Eschatological Expectations in Post-Soviet Russia: Historical Context and Modes of Interpretation

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Penza Hermits

In the winter of 2007–2008, a drama was developing in the Penza region which was closely watched by the Russian people. A group of radical Orthodox believers had enclosed themselves in a cave they had made and declared they would wait for the “end of the world” which, according to them, was at hand.1

In autumn 2007 in the local village Nikol'skoe police took an interest in a group of believers who lived together in the house of Petr Kuznetsov, a village local. Members of the group saw him as their advisor and leader, and called him Hieromonk Maxim. It remains unclear if he really was a monk. In addition to Kuznetsov there was another member of the community, who, as members of the community believed, had a monastic vow: 76 year old (though some thought she was 82 years old) mother Antoniya from Ivanovo region. She led the group at the initial stage of their reclusion; they saw her as staritsa or elder. Kuznetsov's followers called themselves members of the “true” Orthodox Church, and dissociated themselves from the ROC of the Moscow Patriarchate. They did not go to church, did not use electricity, did not read newspapers or watch TV, did not buy food with a bar-code on the package, and destroyed all their documents. They came from different corners of the country, some even from abroad, like Belorussia and Ukraine. Only Kuznetsov was a resident of the Penza region.

Kuznetsov’s followers lived in Nikolaevskoe without the required local registration, and the subsequent fine from the police led to the events that followed. People who lived in Kuznetsov’s house eventually stopped going outside or answering the telephone. They wrote a letter to the local authorities to say that they were moving voluntarily to a shelter in a cave which they had dug themselves. On 24 October they would move to the shelter, three kilometres away from the Nikol’skoe village. On 13 October this was reported in the newspapers and many journalists went to the area to cover the events. The cave where the followers of Kuznetsov had moved had the form of a corridor with an adjacent kitchen, cells, and larder. They had an underground water supply and enough food, petrol, gas cylinders, and kerosene. Later it became clear that there were 35 people living there, including children from the ages of three to fourteen. When police and officials began negotiating with them, they declared that they would stay in the cave until the Second Coming, which, as was announced by Kuznetsov, would happen in May of the following year, 2008. They declared they were ready to burn themselves if anybody tried to get into the cave.

All attempts by the local authorities or by the Orthodox Church to persuade the hermits to leave the cave were in vain. They refused categorically and replied by shooting guns from the shafts used for negotiations. Eventually all negotiations had to stop until the following spring.

Meanwhile, the situation underground developed dramatically. On 20 November one of the hermits, a woman called Maria who came from Belorussia, died less than a month after the beginning of the recluse; she had fasted so severely that she starved herself to death. Another woman, Tamara from Blagoveshchensk, died on 25 March 2008 because of cancer she already had, and which rapidly progressed whilst in the cave. In the middle of March the snow started to thaw and the spring floods led to the ground falling into the cave. The officials started negotiations again, trying to persuade the hermits to leave the cave. On 28 March seven members of the group left the cave to live in the house of Kuznetsov, who was released from a psychiatric unit and allowed to live with the hermits. Four days later a second group of hermits left the cave, and sometime later a woman with two children left the cave as well. It all ended on the night of 16 May, when, after another collapse of soil, the group decided to end their recluse and come out of the cave.

They were no longer a close-knit group. Some of them became disappointed in their leader Kuznetsov and had chosen another leader, V. Nedogon. Soon members of the group started to leave Nikol’skoe.

The Penza hermits are an example of extreme religious radicalism and isolationist behaviour. Their aim was to cut themselves off from the corrupted world. During these six months they balanced between life and death, and two