that the SRs were still entrenched enough to ensure that a secular idiom was one which peasants used to articulate their discontent.¹ After 1922, however, with the elimination of the SRs from the political universe, this was no longer so and may be one reason why peasants reverted to eschatology. Secondly, the Bolsheviki's attacks on the Orthodox Church fostered an apocalyptic identification of Communist with the demonic religion of Tribulation, further eroding a distinction between 'the earthly' and 'supernatural' worlds. We have mentioned that apocalyptic moods were intensified after 1927, as 'True Orthodox' Christians went into the underground following Patriarch Sergei's declaration of loyalty. But eschatological trends were boosted by the 1929 decree requiring all religious associations to register with the authorities, followed by the mass closure of churches and the deportation of clergy. This, in turn, led to the rise of non-registered religious communities, often led by charismatic lay persons, which believed they were living in the Last Times. More indirectly, the Bolsheviki set in train massive political and social disruption whose social anxieties and uncertainties fed the very forms of magical thinking their 'cultural enlightenment' activity set out to combat.

¹ For the documentary evidence, see *Sovetskaya derevnya glazami VChK-OGPU*. Vol.1. [Narsky 2001: 421] argues that in the civil war the most widespread form of rumour was one prophesying positive changes.

This was not about the durability of ‘tradition’. Rather the sharing of texts and stories that from one angle appear ‘traditional’ enabled people to put meaning on new and disturbing times, in particular, by articulating a reality that went beyond time and history. In 1920–21, peasants had tried to take on the might of the state through the idioms of modern politics and had been crushed. At the end of the 1920s, certain elements within rural society came to believe that the threats of mass collectivisation and world war were signs that God was poised to impose his will on human history. The irony remains that the project launched by the Bolsheviks to promote a scientific, rational, technologically developed culture was substantially set back by the turmoil and uncertainty their revolution created.

Appendix

GARF f. R-5407 op. 2 d. 178

To the Editors of *Bezbozhnik* [Militant Godless] Magazine.

This letter writ in 1921, this letter came from greece on the hill of Canaan and the lord god did make it. Who exists as a holey [svetyi] ghost in all the air and all over the wide world I order this so as to help the poor and reward [them] you are to pray to god, whoever does not do this you sinners everywhere and always tsars and [from those] tsars will break out wars and the war will flow like much blood and then you must beware at least of many sins, in the evenings on Saturdays you should go and pray to god because you have all sinned before me and if it [had not been for] my mother who prays for you I would have punished you and dont you use my name in vain and dont you do injury to one another [illegible] mother read anyone who doesnt believe will be punished with fire and water and thunder copy this give it to one another and a person who may have a few sins [on his soul] as many as stars in the heavens will be forgiven and a person who does not give and copy will not go to heaven and a person who has this letter will not go to war on his own the enemy wont harm him that person will be happy and lucky and will go to heaven and bow down to jesus crist the son of god forgive us our sins in thy mercy o lord to thee now and for ever unto endless ages amen holy god powerful god immortal god in the year 7 [or at 7 o'clock?] there were services in Jerusalem during the liturgy a voice was heard saying these words [‘words’ is scored through and what follows is illegible] everyone who listens to the memorial service will be saved from harm this was [illegible] at 8 o’clock in Jerusalem in the church of Jerusalem and then in Smirnovskaya [village?] according to will

l. 12 rev.

give out nine copies of the letter anyone who doesnt want to will have something very bad happen in Kharkov town one person copied this

prayer and took no care on the third day his only daughter was struck by lightning Giving out this prayer nine times you give out knowledge you have been told who believes this letter will not fall prey to enemy weapons will not die under fire or by cold steel and god has also commanded in response from his servant that this be done in the future and then miracles will be decreed all kinds of things from the dawn of time and thus seen and unseen through the holy land So [illegible] of the father and the son and the holy ghost Amen...

[The text then goes on for almost two pages in the same vein.]

l.1 13 rev.

So let him write it and hang it on somekindof animal and shoot at him and see what wound there is from my holy prayer the shot [?] will expire from the prophet and locks be placed on the fire the year 1921 noted in march these days January 4. 12. 18. 26 february 8, 1, 6, 17. march 3,2, 13. April 12, 13, 14, may 3, 10, 13, 17, june 12, 13, 17 july 13, 17, August 13, 17 septemmer 13, 17, 30 october 11, 15 november 1, 17 december [the word 'december' is scored through] the slavs will forget lord jesus Christ forgive us immortal one so as to protect your sinners this year from all misfortune eternal god merciful to us you live and reign by your zeal until endless ages amen in the year there are 42 unlucky days if one falls ill on those days then he will rarely be healed or if one is born then they will not live and if they do then they will be unhappy who live and marry but do not live at home or have no children [?] sowing from those days unhappy with all. And because it was in march that judas traitor to our lord jesus crist was born the year 1172 of a family [?] of the local town [?] gardens at such unhappy times the unclean spirit is rushed along children are born who die a dreadful death avoid sin dont work on holy days spend all your time all day so you understand if you dont do this I will punish you with fire and water and [illegible: plague?] and hunger and war and the day of judgement and the lord said that I will come from one good place and then the mother will rise against the daughter one town against another...

[Another three pages later it ends]: The end of the letter (l. 16).

This letter was put out in the village of V-Krasново myslenky district Siberian region among the pupils of the village school it has been seized and an investigation started of who may have sent it

Copied faithfully from the school exercise book as confirmed by the V-Krasново village soviet.

Signed by the chairman and secretary of the village soviet and stamped.

Dated 10 January 1929.

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