

Chapter 1

From Heresy to Harm: Self-Castrators in the Civic Discourse of Late Tsarist Russia

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In April 1772 it came to the attention of the ecclesiastical authorities in Orel province that a new heretical sect had emerged among the local villagers. They called themselves the Self-Castrators (*Skoptsy*), because surgical removal of all or part of the genital organs, of both women and men, was their distinguishing ritual feature. The group had broken away from an existing sect, the People of God, or Christ-Faith (*Khristovshchina*, or *Khlystovshchina*), which had earlier in the century separated from the priestless Old Believers. The tsarist regime looked unkindly on any deviation from institutional Orthodoxy; it found the *Skoptsy* most repugnant of all. This paper will describe the way in which this particular example of folk religiosity was interpreted by officials, interested observers, and professional men starting with the sect's discovery in 1772 and ending at the start of the twentieth century. It will focus on a number of exemplary texts, in order to show how reactions to the Skoptsy reveal the shifting terms of Russian public discourse.

Who they were

The Skoptsy shared the basic belief system and cult practices of the Christ-Faith. The latter was founded on the conviction that Christ had returned to earth in multiple incarnations to dwell among those who spurned the desecrations wrought by Patriarch Nikon in altering the

liturgical practices of the Orthodox Church. The sect was organized in small congregations called "ships," each led by a preacher who called himself Christ and selected a female member as Mother of God. The followers forswore meat, alcohol, profanity, and sex. Outwardly conforming to Orthodox ways, they participated in secret ceremonies in which they felt themselves visited by the Holy Spirit. Constant repetition of the Jesus prayer in rhythmic cadences keyed to the movement of the breath (hesychasm) induced a sense of physical exaltation; ecstatic dances, in which men and women in separate groups whirled to the point of collapse, left them drenched in sweat and light-headed; sacred meals replaced the discredited sacraments; and inspired prophesy replaced the ministrations of priests. Most adherents were peasants or textile workers, some were merchants. Commercial networks centered on fairs held the community together. The sect was persecuted by government and ecclesiastical authorities, with varying degrees of intensity, throughout the eighteenth century, but to little effect.¹

The Skoptsy crystallized as a separate sect in the 1760s, when a charismatic leader introduced two innovations into the Christ-Faith. Most important, he interpreted the injunction to sexual chastity in literal terms, as the act of physical castration. Second, he declared himself the unique reincarnation of Christ and his own congregation the central governing body. Though his origins are not clear, he appears to have been a runaway peasant, who called himself Kondratii Selivanov and wandered the land, in the fashion of the holy pilgrims, living on charity and avoiding the authorities. At some point he joined a Christ-Faith ship led by a woman of great prophetic conviction, named Akulina Ivanovna, who recognized him as the Son of God. All accounts describe Selivanov as a man of powerful appeal, who attracted a following of devoted converts ready to submit to the knife for the sake of purity and salvation. They called him Father-Redeemer (*Otetslskupitel'*).²

When the existence of the group first came to light in 1772, the authorities arrested and interrogated about 60 peasants, including Akulina Ivanovna and two male prophets, but Selivanov himself escaped.³ On the run for three years, he was eventually betrayed by members of the Christ-Faith hostile to his innovations. Selivanov tells the story of his capture, subjection to the knout, and experience of Siberian exile in a narrative entitled "The Passion of Kondratii Selivanov," which became the sect's principal sacred text.⁴ On his way to exile, Selivanov claimed, he had encountered not only the Devil but also the Cossack rebel Emelian Pugachev. Pugachev had led his followers on a rampage of violence and destruction in the very years between the discovery of the Skoptsy in 1772 and Selivanov's subsequent arrest. In fact, this encounter could not have occurred, since Pugachev was executed in January 1775 and Selivanov marched off to exile only in June. Yet the fable had symbolic force. Both men had a popular following (though clearly, in Selivanov's case, relatively small); both exercised the charisma of Pretendership. As leader of the revolt, Pugachev had assumed the mantle of Tsar Peter III. It was in the name of the murdered emperor's legitimate authority that the rebel challenged Catherine's claim to rule. Upon his return from Siberia, Selivanov likewise began to call himself Tsar Peter III, as well as Jesus Christ. His fate, however, was not as grim as the one Pugachev encountered. Emperor Paul, undoing his mother's legacy, brought Selivanov back to St. Petersburg, where Alexander I then permitted him to reside undisturbed, surrounded by an entourage that included prominent figures well connected at court.⁶ In 1820, however, Selivanov was confined to a monastery in Suzdal', where he died twelve years later, purportedly at the age of 112.⁶

The Skoptsy called the Redeemer's period of trial his Passion and his stay in St. Petersburg his Resurrection. They predicted a Second Coming, when at the end of time the Tsar-Redeemer would gather the faithful in Moscow for the Last Judgment and the onset of eternal happiness. Just as

Selivanov was not merely Christ but also Peter III, and the story of his life a rewriting of Christ's own story, so the Skoptsy combined sacred with secular history. In their accounts the Empress Elizabeth had given birth to Peter III, the Redeemer, who was castrated and then saved from death when a loyal guards officer allowed himself to be murdered in Peter's stead by the Empress Catherine's courtiers. Peter then wandered the earth, promoting the salvation of his followers. Alexander I, who had shown the Skoptsy relative toleration, was considered, honorifically, to be castrated as well.⁷

On what basis did the Skoptsy justify the transition from moral to physical chastity? Of what did the ritual consist? Some observers explained the transition to castration as a naive verbal slip: *iskupiteV* (redeemer) was but two vowels removed from *oskopitel'* (castrator).⁸ The Skoptsy, for their part, cited chapter and verse in support of the practice. In Matthew 19: 12 Christ describes the three kinds of people for whom the injunction to marry does not apply: those who emerge eunuchs from their mother's womb; those made eunuchs by the hand of man; and those who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. In their extreme literal-mindedness, they read the third term as an injunction not to sexual renunciation but to the removal of sexual parts.⁹ In this, the Skoptsy diverged from the host-sect, the People of God, but in another sense they perpetuated the distinguishing feature of the Old Belief in general. Boris Uspenskii argues that Old Believers defended the ancient rituals, spelling, and pronunciation as absolute expressions of the Divine and condemned Nikon's innovations for assuming that form was not synonymous with meaning. The new ritual emphasized the need to communicate through language and symbols; the old ritualists viewed the signs themselves as sacred. The latter thus rejected the use of metaphor as allowing for the play of interpretation. From the Old Believers' point of view, Uspenskii writes, "using words in their figurative meaning contributed to deviation from Christianity and, consequently, promoted a tendency toward

heresy."¹⁰ From the Church's standpoint, on the contrary, the Skoptsy's refusal to understand figurative speech was the source of their heresy.

In defense of castration the Skoptsy cited other biblical passages as well. In Epistle to the Hebrews 9: 22, Paul says, "without shedding of blood is no remission [forgiveness]." The Skoptsy believed Christ had bled twice: first at his circumcision, which they interpreted as castration, and second at the crucifixion. They also cited Matthew 18: 8-9, where Jesus says it is better to cut off the arm or pluck out the eye that offends you than to live in sin.¹¹ One testified in 1844 that he was following the lead of Jesus, who said (Luke 23: 29), "blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck [*blazhenny neplodnye i utroby nerodivshie, i sostsy ne pitavshie*]"¹² The Skoptsy believed the Archangel Michael, who announced Mary's pregnancy, had been castrated, as had John the Baptist, who then castrated Christ.¹³ Removing their own genitals, the Skoptsy suffered intense pain, bled in profusion, and deprived themselves of the instruments of sin. The threat of punishment did not deter them; they welcomed persecution and physical chastisement as elements of holy martyrdom.¹⁴

The Skoptsy were secretive about the details of the operations, but information about the practice emerges from trial testimonies and from a forensic medical study published in 1872. In the case of men, castration took two forms. The lesser operation, called the "minor seal" (*malaia pechat'*) — also, first seal, first whitening, or first purification — entailed removing the testicles. Either simultaneously, or, more commonly, in a separate operation, the penis itself could also be amputated; this was called the second, major, or "royal" seal (*tsarskaia pechat'*) — also, second purification or whitening. Originally the Skoptsy destroyed the testicles and part of the scrotum by applying a red-hot iron, a procedure known as "the fiery baptism." Later they used knives or razors and applied the incandescent iron only to staunch the flow of blood. Another technique was to twist the scrotum until the

seminal vesicles were destroyed, blocking the flow of semen. As a result of twisting, the testicles sometimes dropped to the bottom of the scrotum, where they atrophied. In the case of women, the Skoptsy excised either the nipples or the entire breasts, or simply scarred the sides of the breasts. In addition they excised the labia majora, sometimes also the labia minora and the clitoris.¹⁵ They were unable, of course, to reach the ovaries or womb.

The excisions were occasionally performed by adults upon themselves, but more often by elders or monitors (*nastavniki*) in a special ceremony. As the knife did its task, the words "Christ is risen!" were spoken.¹⁶ In testifying before courts and commissions, ordinary sectarians chose two possible tactics. In the effort to prove they were not connected to the sect, membership in which was to be demonstrated by the fact of ritual castration, they claimed to have lost their genitals in the course of random accidents or assaults. In other cases, those interrogated eagerly assumed responsibility for having castrated others, thus shielding the few members who specialized in the role.¹⁷ The Skoptsy seem to have chosen isolated places for the ritual: bath houses, grain-drying barns, basements, or the forest.¹⁸ Nineteenth-century commentators disagreed about how often the operation proved fatal, but apparently few deaths came to the attention of the authorities.¹⁹ Some subjects claimed to have felt no pain, while others bragged about its intensity. They seem not to have used narcotic substances or alcohol to dull their suffering.²⁰

Some adults clearly elected to undergo the operation; some were convinced to do so (although the degree of coercion cannot be ascertained).²¹ There are also many examples of children being put to the knife, sometimes by relatives who adopted the faith. Children also came into contact with the Skoptsy after being hired from their parents to work as apprentices and servants. Once among the sectarians, the children were raised in the spirit of the creed and allegedly kept from contact with their families. When questioned in court, almost all said they had sought castration of their own free will, as the road to

salvation. Only one or two ever betrayed the identity of the person who had performed the operation.²²

How they were understood

The Skoptsy disturbed contemporaries, just as they disturb us today. How nineteenth-century commentators expressed their discomfort reflected the changing cultural and political circumstances in which they lived. Over the course of one hundred years, no one ceased to deplore the sect's existence, but the reasons for condemning and trying to stop it shifted with the times. At first, the issue was false belief, then political subversion, and finally the inflicting of harm — to the self or the civic body. The sequence mirrored not only the political moods of succeeding reigns, but also the evolution of legal norms and principles in the direction of modern concepts of crime and repression.

Although Russian law guaranteed the status and dogma of institutional Orthodoxy and thus considered heresy not merely an error but a crime, Alexander I treated the Skoptsy with relative toleration. Interestingly enough, in precisely this period, when the state did not energetically fulfill its role as the guardian of true belief, the religious meaning of the Skoptsy was taken most seriously. The first published work on the sect was a brief pamphlet, issued in 1819, by a certain Martyn Piletskii (1780-1859).²³ Citing liberally from chapter and verse, Piletskii addresses the Skoptsy or potential converts in their own, religious terms. The tract was apparently intended to warn the common folk against the lure of the sect's all-too-literal reading of Scripture, though it is too complex to have attracted a popular readership. It might have affected the members of Selivanov's entourage, which included some influential people in these years, but could hardly have reached the largely unlettered peasants to whom Selivanov's teachings appealed.

By translating Christ's call for sexual chastity into the act of bodily mutilation, Piletskii argued, the sectarians failed to

understand that sin originates in the soul not the body. Not only is moral causality reversed by castration, but destroying the instrument of sin actually impairs the believer's moral potential. Without the ability to enact his wicked desires, he considers himself superior to the ordinary person, thus succumbing to the sin of spiritual pride. In fact the psychological roots of desire survive the loss of the genital organs; indeed, frustration only intensifies lust. In the struggle against physical temptation, by contrast, the ordinary Christian achieves the humility essential to virtue. Deprived of the capacity to love, the castrate cannot direct this potentially dangerous impulse toward divine ends and therefore cannot achieve salvation.

Moral improvement through the infliction of physical pain was not only a mark of Christian martyrdom but also the guiding principle of corporal punishment. Mortification of the flesh by act of state or the paternal authority of landowners was thought to have a morally salubrious effect.²⁴ But inflicting pain upon oneself was a gesture of arrogance not self-abasement. It usurped not only the spiritual initiative of God but also the sovereign's political prerogative. The late eighteenth century was an age of physical violence, in which serfs were whipped by masters and felons beaten to bloody death with the knout, in the guise of corporal punishment; in which flesh was branded and nostrils slit. Pugachev's revolt, simultaneous with Selivanov's first public appearance, was a war in which rebels hacked and ripped the bodies of gentry inhabiting the manor houses they looted and burned; in which captured rebels were hung live from gibbets and malefactors chopped to bits and displayed, member for member, at the top of bloody pikes. In the self-administration of physical pain and bodily marking, the Skoptsy enacted a double turn: subjecting themselves to atrocious suffering and flagrant stigma, they spoke the language of holy martyrdom, while at the same time appropriating an idiom proper to the exercise of worldly power.

It was precisely their worldly implications that attracted the attention of the author of the century's most careful study

of Skoptsy practice and belief. Not surprisingly this study was composed during the reign of Nicholas I. Devoted to the joint ideological monopoly of Orthodoxy and Autocracy, Nicholas appointed a top-secret commission to examine the sectarians' history and beliefs and evaluate the extent of their influence. In 1845 the commission issued four volumes of information on the various heretical sects, of which the third concerned the Skoptsy.²⁶ The work of Nikolai Nadezhdin (1804-56), it surveys existing knowledge of the sect, recounts its history from official records, the testimony of interrogated believers, and the sect's own songs and sacred texts, including Selivanov's account of his earthly and spiritual mission. It is not only a gold mine of information but also an eloquent articulation of the Nicholaevan political world view.²⁶

Nadezhdin emphasized the sect's claim to political rather than moral authority, more interested in its challenge to secular principles than its spiritual pretensions. Focusing on the worldly implications of religious belief, he condemned any deviation from Orthodoxy as harmful to the integrity of the state. More specifically, Nadezhdin was alarmed by the subversive implications of Selivanov's second, political Pretendship.²⁷ Once Selivanov added the imperial persona to his divine claims, he called his congregation the "Royal Ship" (*Korabl'-Tsarskii*), to which, as Nadezhdin felicitously put it, the sect's other assemblies were tethered like "dinghies" (*legkie lodochki*) to the main craft.²⁸ The assertion of political as well as spiritual dominance, which Nadezhdin saw in Selivanov's title and in the sect's centralized structure of authority, was the group's distinguishing feature and the reason it ought to be repressed.²⁹

But why should the deluded claims of a single self-mortifying peasant threaten the established order? Nadezhdin estimated that in 1845 the Skoptsy numbered 1,700, but he insisted that many more belonged to the sect than were physically castrated and certainly more than were ever apprehended. Though it is true that not all believers were physically marked, there is no evidence to confirm

Nadezhdin's claim that the proportion was two of every 400.³⁰ If this had been so, the sect would have numbered 300,000 at midcentury, but a German scholar writing in 1909 put the total (including the noncastrated) at no more than 100,000.³¹

Not only were they relatively rare, but the Skoptsy did not cause trouble in the usual sense. Concentrated mostly in the rural and urban lower classes (at least half were peasants), with some presence among junior military men, the sect also included some rich merchants.³² In their home villages as well as in exile, the Skoptsy were known for sobriety, hard work, and economic success, both in agriculture and trade, and the community accumulated considerable wealth. Unlike Pugachev, Selivanov organized no mass movement, and he mobilized the cathartic power of violence as an instrument of group solidarity not a weapon of the weak against the strong. Yet, according to Nadezhdin, Selivanov and his followers represented a similar, no less ominous, threat. "In the dogma, dreams, and hopes of the Skoptsy," Nadezhdin believed, "political interests predominate over religious ones. . . . No longer human, but still of Russian blood, the Skoptsy cannot imagine any other way to achieve the Kingdom of Heaven on earth than with the accession of Peter III to the Russian Imperial Throne... And this will occur not in peace and quiet, but with 'fearful and terrible thunder': led by the False-Tsar, the people will arrive by the legion, a mighty force, in military readiness!"³³

Citing the mythological language of Selivanov's text as though it described the deliberations of an army command, Nadezhdin evoked a threat, which, not surprisingly, reflected the paranoid sensibility of Nicholas's reign. United by the power of Selivanov's dominant personality, Nadezhdin warned, the sect formed a nationwide network of mutual support and subversive propaganda, a single "Brotherhood" or "Association" (*Bratstvo, Obshchestvo*), dedicated to the conversion of souls and the material sustenance of the flock. Operating in secret, beneath the cover of religious conformity, they recognized each other by secret signs, just as Freemasons

did. "The Skoptsy brotherhood," wrote Nadezhdin, "is a solid, powerful union, sustained by active mutual support throughout the entire Empire in which its members are dispersed. From Petersburg to Siberia, from Siberia to the depths of Russia, everywhere they exchange letters, advice, instructions, and — money!" All the more dangerous for being unseen, the sect "permeates [the body politic] like an invisible poison that eats away at the common folk like a deeply embedded sore."³⁴

In the middle of Alexander IPs reign, the voice of science was added to the chorus of commentary on the Skoptsy. In 1872 Evgenii Pelikan (1824-84) published his study of the medical causes and consequences of castration. He described in detail the various techniques used to excise the genitals and tried to understand the physiological effects of their loss. In the case of men, only those castrated before sexual maturity showed signs of physical transformation: shrunken genitals, high voices, sparse body hair. The rest, he claimed, could be recognized by their listless demeanor and sallow complexion. The same traits were said to characterize the mutilated women as well, though disfigurement in their case had no effect on their reproductive system, as the physician was well aware.³⁵

The contrast between the intellectual-political outlook of Nadezhdin, the Nicholaevan official, and of Pelikan, the medical professional, is nowhere better illustrated than by their respective opinions on how castration affected the experience of sexual desire. Nadezhdin in fact did not have a coherent position on this subject. At times he asserted that castration destroyed sexual desire, leaving the Skoptsy deprived of human feeling. But more often he emphasized the paradox that physical incapacity might not hinder, but even enhance, the thirst for physical satisfaction, until desire increased "to the point of savage, frenzied, even bestial rage [*neistovstvo*]."³⁶

Where the bureaucrat saw the threat of passion raging out of control, demanding severe repression, the physician

emphasized the social dangers inherent in the *loss* of desire, which deprived individuals of the opportunity for self-regulation. In so doing, he echoed, in a secular vein, the argument advanced by Piletskii, from a theological perspective. Where the latter extolled the moral value of sexual desire as a precondition of spiritual transcendence, the medical man defended sexual desire as a cornerstone of social existence: "Once he becomes sexually active, the normal man starts to find the opposite sex attractive: the first instinctive call of love also inspires him with the urge to noble action and great deeds and with devotion to the fatherland. The young man castrated before puberty knows none of this: he remains indifferent to his environment, lacking the smallest germ of noble aspiration, sense of duty, or civic obligation... The onset of puberty does not bring him family happiness; manly courage and lofty dreams are alien to him; rather, he acquires the vices of people with limited vision and crude morality: egoism, cunning, perfidy, and cupidity."³⁷ Secular virtue, in the physician's view, consisted not in the absence of desire or in submission to external controls, but in the ability to direct it toward socially constructive ends; indeed he considered desire a precondition of civic virtue.

Views on how the Skoptsy attracted and retained converts also shifted over the course of the years. Piletskii considered believers misguided but sincere and therefore took their theological claims seriously. Nadezhdin, by contrast, interpreted the process of conversion as one in which a core of desperate fanatics preyed on luckless victims, not so much either gullible or inspired, but rather objects of trickery and compulsion. Yet even Nadezhdin credited some of the sectarians' popular appeal to their mystical enthusiasm, folkloric rites, and naive spiritual idiom. He also conceded that the appearance of virtue among the Skoptsy aroused the peasants' admiration. In the end converts remained in the sect not on the strength of spiritual conviction, however, but driven by physiological need. The physical effect of the prayer meetings, with their repetitious movements and recitations,

"exerted a powerful force on the body and soul/" Nadezhdin believed, "like a magnetic enchantment, or, more simply, an intoxication that creates a dependency, which among crude natures, easily becomes an overpowering passion, like an incurable 'addiction to drink' [zopoi].."38

More mundane forms of compulsion also played a role, in his view. In addition to the understandable, though deceptive attractions of virtue, and the involuntary workings of physiology, Nadezhdin also cited material need as a strong inducement to join the sect and stay involved. He explained how the wealthy sectarian community provided shelter for vagrants and runaway criminals, whom they supplied with false papers and new names. To the poor peasant they offered relief from the military draft, escape from serfdom, economic support, and the hope of equality and fellowship. They adopted the children of their own needy relatives, took in orphans, and hired the offspring of impoverished villagers as apprentices.³⁹ Explaining the sect's appeal in material terms made the community seem sinister and mercenary, while converts were relieved of responsibility for their choice.⁴⁰

Bringing the wisdom of science to bear on the question of what motivated the Skoptsy, Pelikan concluded that "mental blindness (or extremely one-sided mental development)" was the precondition for susceptibility to fanatical religious faith. But like Nadezhdin, who contrasted the calculated evil at work among the hard core with the naive vulnerability of their recruits, Pelikan also tried to have it both ways. On the one hand, as a forensic expert he insisted the Skoptsy were responsible for their actions and therefore competent to stand trial. Mentally limited, perhaps, but not insane, the Skoptsy revealed no organic abnormalities, did not behave strangely in everyday life, hallucinate, or rave. The sectarians' creed was systematically propagated and comprehensible to others, whereas the ideas of the insane were meaningful only to themselves. Skoptsy conversions, Pelikan maintained, might be the result of emotional contagion akin to mass hysteria, or

simply the consequence of ignorance, but they were not signs of mental disease.⁴¹

Even the exalted mood that resulted from the ritual ceremonies was not a sign of mental imbalance but could be explained in physiological terms. As participants swirled and waved their arms, the body experienced an almost narcotic intoxication derived from pressure on the nerves and brain. The People of God and Skoptsy therefore used the expression: "to get drunk without drinking" (*chelovek plotskimi ustami ne p'et, a p'ian zhivet*).^{*2} Some physicians believed the flow of blood to the extremities produced a pleasurable light-headedness, "resembling a faint." The physical pressure weakened the rational faculties, stimulated the imagination, and loosened the inhibitions: "lubricious, selfish, and other, mostly base, inclinations come to the surface and struggle for satisfaction." The experts all emphasized the enhancement of erotic desire as a consequence of these physical exercises.⁴³ Thus, if believers joined the sect in their right, if simple, minds, they might emerge functionally deprived of reason.

If it is true that Skoptsy rituals induced states of exaltation and unreason in their participants, they also seem to have induced states of unreason in those who observed them. Not only Nadezhdin, but also Pelikan, the man of science, indulged extravagant fantasies on the subject of Skoptsy ritual practices, which bore a close resemblance to the myths that circulated about the Jews in Russia as well as Europe.⁴⁴ Pelikan reported accounts that accused the Skoptsy of eating the excised testicles or breasts of castrated members. He also repeated the claim that young girls were impregnated during sexual orgies and when they gave birth, their infant boys were pierced to the heart and drained of blood, which the Skoptsy used to take communion. They were also said to dry the dead infant's body, grinding the remains to a powder for use in baking communion bread. Though Pelikan rejected the charge that Skoptsy fed on severed breasts, he did not relinquish his belief that "the mortification of infants and communion with their blood is a religious-historical fact."⁴⁶

Nadezhdin, for his part, emphasized the clannishness of the Skoptsy, who, like the Jews, constituted a "conspiracy [*zagovor* — note classic anti-Semitic vocabulary] against the rest of humanity."⁴⁶ Stressing the resemblance between Jews and Skoptsy, both supposedly possessed of great wealth, wrung from the labor of hapless employees, peasants, and subordinates, became a standard rhetorical turn.⁴⁷ While it is true that the sect had both wealthy, entrepreneurial, and poor, wage-earning members,⁴⁸ it is the language in which these social facts were described that calls our attention to the underlying structures of prejudice. It was a cliché of the antisectarian literature to describe the Skoptsy as ferociously money-loving. Having deprived themselves of human love and renounced all familial ties, they were said to pour their energies into the acquisition of wealth.⁴⁹ Like the Jews, they dealt in precious metal, lent money at interest, and in general were said to profit at the common people's expense. Many had become millionaires, partly, Nadezhdin asserted, as the result of commercial crimes. "Only the Yids," he remarked, "equal them in their wholehearted devotion to the Golden Calf."⁵⁰

Issues in the law

In what terms were the Skoptsy condemned under the law? The sect was investigated in 1772 because it was heretical; the leaders were beaten and exiled but the followers allowed to resume their accustomed lives. Alexander I made the distinction between false belief and social harm. Only when the practice of castration threatened the welfare of others should it be the target of the law. The problem was, of course, that castration was itself the mark of false belief, and therefore it was difficult to distinguish between dogma and harmful acts.⁵¹ The laws enacted in the reign of Nicholas I ignored this distinction. After 1842, the sects were divided into three categories, all criminal, but in degrees of increasing severity: heretical in terms of belief but not socially harmful; "especially harmful"; and "gruesome, fanatical, immoral, and

vile."⁶² Emphasizing the gravity of religious offenses demonstrated the regime's interest in protecting true religion as defined by the Orthodox Church, yet the state's involvement in disciplining false belief only helped erode the church's already weakened institutional authority.⁵³

In the 1870s the Senate turned in the direction Alexander I had earlier taken, ruling that false belief itself should not be subject to penal sanction but that certain of its public manifestations were legitimate targets of the law. In relation to the Skoptsy, the Senators considered castration a criminal act insofar as it was motivated by religious fanaticism, although fanaticism in itself was no longer to be considered a crime.⁵⁴ This qualification signalled an attempt to avoid categorical prohibitions and focus instead on the character of individual acts. In another sense, however, the two moves seem to contradict each other: the first extended protection to private belief; the second made the element of belief the crime's defining feature.

The general trend, even in the conservative reign of Alexander III, was increasingly to focus on active manifestations of false dogma, while releasing the character of belief itself from the scrutiny of the courts. In 1883 the State Council reduced the three categories of heresy to two: benign and vicious, of which last the Skoptsy were the case in point.⁵⁵ This simplification did not, however, diminish the state's interest in repressing the practice of castration. But here the confusion set in. Now, separate statutes penalized the Skoptsy in particular for, on the one hand, spreading their faith (a specific action) and, on the other, merely for belonging to a sect with "vile and immoral" practices.⁵⁶ In the end, castration remained the mark of a crime defined as membership in a sect that promoted castration on the basis of false religious belief.⁵⁷ This tautological framing of the law did not satisfy legal experts, and some began to argue that controlling the spread of this distressing cult should not be the work of the courts.⁶⁸ Some observers took pity on the Skoptsy exiles, who showed remarkable ability to make the best of hard circumstances.

Despite their social virtues, they were nevertheless kept under extremely tight supervision and did not benefit from changes in the law, instituted in the 1880s and 1890s, that alleviated the situation of exiles and Old Believers.⁶⁹

Even those who repented and wished to rejoin the Orthodox community lingered in a perpetual no man's land of the soul. One sympathetic observer turned the Skoptsy's surgical gesture of literalization into metaphor once again, when he described the sad fate of Skoptsy apostates: "Having left the people to whom they were joined by fanaticism and then by shared unhappiness, they cannot tie the knot that would unite them with the rest of the world. The artery is severed and circulation cannot be restored. The heart of the Skopets beats separately from the heart of the world."⁶⁰

Despite their sufferings, spiritual and physical, the Skoptsy survived, even into the 1920s, when they were repressed by the Soviet authorities. The reason for the sect's appeal is not, however, easily explained. One cannot reduce the survival of the community over so long a period of time to the triumph of trickery and brute force. Nor is it obvious why members of an already stigmatized group (the Christ-Faith) wished to retreat even further to the social margin. Nor is the relation between economic success and bodily renunciation at all clear, since Old Believers, People of God, and Skoptsy seem to have shared the capacity for hard work and the talent for commercial success. It is clear that the naive literal-mindedness which characterized the Skoptsy's relation to Scripture neither constrained their economic behavior nor prevented them from devising ways to circumvent the law. Further research will have to determine, if possible, whether those who joined the sect were already set off from their host communities in some distinctive way before they assumed this additional burden. In the end it is genuinely difficult to understand why this particular signature of holy martyrdom should function as the door-keeper of community (especially when it did not apply to all concerned). Yet the extremity of the act must have exercised a powerful symbolic appeal to serve as the

cornerstone of a coherent cultural formation that lasted for over one hundred years.

Notes

- 1 On the Christ-Faith, see John Eugene Clay, "Russian Peasant Religion and Its Repression: The Christ-Faith (*Khristovshchina*) and the Origins of the 'Flagellant' Myth, 1666-1837" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1989).
- 2 K.V. Kutepov, *Sekty khlystov i skoptsov* (Kazan: Imperatorskii universitet, 1883), pp. 107-109, 116-117.
- 3 See N.G. Vysotskii, *Pervyi skopcheskii protsess: Materialy, otnosiashchiesia k nachal'noi istorii skopcheskoi sekty* (Moscow: Snegirevaia, 1915).
- 4 [N.I. Nadezhdin], *Issledovanie o skopcheskoi eresi* (n.p.: Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del, 1845), Appendix, pp. 1-26, reprinted as "Strady Kondratiiia Selivanova," in V.V. Rozanov, *Apokalipsicheskaia sekta: Khlysty i skoptsy* (St. Petersburg: Vaisberg i Gershunin, 1914), pp. 134-152.
- 5 See "Belye golubi," in A.S. Prugavin, *Raskol vverkhui: Ocherki religioznykh iskanii v privilegirovannoi srede* (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1909), pp. 87-95.
- 6 N.A. Gur'ev, *Sibirskie skoptsy, ikh ekonomicheskoe i pravovoe polozhenie* (Tomsk: K.A. Orlov, 1900), p. 8.
- 7 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, pp. 101-108.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
- 10 Boris A. Uspensky, "The Schism and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth Century," in Stephen K. Bataldenthe (ed.), *Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia* (Dekalb, 111.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 121.
- 11 A. Orlov, "Missionerstvo, sekty i raskol: Khronika," *Missionerskoe obozrenie*, vol. 10-11 (1902), pp. 517-518. On misreading of Matthew, see also Martyn Stepanovich Piletskii-Urbanovich, *O skoptsakh* (St. Petersburg: Ios. Ioannesov, 1819), pp. 10-15.
- 12 Evgenii [V.] Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia skopchestva i istoricheskie svedeniia o nem* (St. Petersburg: V. I. Golovin, 1872), p. 92.
- 13 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, pp. 293-294.
- 14 Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, p. 91.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 4-5, 43-44, 48, 60-61.
- 16 For an account, see *ibid.*, pp. 115-118.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

- 18 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, pp. 209-212.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 212 (often fatal); Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, p. 80 (rarely).
- 20 Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, p. 119.
- 21 On use of coercion: Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, pp. 216-217.
- 22 Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, pp. 38,95-97.
- 23 Piletskii, *O skoptsakh*. The author was a member of the imperial court, who was asked to write the pamphlet by the emperor, but apparently Metropolitan Filaret considered it too sympathetic to the Skoptsy to allow it to be circulated: Kutepov, *Sekty*, p. 17.
- 24 D.N. Bludov, "Obshchaia ob"iasnitel'naia zapiska," in *Proekt ulozheniia o nakazaniakh ugolovnykh i ispravitel'nykh, vnesennyi v 1844 godu v Gosudarstvennyi Sovet, s podrobnym oznacheniem osnovanii kazhdogo iz vnesennykh v sei proekt postanovlenii* (St. Petersburg: Tip. Vtorogo Otdeleniia Sobstvennoi Ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva Kantseliarii, 1871), lii.
- 25 The volumes were printed in only 50 copies, intended exclusively for official eyes (Kutepov, *Sekty*, p. 17). They were reprinted, however, in 1860-62 in London, under the editorship of Vasilii Kelsiev, a radical sympathizer, who considered religious sectarianism an expression of the people's desire to free themselves from the tyranny of church and state: see V.I. Kelsiev, (ed.), *Sbornik pravitel'stvennykh svedenii o raskol'nikakh* vols, (London, 1860-62), 1: introduction.
- 26 This volume remained the basic work on the Skoptsy, despite its polemical nature: see Kutepov, *Sekty*, pp. 30-31. Nadezhdin had been the editor of the journal that published Petr Chaadaev's "Philosophical Letter" in 1836; he later became a leading figure in the Imperial Geographical Society.
- 27 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, p. 189.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 193 and 197 (two quotes, respectively).
- 29 For more on centralization and Selivanov's dominant role, see *ibid.*, pp. 270-271.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 324-25; 334 (2:400).
- 31 Karl Konrad Grass, *Die russischen Sekten*, vol. 2: *Die Weissen Tauben oder Skopzen* (1914; rpt. Leipzig: Zentral-Antiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1966), pp. 888,891-892.
- 32 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, pp. 327-328; Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, appendix, pp. 7-8.
- 33 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, pp. 366-367.
- 34 *Ibid.*, pp. 272,284 (quote), pp. 286-287 (quote).
- 35 Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, pp. 69,71-79.
- 36 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, p. 352. This opinion repeated, almost word for word, in Efim Solov'ev, *Svedeniia o russkikh skoptsakh* (Kostroma: Gubernskaia tipografiia, 1870), i.

- 37 Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, p. 87.
- 38 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, 336. Such reasoning became a cliché; see Solov'ev, *Svedeniia*, pp. 78-80.
- 39 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, pp. 337-341; on offering loans and excusing debts on condition of castration, see Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, pp. 95. For persistence of accusations of bribery, enslavement of children, see A. A. Levenstim, "Fanatizm i prestuplenie," part 2, *Zhurnal ministerstva iustitsii*, No. 8 (1898), p. 6.
- 40 Same emphasis on poverty as motive for joining and wealth as source of community's strength: Solov'ev, *Svedeniia*, ii-iii, p. 17.
- 41 Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, pp. 103-106.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134, 136.
- 44 See Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-Siecle Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), chapter 8.
- 45 Pelikan, *Sudebno-meditsinskie issledovaniia*, pp. 148-149, 162, 164.
- 46 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, p. 349.
- 47 Orlov, "Missionerstvo," p. 516 (kagalnoe obshchestvo, kagalnye bogatstva); Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, 347-348 (on conflict between rich and poor among the Skoptsy).
- 48 See, for example, Gur'ev, *Sibirskie skoptsy*, p. 24; also V. I-n [V. I. Iokhel'son], "Olekminskie skoptsy: Istoriko-bytovoi ocherk," part 2, *Zhivaia starina* (1894), pp. 315-316.
- 49 Nadezhdin, *Issledovanie*, pp. 347-348.
- 50 *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352, 362-363 (quote, 361-362).
- 51 I. P. Iakobiia, "Ob ugovolnoi nakazuemosti prinadlezhnosti k izuvernym sektam," *Zhurnal ministerstva iustitsii*, No. 5 (1912), pp. 104-106.
- 52 "Khronika: 203 st. ulozheniia o nakazaniakh po tolkovaniiu Pravitel'stvuiushchego senata," *Zhurnal ministerstva iustitsii*, No. 1 (1896), p. 238 ("izuvernye, soedinennye s proiavleniiami fanatizma ili s protivonravstvennymi, gnusnymi deistviiami"); Levenstim, "Fanatizm," part 2, p. 31; Iakobiia, "Ob ugovolnoi nakazuemosti," pp. 105, 107-108; Ardalion [Vasilevich] Popov, *Sud i nakazaniia za prestupleniia protiv very i nravstvennosti po russkomu pravu* (Kazan: Tipografiia imperatorskogo universiteta, 1904), p. 473.
- 53 Popov, *Sud i nakazaniia*, pp. 509-511.
- 54 V. N. Shiriaev, *Religioznye prestupleniia* (Iaroslavl: Tipografiia gubernskogo pravleniia, 1909), p. 378; Iakobiia, "Ob ugovolnoi nakazuemosti," p. 112.
- 55 Shiriaev, *Religioznye prestupleniia*, p. 348.
- 56 "Khronika," pp. 238-240. For the statutes on the religious sectarians, see Articles pp. 196-204, in N. S. Tagantsev (ed.),

Ulozhenie o nakazaniakh ugovnykh i ispravitel'nykh 1885 goda (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvennaia tipografiia, 1901), pp. 225-237. On contradiction between these two articles, see Iakobiia, "Ob ugovnoi nakazuemosti," pp. 112-114.

57 Complaining that the law against castration actually penalized belief: I-n, "Olekminskie skoptsy," p. 317.

58 Iakobiia, "Ob ugovnoi nakazuemosti," p. 131.

59 See I-n, "Olekminskie skoptsy," pp. 317-320.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 319.