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## Guest Editor's Introduction

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“The sense of God’s presence—of the supernatural—seems to me to penetrate Russian life more completely than that of any of the western nations.”

—H.P. Liddon, canon of Saint Paul’s,  
after a visit to Russia in 1867<sup>1</sup>

Canon H.P. Liddon was hardly alone in his belief, almost a century and a half ago, that Russians are a people by nature more spiritual and religious than other nations in Europe. Yet it is only in recent years, and especially since the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, that scholars both in Russia and internationally have begun to plumb the extraordinary depths and breadth of religious expression in the lands of the former Russian empire. This is especially true in terms of the lived experience of faith and religious practice. Lately, there has been a marked interest in the history of Russian Orthodoxy, the declared faith of the majority of Russians and the “state” religion, at least until 1917. There has also

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been a most welcome rush of works examining the many Christian nonconformist communities that developed in Russia from the seventeenth century on: both the Old Believers, who split from the official Orthodox Church in the seventeenth-century Schism, and the wide range of so-called sectarians (*sektanty*), who are the subject of this issue of *Russian Studies in History*.<sup>2</sup>

This flourishing of interest in the history of Christian nonconformism in Russia has generated enormously productive results, unveiling a diverse spiritual creativity across a broad spectrum of the Russian population. Rather than see the Russian nonconformists as isolated, unusual, heretical, and often abhorrent groups, scholars now approach them as interwoven in the larger tapestry of Russian and European Christianity. The latest studies of these spiritual movements have also been important in shedding new light on Russian historical experience writ large: on social relations between elite and peasant society, state–subject interactions and the patterns of political power, economic development, ethnic and national identity, civic society and the public sphere in Russia, gender and family, architecture and the spatial meanings of the built environment, and colonialism and empire, to name but a few.

The essays here focus on two of these “sectarian” groups—Molokans and Dukhobors. Like much of the current scholarship, the authors in this issue combine tireless hours researching in multiple archives scattered through the former Soviet Union, extensive ethnographic fieldwork interviewing remaining communities, and rigorous historical analysis. Molokans and Dukhobors appeared in the historical record for the first time in the eighteenth century and were subject to various forms of official persecution almost immediately. The names “Molokan” (usually translated as “Milk-drinkers” because they permitted dairy products during Lent) and “Dukhobor” (“Spirit-wrestlers”) were labels initially applied derisively to them by the Orthodox but that they later embraced. While Dukhobor and Molokan religious beliefs and practices were distinct in many ways, they shared certain commonalities: they opposed the institutional Orthodox Church; refuted the need for priests and hierarchies (or any other mediators in a relationship with God); and abjured Orthodox sacraments (most notably water baptism), icons, saints, relics, candles, and churches. They also shared certain communalist, antiauthoritarian/egalitarian, and pacifist viewpoints that grew out of these religious beliefs. Around the turn of the twentieth century, many thousands of Dukhobors and Molokans (for different reasons) left Russia for, respectively, Canada

and the United States, leaving others of their coreligionists behind and the spiritual community geographically divided.<sup>3</sup>

The first article, “The Tambov Dukhobors in the 1760s” by Svetlana A. Inikova, examines the early and generally unknown history of the Dukhobors in the eighteenth century. A senior researcher and historian/ethnographer at the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow, Inikova is the world’s foremost Dukhobor expert who is not from the community itself.<sup>4</sup> Here she asks a question germane to all nonconformist religious groups: when and how did this “sectarian” movement become a formalized spiritual community—a conscious group with a more or less articulated series of beliefs and practices (albeit always subject to change), leaders, and organizational structures, rather than simply a group of like-minded thinkers?

Inikova answers that the Dukhobors existed as an institutionalized community in various places along the southern fringes of the tsarist empire by at least the middle part of the eighteenth century, considerably earlier than most other scholars have previously believed. Her assertion that the dispersed Dukhobor communities maintained close contacts and secretive communication networks offers an enticing glimpse into the structures of rural Russia. Throughout, the article underscores the way in which the territory that is now southern Ukraine and Russia has acted for centuries as a vibrant and creative meeting ground of different variants of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and paganism, engendering new religious movements through synthesis and competition.<sup>5</sup>

Inikova’s article also sheds light on two other important questions of Russian history: the relations between elite and nonelite culture and the interactions of central and local tsarist authorities. Regarding the former, in addition to noting the connections between religious nonconformism and the Masonic movement, Inikova asserts that the Tambov Dukhobors were aware of the Enlightenment-based views of Catherine the Great concerning religious toleration, to such an extent that they felt confident enough not only to begin practicing their faith more openly but also to approach her with a request for formal recognition. Here then, the westernized world of the St. Petersburg enlightenment was not sealed off from the everyday life of rural villagers on the empire’s periphery. In terms of the latter, Inikova reminds us of the often large disjuncture between central policy and the actions of local officials. While Catherine elaborated a policy of greater religious toleration, local Tambov authorities, both secular and spiritual, generally ignored orders from on high,

meted out corporal and military punishments, and then disparaged the Dukhobors to St. Petersburg.

The next two articles, “The Tenor of Religious and Everyday Culture Among Russian Peasant Sectarrians in Eastern Armenia (Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century)” by Irina Vladimirovna Dolzhenko and “Molokans in the Amur Region” by Iuliia Viktorovna Argudiaeva, shift our attention to the nineteenth century and to the social, cultural, and religious structures of Molokan villages in such far-flung areas of the former tsarist empire as South Caucasia and the Russian Far East. Dolzhenko, a historian and researcher at the Armenian Institute for Archaeology and Ethnography, examines the sectarian settlements near Lake Sevan in what is today Armenia.<sup>6</sup> These villages were mostly Molokan (with representatives from both the “Jumper” and “Steadfast/Constant” branches)<sup>7</sup> with some Subbotniks (“Sabbatarians”).<sup>8</sup> Argudiaeva is head of the Department of Ethnography, Ethnology, and Anthropology of the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography at the Far Eastern Division of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Vladivostok. An extremely well-published historian of the lived experience of Russian settlers (of all faiths) in the Far East, she focuses here on the Molokans who lived near the Amur River and the border with China.<sup>9</sup>

It is characteristic of the former tsarist empire that these Molokan communities were to be found in its borderland regions. As Inikova’s article indicates, these sectarian communities often got their start in lands distant from the corridors of central power. Particularly in the nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of religious dissenters migrated to the most far-reaching parts of the imperial holdings. That these religious movements developed in diverse imperial borderlands—with different ecologies, indigenous communities, and social and political realities—understandably affected the broad development of their communities.<sup>10</sup>

The two essays spotlight the commonalities of Molokan communities across diverse territory and share much in common in terms of methodology. They approach the Molokan experience as part of a broader effort to understand the Russian experience in all its myriad forms. Also, as is characteristic of much of the Soviet and post-Soviet scholarship on sectarians, the focus in both these articles is not on religion per se (on faith, ritual, practice) but rather on the social, cultural, and economic systems that developed from their religious beliefs.<sup>11</sup> In parallel articles, each author offers a study of family and everyday life, marriage rituals, childrearing practices, literacy levels, gender divisions, clothing and the

development of dress as an ethno-confessional marker (with Argudiaeva appending some fascinating, recently transcribed Molokan songs).

Using Max Weber's idea of the "Protestant work ethic" as a point of departure, Argudiaeva argues that Molokan economic success was "predetermined by their religious views," and she defines their approach to work as capitalist, internationalist, and innovationist in their willingness to embrace new technology and methods. Like many contemporary Russian scholars, she locates—in part, at least—the sources of Russia's historical path (its "deviation" from capitalist, democratic modernity into Bolshevism) in the failings of Orthodoxy as a religion to generate bourgeois capitalist practices or ideologies. Here then, the Molokans (and those religious dissenters like them) represent somewhat of a missed opportunity that might have brought great wealth (and a more benign fate) to Russia had it not been for tsarist and Soviet intolerance.

In the final essay, "The Dukhobor and Molokan Ethno-Denominational Groups," we return once again to the work of Svetlana Inikova, who examines the history of the Molokans and Dukhobors in the early years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Very little has been written about the history of any of the nonconformist movements during the Soviet years, although there are documents aplenty on this topic to keep scholars busy for years to come. Whatever the many burdens of the communist era, however, a whole spate of new obstacles appeared before the nonconformists as they attempted to navigate the uncertain world of the 1990s. As they searched for sufficient funding to support their communal activities, they faced a shrinking and aging congregation, cleaved by differences of opinion and often poor leadership. In a media-saturated age, they were challenged by a much more competitive religious marketplace: not only from the Orthodox Church but also from a strong, often foreign-based evangelical missionary presence.

Inikova ends on a pessimistic note. For her, Russian Molokans and Dukhobors have squandered their post-Soviet opportunities. Yet, even as their present remains uncertain, the articles in this issue showcase our ever greater knowledge of their past.

## Notes

1. Quoted in Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), p. 112.

2. For a small sampling of the recent scholarship on sectarians, see John Eugene Clay, "Russian Peasant Religion and Its Repression: The Christ-Faith

(Khristovshchina) and the Origin of the 'Flagellant' Myth, 1666–1837," Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1989); Claudio Sergio Ingerflom, ed., *La secte russe des castrats* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1995); Aleksandr Etkind, *Khlyst: sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1998); Laura Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Sergei I. Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millennialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830–1917* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press and the Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004); Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905–1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Nicholas B. Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). The research of such Soviet-era scholars of religious dissent as V.D. Bonch-Bruevich and A.I. Kliabanov, as well as the work of the American scholars Ethel and Stephen P. Dunn, was groundbreaking and indispensable, making possible the marked increase in interest in such groups beginning in the 1980s. The same should be said regarding the publications of Canadian Dukhobors like Koozma Tarasoff and Eli Popoff and American Molokans like John Berekoff and George Mohoff. See also [www.molokane.org](http://www.molokane.org) (Andy Conovaloff) and [www.doukhobor.org](http://www.doukhobor.org) (Jon Kalmakoff).

3. On the emigration, see Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers*. A few also moved to Mexico and Australia.

4. Among Inikova's many publications on the Dukhobors, see *History of the Dukhobors in V.D. Bonch-Bruevich's Archives (1886–1950s)*, ed. Koozma Tarasoff (Ottawa: Legas, 1999); *Doukhobor Incantations Through the Centuries*, trans. and ed. Koozma Tarasoff (Ottawa: Legas, 1999); "Vzaimootnosheniia i khoziaistvennokul'turnye kontakty kavkazskikh dukhobortsev s mestnym naseleniem," in *Dukhobortsy i Molokane v Zakavkaz'e*, ed. V.I. Kozlov and A.P. Pavlenko (Moscow: Institut etnologii RAN, 1992), pp. 44–59; "Istoriia i simvolika dukhoborcheskogo kostiama," *Zhivaia starina*, 1994, no. 1, pp. 29–36; and "Istoriia patsifistskogo dvizheniia v sekte dukhoborov (XVII–XX vv.)," in *Dolgii put' Rossiiskogo patsifizma*, ed. T.A. Pavlova (Moscow: Institut vseobshchei istorii RAN, 1997), pp. 122–36.

5. See, for instance, Borys A. Gudziak, *Crisis and Reform: The Kyivan Metropolitanate, the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Genesis of the Union of Brest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2001); Serhii Plokhyy, *The Cossacks and Religion in Early Modern Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation*; and Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

6. Among Dolzhenko's many works, see *Khoziaistvennyi i obshchestvennyi byt russkikh krest'ian vostochnoi Armenii (konets XIX–nachalo XX vv.)* (Erevan: Izdatel'stvo AN Armianskoi SSR, 1985); and "Russkie begletsy v Zakavkaz'e (k istorii formirovaniia russkoi diaspori v 1830–1850-e gody)," *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, 1995, no. 1, pp. 53–66.

7. The Jumper ("Prygun") branch of the Molokans developed around the 1850s and, along with other differences and special songs, diverged from the Steadfast Molokans in the fact that during services they experience the Holy Spirit descend into them, causing them to jump. For an introduction to the differences between Steadfast and Jumper Molokans, see [www.molokane.org/molokan/index.html](http://www.molokane.org/molokan/index.html); and

A.I. Klibanov, *History of Religious Sectarianism in Russia (1860s–1917)*, ed. Stephen P. Dunn, trans. Ethel Dunn (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 178–81.

8. Subbotniks were Russians who adhered to some, if not all, of the tenets and laws of Judaism (as they interpreted them). On the Subbotniki, see Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers*, and [www.subbotniki.net](http://www.subbotniki.net).

9. Among myriad articles and edited volumes, two of Argudiaeva's books are *Starobriadtsy na Dal'nom Vostoke Rossii* (Moscow: Institut etnologii i antropologii RAN, 2000); and *Krest'ianskaia sem'ia u vostochnykh slavian na iuge Dal'nego Vostoka Rossii (50-e gody XIXv.–nachalo XXv.)* (Moscow: Koordinatsionno-metodicheskii tsentr prikladnoi etnografii Instituta etnologii i antropologii RAN, 1997).

10. On sectarians in the borderland regions, see Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers*; Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation*; Klibanov, *History of Religious Sectarianism*; and John Staples, *Cross-Cultural Encounters on the Ukrainian Steppe: Settling the Molochna Basin, 1783–1861* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

11. For an exception, see A.A. Panchenko, *Khristovshchina i skopchestvo: fol'klor i traditsionnaia kul'tura russkikh misticheskikh sekt* (Moscow: Ob''edinennoe gumanitarnoe izdatel'stvo, 2002).

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