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The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Mormons

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Joseph Kellner (U Georgia) outlines his forthcoming book on *The Spirit of Socialism*, which looks at the emergence of spiritual subcultures around the time of the collapse of the USSR. Here he focuses on the Mormon (or Latter Day Saints) movement, revealing connections with communities around the world, in particular the USA. Why did certain movements, like the Hare Krishnas, succeed more than others in negotiating these turbulent times? What existing modes of spirituality and authority did they draw on and how did they build transnational connections as borders opened? He explores in particular the links that emerged between Soviet/post-Soviet Russia and the US, tracing how not all the Mormon utopian, spiritual and material ideals could translate from the US to turbulent Russian realities.

Kvas Being Sold on the Street, Leningrad 1991 photo by Susanne Schattenberg CC BY-SA 3.0 courtesy of https://perestroika.visual-history.de/strassenszenen/

At the twilight of Marxism-Leninism, some Soviet citizens, mostly of the educated urban middle class, accepted Western-style liberal democracy and capitalism as the only worldview still worthy of the

name. Many of their peers—likewise educated, urban, middle-class—instead trained as astrologers, sang Hare Krishna and sold the Bhagavad-Gita in the streets, took flight from a coming apocalypse, or sought salvation in regimes of traditional ice baths, or in pagan manuscripts, or in mythical or mystical histories. Today, popular memory of the collapse is colored by blue Books of Mormon and saffron robes, while the graying prophets of American economics have returned to obscurity.

My forthcoming book, (possibly) titled *The Spirit of Socialism: Culture and Belief at the Soviet Collapse*, is a cultural history of the end of the USSR, focused on this eclectic milieu and the societal crisis they signaled. As a visiting fellow at the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (IOS), I focused on the saffron robes in particular, that is, on the extraordinary growth and visibility of the Hare Krishna movement in the years immediately following the collapse. The blue Books of Mormon provide an instructive comparison. Both movements invested heavily and spread rapidly in the years immediately following the collapse; both movements were global but carried strong associations with the United States. The Hare Krishnas have remained a visible, if more muted, presence in cities across the Russian Federation. The Mormon (henceforth, LDS or Latter-day Saints) mission, to a greater or lesser degree, failed. Numbers peaked in the low five-figures; growth plateaued by the end of the 1990s and then declined; problems of retention dominate the recollections of later missionaries. What might explain these divergent outcomes, and what does it tell us about the collapse?

I will suggest here a partial answer, but it depends on some understanding of the collapse itself. The years of collapse and transition were marked by material crisis, but the problems facing Russians at the time were in some sense even deeper. In material terms, in the years 1991 to 1995 the country saw a 25% contraction in GDP, the rapid deindustrialization of the economy (towards resource extraction),[1] the ostentatiously corrupt privatization of public assets,[2] and with that, skyrocketing inequality and a doubling of crime rates, often perpetrated by organized gangs. In public health, the period saw 1.3 million excess deaths (compared to a benchmark of 1987), mostly due to suicide, homicide, and overdoses.[3] Between 1987 and 1993, male life expectancy dropped from 65 to 59, a figure unprecedented in the absence of war, plague or famine.[4] All of this was paired with a *moral* crisis as well, marked by rampant drug and alcohol abuse, widespread and unregulated pornographic material, and violence in media and on the street. And all must be understood in comparison to what came before—though some of these figures are comparable to those in the developing world at the time, this same country had, in living memory, led the world into space, won some twenty Nobel Prizes, topped the medal tables in international sport, and provided adequate housing, education, employment and healthcare to a population of 300 million people. The foundations and the expectations on which Soviet people had built their lives eroded overnight. Thus the crisis was, at its heart, *spiritual*, in that it severed people from anything fixed or eternal. The long-term expectations and the deeply-held values of most Soviet people suddenly amounted to nothing, and had no bearing on their lives in a world

without reference points—the experience of the Soviet collapse was the experience of total disorientation.

> The long-term expectations and the deeply-held values of most Soviet people suddenly amounted to nothing, and had no bearing on their lives in a world without reference points—the experience of the Soviet collapse was the experience of total disorientation. It was this spiritual element that the successful religious movements of the time seized on—specifically, they offered charismatic new authorities where old ones had collapsed; a new sense of Russia's place in the world; a new orientation in history and in time.

It was this spiritual element that the successful religious movements of the time seized on—specifically, they offered charismatic new authorities where old ones had collapsed; a new sense of Russia's place in the world; a new orientation in history and in time. The Hare Krishnas, to take one example—this is based on my own oral interviews and on the group's Russian-language literature—offered a highly-elaborated devotional practice rooted in the traditions in Bengali Vaishnavism; a means of connecting Russia to "timeless" Eastern wisdom and practice; and an ancient golden age, towards which the devotees reoriented themselves in a type of mass nostalgia. But what of the Latter-day Saints?

By the winter of 1989-1990, LDS missionaries serving in Helsinki were permitted to visit Soviet believers within Soviet borders, but these were still few–by one count, five Saints in Leningrad, a dozen in Tallinn, and only one in all of Moscow.[5] In May of 1990, the Soviet government passed the sweeping Law on Freedom of Religious Conscience, which guaranteed the right to propagate religious views and granted legal personhood to religious organizations. That very month, the Church established the so-called Finland Helsinki East mission, based in Finland but operating in the Baltic States and Russia's northeastern cities (Vyborg, Leningrad and Moscow).[6] In mid-1991, the Church would claim 300 members, 600 by early 1992, and nearly 2000 by the beginning of 1994.[7] That year, the church would send 140 missionaries to Saratov, Nizhnyi-Novgorod, Samara and Voronezh; the largest growth would be in Leningrad/St. Petersburg. By 1995, the Church dispatched an archivist and historian to conduct interviews with the earliest and most prominent former Soviet converts (this research note is based on those interviews).[8] When they were conducted, there were already eight independent missions operating on former Soviet land, and a total of 2500 Saints in Russia.[9] The mission, in other words, saw some early success. From interviews, two major reasons for this success emerge: the church's charitable apparatus, and its ties to the United States.

Hare Krishnas in Moscow, 1990. Image courtesy of Katharina Kucher and her extraordinary image collection, perestroika.visual-history.de

First, concerning charity. The relationship between faith and works is a central ambiguity of Christian thought, but the LDS position is clear. A centrally important verse reads: "For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do."[10] Ezra Taft Benson, who led the Church during the expansion into Russia, clarified this last phrase in a 1988 article in Liahona, the Church's official international magazine. "After all we can do" entails "…living [God's] commandments … loving our fellow men and praying for those who regard us as their adversary. It means clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and giving 'succor [to] those who stand in need of our succor.'"[11] Caring for one's community is a prerequisite to salvation, and Russian converts benefited materially from membership. This is not, to be clear, to suggest anything so crude as "bribery," but only to say that the Saints "walked the walk," and were able to demonstrate the concrete support of their community. This included major shipments of food and clothing from Saints in Germany; local check-ins, meal deliveries, children's clothing drives and group dinners from the Church's formal charitable apparatus (the Relief Society); and extraordinary generosity from individual missionaries.

> Several [interviewees] admit to being first drawn to the Church by its association with the United States. […] Mormonism offers the utopia of the American suburb; it is staid and routinized and skeptical of charisma and mysticism. This model has worked extraordinarily well in the United States and the Church continues to grow remarkably quickly around the world. But perhaps it is better suited to stability than to crisis.

The other driver of the Church's growth was its ties to the United States.[12] In a scripture near to the hearts of missionaries, the Saints are ordered by the prophet to declaim the gospel to all who will listen: "…I gave unto you the commandment that ye should go to the Ohio; and there I will give unto

you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on high; And from thence, whosoever I will shall go forth among all nations."[13] Such a call is hardly unique to Mormonism, but that peculiar reference to the Ohio River points to a uniquely Mormon paradox: it is a Church with universal ambitions (and successes), but whose history and scriptures are distinctly, even quintessentially, American. In Russia at this time, this was a strength: Several admit to being first drawn to the Church by its association with the United States. Some wanted to practice their English, some asked the missionaries what they ate or what they wore; many had never seen an American in person and admit to being dazzled.[14] Most of the converts interviewed, naturally, denied that the American connection had much to do with their faith, but they sometimes, inadvertently, painted a more complex picture.[15] To take an example, one Anatolii Sitonin appeared to adjust the relative importance of the American connection mid-statement. When asked why he and his wife initially agreed to have the American missionaries over to their home (after meeting them elsewhere), he thought aloud: "The missionaries left, and my wife and I discussed the issue for a while. … Americans. Come on, it's interesting. Americans." The interviewer then asked, "because they were Americans?" To which Sitonin responded, "No. Absolutely not. I don't know why. Not because they were Americans. … Probably because the Holy Spirit said 'yes' in my place… Most likely it was that.[16]

The two explanations might not be mutually exclusive. As in many proselytizing faiths, Mormons believe that spiritual ends can justify more earthly means, and the Church could be at once universal and American. At least two of the converts interviewed in 1995 had children studying or living in the United States, and many more had, at some time, traveled to or lived in Utah; ties to America were a given following conversion.

An LDS missionary in Moscow ca. 1991. Photo courtesy of Mandy Green

It is tempting to conclude that interest in the Church declined alongside the cachet of the United States, or that economic stabilization after 1998 undercut the need for material aid, but such explanations seem to me overly mechanical. The bases for faith are complex and always plural, and in both of these cases, the material benefits came with significant commitment from the believers—dramatic change in lifestyle (quitting alcohol, tobacco and even tea), tithing, and church attendance are difficult to maintain for purely pragmatic ends. The faith itself held appeal to people, above and beyond the access it provided. That said, I believe there is a quality of Mormonism that underlies both of these incentives—the charitable apparatus and the American connections—that ultimately failed to meet the moment in Russia in the 1990s. As I suggested above, the more successful movements of the period addressed spiritual and existential problems specific to that time and place, and most often in charismatic and novel form. Yet Mormonism is marked by moderation; it offers the utopia of the American suburb; it is staid and routinized and skeptical of charisma and mysticism. This model has worked extraordinarily well in the United States and the Church continues to grow

remarkably quickly around the world. But perhaps it is better suited to stability than to crisis. The Mormon utopia may be what many Russians needed following the collapse, but it does not seem to be what they sought.

Notes

[1] Piotr Dutkiewicz, Vladimir Kulind, and Richard Sakwa, eds. *A Social History of Post-Communist Russia* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 48.

[2] Ibid., 43, 49. On inequality, the Gini coefficient was 26% in 1986, 38% in 1995.

[3] Nicholas Eberstadt and Apoorva Shah, "Russia's Demographic Disaster," Special Report (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, May 2009), 2–3.

[4] V.M. Shkolnikov and France Meslé, "The Russian Epidemiological Crisis as Mirrored by Mortality Trends," ch.4 in "Russia's Demographic 'Crisis,'" eds. Julie DaVanzo and Gwen Farnsworth (RAND Corporation, 1996), DOI: https://doi.org/10.7249/CF124, and Dutkiewicz et al., 46.

[5] See Sergei Antonenko, *Mormony v Rossii: Put' Dlinoi v Stoletie* (Moscow: OOO "Rodina," 2007), 208–210, for a concise summary of the Church's growth in this period.

[6] Gary Browning, Russia and the Restored Gospel (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1997), 51.

[7] "Russia profile," the Cumorah Project, https://www.cumorah.com/countries/viewIntlLDSAtlas/Russia, accessed 25 May 2020.

[8] About fifty years earlier, and coinciding with a turn towards international proselytizing, the Mormon Church accelerated efforts to record and catalog its own growth (the Church's international turn is detailed below). In 1947, prominent Church member and Utah politician James Moyle created the James Moyle Genealogical and Historical Foundation, initially to document his own family's pioneer history. The Foundation's mission expanded over time, and in 1976, it donated funds to the Church's Historical Department to establish the James Moyle Oral History Program, a worldwide effort to record the experiences of new Church leaders and the international rank-and-file. Church archivist and historian Matt Heiss was dispatched, in 1995, to interview former Soviet believers under the aegis of the Moyle Program.

[9] Antonenko, *Mormony v Rossii,* 210, and "Russia profile," the Cumorah Project,

https://www.cumorah.com/countries/viewIntlLDSAtlas/Russia, accessed 25 May 2020. The 2500 figure is estimated from a table on the same site, averaging the growth rate from 1994 and 1996 and applying this rate to the Church's membership in 1994 (1900 members).

[10] 2 Nephi 25:23.

[11] Ezra Taft Benson, "Redemption through Jesus Christ after All We Can Do," *Liahona*, December 1988. https://www.lds.org/liahona/1988/12/redemption-through-jesus-christ-after-all-we-can-do?lang=eng.The last line, about giving succor, is a reference to another scripture in the Book of Mormon, Mosiah 4:16.

[12] One convert from the period estimated that 90% of seekers didn't commit to the Church, and that most of these just wanted to interact with Americans.

[13] Doctrine and Covenants, 38:32–33.

[14] Moyle Program (see note above). See OH 1281, 7; OH 1289, 7; OH 1355, 11, among others.

[15] Previous studies, as this one, identify Mormonism's American cachet as a major draw – see Antonenko, *Mormony v Rossii,* 220. For this phenomenon in other denominations, see Catherine Wanner, "Explaining the Appeal of Evangelicalism in Ukraine," in *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine*, eds. Dominique Arel and Blair A. Ruble (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006), 258. In Catherine Wanner, "Missionaries of Faith and Culture: Evangelical Encounters in Ukraine," *Slavic Review* 63, no. 4 (n. d.): 732–755.

[16] Sitonin, Anatolii L'vovich. St. Petersburg, Russia, May 1995. Moyle Program. OH 1279, 5.

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