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Apocalypticism in the Russian Borderlands: Inochentie Levizor and his Moldovan Followers*

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In 1908, in the southwestern outskirts of the Russian Empire, the Moldovan monk Inochentie (Ioan Levizor, 1875–1917) began to preach the imminent end of the world. His following among his fellow Moldovans grew to embrace three provinces of the empire: Podol'sk, Kherson and especially Bessarabia. His monastery, located in the small and insignificant town of Baltă in the southeastern corner of Podol'sk province, attracted over 80,000 pilgrims in late 1910 – over twice the population of Baltă itself. Marked by miraculous visitations of the Holy Spirit, Inochentie's followers held special prayer meetings where they venerated the Moldovan monk's photograph. Some of the believers, who called themselves 'martyrs', experienced violent fits; they believed that through their suffering, sent by God, they were helping to redeem the world.

Inochentie's movement contributed to the development of a Moldovan ethnic spirituality distinctive and separate from that of Russia. Although the areas in which Inochentie preached were ethnically mixed, only Moldovans answered his apocalyptic call. Living on the periphery of the empire, the Moldovans were outsiders. Although, like their Russian rulers, they were Orthodox Christians, they spoke Romanian, a Romance rather than a Slavic language. The schools available to them taught in Russian, not Romanian. The Holy Synod, located in St Petersburg, appointed their bishops who shared no ties of kinship or language with their flock.

Inochentie, on the other hand, preached eloquently in Romanian and attracted thousands of disciples to the Baltă monastery. Before his arrest and exile in 1912 he had established his own community, the 'Garden of Paradise', on land donated to the monastery. Released from exile in 1917 by the Russian Provisional Government, Inochentie returned to his community, only to fall ill and die at the end of the year. Nevertheless, his movement has survived in Moldova, and today some Orthodox Christians are seeking his rehabilitation.

Inochentie's movement allowed the Moldovan Orthodox to assert control over their own spiritual lives. By asserting a direct and charismatic contact with the Holy Spirit, they rejected the power of the Russian bishops. By defying the bishops, Inochentie and his Moldovan followers made the Russian Orthodox into outsiders; at the same time, through their repressive measures against Inochentie, the Russians pushed his followers from the Church. This conflict between Russian and Moldovan

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Orthodox foreshadowed the current conflicts between the predominantly Russian Transdnestr Republic in Moldova and the Moldovan central government in Chişinău.

The Russification of Moldova

Inochentie's movement has to be understood in the context of the history of Bessarabia, the territory that since 1991 has become the major part of the independent nation of Moldova. Inochentie led a movement that sought to restore spiritual and linguistic autonomy to the Moldovans under Russian domination.

Since the Russian conquest of Bessarabia in 1812 the parish churches of the Moldovans had played an important role in maintaining the Romanian language and culture. The first two bishops of Chişinău (Kishinev), Gavriil (Bonolesko-Bodoni, r. 1813–21) and Dimitri (r. 1821–44) were themselves Moldovans; Gavriil had served as the Metropolitan of Iaşi, the capital of Moldavia, in the 1790s. Both men promoted the use of the Romanian language in the church. Gavriil established a printing press where books in Romanian in the Cyrillic script could be published.¹

With Dimitri's death in 1844, imperial policy changed; the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church sent Russian bishops to rule the diocese in Chişinău. Archbishop Irinarkh (Popov, r. 1844–58) moved to Chişinău from the northern eparchy of Vologda; his successor, Antoni (Shokotov, r. 1858–71), came from the southeastern frontier town of Orenburg in the Urals. Both men followed the policy of integration and russification that the central authorities of church and state had laid out. Irinarkh suspended the Romanian publishing house and brought Russian priests to Bessarabia to serve Moldovan parishes; Antoni continued his predecessor's policies.

When it lost the three southern districts of Bessarabia at the Treaty of Paris in 1856 Russia had a good reason to try to strengthen its claim to the rest of the province by russifying it. Later the abortive Polish Revolution in 1863 frightened Alexander II and encouraged him to intensify his efforts to russify the hinterland of the empire. In 1867 education in the Romanian language was forbidden.² Archbishop Pavel (Lebedev, r. 1871–82) proved to be a zealous russifier. He replaced the abbots of the 18 Bessarabian monasteries with Russians, removed Romania liturgical books from the churches, reduced the number of Moldovan priests from 778 to 433, ended the publication of a Moldovan version of the diocesan newspaper, established Russian parochial schools in the monasteries, demanded that all parish registers be kept in Russian, and required parish priests to send their children to Russian schools.³

After the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78 Pavel oversaw the reintegration of southern Bessarabia into the empire. He ordered all priests to learn Russian within two years or risk removal from their parishes. He also closed 340 Moldovan churches. Pavel's successor, the conservative Archbishop Sergi (Nikolai Yakovlevich Lyapidevsky, 1820–98, r. 1882–91), went even further and closed the Romanian printing plant altogether.⁴

Inochentie

Ioan Levizor, the future hieromonk Inochentie, was born in 1875 during this period of intense russification.⁵ He grew up in Keseutsy village of Soroca district, one of the least urbanised regions in Bessarabia. In 1894, when Levizor was 19, his father Vasili entrusted him to carry some papers from the village elder [*starosta*] to the neighbouring village of Yezhnitsy about five miles away. According to an Inno-

centite tradition, as he was passing a chapel that marked the site of an ancient monastery he heard a voice call out three times 'Ioan! The time has come! Hurry up!' Three days later, while passing the chapel again, Levizor saw the Mother of God. The apparition convinced him to enter St Nicholas' Monastery in Dobrusha, a small town not far from his home. Refusing to ride in the waggon his father offered him, Ioan piously chose to go on foot. Archimandrite Porfiri, the abbot of the monastery, allowed Levizor to live and work in the monastery initially for six months.⁶

Levizor spent three years in the monastery. By choosing the spiritual vocation of a holy fool – a religious person who feigns madness and violates decorum to push others toward a spiritual awakening – Levizor earned the hearty dislike of his fellow monks. Although he suffered much from the other monks (all of them lazy drunkards according to the hagiography), Levizor found supernatural comfort in visits from the Mother of God. Despite his unpopularity, Levizor also found favour with his spiritual superior, Archimandrite Porfiri, who entrusted the young man with the keys to the monastery. According to his hagiographer, Levizor secretly used his position to help those in need; for example, he gave monastery property to the nuns of the neighbouring Koshelevsky Dormition convent.⁷ Although the abbot initially punished him for taking such liberties, Levizor accepted his chastisement so meekly that he quickly won the abbot's heart. Porfiri began to point to Levizor as an example to the other monks.⁸

Around 1897 Levizor decided to leave the monastery. Archbishop Ioann attributes his decision to the intervention of the Mother of God, who ordered the novice to another place, much to the chagrin of Archimandrite Porfiri. On the other hand, a recent encyclopedia of secret sects makes the unsubstantiated charge that Levizor was expelled from the monastery for 'unworthy behaviour in relation to the female sex'.⁹ Although this accusation is probably slander drawn from Soviet antireligious works, even Inochentie's hagiographer admits that Levizor's unusual behaviour and his vocation as a holy fool had scandalised many.¹⁰

Levizor first travelled to the famous Kievan Lavra of the Caves, the first monastery to have been established in Rus' after Prince Vladimir's conversion in 988. A gifted singer, Levizor spent 18 months in the choir of St Michael's monastery in Kiev.¹¹ His desire to perform spiritual feats led him to journey to Yaroslavl' province where he stayed for 11 months at yet another monastery, St Adrian's.¹²

For several years Levizor continued to move from cloister to cloister until returning home to St Nicholas' monastery. According to his followers, the Moldovan monk never settled down because he was dissatisfied with the low moral level of the monasteries he visited; but the national and linguistic problems that the Moldovan monk faced in Russian monasteries probably also discouraged him. Indeed, after serving for a time in the episcopal choir, Levizor ultimately entered the Moldovan New Neamț Ascension Monastery in Kitskany, a small town on the banks of the Dnestr in Bessarabia. Founded in 1864 by Romanian monks from the Neamț Monastery, the New Neamț provided a more hospitable environment for Moldovans.¹³

The Cult of Feodosie Levitzki and the Rise of the Innocentites

By the late 1890s the new bishops of Chișinău proved more sympathetic to the plight of their Romanian-speaking flock. In 1899 Bishop Yakov (Ivan Alekseyevich Pyatnitsky, 1844–1922) of Chișinău (r. 1898–1904), alarmed by the large numbers of Moldovans who had no understanding of the Slavonic liturgy, opened a missionary

brotherhood named after the Nativity of Christ. A year later he asked the Holy Synod for permission to print religious literature in Romanian. (Despite this, Yakov was genuinely shocked by the fact that the local monasteries followed Greek, not Russian, customs concerning the monks' daily fare.¹⁴) His successor, the culturally sensitive Bishop Vladimir (Filaret Alekseyevich Sen'kovsky, 1847–1917, r. 1904–8), who had served as an anti-Muslim missionary in the Altai and the Caucasus, also encouraged the use of Romanian for religious purposes.¹⁵

This new, more liberal linguistic policy reflected the Church's growing concern for those Orthodox Christians who were not ethnically Russian. Under the great missionary Nikolai Ivanovich Il'minsky (1822–91), professor in the Kazan' Theological Academy, some of the church hierarchs had begun to promote education and liturgies in the native languages of the non-Russian Orthodox. Bishop Vladimir, who had studied at the Kazan' Academy, put these theories into practice when he became bishop of Bessarabia in 1904. Il'minsky's position was far from universally accepted, however; Vladimir's successor, Serafim (r. 1908–12), later reversed this liberal linguistic policy.

State schools, on the other hand, were conducted entirely in Russian down to the February Revolution of 1917. Although Moldovan nationalists called for the introduction of Romanian language instruction in the primary school system their pleas fell on deaf ears. Thus by 1905 the Bessarabian Church was the one institution that preserved Romanian language and culture.

Thanks to this more liberal policy toward the non-Russian Orthodox, Levizor was able to enter a new, predominantly Moldovan monastery created to honour Fr Feodosie Levitzki (d. 1845), a Moldovan priest well known for his philanthropic activities. Feodosie had served in the church of St Nicholas in Baltă where he had established a school for poor children. His dying request had been to open a monastery in his home town. Feodosie's deathbed wish was fulfilled only in 1908, when a group of Moldovan monks opened the new monastery.¹⁶ This Moldovan enterprise attracted Levizor, who became an active and eloquent spokesman for the cult of the dead priest. Here, finally, Levizor took monastic vows and the name Inochentie. In his new home Levizor began a promising clerical career: on 15 August, the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, he became a hierodeacon, and a few months later, in 1909, he was ordained an Orthodox priest.¹⁷

In the meantime Feodosie Levitzki's reputation for holiness had led to a movement for his canonisation. On 22 May 1909, with the full approval of the Holy Synod, the priest's remains were translated from the cemetery to the monastery church of the Holy Trinity. Although it stopped short of canonising the Moldovan priest the Synod had by this resolution encouraged the growing cult of Feodosie, whom Moldovans increasingly saw as their national saint. The psychiatrist V. S. Yakovenko reported that on some days the numbers of pilgrims to the new monastery exceeded the population of the entire town.¹⁸

Inochentie actively promoted the cult of Feodosie. According to a recent hagiographic account a miracle forced the local bishop to ordain Inochentie as a priest. Mysteriously, none of the 'pharisees' who had tortured Feodosie during his lifetime were able to travel to the grave, so they asked Inochentie to take responsibility for translating the relics.¹⁹ Inochentie used this opportunity to force the bishop to ordain him a priest, since a mere deacon would not have had the authority to move Feodosie's relics into the church. After his ordination the new Hieromonk Inochentie experienced a vision when he uncovered Feodosie's remains: he saw the saint hand him his cross and instruct him to call the people to repentance.²⁰

A persuasive teacher, Inochentie attracted many Moldovans who came to hear him speak in their native tongue. In 1911 V. S. Yakovenko described the power of his eloquence:

A Moldovan himself, Hieromonk Inochentie knows Moldovan culture intimately and relates spiritually (*dushevno*) to the Moldovans not only as a pastor, but as a compatriot. He speaks to them in their own language in revelatory, burning words. ...²¹

Inochentie turned his remarkable oratorical gifts to champion the growing cult of Fr Feodosie. In his fiery sermons he demanded repentance from the pilgrims who came to adore the relics of the Moldovan priest; he also warned of an imminent judgment. Other Moldovan monks from nearby monasteries also encouraged their compatriots to venerate Feodosie.²³

Soon the Russian authorities began to express concern about Feodosie's cult. Rumours about miracles at the Baltă monastery attracted thousands of Moldovan pilgrims, many of whom had seizures while worshipping at the site. Much like the converts in the Second Great Awakening in the United States, the Moldovan pilgrims trembled uncontrollably, jerked their limbs, groaned, hiccuped, beat themselves, fell to the floor, and spoke ecstatically. Moreover, when they returned home to their villages these convulsions continued and even spread to others. Convinced that God had sent them these attacks so that their innocent suffering might help to redeem a sinful world, these devotees of Father Feodosie became the focus of a cult of their own. For example, in Chobruchi village of Kherson province, those who experienced such fits were regarded as martyrs (*mucheniki*), and lived together in a special cottage. The martyrs were all Moldovan teenagers who had usually become afflicted after a pilgrimage to Baltă. Local peasants donated food and other goods to support the martyrs, who would, when pressed, visit other households. Their supernatural seizures gave them clairvoyant powers, and they sometimes predicted the future or provided new information about local crimes.²³ The missionary council of the Chişinău diocese described the meetings in a report completed in 1911:

Persons who had been in Baltă and had returned from there under the fresh impression of what they had seen and heard began to gather together for prayer. At first they did this openly, but later they met secretly at the homes of certain people. Usually they placed icons, crosses, and also pictures of the late Fr Feodosie or Hieromonk Inochentie on a table. Those gathered (who always included some hysterical women (*klikushi*) who were considered to be prophetesses) sang prayers and read akathists. One of the leaders asperged everyone with holy water and anointed the congregation with oil supposedly taken from the grave of Fr Feodosie in Baltă. They performed various spells over those present, and told the pilgrims that each person was possessed by a demon, or even several demons. As a result those who had weak nerves – especially women and girls – entered a neurotic frenzy, screamed, hiccuped, jumped about, and beat themselves in convulsions. The leaders treated them as though they were possessed by sprinkling them with water, anointing them with oil, and blowing into their faces to exorcise the demons.²⁴

According to this same report, Inochentie's followers believed that Jesus Christ had delegated all divine power and authority to Fr Feodosie, who had in turn given it to Inochentie. Moreover, the cult had penetrated deeply into the popular consciousness,

for the peasants treated those who were possessed with particular reverence; the sufferings of the 'possessed' were redeeming the world and preparing the way for the kingdom of God.²⁵

Significantly, the report did not emphasise the apocalyptic aspects of Inochentie's preaching; the only hint of the apocalypse comes in the eschatological role played by the 'martyrs' who were preparing for God's kingdom through their suffering. The psychiatrists whom the church and the government called upon to investigate the 'Baltă psychosis' likewise did not analyse the apocalyptic ideology behind the miraculous fits of the 'martyrs': the more sympathetic psychiatrists, such as V. S. Yakovenko, attributed this 'psychosis' to poor diet and education; those who were less sympathetic to the Innocentites, such as A. D. Kotsovsky, ascribed the whole movement to the charlatanism of its leaders.²⁶

As the government intensified a campaign of persecution against Inochentie and his disciplines, their apocalyptic vision became increasingly dominant. By 1913, after Inochentie had been arrested and exiled, his followers were selling their property, taking up celibacy and building a communal society near the Baltă monastery in expectation of the imminent end of the world. On 23 August 1913 the Holy Synod reported that

the preaching of Hieromonk Inochentie is primarily about the imminence of the Last Judgment and about the necessity, in view of this, to sell all property. He also teaches that it is an abomination before God for a married couple bound by the sacrament of holy matrimony to live together and have children, but that free love is pleasing to God. The main means for healing any disease are Inochentie's prayers and oil from the lamp at the grave of the priest Levitzki. The true path to salvation and blessing is through rashes and demonism, since people can cleanse themselves from sin thanks to these diseases.²⁷

The Synod's accusation that the Innocentites were teaching free love was a standard unsubstantiated slander directed against many celibate charismatic groups.

Local Russian and Ukrainian priests complained about the 'martyrs', whose violent fits often interrupted church services and destroyed the decorum of the liturgy. Ignorant of the Moldovan culture and language, the Slavic clergy regarded the Moldovan martyrs with deep suspicion and put pressure on local authorities to punish them. Along with their heavenly afflictions, the martyrs experienced earthly persecution, as the village elders and the local police often beat them for disturbing good order in the church. Such beatings did not discourage the young Moldovans, who meekly bore their suffering as part of God's redemption of the world.²⁸

The Slavic clergy also reacted strongly against other extra-ecclesial practices of the 'martyrs' and their admirers. Believing that Fr Feodosie was a saint, the Moldovans held prayer meetings in which they venerated his photograph as though it were an icon. For the Slavs, such pious expressions were at best premature (since Feodosie had not been officially canonised) and at worst heretical.²⁹

Russians and Ukrainians circulated rumours about the witchcraft that these Moldovan martyrs performed. They were said to place a pot of water on the table, throw spoons into the pot, and chant 'Little god, little god, reveal yourself to us and give us more spoons'. Others spoke of how they gathered at night around wells to conjure up the spirits of the saints, including the spirit of Fr Feodosie. When confronted with such rumours, the Moldovan martyrs angrily denied them.³⁰

Inochentie and his disciples also made spiritual claims on physical territory by

placing whitewashed wooden crosses and crucifixes on wells, thus sanctifying the water. After such a ritual the Innocentites stood guard over the wells to ensure that the blessed water would not be used for cattle or laundry. Under the crucifixes the Innocentites hung an icon lamp, whose flame burned continually.

The Russians resisted such rituals; Bishop Serafim of Chişinău ordered the clergy to refuse to sanctify wells for the Innocentites. In at least one case in 1910 in Nezavertailovka village in Tiraspol' district, the Russian authorities suppressed one such procession and arrested the leaders. Yet the practice of sanctifying wells with crucifixes continued into the Soviet period: at the beginning of 1959 the Committee of State Security of the Moldavian Republic began an operation to remove all such crucifixes.³¹

After the translation of Feodosie's relics the cult reached such alarming proportions that the Russian bishops of Kherson, Chişinău and Podol'sk took immediate measures to halt it. On 22 May 1910 – the first anniversary of the translation of Fr Feodosie's relics – Bishop Serafim (Sergi Georgiyevich Golubyatnikov, 1856–1921) of Kamenets-Podol'sky (r. 1908–14) removed Inochentie from the Baltă monastery and imprisoned him for two months.³² V. S. Yakovenko described the scene:

His forced exit from the monastery in May of last year was truly majestic and moving: his followers gathered in their thousands and cried and wept as they parted with him. As they accompanied their beloved pastor, they not only kissed the edge of his clothes but, according to eyewitnesses, kissed the traces left by the team that carried him away.³³

Inochentie's temporary imprisonment did nothing to stop the new Moldovan religious movement; indeed, it only served to increase his authority over those involved in it.

Bishop Serafim of Chişinău and the Church's Reaction to the Innocentites

Concern about growing Moldovan nationalism among the clergy undoubtedly played a role in the appointment of the ardent russifier Bishop Serafim (Leonid Mikhailovich Chichagov, 1856–1937) to the see of the Bessarabian capital (r. 1908–12). The grandson of the Russian admiral Pavel Vasil'yevich Chichagov (1765–1849) who had conquered Bessarabia back in 1812, Bishop Serafim denounced the nationalist aspirations of the native clergy. Serafim had taken holy orders only after a military career in the elite Preobrazhensky regiment; he retained a deep sense of patriotic duty and regarded the movement for ethnic autonomy as a danger to the state.

In the past, Serafim had sympathised with Orthodox mystics, even with those that had been condemned as heretics. Endowed with a strong mystical streak himself, Serafim took his monastic name from the thaumaturgical elder Serafim of Sarov, whose canonisation he tirelessly championed. As a parish priest in 1896 Leonid Chichagov compiled and published a monastic chronicle designed to aid the case for his namesake's glorification as a saint; later, as the monk Serafim, he used his contacts at court to help push the canonisation through a reluctant Holy Synod.

As abbot of the Spaso-Yevfimov monastery in Suzdal' Serafim helped to rehabilitate one of the heretics in the monastery dungeon, the mystical Khar'kov peasant Vasili Karpovich Podgorny. A devout Orthodox layman who had founded a convent, Podgorny led a movement of intense and ecstatic prayer meetings marked by miraculous visions and wonders. Such mysticism was too much for the reactionary Archbishop Amvrosi (Aleksii Ivanovich Klyucharev, 1820–1901,

r. 1882–1901) who condemned the peasant as a heretic in 1892. Imprisoned by administrative order, Podgorny was not given the benefit of a trial; he spent 11 years in the Suzdal' monastery, famous for its political and religious prisoners. But when Serafim became abbot he befriended the accused heretic and in 1903 even allowed him to take monastic vows as the monk Stefan. The two men shared an intense, ecstatic mysticism; like Stefan, Serafim also experienced visions. In 1902 he was visited by his famous namesake, the wonderworker Serafim of Sarov. Even after his consecration as a bishop, Serafim kept in contact with Stefan's followers; a visionary himself, Serafim lent a sympathetic ear to their concerns.³⁴

But Serafim had no such sympathy for the Moldovan mystical hieromonk Inochentie. As a representative of one of the colonised minorities of the empire, Inochentie embodied nothing more than a danger to the state for the retired-colonel-turned-bishop. As his own words reveal, Serafim regarded the use of Romanian language as subversive, and insisted on the use of Russian; he thus reversed the linguistic policies of his immediate predecessor, Bishop Vladimir (Sen'kovsky):

At the time of my appointment in Chişinău, I became acquainted with the existing tendency of the Moldavian clergy for separatism and the autonomy of the Moldavian church. The nationalistic movement – manifested by the desire of the priests to conduct religious services in their own language, to translate religious and didactic books into Roumanian, to revive Roumanian church systems and to teach the Roumanian language in the parochial schools and seminaries – was likewise pointed out to me as a danger to the State.³⁵

During the revolution of 1905 Moldovan seminary students had taken the lead in demanding greater linguistic autonomy for the local Church.³⁶ In the heady period of 1905–7, when Tsar Nicholas II granted the empire a constitution and an elected legislature, the Moldovans saw some of their demands granted; the former Bishop Vladimir of Chişinău (1904–8) was particularly sympathetic toward their desire to worship in their own language. By 1908, however, an empire-wide reaction to the democratic reforms had set in; Nicholas II dissolved Russia's first parliament and appointed as prime minister the hard-headed landowner Petr Stolypin (d. 1911), famous for the repressive measures he had taken as governor of Saratov against peasant rebels. Serafim's appointment to the Chişinău diocese corresponded to a larger pattern of reaction; he was determined to russify his diocese and put an end to nationalist aspirations within the Church. For Serafim, Inochentie the Moldovan preacher was simply one more dangerous manifestation of religious and national separatism in Bessarabia.

In October 1910 Serafim ordered the diocesan missionary committee to conduct an investigation into the religious movement, a task that took six months. At the same time similar inquests took place in the neighbouring dioceses of Podol'sk and Kherson, where the Moldovan minority has also embraced the new movement. The investigation drew on the expertise of the young science of psychiatry; both Serafim and Bishop Dmitri of Kherson called on the medical district psychiatrists.³⁷ Predictably, the Church concluded that the cult was a form of religious exploitation, and blamed the Moldovan monks for promoting the movement for their own monetary interests.

In February or March 1912 the Holy Synod decided to exile Inochentie to a monastery in Murmansk in the far northern Russian province of Olonets. But even in

the absence of its leader the movement continued to grow among the Moldovan population: Inochentie's disciples built an underground monastery with the apocalyptic designation 'New Jerusalem' near Lipetskoye village, Anan'yev district, Kherson province. Inochentie also attracted many pilgrims to the monastery. In December 1912, in response to a letter from their leader, several thousand of Inochentie's followers travelled from Bessarabia to the Murmansk monastery.³⁸

The large numbers of pilgrims unnerved the abbot of the monastery, Archimandrite Merkuri. On 5 February 1913 he called upon government soldiers to evict Inochentie and his disciples from the monastery. Although the band started south, within a few days more soldiers succeeded in arresting the pilgrims. The soldiers placed Inochentie in prison in Petrozavodsk and sent the pilgrims home in a military convoy.³⁹

On 23 August 1913 the Synod condemned Inochentie for causing 'the spread of many demonic and nervous illnesses and even deaths among the people'.⁴⁰ Inochentie remained in prison until he repented, but on 26 November 1914 he was released under the supervision of the local bishop. Despite his erstwhile change of heart, the hieromonk continued preaching; in May 1915 the Synod sent him to the Solovetsky monastery located on a remote island in the White Sea, which had long been used for the imprisonment of religious and political dissenters. In order to isolate the hieromonk further the Synod placed him in Anzersky skete, one of the more remote hermitages of the monastic complex.⁴¹

The Innocentites Between the World Wars

The February Revolution of 1917 helped to free Inochentie. An amnesty declared by the Provisional Government allowed him to return home and take his place as the leader of the New Jerusalem monastery his followers had built. The movement, never centralised, had broken into schismatic infighting in Inochentie's absence. But Inochentie had little time to bring his flock together, for he fell ill and died on 30 December 1917.⁴² Three years later, on 14 September 1920, the Bolsheviks forcibly closed the monastery, arrested or killed the leaders (including Inochentie's family), and brought the survivors to Odessa for trial.

In the meantime, in 1918, Romania reclaimed Bessarabia, where most of Inochentie's followers lived. Bessarabia remained part of Romania until the Soviet invasion of 1940. In 1941, when German troops overran the Soviet Union, Romania benefited as a German ally by the recovery of Bessarabia, but three years later lost the territory once again to the USSR.

Between 1918 and 1944 the Innocentites found favourable ground for their teachings in Romanian-controlled Bessarabia. In 1931, for example, a sociological survey of the village of Cornova in Orhei district found that the progressive local priest, Father Ioan Zamă – an amateur astronomer and philosopher who read Schopenhauer and fought for the adoption of the Gregorian calendar – had struggled against the Innocentites in a nearby village.⁴³ Despite such opposition among the educated and progressive clergy Inochentie's following grew until Soviet forces once again conquered the region. In a memorandum of 17 October 1946 the viceminister of State Security of the Moldavian SSR, B. Kozachenko, reported that the Innocentites were widespread in the republic, especially in Bălți, Soroca, Orhei and Chişinău districts; almost every village in these four districts contained a group of Innocentites. They were active in the working monasteries in Moldavia and among the 'most reactionary and backward' clergy.⁴⁴

The Soviet Repression of the Innocentites, 1944–88

In the postwar Soviet Union the immense power of the antireligious establishment was directed against the Innocentites and other religious groups considered dangerous. Kozachenko's 1946 memorandum resulted in a repression of the Innocentites a few months later. In a well-publicised case in January 1947 the Ministry of State Security of Moldavia arrested ten Innocentite leaders.⁴⁵ According to press reports two of the Innocentites claimed to be Tsarevich Aleksei and Grand Duchess Anastasia. Another Innocentite preacher asserted that Nicholas II was alive and would soon return to the throne. These specific charges seem unlikely, given the exclusively Moldovan character of the Innocentite movement.⁴⁶ Most of the Innocentites were sentenced to terms ranging from six to ten years in the euphemistically titled 'corrective labour camps'.

This repression was part of a broader effort to crush the most active antisoviet religious groups and to put pressure on more moderate denominations. On 6 April 1949 the Council of Ministers of the USSR began 'Operation South', the mass deportation of all suspected antisoviet persons and their families to 'eternal exile' in Central Asia or the Soviet East.⁴⁷ These enemies included not only wealthy peasants (*kulaki*), former landowners and suspected collaborators, but also members of illegal sects, such as the Innocentites. After two months of preparation the Soviet authorities began the deportations in July; in the next six months they arrested and transported over 11,000 families – 35,000 men, women, and children – to Siberia.⁴⁸ Two years later, on 3 March 1951, the Soviet government instituted 'Operation North', the mass deportation of Jehovah's Witnesses from the Baltic republics and Moldavia to Siberia. In all, at least 2617 Witnesses – 723 families – were exiled from the Moldavian republic.⁴⁹

After Stalin's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's famous 'destalinisation' speech at the Communist Party Congress of 1956 these political exiles began to return home. According to a 1957 memorandum of the Ministry of State Security 150 Innocentites had come back to Moldova.⁵⁰ The memorandum was a precursor to a second purge that occurred in April and May 1957, when the authorities arrested another group of Innocentite leaders. This time Soviet officials publicly attacked the Innocentites both in the main republican newspaper, *Sovetskaya Moldaviya*, and in a propaganda film.⁵¹

During Nikita Khrushchev's campaign of religious persecution that lasted from 1959 to 1964 attacks on the Innocentites were especially intense. Ever since Inochentie had begun his public ministry in 1908 he had found support in Orthodox monasteries (perhaps because of his uncompromising ascetic ethic); by the end of the Khrushchev persecution, the Soviet state had closed all the 28 Orthodox monasteries that had been operating in Moldova in 1944.⁵² To discredit the movement, antireligious specialists wrote and distributed popular propaganda that distorted Inochentie's teaching. For example, Fedor Fedorenko, the author of an important survey of sects published in 1965, wrote that Inochentie had declared himself to be the Holy Spirit in 1908.⁵³ Exceeding the slanders of prerevolutionary church officials, Soviet atheists accused the Innocentites not only of sexual immorality but even of human sacrifice.⁵⁴ Soviet officials were especially critical of the Innocentites' emphasis on mortification of the flesh. In 1964, for example, the newspaper *Sovetskaya Moldaviya* used purple prose to report the discovery of a young Innocentite, Mariya Krechun, in Talmazy village in the Transdnestr region: 'The bestial leaders of the sect insistently prepared Mariya for death'.⁵⁵

According to the security organs, these measures were effective. In 1960 G. Volkov, vicechairman of the KGB in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, reported that the 'sectarian-Innocentite underground' had been reduced from over 2000 to fewer than 250 active members. In the previous two years 20 of their illegal churches had been closed, the Innocentites had been publicly humiliated before the collective farmers that they had refused to join, and major trials had been conducted against them.⁵⁶ Despite these repressive measures, the Innocentites survived; the Soviet authorities continued to publish anti-Innocentite pamphlets until at least 1980.⁵⁷ In 1987 a community still existed near the ruins of Inochentie's monastery, 'Garden of Paradise', near Baltă, just outside Moldova.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Inochentie and his movement grew because they were outsiders in the Russian Empire. Prevented from using their own language in school and business, the Moldovans who followed Inochentie created a spiritual and cultural space of their own, independent of their Slavic overlords. They did this both by the use of their native tongue and by religious ritual. Defying the restrictions placed on Romanian even in worship, the Innocentites responded to their leaders' eloquent Romanian sermons. The cult of the Moldovan priest Feodosie affirmed Moldovan spiritual autonomy.

Through their faith the Innocentites seized Jesus' eschatological promise that the last would be first. All the Innocentite martyrs whom the Ukrainian psychiatrist V. S. Yakovenko examined in 1910, for example, were socially marginal. They were all minors, ranging in age from eight to 18. Most were girls, and many of them came from broken or alcoholic families. For example, 'Yevdokiya Zh-ina', a 15-year-old martyr in Slobodzeya village, Tiraspol' district, had seen three of her seven siblings die and was regularly beaten by her alcoholic father. In Chobruchi village a blind girl was the leader of the 'martyrs'. In these cases, the last truly had become first: the handicapped, the young and the afflicted were regarded as the harbingers of God's kingdom.⁵⁹

Dominated by the Slavs even in their religious life, the Innocentites celebrated their position on the outskirts of Russian Orthodoxy through their theology of redemptive suffering. Through their supernatural fits, the Moldovan martyrs helped to usher in the kingdom of God; the outsiders (Russians such as bishop Serafim) only brought the kingdom closer by their persecutions.

Notes and References

- ¹ Andrei Popovici, *The Political Status of Bessarabia* (Ransdell, Washington, DC, 1931), pp. 101–3.
- ² Wim P. van Meurs, *The Bessarabian Question in Communist Historiography: Nationalist and Communist Politics and History-Writing* (East European Monographs, New York, 1994), p. 48.
- ³ Popovici, *op. cit.*, pp. 103–5.
- ⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 104–5.
- ⁵ Inochentie has been almost completely ignored in serious scholarly literature. In 1911 the Ukrainian psychiatrist V. S. Yakovenko, who had been called in by the governor and bishop of Kherson to investigate the 'mass psychosis' of the Innocentites, published an article that included some of her personal observations about Inochentie. (V. S. Yakovenko, 'Psikhicheskaya epidemiya na religioznoi pochve v Anan'yevskom i Tiraspol'skom yuezdakh Khersonskoi gub.', *Sovremennaya psikiatriya*, vol. 5, no. 3,

March 1911, pp. 191–98; no. 4, April 1911, pp. 229–49.) (I am grateful to Kim Friedlander for this reference.) In the same year Bishop Serafim (Chichagov) of Chişinău issued a report condemning Inochentie and his followers for preaching heresy; later, in 1913, the entire Holy Synod issued its own condemnation after a formal heresy trial. Soviet antireligious propagandists published excerpts from these reports. (A. I. Babi, A. P. Lisovina, K. P. Kryzhanovskaya, V. I. Zhukov (eds), *Reaktsionnaya rol' religii i tserkvi: Arkhivnyye dokumenty o deyatel'nosti svyashchennosluzhitelei v Moldavii* (Izdatel'stvo 'Kartya Moldovenyanske', Kishinev, 1969), pp. 166–70.) In 1931 the Romanian sociologist and ethnographer Henri H. Stahl interviewed Fr Ioan Zamă, who provided his own recollections of Inochentie. (Henri H. Stahl, 'Despre Inochentie și Inochentism: fragment de convorbire cu părintele Zamă, din satul Cornova', *Arhiva pentru știința și reforma socială*, vol. 10, nos. 1–4, 1931, pp. 175–83.) In 1991 Bishop Ioann (V. Ya. Bereslavsky), the charismatic leader of a new religious movement called the Bogorodichny tseŋr (Mother-of-God Centre or the Church of the Transfiguring Theotokos), published a hagiography of the Moldovan monk based on an Innocentite manuscript. (Ioann, *Nekanonizirovannyye svyatyie istinnogo pravoslaviya: Innokenti Baltsky (1875–1917)* (Bogorodichny tseŋtr, Moscow, 1992).)

⁶ Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 6. On the monastery, see Leonid Ivanovich Denisov, *Pravoslavnyye monastyri Rossiiskoi imperii: Polny spisok vsekh 1105 nyne sushchestvuyushchikh v 75 guberniyakh i oblastyakh Rossii (i 2 inostrannykh gosudarstvakh) muzhskikh i zhenskikh monastyrei, arkhivnykh domov i zhenskikh obshchin* (Izdaniye A. D. Stupina, Moscow, 1908), pp. 51–52, monastery no. 50.

⁷ Denisov, *op. cit.*, p. 59, no. 63.

⁸ Ioann, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–9.

⁹ 'Sakta innokent'yevtsev', in *Tainnye obshchestva i sekty: Kul'tovyye ubiitsy, religioznyye soyuzy i ordena, satanisty i fanatiki* (Literatura, Minsk, 1996), p. 446.

¹⁰ Ioann, *op. cit.*, pp. 7–10.

¹¹ Denisov, *op. cit.*, pp. 300–3.

¹² Ioann, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11; Denisov, *op. cit.*, p. 922, no. 1058.

¹³ Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 11; Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, p. 234; Denisov, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–48, no. 45; [Bishop] Arseni, *Issledovaniya i monografii po istorii moldavskoi tserkvi* (Tipografiya F. Vaisberga i P. Gershunina, St Petersburg, 1904), pp. 309–18.

¹⁴ Serge Dmitriyevich Urussov, *Memoirs of a Russian Governor* (trans. Herman Rosenthal) (Harper Brothers, New York, 1908), p. 86.

¹⁵ Keith Hitchens, *Rumania, 1866–1947* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1994), p. 246; Alexandru V. Boldur, *Istoria Basarabiei* (V. Frunza, Bucharest, 1992), p. 460.

¹⁶ Writing in 1911 the *zemstvo* psychiatrist V. S. Yakovenko, who conducted fieldwork in the area, gave 1908 as the date of the opening of the Baltă monastery. (Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, p. 235.) In 1931 Fr Ioan Zamă of Cornova village in Bessarabia confirmed that Bishop Serafim (Golubyatnikov), who from 1908 to 1912 ruled over the Kamenets-Podol'sky diocese where Baltă was located, pushed for the creation of the monastery. (Stahl, *op. cit.*, p. 176.) A recent encyclopedia of sects holds that the monastery was opened as early as 1906 ('Sakta innokent'yevtsev', pp. 446–47), but it is not listed in Denisov's comprehensive catalogue of monasteries published in 1908.

¹⁷ Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Stahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 175–77.

¹⁸ Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, p. 235; Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁹ The author of the hagiography, Archbishop Ioann (V. Ya. Bereslavsky), the leader of a new religious movement called the Bogorodichny tseŋtr (Mother-of-God Centre), was apparently unaware that Feodosie had died in 1845, and that any 'pharisees' who had opposed him had therefore long passed away by 1910. (Ioann, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–14).

²⁰ Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²¹ Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, pp. 234–35.

²² Babi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 168–70.

²³ Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, pp. 192, 197.

- ²⁴ Babi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
- ²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 167.
- ²⁶ Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, pp. 191–98; Babi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
- ²⁷ Babi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.
- ²⁸ Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
- ²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 235.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 236.
- ³¹ To avoid provoking riots among believing Christians the crucifixes were transferred to cemeteries and churches. (Valeri Ivanovich Pasat (ed.), *Trudnyye stranitsy istorii Moldovy, 1940–1950* (Terra, Moscow, 1994), pp. 588–90.)
- ³² Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 19; Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
- ³³ Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
- ³⁴ Timofei Ivanovich Butkevich, *Obzor russkikh sekt i ikh tolkov* (Tipografiya gubernskogo pravleniya, Khar'kov, 1910), pp. 166–70; Aleksandr Stepanovich Prugavin, *Monastyrskiy tyur'my v bor'be s sektantsvom. K voprosu o veroterpimosti* (Typo-litografiya T-va I. N. Kushnerev i Ko., St Petersburg, 1904), pp. 119–21.
- ³⁵ Popovici, *op. cit.*, pp. 106–7.
- ³⁶ A. I. Babi, 'Antiklerikalizm i ateisticheskiye nastroyeniya sredi gorozhan Moldavii epokhi imperializma', in V. N. Yermuratsky (ed.), *Stranitsy istorii religii a ateizma v Moldavii* (Redaktsionno-izdatel'sky otdel Akademii Nauk Moldavskoi SSR, Kishinev, 1970), pp. 58–71.
- ³⁷ Babi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
- ³⁸ Ioann, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–29; 'Sekta innokent'yevtsev', pp. 448–49.
- ³⁹ Ioann, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–46; 'Sekta innokent'yevtsev', p. 449.
- ⁴⁰ Babi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.
- ⁴¹ Ioann, *op. cit.*, pp. 46–47; 'Sekta innokent'yevtsev', p. 450.
- ⁴² Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 60. One imaginative Soviet antireligious propagandist claimed that an enraged Innocentite killed Inochentie in 1919 after the hieromonk had raped several girls (Fedor Fedorenko, *Sekty, ikh very i dela* (Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, Moscow, 1965), pp. 207–9). A more recent encyclopedia of secret sects held that he had been killed in a drunken brawl ('Sekta innokent'yevtsev', p. 450).
- ⁴³ Stahl, *op. cit.*, p. 183; *id.*, *Amintiri și gânduri din vechea școală a 'monografiilor sociologice'* (Minerva, Bucharest, 1981), pp. 160–70.
- ⁴⁴ Pasat, *op. cit.*, pp. 588–90.
- ⁴⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 594, 596, note 1.
- ⁴⁶ Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (St Martin's Press, New York, 1961), pp. 366–67.
- ⁴⁷ Pasat, *op. cit.*, pp. 387–89.
- ⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 545.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 613, note 3.
- ⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 727.
- ⁵¹ Nikita Struve, *Christians in Contemporary Russia* (trans. Lancelot Sheppard and A. Manson) (Charles Scribner & Sons, New York, 1967), pp. 230–31.
- ⁵² Pasat, *op. cit.*, p. 652; Jane Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History* (Croom Helm, London, 1986).
- ⁵³ Fedorenko, pp. 207–9. There is no evidence that Inochentie made such a claim, though some of his followers apparently identified him with the Holy Spirit (Stahl, *op. cit.*, p. 182; Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 49).
- ⁵⁴ Struve, *op. cit.*, pp. 230–31.
- ⁵⁵ Babi *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
- ⁵⁶ Pasat, *op. cit.*, p. 656.
- ⁵⁷ N. M. Shilintsev, *Pravda o sekte innokent'yevtsev* (Znaniye, Kishinev, 1980).
- ⁵⁸ Ioann, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- ⁵⁹ Yakovenko, *op. cit.*, pp. 194–95, 229–35.