The history of popular rebellion demonstrates how symbols of legitimate authority may be deployed as standards of disobedience. Whether in the form of Pretendership (Emelian Pugachev, the Cossack insurgent, calling himself Peter III and imitating the court of Catherine the Great) or "naive monarchical" (the peasants of Bezdna finding the tsar's "true intention" behind the disappointing text of the emancipation decree), the subservient have evoked the aura of legitimacy to assert disruptive claims. Iconographic pirating also played a role in religious dissent; which, in the Russian context, was not entirely devoid of challenge to political authority. Here too, the Supreme Power was sometimes invoked to justify the most daring defections. Similar inversions also opened cultural fissures in everyday life, through which communities and individual figures might define themselves in opposition to the dominant system of belief. This essay will explore an example of collective and personal self-assertion organized around the figure of Jesus Christ. It offers a cameo of folk religiosity, operating not only as an instrument of social cohesion but also as the language of separation and difference.

Identifying with Christ was not a form of humility in premodern Russia, but an assertion of power. The Muscovite princes were considered Christlike: saintly in their transcendence of the merely human and awesome in their omnipotence. In the sixteenth century, as the state became increasingly distinct from the person of the sovereign, this identification weakened, but the Savior's mantle continued to signal earthly as well as spiritual authority. In refusing the changes in Orthodox worship imposed by Patriarch Nikon in the mid-seventeenth century, the Archpriest Avvakum impugned this authority by casting tsar and patriarch in the role of Antichrist and himself as the messiah. Likewise, tsars who returned from the dead in the folk guise of Pretenders testified, in their capacity for resurrection, to the enduring sanctity of sovereign

power. Christ was Divine for having died and risen: he truly suffered, as mortals did, but, unlike them, died once but not forever. In the 1770s, Pugachev legitimized rebellion against the state by invoking, not Christ directly, but the late Peter III, whose salvific prowess derived from his refusal to die.

The figure of Christ seems to have endorsed not only the authority of rule, but also cultural recognition of the self. The first personal biographies written in seventeenth-century Russia adopted as their narrative model the story of Christ's Passion. The best example is Avvakum's famous account of his spiritual and worldly martyrdom for the true faith. The Old Believers who followed in his steps eventually came to terms, however, with the imperfection of the secular authorities and compromised with the Antichrist. Some of the more rigorous then broke away, once again in the name of Christ. Members of the so-called Christ-Faith, or People of God (Liudi bozh'i, or Khristovshchina3), considered their prophets the embodiments of Christ come to life yet again (in multiple guise) through the intercession of the Holy Spirit. Following the Old Believer tradition of abstinence, the new sect abjured the pleasures of the flesh and of everyday transgression: meat, drink, profanity, and sex. At the end of the eighteenth century, some of them, pushing the logic of belief to the extreme, reemphasized the centrality of renunciation by rewriting the Passion, literally, on their bodies. These were the Skoptsy.

The Skoptsy, or "castrated ones," interpreted Christ's call to sexual chastity as an injunction to genital amputation. This imitation of the Savior's corporeal suffering recalls the medieval European tradition of saintly martyrdom, with the important difference that saints were venerated but the Skoptsy reviled. More directly, it conforms to the Russian popular practice of lodging dissent in the figure of the embodied God. The leader of the latest in the chain of Christ-centered spiritual deviations was a peasant called Kondratii


3. The corrupt variant is Khlystovshchina.


5. The following account of the Skoptsy is based on a number of sources, including, [N. I. Nadezhdina], Issledovanie o skopcheskoi eresi (St. Petersburg: Ministerstvo vnutilnikh del, 1845); Evgenii [V.] Pelikan, Sudbo-mentisinskie issledovaniia skophestva i istoricheneskie svedeniia o nem (St. Petersburg: V. I. Golovin, 1872); K. V. Kutepov, Sekty khlystov i skoptsov (Kazan'; Imperatorskii universitet, 1883); N. A. Gur'ev, Sibirskie skoptsy, ikh ekonomicheskoe i pravovoe polozhenie (Tomsk: K. A. Orlov, 1900).