Review Essay

Russian Sects Still Seem Obscure

Alexander Etkind


“Not much is published on the mysterious teaching of the Khlysty and the Skoptsy,” is how Pavel Mel’nikov, a government official also known as the popular writer Andrei Pecherskii, began his 1867 essay.¹ He was wrong and he knew it. Before Mel’nikov, essays and books on the subject were composed by such widely known authors as Martyn Piletskii (a teacher of Pushkin), Ivan Liprandi (the founder of Russian counter-intelligence), Vladimir Dal’ (author of the famous dictionary), Afanasii Shchapov (the leading Populist historian) and Vasilii Kelsiev (an émigré revolutionary who published four volumes of documents related to the Schism and sectarianism). Mel’nikov’s obliviousness did not stem from his personal style but from the logic of the field in which he wrote, which tends more towards adventurous storytelling than to conscientious research. In esoteric fields, scholars are rarely grateful to their predecessors. An author finds autonomy in an unknown continent discovered on a well-known, even old-fashioned spot. Anxiety of influence transforms into awe of mystery. To attract publicity, an author characterizes her subject as “mysterious,” “forgotten,” and “obscure”; to gain respectability, she pretends to demystify it.

After Mel’nikov, a great deal was published on Russian sects. Sectarian “mysteries” were a central preoccupation of such luminaries as Vasilii Skvortsov

¹ P. I. Mel’nikov, “Belye golubi,” *Russkii vestnik*, February 1867, cited from the republication in Mel’nikov (Andrei Pecherskii), *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6 (Moscow: Pravda, 1963), 255.

(Orthodox missionary and editor of the Synodal newspaper), Aleksei Prugavin (Socialist-Revolutionary and ethnographer), Vasilii Chertkov (Tolstoyan luminary and the movement’s second most important figure), and Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich (Social Democrat and author very close to Lenin). Each boasted a small army of groupies as well as top-level connections in the world of publicity. Each wrote or edited numerous volumes on the Khlysty, Skoptsy, Dukhobory, Molokane and other sectarians. Every Russian encyclopedia from the late 19th and early 20th century, moreover, contained entries on these sects, often furnished with impressive bibliographies. Contemporary Western scholars were fully aware of this literature. Such stars of pre-revolutionary journalism as Vasilii Rozanov, Nikolai Berdiaev, and Mikhail Prishvin wrote book-scale works on Russian sects. Before and after the revolution, fictionalized sectarians were central characters of major novels of Andrei Belyi (The Silver Dove), Maksim Gor’kii (The Life of Klim Samgin), Andrei Platonov (Chevengur), Anna Radlova (Povest’ o Tatarinovoi), and Vsevolod Ivanov (The Kremlin).

For two centuries and until the present day, Russian sectarianism has remained a hot political issue. The large-scale project of Protestant Reformation initiated by the government of Alexander I produced a fierce debate on sects. The Orthodox hierarchy blamed the reformers for “sectarianism,” “mysticism,” and “masonry.” The emerging nationalism of the nobility did not assimilate the culturally foreign tradition of evangelism and the Bible Society. After a decade of struggle, Napoleon’s victor capitulated. In Russian cultural history this period is comparatively well studied, but it is still in need of radical reassessment today. The epoch still appears to us through Pushkinian texts, which prompt hostility to the state and aesthetic contemplation of the Orthodox Church. But for observers of subsequent Russian attempts at capitalism without Reformation, Max Weber would make a better companion. To my mind, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism suggests what could have happened in 19th-century Russia, but did not.

The anti-Alexandrine resistance conflated Russian Orthodoxy with Russian nationalism under a mystical umbrella of Slavophilism. Although this hybrid failed in the realm of practical politics, it proved viable as an imaginary construct (even now, current theoreticians of the radical Left such as Aleksandr Dugin aim at reviving the same connection). For a project that strove to conflate nation-state with a specific religion, sects represented an exception and a threat. Corre-

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spondingly, the radical opposition of the middle of the 19th century known as the Populist movement considered popular sects as a major ally. As I argue elsewhere, the issue of popular sectarianism was strategically involved in the debate about the Russian people, which shaped several generations of future Russian revolutionaries. From Afanasii Shchapov to Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, Russian radicals took sectarian mores, genuine or invented, as a final proof of the primordial propensity of the Russian folk towards communism. In more mundane terms, populists, Social Revolutionaries, and even some Social Democrats counted on sects as a source of support, recruits, and money.

For those populists who launched their “going to the people” movement in the 1870s, the crucial questions were: Which narod? Who were the people? Where could its “typical representatives” be found? Historians do not have easy answers, but those who initiated the Revolution did. Our task is to analyze their answers, not our own. Leaders of the revolutionary movement began their activities with peaceful propaganda among sectarians: Nikolai Chaikovskii went to the Khlysty, Aleksandr Mikhailov to the Spasovtsy, Ivan Fesenko to the Shapoloputy, and Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia to the Shundisty. Even leaders of the next generation of revolutionaries began their activity with the sectarians: Georgii Plekhanov with the Spasovtsy, Viktor Chernov with the Molokane, and Lev Davydovich Trotsky with the Shundisty. It is because of their painful confrontation with the cultural realities of these communities that the early prophets of revolution in Russia changed their agenda, first to the invention of political terrorism and later to large-scale social mobilization. Their ideas of “the people” that they acquired from reading scholarly authors of the time, such as Shchapov, were hardly confirmed in practice. Yet in Russia, as in the United States, the attractiveness of the young revolutionaries, victims of the hateful monarchy, lingered long into the century that followed. That their knowledge was false, and their actions dysfunctional and self-destructive, is now more obvious than ever. I would suggest, drawing on the elegant formulation of Clifford Geertz, that the populist representation of the people functioned as a “model for reality” rather than a “model of reality.” Although representations of sectarians have nothing to do with the historical reality of the Russian peasantry as we, historians, now interpret it, they proved crucially important for the dynamics of successive revolutions made in the name of the people.

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In 1908, Dmitrii Konovalov produced the most valuable body of work on Russian sects that we have until the present day. Combining hundreds of police and ecclesiastical reports, he attempted a systematic description of the “religious ecstasy” of Russian sectarians in the manner of William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience. He wished to pursue apolitical scholarship, but got caught up in a whirlwind of political struggle. When the figure of the allegedly sectarian Grigorii Rasputin gained recognition, the question of what it meant to be sectarian became an issue of national importance. As a result of a public attack on the part of the religious Right in 1909, Konovalov lost his job, his dissertation was rejected, and his contribution went unacknowledged for almost a century.

The early Soviets attempted to establish a special regime for sects, which continued to be perceived through the amalgam of national sentiment and social utopianism typical of the populist tradition. Bonch-Bruevich managed to support sectarians from the very apex of the Soviet political leadership. He sponsored such unusual steps as exemption of sectarians from conscription during the height of the Civil War; a governmental appeal to sectarians to occupy the estates vacated by the flight of the nobility; and the organization of the first Soviet collective farm (sovkhoz) as an entirely sectarian enterprise. After his removal from the position as chief of staff of the Kremlin in 1921, Bonch-Bruevich organized a discussion on sects for the 13th Party Congress in 1924. Leading Bolsheviks, Kalinin and Rykov among them, argued in favor of the party’s collaboration with sectarians. When this attempt failed, Bonch-Bruevich retreated to better-protected positions in the sphere of academic knowledge and institutional memory. He set up a Museum of History of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad, conveniently located in a former Orthodox cathedral, and launched a scholarly publication series of research on Russian sects. He died as an

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old man who had miraculously survived his political enemies as well as his academic subjects. Part of his efforts at collection devoted to local sects had a sentimental touch: here are traces of those who embodied the natural communism of the Russian people.

Stalinist collectivization was, among other things, a cultural war against the Russian peasantry. It produced an aggressive anti-sectarian literature, and even the powerful Bonch-Bruevich had his own share of difficulties with militant atheists such as his arch-enemy Fedor Putintsev. Revolution, made for the sake of the people, was colonizing the people once again, and the colonizers needed ideological symbols to justify their actions. In the annals of colonial anthropology there is hardly a phenomenon more disturbing than the voluntary castration of men and the mutilation of women. The self-fashioning colonizers did not pass up the opportunity to use the Skopsty to prove the barbarism of the peasant tradition. The Skopsty trials of 1929–30, propagandized in newspapers, books, and even films, were held in Leningrad, the traditional base for an offensive against Russian backwardness. Of course, the public demonstration of the Skopsty was just one touch in the ideological palette of collectivization. In the metonymical mythology of the Great Terror, a part symbolizes and justifies the whole. The appalling Skopsty, sentenced to forced labor, figured as symbols of rural Russia, sentenced to collectivization.

Soviet scholarship on sects continued even after the purges, as Aleksandr Klibanov formulated an academic variation on the enthusiastic approach of his teacher Bonch-Bruevich. Heretics such as the medieval Strigol’niki and the pre-revolutionary Khlysty and Dukhobory were indiscriminately interpreted as forerunners of the communist ideal of free, non-coercive life on commonly owned land. The Bonchian tradition of “empirical” study survived in the manuscript divisions of a few academic institutions, such as Leningrad’s Pushkinskii Dom.

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8 Fedor Maksimovich Putintsev, Politcheskaia rol’ i taktika sekt (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe antireligioznoe izdatel’stvo, 1935).

9 On collectivization as inner colonization, see James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 193–222.


Important research conducted by a Leningrad team led by Aleksandr Mal’tsev, who published an original work on the Beguny sect, appeared in the final years of the Soviet Union.¹²

Understanding the past requires analysis of the knowledge and beliefs of historical actors independent of our own knowledge of, or belief in, their validity. Versions of reality compete as blueprints for action, and one or more of them win. It may happen that looking back at such situations, we may be able to distinguish between truth and falsification. For instance, when Bonch-Bruevich estimated the number of “sectarians and Old Believers” as over 30 million, his error dictated his and others’ actions toward sectarians, and arguably toward the “people.” For one thing, we know that the gross number was probably one-third of this figure. Second, and more important, the very act of quantifying sectarians together with Old Believers was misleading: thousands of sectarians who practiced a radically unusual lifestyle were added to millions of conservative Old Believers, most of them patriarchal peasants or Cossacks. Conscious or not, this misjudgment lay at the origins of the very idea of the narod and directed the political action of those who subscribed to it.

This does not mean that historical actors are essentially irrational, that only their mistakes are interesting, or that cultural explanations should gain priority over functional ones. It does mean, however, that our dealing with the Russian past shifts from compassion for the oppressed, an attitude equally characteristic for Soviet and anti-Soviet authors, to analysis of those theories and practices formed by historical actors in relation to the “oppressed.” Unfortunately, almost everything that we know about the oppressed we know from their oppressors. There is no other case that better illustrates this bitter truth than the case of the Russian people. Virtually everything that we know on the subject, including language and folklore, we know from the efforts of those who came from more privileged groups, often not poor and sometimes not Russian, to write it down with varying degrees of care, precision, and fantasy.

There were two major exceptions to the general neglect of Bolshevism’s religious, and specifically sectarian, links – one from the ranks of European observers, and one from the ranks of Russian scholarship in emigration. The cultural critic René Fülöp-Miller provided similar formulations in his book about Soviet Russia, The Mind and Face of Bolshevism, first published in German in 1926. A personal friend of Sigmund Freud, publisher of the German edition of Dostoevskii, and author of the first Western treatise about Rasputin, Fülöp-Miller interpreted Bolshevism as a militant religious movement. Specifically, he

saw Bolshevism as the realization of the tradition of the Khlysty. "However strange it may sound at first," he wrote, "it must be emphasized that Bolshevism has features which may very well be connected with this sect." Strange as it may seem, this conclusion was partially reproduced by the philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, who insisted that the Revolution originated from the apocalyptic expectations of Russian sects.¹³

Russian sects presented different problems for different scholars. Some émigré Slavists were Orthodox by religion and therefore suspicious of Russian dissident beliefs. For others, the topic itself seemed an echo of the exaggerations of the popular literature on both sides of the polemics about Rasputin and about the Bolsheviks. Still, great experts on Russian populism such as Franco Venturi did take notice of the sectarian theme. Isaiah Berlin, in the introduction to Venturi’s *Roots of Revolution*, referred to the radicals of the 1870s as “missionaries” and (erroneously, I think) classified some of them, including Shchapov, as religious sectarian.¹⁵ Hugh Seton-Watson, in his early review of this work, indicated that Venturi left as an open question “the interconnection between religious and revolutionary ideas.” ¹⁶ As it happened, Venturi’s classic study was more sensitive to the religious aspects of the populist movement than most recent works.

Cold War Sovietology replaced the early and controversial formulas of Fülöp-Miller with a diametrically opposed perception of Bolshevism. The dominant view now considered Bolshevism as a monolithic, pragmatic, and atheist movement with a crudely violent stranglehold over the Russian population. An important exception, however, was created by the totalitarian paradigm. Hannah Arendt saw the communist and the Nazi regimes as irrational, dysfunctional forces with deep cultural roots.¹⁷ She interpreted Soviet ideology as a surrogate religion, but did not try to historicize this connection.¹⁸ For their part, historians of Western religious movements have all too easily drawn parallels between European Brotherhoods of Free Spirit and Russian anarchist circles, or between


¹⁴ See, for example, Nikolai Berdiaev, *Russkaia religioznaia psikhologiia i kommunisticheskii ateizm* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1931).


¹⁶ *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 June 1953.


the radical Reformation and totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. In the study of Russian sects, one result of Western interest in the links between religion and revolution was a penetrating essay by a pair of Berkeley scholars, who first noticed the unexpected sympathy of the early Soviet regime to religious sects. The émigré Slavist George Ivask delineated the connection between mystical sectarianism and the literature of Russian modernism. Later, Richard Stites, in his exemplary Revolutionaty Dreams, emphasized the continuity between radical elements of the native tradition, such as sectarianism, and a range of revolutionary projects. Changes in our world have once again transformed the style of historical explanation. Such developments as the spread of the methods of New Historicism in area studies and the revival of Hannah Arendt in political philosophy suggest that speculations on the links between politics and religion will no longer be taken as religiously blasphemous or politically incorrect. The fierce 1990s were a time of renewed interest in Orthodox Christianity. A series of Berkeley volumes on the cultural history of Eastern Christianity contained pioneering attempts to uncover religious traditions in the cultural domain. Ronald Vroon demonstrated the relevance of non-Orthodox Christian “models” for major literary figures of pre-revolutionary high culture such as Aleksandr Blok. On the other side of the

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19 See, for example, Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957), 148 (analogy between the Brothers of Free Spirit and Mikhail Bakunin), and 285 (between radical Reformation and communist movements).


24 An heir of the populist tradition, Aleksandr Blok took the Khlysty as the true representatives of the people. His poetic blessing of the Revolution reified the ideological/ethnographic ideal that he acquired from reading Shchapov, observing Rasputin, and befriending the poets Nikolai Kliuev and Pimen Karpov, who presented themselves as descendants of the Khlysty. Blok also visited a Petersburg community of Khlysty called Chemreki and for a while was infatuated with their godmother; see Ronald Vroon, "Old Belief and Sectarianism as Cultural Models in the Silver Age," in
spectrum, Mikhail Epshtein published his *New Sectarianism: The Varieties of Religious-Philosophical Consciousness in Russia (1970s–1980s)*. In this religious sermon disguised as an academic treatise, Epshtein blamed intellectual inquiry among various intelligentsia groups on the eve of perestroika for the creation of “sects” (for the most part fictionalized by the author) such as “duriki,” “krovosviatstva,” and “pushkinians.” The work is filled with postmodernist fantasy which, while having nothing to do with knowledge, expresses the interests and fears of the late Soviet intelligentsia.

In 1995, I published my first essay on the Skoptsy. It was characteristic of the time that this long historical text, with its 270 footnotes, was published by the popular “thick” journal *Zvezda* rather than by a specialized Russian- or English-language journal. Drawing on the rich 19th-century historiography and selected archival materials, this essay reviewed evidence on the sectarian movement of Russian self-castrators and sought appropriate contexts in which to place them. The Skoptsy were early and successful capitalists who guaranteed their asceticism through physical castration, and as such they provide an inspiring case for Weberian sociology. It was Sigmund Freud who first made castration a theoretical issue, but, not being familiar in his practice with physical mutilation in the manner of the Skoptsy, Freud referred to it as a metaphor. In 1996, I developed these and other speculations into a collection of essays entitled *Sodom and Psyche*.

In 1996–97, two major West European journals of Slavic Studies, *Wiener slawistischer Almanach* and *Revue des études slaves*, devoted special issues to the subject of Russian sectarianism. For a student of historiography it would be important to notice the simultaneity of these two special issues with the Berkeley volumes on *Christianity and the Eastern Slavs* and my own series of publications in Russian. The Parisian journal, edited by Michel Niqueux, contains essays by French, Russian, and American scholars. Their studies of sects, Old Belief, and

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*Mikhail Epshtein, Novoe sektantstvo. Tipy religiozno-filosofskikh umonastroenii v Rossii (70–80 gg. XX veka) (Moscow: Labirint, 1994), portions of which were translated by Eve Adler in *New England Review* 18: 2 (Spring 1997), 70–102.*

*Mikhail Epshtein, New Sectarianism: The Varieties of Religious-Philosophical Consciousness in Russia (1970s–1980s)*.


their cultural reception scan the cultural landscape from the 17th-century founding fathers to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The Viennese journal featured a long and important essay by Aage A. Hansen-Löve entitled “General Heresy, Russian Sects and their Literarization in Modernity,” suggesting that Russian sectarianism was an important point of reference for the high culture of the late 19th and early 20th century. Hansen-Löve defined major issues in the cultural representation of Russian sects, and many of us follow in his footsteps. But his narrative is not sensitive to Foucauldian interplays between power and knowledge, and is therefore permanently in search of an apolitical, ahistorical anchor. He finds such a starting point, certainly not for the first time, in ancient Gnosticism. Mid-19th-century Russian peasants and early-20th-century Russian intellectuals thus emerge as the progeny of the historical Gnostics, ancient teachers of the 2nd century A.D. To be sure, erudites of the Silver Age were aware of Gnostic sources. To give just one example, Mikhail Kuzmin stylized his verses of the 1920s as a translation from the Gnostics. Logically, this fact should be placed in the same basket as the massive usage of Greek mythology or Evangelic motifs by Symbolist writers. However, Hansen-Löve and some of his Russian followers go further than that. They imply the existence of a trans-historical continuity that transmits substantial ideas, untouched in their fundamentals, from Valentinus to the most fashionable Russian thinkers of the 20th century. If Heidegger could be influenced by reading obscure thinkers of the 2nd century, why not Solov’ev?

Vladimir Solov’ev, an avid reader and professional philosopher, arguably could be influenced, but such an inference has nothing to do with popular sects. Although poets and philosophers eagerly used the ancients as their subtexts, both implicitly and explicitly, it is far from clear how popular sects such as the Khlysty, usually composed of semi-literate people, could find and use them. On the one hand, intellectuals could easily read the Gnostics in the original or in translation. On the other hand, we know definitively the written or oral sources from which thinkers such as Solov’ev and Blok derived their knowledge of the Khlysty. For those who do not believe that the Khlysty were introduced to Gnos-

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30 For example, Sergei Slobodniuk, Diavoly Serebriansogo veka (drevnii gnostitsizm i russkaia literatura 1890–1930 gg.) (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 1998); Vera Proskurina, Techenie Gol’fizrina: Mikhail Gershenzon, ego zhizni i mit (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 1998).
ticism through their ecstatic revelations, there is no reason to follow the subterranean line from Gnostics to Khlysty to Symbolists. The hidden transfer of dissident beliefs over the course of Western civilization might be likened to a transatlantic cable that leaves no traces along the way but restores all the information at the other end. While we certainly need cables, the paradigm for historical research is exactly the opposite: there are no transfers that do not leave traces. It is possible, and potentially interesting, however, to argue that the Silver Age appropriation of the Khlysty myth was mediated by scholarly knowledge of the ancient Gnostics in the same way as the populist appropriation of the peasant commune was mediated by scholarly knowledge of European socialism.

In my 1998 book on Russian sects, their cultural representation, and the revolutionary politics of the early 20th century, I tried to maintain a balance between competing theoretical perspectives – sociological, intertextual, and, first and foremost, historical. I wished to break out of the usual cycle in which a historian in search of the facts throws out everything he or she does not consider as such, keeping nothing in hand but an indiscriminate collection of primary documents that he or she came across. Myths are no less important than truths, provided that there were people who believed in those myths. To be sure, I made every effort to check Russian mythologies of sectarianism against any relevant piece of evidence that I could trust. But if there is no such evidence, and therefore no hope to find historical truth, which is too often the case, we need to confront the myths themselves. For instance, despite dozens of hostile testimonies, we do not know whether the Khlysty ever performed sexual orgies during their rituals. Unfortunate as this is, this does not mean that we should ignore the whole subject altogether. The story itself, as it was conceived, developed, and reiterated, is of sufficient interest to follow independent of its validity. Who retold the story, and for what purposes? What doubts were expressed by those who told it, if any? How do other narratives of equally uncertain validity, such as the story of Rasputin’s orgies, relate to this one? In the middle of the 19th century, it was often observed that Russian sects reformulated gender relations in such a way that in terms of power relations women were put on an equal footing with men. We do not know whether this was true, or whether the populist ethnographers projected the ideals of European socialism onto their beloved folk. For the cultural historian, the latter version is no less interesting than the former one. I therefore treated the historical evidence about sects, or rather that which I believe to be true about them, in one section of the book, and proceeded separately to analyze stories about sects of any genre and plausibility. In this way, I followed the whole development of the discourse about Russian sects, from foreign travelers, ethnographers, writers, and philosophers to politicians, concluding with

31 See Etkind, Khlyst.
chapters on Rasputin and Bonch-Bruevich. The ratio of “truth” (what I believe really happened) to “myths” (what I believe was really told) in my book is probably 1:10 or less. But what is certainly true is that myths generate historical consequences independent of their validity. The Marxist Revolution of 1917 is just one example.

I am convinced that the basic affinity between religion and ideology, critically analyzed in traditions as varied as émigré Orthodox theology, the Frankfurt School, and the totalitarian paradigm, remains important for understanding the Russian Revolution. Russian sects provide fascinating material for these classic concerns, and the 700 pages of my book hardly exhaust the subject. Specific events, texts, and personalities deserve more concentrated research, and certainly will get it. In the meantime, the book sparked a considerable debate in Russia and abroad.32

Sects continue to mark a space in which cultural, religious, and nationalist prejudices intersect. The recent book by Laura Engelstein, _Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folk-Tale_, demonstrates the persistent difficulties of the topic. She chose the Skoptsy, a fascinating and difficult people, as her subject. This was a sect that practiced voluntary castration of men and mutilation of women for religious purposes. The communities of Skoptsy were stable and surprisingly numerous. They are solidly documented from the time of Catherine II to the time of Stalin. Their heyday was the reign of Alexander I, when they resided in the capital, conferred with the emperor, and forwarded a proposal to the government to castrate Russians beginning with the army and navy. They were exiled from St. Petersburg after a brilliant officer, nephew and aide-de-camp of the Governor-General, consented to castration. Estimates of their numbers, typically unreliable, were invariably high, e.g. 100,000 in the early 20th century. These pious and successful self-castrators were a unique phenomenon. There was nothing similar from the times of Origen.

What motivated these people? Why did they wish to get rid of their masculinity, to accept pain and danger, and to deprive themselves of so many pleasures of this world? What did they get in return that was so attractive for thousands of followers? There are two ways of dealing with difficult problems: to confront them or to avoid them. For Engelstein, the burden of these questions seems so overwhelming that she prefers an easy escape. First, any kind of “theory” is ignored pretty much entirely. Second, an assortment of documents from an obvious but questionable location, the collection of Bonch-Bruevich, are proudly presented as archival discoveries. Third, we have the result: the self-castrators are

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32 For my response to the criticism of the book in Russia, which was often connected to pro-communist political traditions, see Aleksandr Etkind, “Gospoda retsenzenty,” in _Neprikosnovennyi zapas_, no. 2 (1998), 43–47.
 pictured in a style and language that would fit the description of any voluntary association such as, say, a club of philatelists. It is not surgery or liturgy that is interesting to Engelstein, but the attempt of this “obscure community” to pass its experience to “us.”

In fact, the Skoptsy were very far from being “obscure.” On the contrary, as I have suggested, for two centuries the Skoptsy were the source of sensational and ceaseless publicity, in which they were hardly interested at all. Alexander I received them, Pushkin and Dostoevskii mentioned them, Tolstoi wrote to them, and even Trotsky met them in person. One cannot gain more attention even if one castrates oneself. Yet the Skoptsy never seemed to appreciate their fame. If one or another of them, on the eve of final extermination, wrote a letter to Stalin or donated an artifact to Bonch-Bruevich, such an action is humane and interesting but has nothing to do with the Skoptsy’s project.

The significant questions that the Skoptsy still present – the relationships between religion and the body, community and castration, high and low culture – are thus replaced by their desire to communicate their experience. As Engelstein puts it, “castration was only the opening move in a complex spiritual destiny. In some ways it was a beginning, not an end.” The end of the Skoptsy, according to Engelstein, was their desire to talk to a historian. Engelstein does not notice that her emphasis on the end (leaving traces in the archive) rather than on the beginning (self-castration) reduces a unique experience to the most trivial of notions. Almost exclusively, she relies upon the documents that renegades or the last Skoptsy survivors composed specially for the archive. To see the Skoptsy through these materials is the same as to see the Shakers through their current heirs – or, to use a more distant analogy, to represent communism through the memoirs of the last Communists. There is nothing wrong in publishing documents of those who outlived their cause. Just do not take their partial revelations for the whole story.

The actual partner of Engelstein’s trustful communication is not the Skoptsy but Bonch-Bruevich, the Leningrad collector of the documents now proudly published by the Princeton author. Engelstein’s understanding of Bonch-Bruevich demonstrates his overwhelming victory: “the otherwise ruthless old Bolshevik, truculent about his secular views, hewing the party line, yet respectful of the common folk despite the errors of their ways,” Bonch-Bruevich was “ultimately unable to control the ambiguous implications of his ethnographic and conservatorial tasks.” This is the portrait that Bonch-Bruevich presented to his contemporaries and wished to leave for his descendants. What is true here is that Bonch-Bruevich was ruthless and a Bolshevik; everything else is naive and erro-

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33 Laura Engelstein, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom*, 236.
neous. Bonch-Bruevich was consistent in his ideological, transformationalist views. His “Marxism” was no less utopian, narrow, and fantastic than any exhibit in his Museum of Religion and Atheism. He twisted with the party line rather than “hewed” it, whatever that means. Having survived the purges, he found a new mission in controlling historical memory. He was as efficient in this task as he was in his previous roles. He wanted the disgusting Skoptsy to look like an “obscure” exception from the other sectarian folk. This is the way Engelstein sees her subject. It is amusing that a guest from another culture finds an Old Bolshevik’s ways of presentation congruous to her own needs, and amazing that she ignores other authoritative views on her subject: Mel’nikov’s hostile and politicized, but uniquely knowledgeable treatises; Dostoevskii’s despair, monumentalized in the Skoptsy motifs of *Idiot*; and Rozanov’s ambivalent fascination, epitomized in his book on the “apocalyptic sects,” so characteristic of the Silver Age.

The closest analogue to the Skoptsy and Khlysty are the Shakers. All of them whirled during their rituals, and all of them looked for new experiences of love, body, and community. Unlike the Skoptsy, Shakers did not perform castration. Unlike the Khlysty, Shakers completely abstained from sex. These and similar experiments were grassroot attempts to find an alternative to the Enlightenment, the bourgeois family, and the advance of modernity. Unfortunately, we know the Shakers much better than we know their Russian counterparts. The Shakers developed their own culture; the much more numerous Khlysty were not permitted to develop their furniture or to leave us their museums. But the Khlysty and other Russian sects are not mute. They talk to us through their reflections in high Russian culture. What we know about Shakers we know from them; what we know about Russian sects we know from the Russian intelligentsia – from ethnographers, philosophers, poets, and politicians. This is a highly unreliable, but an extremely important source.

Engelstein more or less ignores this mountain of secondary evidence and prefers to concentrate on an inadequate sample of primary data. She observes a part of the community in decay and presents it as the history of the whole. Of course, no archive is complete. But you have no way to learn about how it is incomplete if your approach is deliberately to shun all theories and mock your predecessors. In her two recent responses to my *Khlyst: Sects, Literature, and Revolution*, Engel-

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35 In the index to Engelstein’s book there is a half-line of references to Mel’nikov and 11 lines of references to Gavriil Men’shenin, a minor Skopets author of the early 20th century who was in correspondence with Bonch-Bruevich.


37 Vasilii Rozanov, *Apokalipticheskaia sekta (khlysty i skoptsy)* (St. Petersburg, 1914).
stein singled out the Skoptsy connection of the work and, what is more unfortu-
uate, ignored everything else. She ascribed to me spectacular beliefs, as if I were
as “obscure” (Engelstein’s favorite word in describing Russian sects) and mute as
the dead Skoptsy: “in Etkind’s view … the [Bolshevik] elite adopts the Skoptsy
paradigm as its own.” “Etkind’s view” is that the Skoptsy were “repressed homo-
sexuals”; moreover, “one might be forgiven for concluding from Etkind’s work
that repressed homosexuality was at the root of the Soviet system.” These dis-
tortions cannot be forgiven, for there is not a single word about repressed homo-
sexuality in my book, nor is it an attempt to show “the root” of the Soviet sys-
tem. I did indeed review various interpretations of the Skoptsy, but I find it
remarkable that Engelstein should ascribe all of them to me. For instance, certain
clerical persecutors denounced erotic cohabitation among male Skoptsy, and I
reviewed such documents. This is the basis for Engelstein’s judgement of how I
“diagnosed” the Skoptsy. In fact, I questioned the validity of these hostile allega-
tions and analyzed them as a sort of mythology. What is probably true is that
much activity among the Skoptsy was homosocial. Men recruited other men and
performed surgical operations on them. It is up to the reader to judge how dif-
ferent this observation is from the idea of “repressed homosexuality,” to say
nothing about the “root” of the Soviet system. In her anti-theoretical rage,
Engelstein accuses me of using “Freud to diagnose the Skoptsy” along with using
“the Skoptsy to diagnose Russia.” She failed to notice my comparison between
two notions of castration, the physical operation performed by the Skoptsy and
the metaphorical construction imagined by psychoanalysis, as well as my con-
clusion that the psychoanalytic concept of castration anxiety does not explain
the self-imposed castration of the Skoptsy. I am sorry to say it, but Engelstein ob-
viously hopes that readers of English-language journals will not check her reading
of a Russian-language book.

Engelstein’s assertion that “the family was the backbone of Skoptsy commu-
nity existence” is false. In the Plotitsyn trial of 1868, the Skoptsy community
consisted of six virgin females (ages 19 to 70) and one unrelated man. In the
Kudrin trial of 1871, three castrated brothers and an unrelated man lived with
24 women (ages 15–80). From these and other examples we know that the Skop-
tsy lived in communities, not families or kinships. In those latter days that
Engelstein glimpses through the Bonch-Bruevich archive, some of the Skoptsy
survivors lived in couples. In their heyday they did not. In assessing the alleged

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38 Laura Engelstein, “Paradigms, Pathologies,” 868, followed by the unusually personal attack in
her review of Khlyst in Slavic Review 58: 2 (Summer 1999), 482–83.
40 Etkind, Khlyst, 82–106, esp. 92–94.
41 Engelstein, Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom, 94.
loyalty of the Skoptsy to family, a relevant fact is the practice of voluntary castration in male collectives such as army, monastery, and prison. In the early 19th century the Skoptsy were sent to infantry regiments, where some of them reestablished their community rituals and castrated their fellow soldiers. Around 1818, the captain of the Eger regiment, Boris Sozonovich, castrated 30 soldiers and was incarcerated in the monastery prison in Solovki. In 1867 “all monks [inoki, meaning males] of the Sviatogor monastery of the Kharkov diocese castrated themselves.” The 1927 community investigated by the Soviet secret police consisted of 150 men and eight women. It would be absurd to assert that family was of any importance to these people. Of course, some community members were related to others. There are descriptions of disappointed Skoptsy who returned to mundane existence and lived with a lay woman, or of former Skoptsy women who married and gave birth. Family ties and married defectors were not “the backbone” of the Skoptsy project, but its concession to incorrigible nature. Who needs nowadays to allege family values among self-castrators? Having no means to penetrate her subject, Engelstein trivializes it. Her protagonists were champions of what might be considered an extraordinary attempt to reshape human nature for the sake of a new order of living. Engelstein turns these people into practitioners of “folklore, husbandry, endemic violence” (23), “sheep in goat’s clothing” (93), pitiful victims of nothing serious.

True, it is difficult to identify with, or to be compassionate toward, voluntary castration. To my mind, exactly because of this emotional difficulty, the subject invites theoretical investigation. We do not need highbrow theories to understand those who are close and similar to us. To understand the Other, we need pure reason. Whether one reads Freud or Weber or neither of the two, the connection between castration and asceticism remains a plausible one. Castration destroys desire. It disrupts selective ties known as love. It undermines competition. In a word, castration adjusts people to community. As I put it elsewhere, “castration makes communism possible and necessary.” This does not mean, of course, that the Skoptsy were Communists, or that the Soviet “elite adopt[ed] the Skoptsy paradigm as its own.” It does mean that the voluntary castration of the Skoptsy materialized certain hopes and beliefs that were used by better-known utopian projects. Marking an extreme point of cultural manipulation over human nature, the Skoptsy courageously performed a uniquely transgressive experiment, one that is highly relevant for our understanding of ourselves.

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42 Ivan Liprandi, “Iz dnevnika i vosminanii,” Ruskii arkhiv, no. 10 (1866), 1462.
44 Etkind, Khlyst, 88, quoted by Engelstein in her review in Slavic Review, 482.
45 Here I quote directly from Engelstein, ibid.
For whatever reason, Engelstein condemned all such investigations with the strongest words in her lexicon: Freudian, New Historical, and, *horribile dictu*, post-Soviet. Castrated once again by her narrative, the Skoptsy are purified of cultural particularity, denuded of historical context, and deprived of theoretical significance. There are authors who still like to retell “Russian folk-tales.” The Rasputin industry is a familiar example of that kind of business. It would be a pity if Russian sects are turned into something similar. The proper framework for investigating Russian sectarianism is not the pathetic sentimentality of sectarian “faith in historical record,” but the panorama of a repressed Reformation that returns in uncanny, revolutionary experiments with bodies, genders, and societies.

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46 Engelstein’s concluding formula, *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom*, 236.