

Russian Doomsday Cult Ends Stand-Off

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(April 2, 2008) Members of a Russian doomsday cult, who have been holed up in an earthen bunker in preparation for the end of the world, have finally begun to surface after spending months underground.

Thirty-five members of the True Russian Orthodox Church have been barricaded in a bunker in Nikolskoe, a village 450 miles south east of Moscow since October 27. They entered the bunker after their leader, Pyotr Kutnetsov, a 43 year-old engineer and self-declared prophet, told them the Apocalypse foretold in the Book of Revelation was due to happen in May.

Kutnetsov set up the cult several years ago after splitting from the mainstream Russian Orthodox Church and recruited his followers by writing books and touring monasteries in Russia and Belarus. Those who choose to follow him are forbidden to watch television, listen to the radio or handle money. Credit cards and the bar codes on packaging are to be considered Satanic. Kutnetsov also told them that when they die they will be allowed to judge those who will go to heaven or hell.

Last fall, Kutnetsov ordered his followers to burn their passports and go into the cave, but did not accompany them himself, saying that God had given him different tasks. They obeyed and have been threatening to blow themselves up with canisters of gasoline if anyone tries to remove them.

Kutnetsov was later arrested and charged with setting up a religious organization associated with violence but psychiatrists declared him unfit to stand trial.

In the meantime, authorities have kept in regular contact with the cultists, who agreed to accept food so long as it had not been processed with modern factory equipment. Authorities have sent doctors, rescue workers and even Russian monks down into the heavily wooded ravine where the cave is located. Local residents say the bunker was a pre-revolutionary convent with a well, a kitchen and areas for sleeping and praying.

The crisis came to a head on March 28 when the entrance to the bunker partially collapsed after rain and melting snow caused the surrounding hillside to give way. The resulting mudslide and collapse caused seven women to become isolated from the rest of the group, forcing them to emerge and seek shelter in a nearby home. Since that time, more group members have emerged, including two children, but the rest of the group remains barricaded in the bunker.

The local chief negotiator, who has been negotiating with the group through a ventilation shaft, told *Reuters* on April 1 that the cult members who remain underground said they would spend the night in the bunker praying for a sign from God that it was time for them to come out.

“They understand this is a chance the Lord is giving them,” said Oleg Melnichenko, deputy governor of the Penza region where Nikolskoe is located. “They will pray all night in the hopes

that a sign comes to them to leave their bunker,” he told reporters.

As of today, this has not yet happened.

“Those who have come out of the cave are in good condition, considering they have spent half a year underground,” Melnichenko said. “They have refused medical attention and are now in a house, praying, where they say they will stay until Orthodox Easter (on April 27) . . . They said that God had given them a signal to leave.”

Georgy Ryabov, a spokesman for the Russian Orthodox Church, said that the emergence of cults such as Kutnetsov’s is a consequence of “the absence of a system of spiritual and moral education” in Russia.

“All Christians of Russia have to pray for them so they awaken and understand their mistake,” Ryabov said.

The incident is the latest in the country’s troubled relations with cults and new religious movements that have been springing up since post-communist Russia relaxed restrictions on religious freedom. It is estimated that there are 300 to 400 new religious movements in the country, including Jehovah Witnesses, which have been present in Russia for decades. More recently, groups such as Scientologists, Moonies and Krishna have drawn followers within the country. Even though there have been attempts in the past decade to restrict foreign or foreign-influenced groups, they continue to proliferate throughout Russia.

One of the largest “home-grown” groups is the Church of the Last Testament in Siberia, which has about 5,000 followers. Its leader, a 46 year-old former traffic policeman, predicted that the world would end a few years ago, but the date passed without incident.

“In the 1990s, there was a coming together of conservative forces, politicians, authorities within the Orthodox Church and the media in a kind of campaign against foreign groups,” said James T. Richardson, an expert in new religious movements at the University of Nevada, to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

He said the campaign was partly responsible for the introduction of a 1997 law that enshrined Orthodox Christianity as the country's predominant religion. The law pledges respect for Buddhism, Islam and Judaism, which are called traditional religions, but places restrictions on other groups.

Marat Shterin, a sociologist of religion at Kings College London, told the BBC: “The Russian Orthodox Church tends to be quite anti-sectarian, but on this occasion there seems to be a degree of understanding that while this manifestation of millenarian beliefs - belief that we live in ‘the end time’ - is extreme, some of the group's views are shared by many within the Church.”

According to Shterin, millenarian - or “doomsday” beliefs - are widespread in Russian Orthodoxy and exist both inside and outside the formal structures of the Church.

“What they all share is a sharply dualistic view of the world, according to which salvation in these end times is only possible within and through the Church, while the world outside is evil and doomed to imminent destruction.

“However, some of them feel that the official Church does not live up to its salvationist mission and they get attracted to new prophecies and prophets who claim the failing church is in itself a sign of the end of time.”

Millenarian groups share many of the same concerns. “In recent years there has been a whole movement within the Church that resisted the introduction of tax and individual identification numbers and new passports, seeing these as signs of 'satanic globalization' and tribulations leading to the end of the world,” Dr. Shterin said.

However, not all of them are as radical as the True Russian Orthodox Church. Many cult members are integrated in society and are more concerned with “spiritual purification and trying to conquer evil by improving the world around them,” he said.

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