
Background to the News

Optina Pustyn revival is return to roots of Bolshevism

by Allen and Rachel Douglas

“It is curious that the Russian revolution was preceded not by a century of monastic decadence and torpor, but by a monastic Golden Age,” wrote Thomas Merton, the American mystic.

Curious it might seem, but it was entirely lawful. In approving the revival of Optina Pustyn monastery (see “Mother Russia,” *EIR* April 1, 1988), Soviet authorities really are returning to the spiritual and political roots of collectivist Bolshevism. This resuscitation of the most prominent center of the 19th century Russian monastic movement presents us with an opportunity to reflect on an essential aspect of the pre-history of the Bolsheviks, which is little understood by strategic analysts. Those who believe that the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church means either that atheistic communism has been forced to dress itself in the garb of Russian nationalism or that Bolshevism has fundamentally changed, will benefit from an acquaintance with the case of Optina Pustyn.

Its story also illustrates well, how the most momentous transformations in Russian history, like the dynastic shift that occurred in 1917, have been perpetrated by the old Russian landed aristocracy, always in collaboration with powerful forces from outside Russia. The most fervent Russian nationalist will cringe, at the evidence that his passion for the blood and soil of Holy Mother Russia is a synthetic belief structure, cooked up for him by foreigners.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Czar Peter the Great had assailed the monasteries as “sources of innumerable disorders” and closed many of them, ending the hegemony in Russian cultural life, enjoyed by the monasteries since their

proliferation in the 14th century. In the late 1700s, however, oligarchical families and Orthodox church circles, from Venice and from the monastic center at Mt. Athos, in Greece, unleashed a new wave of the irrationalist hesychast movement into Russia. The old Venetian possessions in the Aegean—Chios, Hydra, Naxos, and Corfu—were the staging ground for this campaign. It was to be the most important outside input to the re-creation of monastery-dominated culture in 19th century Russia, and a prelude to the dynastic shift of 1917.

As had been the case in the 15th century, the main mover of a highly organized irrationalist outburst was a member of the Byzantine nobility—Macarius, Archbishop of Corinth, from the Notaras family. Macarius and his collaborators compiled the *Philocalia*, a compendium of hesychastic writings, from ancient works held in the libraries at Mt. Athos. They were published in Venice, beginning in 1782.

While the Russian court and the Academy of Sciences (founded by Peter the Great, according to plans drafted by the great German scientist and statesman, Leibniz) were the scene of combat between Leibniz’s heirs and the would-be apostles of Enlightenment who flourished in Catherine the Great’s reign (1762-1796), the next, more characteristic phase of Russian culture was being prepared in the Phanariot (Greeks from the Ottoman Empire) districts of Moldavia and Wallachia, the area of modern-day Romania. There, the Russian monk Paisi Velichkovsky trained more than 1,000 monks, who would soon pour into Russia to populate the reopened monasteries, with the sponsorship of Prince Potyomkin and funding from the aristocratic Orlov family.

When Peter came to power in the late 17th century, there were more than 2000 monasteries. In 1762, there were only 318. With the monastic resurgence, the number reached 476 in 1825, 597 by 1850, 619 by 1879, 783 at the beginning of 1902, 970 by 1907, and over 1,000 by 1917.

Macarius Notaras and the Kollyvades movement

In the second half of the 18th century, Mt. Athos initiated a movement for a return to the strict practices of the 4th century Desert Fathers. This was known as the Kollyvades movement: "Together with the Kollyvades' fervor for a stricter adherence to Sacred Tradition went an endeavor to revive and cultivate this mysticism, known as hesychasm. . . . It was revived by the Kollyvades, particularly Macarios and Nikodemos. The *Philokalia*, a monumental anthology of ascetic-mystical writings by some thirty Greek Fathers which played a role of first importance in the revival of hesychasm in Greece, the other Balkan countries and Russia, owed its publication to these two saints," reported the biographer of Macarios, Constantine Cavarnos.

Macarius of Corinth came from the family of the last Grand Duke of the Byzantine Empire, Lucas Notaras, who was famous for having said, as Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, "Better to see the turban of the Turk ruling in the city than the Latin mitre." After taking charge of the Archbishopric of Corinth in 1765, Macarius went to Mt. Athos to dig out the main works of hesychasm. After arranging for their publication, he established a school of hesychastic practice on Chios.

Central to this hesychastic revival, as it had been for the hesychasts of the 14th and 15th centuries, was a death cult, from which Macarius derived his title, "Trainer of Martyrs." One of the major works he got published in Venice was the *New Martyrologium*, which glorified death at the hands of the "infidels." Together with Macarius' teaching, according to Cavarnos, "The *Martyrologium* had the effect of leading many to suffer martyrdom for the sake of their Christian faith. . . . A good number of Greeks . . . went to Macarios, attracted by his fame as a holy man, in order to prepare themselves for facing the great trial of martyrdom with unyielding fortitude. . . . These neo-martyrs felt that only by boldly affirming their faith in Christ before the Muslim authorities could they be fully cleansed of their sin." The *New Martyrologium* (Venice, 1799) celebrated the number of Orthodox martyrs, who had volunteered in this way, to be tortured or decapitated.

The chief editor for Macarius' publishing project on hesychasm was St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite (1749-1809), who sent a steady stream of books of Gregory Palamas, St. Symeon the New Theologian, and other hesychasts, to Venice to be printed. But Nicodemus used not only the "Eastern spiritual fathers." To this day, there is great embarrassment in Orthodox circles, over the fact that this great Orthodox

theologian drew inspiration from "Western" sources. These were Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and *The Spiritual Combat* of Lorenzo Scupoli, a member of the Venetian-dominated "reform" order, the Theatines. They had been two of the most important figures, relied upon by the 16th-century Venetian Gasparo Contarini and his friends, in their attempts to expunge the influence of the Renaissance from Western Christianity.

Fanning out from Mt. Athos, the Kollyvades established schools all over the ancient possessions of Venice in the Aegean, to train proselytizers for the entire Orthodox East. Macarius met with various Phanariot nobles to arrange financing. John Mavrogordatos, of a dragoman (Greek "interpreter", or powerful civil servant, in the Ottoman Empire) family, put up the funds for the first publication of the *Philocalia*, in Venice in 1782.

The core of the new doctrine was ancient hesychastic practice: ceaseless repetition, day and night, of the "Jesus Prayer" ("Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, a sinner"), while breathing is coordinated with the timing of these words. The purpose was to obliterate mind altogether, as was described by a Russian practitioner in this time: "Listen to me, a sinner. I reveal to you a secret. . . . After my arrival at Neamtu Monastery, hearing from Starets Paisius about Hesychast prayer, I began to experiment with it. This prayer appeared to me so sweet that I liked it above everything else in the world! For this reason I isolated myself from the brethren, I loved silence and went often to solitude avoiding all scandals and particularly, vain talk. For the sake of this prayer, I often became a recluse. I spent all my strength in order to attain it, even to the point of prostration. Many years passed by in this kind of living and little by little prayer began to deepen. . . . I sleep hardly one hour in twenty-four, and then sitting. When I rise again, it seems as if I never slept. And even when I sleep my heart is watching. . . . If I wish, I can weep without stopping. . . . Often I rise in the evening to read Psalms or say the Prayer of Jesus and I become enraptured, drawn out of myself I know not where, in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows. Only when I come to myself it is already light. But a sting of the flesh is given to me—to disturb me—to keep me humble. In no wise can I be with people, still less with laymen. With women I cannot even talk. For more than 40 years, in Moldavia, no woman has visited me although many wanted to have a talk with me. But I refuse, saying that I am ill." (Quoted in Sergius Bolshakoff's *Russian Mystics*, Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1977.)

Alexandre Bennigsen, the Orthodox-bred specialist in Sufism, has compared the Russian Orthodox technique of "the Jesus Prayer" to the Sufi practice of *zikr*, which also employs hyperventilation in the pursuit of mystic ecstasy.

Starets Paisi Velichkovsky

The chief importer of revived hesychasm to the Russian

monasteries, from Mt. Athos and the Venetian strongholds of the Aegean, was the Russian monk Paisi Velichkovsky. In the words of Thomas Merton, "The great novels of Dostoevsky keep before the Russian masses, and especially the youth, the image of Christ and the figures of the Russian Staretz. The great Optino staretzy whose influence on the life of many prominent Russians like Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Leontiev, Soloviev, and Rosanov was very considerable, were themselves disciples of another Staretz, Paisi Velichkovsky . . . who initiated in his Neamtu Monastery in Moldavia, the astonishing revival of Russian monasticism in the 19th century which also became the Golden Age of Russian mysticism."

Fyodor Dostoevsky himself paid homage to Velichkovsky and to the irrationalist methods of the *starsy* (elders), which Velichkovsky reintroduced to Russia, in the following passage from *The Brothers Karamazov*:

"I must digress to explain what an 'elder' is in Russian monasteries. . . . Authorities on the subject assert that the institution of 'elders' is of recent date, not more than a hundred years old in our monasteries, though in the Orthodox East, especially in Sinai and Athos, it has existed over a thousand years. . . . It was revived among us towards the end of the last century by one of the great 'ascetics', as they called him, Paisi Velichkovsky, and his disciples. . . . It flourished especially in the celebrated Kozelski Optin Monastery [Optina Pustyn]. . . . Our monastery had flourished and been glorious all over Russia only because of its elders. And pilgrims had flocked for thousands of miles, from all parts, to see and hear them.

"What was such an elder? An elder was one who took your soul, your will, into his soul and his will. When you choose an elder, you renounce your own will and yield it to him in complete submission, complete self-abnegation. This novitiate, this terrible school of abnegation, undertaken voluntarily, in the hope of self-conquest, of self-mastery, in order, after a life of obedience, to attain perfect freedom, that is, from self."

Like their spiritual heirs, the Bolshevik collectivists, the *starsy* obliterated the sanctity of the individual soul, his free will and creativity.

Born in the Ukraine in 1722, Velichkovsky traveled to Mt. Athos in the 1740s, in search of a more "spiritual" life than that of the relatively "Latinized" Russian Orthodox Church, as it was in the wake of Peter's reforms. There, he adopted hesychasm. These practices being banned in Russian monasteries subject to Peter's edicts, Velichkovsky set up shop in the Phanariot-run districts of Romania. His sponsor, the Phanariot Prince Constantin Murusi, gave him the largest monastery in Moldavia, Neamtu, which had historically been closely tied to Russian monasticism. The Romanian monasteries, which controlled vast holdings in Russia since their establishment in the 15th and 16th centuries, were extraordinarily important centers. Handing the largest of them to

Velichkovsky was a big boost for the hesychasm project.

Velichkovsky trained a virtual army of 1,000 monks in the ways of the ancient desert fathers. They studied, besides the Philocalia, the writings of leading Byzantine opponents of the Western Church's doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit equally from the Son and the Father. Velichkovsky himself, in his "Letter to a Uniate Priest, on the Procession of the Holy Spirit," railed against the *Filioque* clause in the Creed.

In 1790, during the Second Russo-Turkish War, Russian Commander-in-Chief Prince Grigori Potyomkin sent his personal Archbishop, Amvrosi, to visit Velichkovsky at Neamtu. Amvrosi officially approved ties between Velichkovsky's Moldavian monasticism and Russian monasticism and raised Velichkovsky to the rank of Archimandrite. With the death of Catherine in 1796, the Velichkovsky-trained hesychasts poured back into Russia. They became abbots of existing monasteries and set up new ones all over the country, where they reintroduced hesychastic prayer and the institution of the *starsy*. Over 160 monasteries had the immediate disciples of Paisi or their pupils.

Potyomkin's own son was a hesychastic monk of Velichkovsky's school.

The biggest political and financial patron of the monastic expansion, after the death of Potyomkin in 1791, was Countess Anna Orlova-Chesmenskaya. She was the only child of Count Aleksei Orlov-Chesme, the Venetian-tied Orlov who was granted the right to add "of Chesme" to his title, for his role in the Russians' first major naval victory over the Turks. Anna Orlova-Chesmenskaya bequeathed 5,000 rubles to each of 340 monasteries, besides larger donations to selected other monasteries. She also sponsored the notorious Patriarch Photius, who presided over a resurgence of Russian Orthodoxy in court circles, after Czar Alexander I was won—by his Phanariot aide Alexander Sturdza and others—to a mystical belief in Russia's divine mission, during the period the Holy Alliance was contrived.

Leontyev's design

The home base of Velichkovsky's hesychasm was Optina Pustyn, established by his disciples in Kaluga province, Central Russia. It became, historian James Billington reported in *The Icon and the Axe*, "a center of counseling and of spiritual retreats for many of Russia's most famous 19th-century thinkers: beginning with the Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky, who spent much of his later life there, and extending on through Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Vladimir Solovyov."

The "spiritual son" of the Optina *starsy*, who, besides Dostoevsky, most foreshadowed the Bolsheviks to come, was Konstantin Leontyev.

He would work for six years as an official censor at the Moscow Censorship Board, directed by the Okhrana (secret police). It was the ideas taught by the *starsy* that got the stamp of approval for Leontyev from the Okhrana, the same

Okhrana whose masters of provocation did so much to build the Bolshevik party and bring it to power.

Nicholas Berdyayev, a later devotee of Leontyev: "The Elders approved of Leontyev's inner spiritual development, and looked upon him as a true Orthodox Christian. . . . Almost everything he wrote received the Elder's [Ambrose] blessing. Of its kind this was a unique phenomenon in the history of Russian literature." (This and subsequent quotations are from Berdyayev's *Leontyev*, Academic International Press, 1968; all emphases are in Leontyev's original.)

Raised in a noble Russian family, Leontyev went to Crete in 1865, explicitly to get away from the increasing penetration of the "bourgeois spirit" into Russia through the growth of industry and cities, in favor of the picturesque and backward Levant. "When living in Turkey," he later recalled, "I very quickly learnt a bitter truth: I was horrified and saddened to discover that the strength of certain Slav and Orthodox elements in the East was due entirely to the Turks. I began to suspect that, for want of anything better, the Mussulman tyranny could, in spite of its viciousness, be a source of strength for our Slav characteristics, that without its consolidating pressure, the dissolving influence of Europeanism would become still more troublesome."

The "dissolving influence of Europeanism" meant the threat to the crippling mysticism of Orthodoxy, from Reason as an efficient force for progress in the world. This was most hated by the Optina Elders, who "were indulgent to the personality, but merciless to the temptation and illusions of earthly progress and prosperity."

Leontyev, like his *startsya*, believed: "Evil passions are better in monks than lofty but unsuitable and improper principles. . . . *It is even essential for the higher ends of monkhood* that the majority of monks should be imperfect and sinful. If all monks were like angels in fact as well as in inspiration or in ideal, then the monasteries would be unable to produce their Saints, their great ascetics and their Elders."

For Leontyev, "How can there be any new ways? I have not but those of dogmatic and ascetic Orthodoxy, which have resisted science and progress." Indeed, "It would be foolish to worship the *orthodoxy of progress*, the idol of the progressive movement, having first of all denied every positive and restricting *mystical orthodoxy* as a sign of naivete and backwardness. . . . I have the right to despise such a pallid and unworthy humanity, without vices it is true, but without virtues also, and I have no wish to do anything to help such progress!"

Leontyev by no means confined such meditations to the monastery, for, as Berdyayev reported, "The problem of Russia, that of her destiny and vocation, was the main theme of Leontyev's speculation, and a constant source of anxiety to him." A few of his dicta on the theme:

● "I believe now, that, were Russia to put herself at the head of some new Oriental State, she would give the world a *new culture*, a new Slav-Oriental civilization, in place of the

declining Romano-German civilization. . . ."

● "We must have faith in the further development of Byzantine Christianity, in the fruitfulness of the *Turanian strain* in our blood."

● "We Russians must absolutely get off the European rails and, blazing a new trail for ourselves, we must ultimately direct the mental and social life of mankind."

● "To *arrest* the march of peoples along the path of anti-Christian progress, to postpone the advent of the Antichrist . . . *it is essential to keep czarist power strong and alive.*"

In truth, however, Leontyev very much doubted, given how far Western principles had already intruded into Russia, that the preservation of an anti-progress Orthodoxy were possible under Czarist power. "Leontyev had early grasped the fact," Berdyayev wrote, "and he had grasped it better than others, that Socialism would have the effect of transforming humanism into anti-humanism. Therefore he preferred Socialism to Liberalism and democracy. . . . In his opinion, Socialism was 'performing an unconscious service for the reactionary organization of the future.' "

Approximately 35 years before the Russian Revolution, Optina Pustyn's Leontyev, reflecting a gamemaster's knowledge of how things *must* transpire in a brutal Orthodox society, made this prediction: "If liberalism were a little more widespread, it would bring about an explosion, and the so-called *constitution* would be the surest way of putting us under a Socialist yoke, of inciting the poorer classes to fight the rich, the landowners, the bankers and the merchants. It would be a new and even more terrible 'Pugatchev revolt'! [Peasant uprising in the 18th century] It is surprising that well-meaning men should wish to see the Czar's power limited in the hope of pacifying Russia! . . . It is well known that Russia is impervious to common sense. It is naturally inclined to extremes. *Thus, if the power of the monarchy were to lose its absolute significance; and if the people were to grasp that it was no longer ruled by a sovereign, but by deputies elected according to a system of voting they did not understand (less even than the workers of other countries); then this people would reach the stage of believing that it had outgrown obedience.* At this very moment, the people is weeping in the Churches for its assassinated Emperor. . . . Not only would it not weep for its elected deputies, but it would claim *as much soil and wealth as possible.*"

Berdyayev, looking back, observed, "Leontyev's wish came true: a 'Pugatchev revolt' did triumph over a 'lawful and pacific constitution.' "

As it was to happen, the masterminds of the Russian revolutions carried out just such a downgrading of the sovereign—the "desacralization of the Czar," they called it—as Leontyev described. Like him and like the *startsya* of Optina Pustyn, they knew just what the effect would be. The Bolsheviks, the "new Turk," would be brought in to preserve, after a minor pause, Orthodoxy, and to preserve the mission of Holy Russia in the world.