

# Knowing the Time, Knowing of a Time

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## **The Russian Idea Of Apocalypse: Nikolai Berdyaev's Theory Of Russian Cultural Apocalyptic**

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The approaching end of the world strikes me like some obvious but quite subtle scent—just as a traveler nearing the sea feels the sea breeze before he sees the sea.<sup>1</sup>

. . . Russian people, in accordance with their metaphysical nature and vocation in the world, are a people of the end.<sup>2</sup>

The Russians have a proclivity for apocalyptic visions, and the coming of the new century intensified it... {They} had lived so near to the abyss for so long that they were inclined to regard each new disaster as a portent of the ultimate cataclysm.<sup>3</sup>

### INTRODUCTION:

When we think of Russian literary apocalyptic, three key figures come to mind: Vladimir Solovyov, Nicolas Fyodorov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nikolai Berdyaev. Solovyov, for example, envisioned the coming Antichrist as a popular “do-gooder” devoid of authenticity and spirituality, appearing righteous but possessed by the Devil, who appears on the scene at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and becomes the President of Europe. He envisioned and published this scenario in 1899. (*A Short History of the Antichrist*). Though more optimistic than his mentor, Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyaev is an apocalyptic thinker who writes in this same tradition of Russian religious philosophy.

Russian philosophy of history is decidedly different from that of the modern West. It

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<sup>1</sup>Vladimir Solovyev in a letter to a friend, quoted by Otto Friedrich, *The End of the World: A History* (NY: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1986) p. 221.

<sup>2</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), p. 208.

<sup>3</sup>Otto Friedrich, *The End of the World: A History* (NY: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1986) p. 220,274.

tends to be a history of interpreted meanings and ideas more than literal facts, dates and social events.<sup>4</sup> Historic facts and dates are important only as they interpret the deeper meaning of the age. Russian apocalyptic reveals itself most intensely during periods of national crisis and catastrophe,<sup>5</sup> often linked to specific dates of *millennial expectation* which<sup>6</sup> “correspond to certain signs in the heavens” and on earth, according to Berdyaev.<sup>7</sup>

Noting how Berdyaev and other premodern thinkers understand cosmological signs in the heavens (like comets, solar and lunar eclipses, planetary conjunctions, etc) as acts of God that arguer and parallel significant human events, Carl Savage and I developed an apocalyptic method of theological triangulation to mark the ends and beginnings of major historic epochs. When three or more “apocalyptic signs” (an historic milestone, technological innovation, revolutionary idea, contextual crisis, and/or cosmological sign) *triangulate* and point toward a specific end date in cultural interpretation, an apocalyptic moment can be identified as a candidate (among other dates) to mark the end of an age. Such is the case with the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe of April 26, 1986.

Today, I want to describe the so-called “Chernobyl Prophecy” cited often in Belarus and Ukraine, and interpret it within the tradition of Russian apocalyptic eschatology as portrayed by writer/philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev. I will use the word “apocalyptic” (both as a noun and a verb) not in its original meaning as “uncovering” or “disclosure” but in its popular usage (and as employed by Berdyaev) as *an orientation toward the end*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>For example, the “baptism of Rus” on August, 988, meant that Prince Vladimir formally accepted Christianity and thus the empire with him, rather than a literal fact that the citizens of Rus’ were all baptized in one day.

<sup>5</sup>In times of national catastrophe, Berdyaev argues, apocalyptic mentality dominates, not just in Russia but in the West. Dates are set for the end of the world and revised after the crisis passes. “Such was the case after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. At that time Jung-Stilling prophesied the near appearance of Anti-christ.” Similarly, as the year 1000 C.E. or 1500 C.E. approached, masses of Europeans felt that the end of the world was at hand. “Nearer to the Russians were the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore about a new era of the Holy Spirit, an era of love, friendship and freedom. . . .” Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) witnessed the European upheavals in church and state during the Crusades, and interpreted the Apocalypse as providing an outline of current and future historical events. Joachim’s vision of the coming new age of the Spirit appealed to Berdyaev who related it to his own thought. Nikolai Berdyaev, The Russian Idea, (NY:Lindisfarne Press, 1992), pp. 209-210.

<sup>6</sup>Millennial Expectation: the belief that the end will come at the completion of the current period of 1000 years by whatever calendar (annus mundi, anno domini, annus ab urbe condita: 5000 AM, 6000 AM, 1000 AD); by extension, millennialism represents ‘date-based’ apocalyptic expectation and can derive from some widely accepted date which is the culmination of several generations of anticipation (1260 AD, 1300, 1500, 1666).” Richard Landes, While God Tarried: Disappointed Millennialism and the Genealogy of the West “Glossary” (Houghton-Mifflin, 1997) <<http://www.mille.org/glossary.htm> (26 February 1997).

<sup>4</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, The Meaning of the Creative Act, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1955), p.320.

<sup>8</sup>“Apocalyptic” in popular usage, often implies the catastrophic end of the world (as it is known) and the beginning of a new epoch (as it is envisioned)--signaled and determined by divine action or fate. In Russian cultural and religious contexts (my particular academic interest), *apocalyptic* is a word associated with unchangeable fate, prophetic destiny, present suffering, divine

I want to pick up where my Drew colleague, Carl Savage, left off on Sunday. Carl presented our experimental method of theological triangulation—which we developed for a course and call the MMM or Millennial Marker Methodology—to identify and mark ends of epochs in apocalyptic and millennial history.<sup>9</sup> Employing the MMM in the context of Russian apocalyptic history, April 26, 1986 is a millennial marker of the end of the nuclear age in the former Soviet Union.

## I. THE CHERNOBYL PROPHECY IN RUSSIAN APOCALYPTIC

Then the third angel sounded: And a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood.\* A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it was made bitter. (Revelation 8:10-11)

\* Wormwood (in Slavonic, “Chernobyl”), an extremely bitter plant that would make water undrinkable, symbolizes the bitter fruits of idolatry...<sup>10</sup>

### Background:

On the banks of the Pripjat River in Ukraine, near the border of Belarus, a nuclear power plant was hastily constructed in 1983, utilizing outdated 1960's technology (see map of Belarus). On April 26, 1986,<sup>11</sup> an explosion occurred blowing the lid off the reactor and releasing seven tons of radioactive particles into the atmosphere. A mile-high nuclear cloud rained down isotopes on an unsuspecting population of five million. Because of the direction of the winds after the explosion, Belarus received 70% of the fallout (Ukraine received 20% and Russia 5%. The rest fell on western Europe). The Chernobyl disaster is internationally regarded as the world's worst nuclear accident. The actual explosion was only the size of a small atomic bomb. However, in terms of fallout, Chernobyl produced 200 times the radioactive contamination of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined, and one million times the emissions of Three Mile Island. While the atmospheric radiation has returned to normal, hot particles of plutonium and cesium remain in the soil, in the water supply, and in plant and animal life. Much of the land will be contaminated for hundreds of thousands of years.

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punishment, cosmic warning, the coming Antichrist, final consummation, and the birth pangs of a new age. Thus, Russian apocalyptic thinking or simply “Russian apocalyptic” refers to a cultural consciousness and popular religious mentality *oriented toward the End*. See Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), p. 208.

<sup>9</sup>The MMM (Millennial Marker Methodology) is based on the premodern insight of Berdyaev and other apocalyptic thinkers who discern “end times” by pairing certain cosmological signs (eclipses, comets, planetary conjunctions) with critical historical events (decisive battles, invasions, terrors) that may mark the end of a major era. Carl and I simply added a critical third apocalyptic sign (technological innovation or revolutionary idea) for better triangulation. (See presentation and article, “Triangulation” by Carl Savage in these Proceedings.)

<sup>10</sup>The Orthodox Study Bible, New Testament and Psalms, King James Version. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993.

<sup>11</sup>Following a lunar eclipse the night before, while Halley's comet fell from the sky...

### How was the event interpreted?

On a widespread and popular level in Ukraine and Belarus, according to documentary evidence, the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster is considered “an act of God” and assigned religious significance.<sup>12</sup> Chernobyl is interpreted as *prophetic* (fatalistic or predictive) and *apocalyptic* (cataclysmic or revelatory) in harmony with a long, popular tradition of Russian apocalyptic.

During my initial visits to the Chernobyl region in 1990-91, on the eve of the fifth anniversary of Chernobyl, I often would ask Belarusians: “Do you have a religious opinion about Chernobyl?” They typically answered “yes,” and proceeded to rehearse the long history of suffering in Belarus. Frequently, they would cite the “Wormwood star” in the writings of Nostradamus<sup>13</sup> and in the Bible<sup>14</sup> as referring specifically to the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

In a 1994 national poll, 1,550 Belarusian citizens (including a quota sample of 244 institutional leaders) were asked a variety of questions, including how strongly they disagreed or agreed with the following statement:

*The Chernobyl disaster was prophesied in the Revelation of John and was therefore inevitable.*

On a scale from 1 to 5, the *mean response* was 2.56 (1=Strongly Disagree, 5= Strongly Agree). The surprisingly high number of “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” responses among certain segments of the population was considered significant.<sup>15</sup> According to a survey of 485 Belarusian citizens I commissioned in April 1996 (during the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chernobyl), nearly one third (31.2%) considered the Chernobyl nuclear disaster a prophecy specifically predicted in the Bible.

“Wormwood” is the English name for a variety of the plant absinthe with a red-brown or deep-purple bitter stem. Absinthe, the main ingredient of which is vermouth, was used for medicinal purposes to cure intestinal worms (vermes = worm). The word “amnesia” (forgetfulness) is derived from the Greek absinthe. The botanical associations of the bitter medicinal plant serve as a biblical metaphor for the bitterness and forgetfulness of sin resulting in

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<sup>12</sup>Natural disasters commonly are interpreted as “acts of God” throughout history. the religious interpretation of technological disasters as an “act of God” may constitute a new psychosocial phenomenon in the former Soviet Union. See Michael Christensen, Chernobyl Apocalypse (Drew University dissertation, 1996).

<sup>13</sup>Nostradamus was cited as often as St. John on the Chernobyl Prophecy in Belarus in the 1996 survey (Appendix Q2). Nostradamus is the famous 16th-century French astrologer who some sources believe foresaw and recorded in coded quatrains future world events with remarkable accuracy (including the rise of Hitler, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the end of the age in July 1999). See Henry C. Roberts, trans. and ed., “Century X, Quatrain 72, The Complete Prophecies of Nostradamus. Revised Edition. (NY: Nostradamus Co., 1947), p. 336.

<sup>14</sup>Revelation 8:10,11 quoted above.

<sup>15</sup>Peter Clark, “Belarus—Let’s Understand Ourselves and Our Future: Summary of the Descriptive Statistics from a Survey of National Public Opinion .” The Center for Sociological Research--ORACUL, World Vision International, (Cornell University, 1994), p. 34.

divine judgment.<sup>16</sup>

The Slavic name for the bitter Wormwood plant is Chornobyl (Ukrainian spelling). In Russian, the name of the plant is Polyn, also known as Chernobyl. (Chernyi means dark/black while byl literally means story (the past tense of existence) and connotes the bitterness of being, the blackness of existence, the darkness of reality).<sup>17</sup> In Ukrainian Bibles, the Greek word apsinthos (absinthe) in Revelation 8:11 is understood as Chornobyl--which invites its popular association with the 1986 disaster near the historic town of Chernobyl.

Chernobyl is first mentioned in twelfth century manuscripts as a settlement near the River Pripyat in Lithuania (later Poland and Ukraine), and was settled by an apocalyptic sect of Old Believers in 1775, under the headship of one Illarian Petrov.<sup>18</sup> The “Chernobylites” preached the arrival of the Antichrist and the imminent end of the world. Whether they migrated to Chernobyl because they believed the end centered around that town, we do not know. Illarian Petrov, according to Russian journalist, Andrey Illesh, “bore the rather strange nickname ‘Cows Legs’ and was known for his extreme fanaticism.” The Chernobylites were persecuted because they “refused to pray for the tsar, acknowledge passports, forbade military service and oaths, and behaved in a contrary manner.” At the end of the nineteenth century (when the end did not come), the sect emigrated to Austria.<sup>19</sup>

The symbolic (or prophetic) connection between nineteenth-century Chernobylites and twentieth-century Chernobyl apocalypticism is an obvious one, according to Illesh. When a Russian, Belarusian or Ukrainian familiar with the town of Chernobyl and its nuclear disaster reads about Chornobyl in the eighth chapter of the text, apocalyptic associations can be expected. “The lines from the Revelation in the Bible are known by practically everyone,” Illesh explained in 1987. “The connection between Chernobyl and the Apocalypse was suggestive,” and attractive to apocalyptic mentality.

Indeed, in the history of popular apocalyptic interpretation, Revelation 8:10-11 has been identified with a volcanic eruption, a meteorite or comet striking the earth, and global nuclear

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<sup>16</sup>Other biblical references to the bitter Wormwood plant include: Proverbs 5:4; Jeremiah 9:15; 23:15; Lamentations 3:15-19; and Amos 5:7; 6:12.

<sup>17</sup>In Slavic languages, the meaning of a word is found in its associations, allusions and connotations. “To the Russian ear,” according to Andrey Illesh, “the word Chernobyl is rich in meanings and tones.” Beyond its historical and philological meanings, it also has botanical associations: “Bylka, or bylinka, is a blade of grass. And the chernaya bylka, or Chernobyl is another name for wormwood.” Andrey Illesh, A Russian Journalist’s Eye Witness Account (NY: Richardson & Steirman), p. 69.

<sup>18</sup>Russian history professor, Eugene Clay, after hearing an early presentation of this case study, offered the following information: Illarian Petrov, after starting the monastic community in Chernobyl, became a leader in the Old Believers’ monastery in Belaia Krinitza (now in Ukraine but part of Austrian territory in the early nineteenth century). His spiritual descendants are the adherents of the Old Believer Metropolitanate of Moscow, headquartered in Rogozhskoe kladbishche in Moscow. The current metropolitan is Alimpii.

<sup>19</sup> Petrov was invited by the Emperor Josef II (who freed Old Believers from taxation) to migrate to Austria at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Andrey Illesh A Russian Journalist’s Eye Witness Account (NY: Richardson & Steirman) p. 72-73.

war. In the refectory of Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos, there is a fresco illustrating the falling Wormwood star. During the 1950's, the monks interpreted the Wormwood prophecy in terms of a atomic bombs.<sup>20</sup>

What theoretical or theological framework shall we use to understand apocalyptic interpretations of Chernobyl? The 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian religious philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, is a helpful guide.

## II. THE RUSSIAN IDEA OF APOCALYPSE

**A. Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev (1874-1948)**, a self-described apocalyptic thinker, is probably the best known Russian philosopher in the twentieth century. Berdyaev, together with earlier Russian thinkers (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Fyodorov, Solovyov), embodies a distinctly Russian eschatological orientation. Berdyaev lived, thought, and wrote during a revolutionary time in Russian history (amid world wars and rumors of wars), as a prophetic witness to a disrupting world order in an *apocalyptic* or *millennial* moment<sup>21</sup> of world history. As Berdyaev states in the Preface to his autobiography, Dream and Reality: “It has been my lot to live in an age catastrophic alike for my own country and the whole world. Before my eyes old worlds have collapsed and new ones arisen... .”<sup>22</sup> His writings typically end on an eschatological note, and he devoted an entire volume, entitled The Beginning and the End, to what he called “eschatological metaphysics.” Most of his thirty plus works have been published in French, German and English translations.

*Berdyaev was an eschatological thinker.* Though not a literal apocalypticist or millennialist who sets dates for the beginning or end of the biblical one thousand years, Berdyaev took seriously prophetic judgment and visions of a new age.<sup>23</sup> He doubted that the new age of the Spirit could begin until the old order of church and society had passed away. Inclined toward pessimism, but spiritually hopeful, Berdyaev anticipated the dawning of a spiritual age in which liberty and justice would reign supreme. The “end” of history (*kronos*) was necessary for the new beginning, understood as an eschatological time (*kairos*) which transcends ordinary time and human history (*kronos*), to which we are summoned and in which we participate here and now.

Berdyaev was “apocalyptic” in his living and thinking. He understood the term to mean “on the edge” of a new epoch, and prophetically focused on the final events inaugurating its advent. Unlike many of his contemporaries in both intellectual and popular culture, Berdyaev’s

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<sup>20</sup>See photo of Wormwood fresco in Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos and commentary by Jacques Valentin, in *The Monks of Mount Athos* by Jacques Valentin, translated by Diana Athill, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1960), pp.121-123.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Landes uses the term “millennial moment” to describe a season of cultural history, particularly open to apocalyptic ideas and figures--signs and wonders, wars and rumors of war, catastrophic events, utopian hopes, Messiahs and Antichrists etc. which spur eschatological expectations of the end of the age and beginning a golden age of a thousand years.

<sup>22</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, Dream and Reality trans. Katharine Lambert (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), ix.

<sup>23</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, Toward a New Epoch (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949). Berdyaev referred to the new era that follows the apocalypse as “the Age of the Spirit.”

apocalyptic eschatology was not pessimistic or passive, but optimistic and active, as Clarke explains:

To look forward to the Second Coming of Christ as the only final solution of history, to see the meaning of history beyond history and outside of time is neither to abandon hope nor resign oneself to inactivity, still less to retreat into individualistic mysticism. That Christian eschatology has meant these things in the past and means them still to some is true. But it is not true of Berdyaev.<sup>24</sup>

For Berdyaev, apocalyptic eschatology was the source of creative power and spiritual illumination to transform the present social order.

**B. Berdyaev's Theory.** When Berdyaev uses the term apocalyptic he means not simply revealing or unveiling of that which was hidden, but "oriented toward the End" of time and human history in anticipation of divine intervention. When he speaks of "Russians," he refers not to ethnic Russians only, but to the cultural descendants of ancient Rus' (including Ukrainians and Belarusians) who constituted for him a *national character type*--a group psyche or corporate pattern of thinking-- which developed over time and across generations among people who lived within the borders of the old Russian empire.

Berdyaev includes himself when he states in his work on Dostoevsky: "Russians classify themselves as apocalypticists and nihilists." Their constitution drives them to extremes. Russians either look for the "revelation of a new heaven and earth" as apocalypticists, or they become revolutionary nihilists. The apocalyptic orientation passively awaits the end of the world, while the nihilist actively brings it about. "Nihilism has appeared among us because we are all nihilists," Dostoevsky wrote in his diary.<sup>25</sup> The Soviet Encyclopedia defines *Russian nihilism* as the "rejection of common values: ideals, moral norms, culture and the forms of social life."<sup>26</sup> The term was introduced in Russia by Ivan Turgenev's novel, Fathers and Sons (1862) and was applied to the revolutionary movement. Russian nihilism, says Berdyaev, is the eschatological theme negatively stated: "It is a revolt against the injustices of history, against false civilization; it is a demand that history shall come to an end, and a new life, outside or above history, begin."<sup>27</sup>

Russian apocalyptic can be described as a similar disillusionment with the present social order, usually resulting in pessimism and passive acceptance of the way things are, and yet hopeful of the impending end (of suffering) and final triumph of God. Nihilism, according to Berdyaev, "is only an inverted apocalypticism." Both tendencies can be thought of as two sides of the same coin, or opposite ends of an eschatological spectrum. "Thus the structure of the Russian soul differs profoundly from that of a German, who is a mystic or a 'criticist,' or that of a Frenchman,

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<sup>24</sup>Oliver Fielding Clarke, Introduction to Berdyaev (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), p. 184.

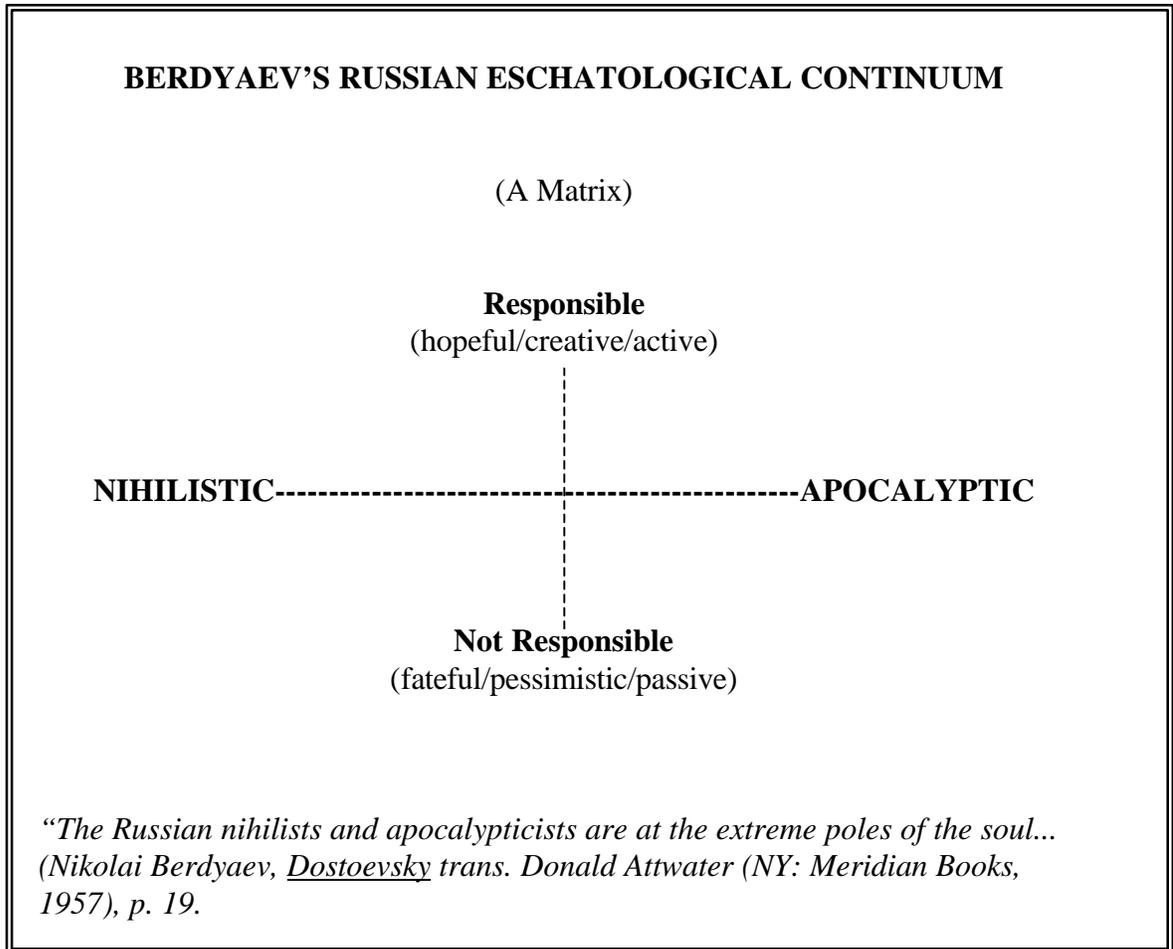
<sup>25</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, Dostoevsky trans. Donald Attwater (NY:Meridian Books, 1957), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup>Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary, A.M. Prochorov, ed., (Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia, 1987), p. 886.

<sup>27</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, The Origin of Russian Communism, pp. 40-41.

who is a skeptic or a dogmatist. . .”<sup>28</sup> Below is a diagram of Berdyaev’s cultural understanding of popular Russian eschatology: an eschatological continuum with two polarities (responsible/active and nonresponsible/passive; and two extreme tendencies (nihilistic and apocalyptic).

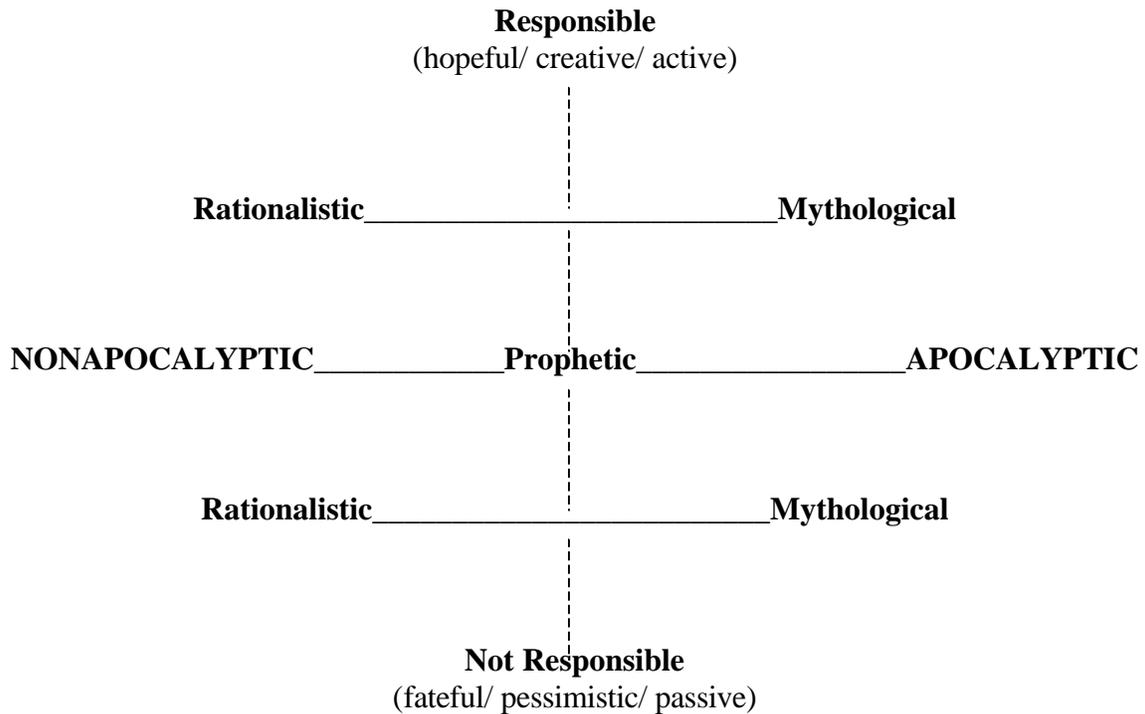
An indigenous hermeneutical theory within its context, Berdyaev’s perspective provides a critical framework which can be applied to a contemporary theological case study of Russian/Belarusian eschatology (The Chernobyl Prophecy).



<sup>28</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, Dostoevsky trans. Donald Attwater (NY: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 17.



**Modified  
ESCHATOLOGICAL MATRIX**



*“ . . . my interpretation of eschatology is active and creative, not passive. The end of the world, and the end of history depend also upon the creative act of man.”  
(Nikolai Berdyaev, The Russian Idea, p. 257.)*

**C. Apocalyptic Character of the Russian Soul** The Dusha Rossii (Russian soul) is by nature apocalyptic, according to Berdyaev. By the term Rossii, he is inclusive of other national psychologies in the family of ancient Rus’ (primarily Ukrainian and Belarusian, although post-Soviet nationalists in these independent States deny their association with Russia). By dusha he does not mean an individual soul but a national mentality, subjectivity, consciousness and character-type. Although his attempt to describe a national psychology is fraught with difficulties, I have found that Russians and Belarusians often use these categories of thought in contrast to Western ways of examining cultural phenomenon. In order to consider whether Berdyaev’s theory sheds light on the phenomenon of apocalyptic thinking in Russia and Belarus, we must

employ, qualify and apply his constructs and language in the cultural context.<sup>29</sup>

Berdyaev identifies at least five qualities of the Russian soul in the psychological history of its development: 1) deeply personal and yet communal;<sup>30</sup> 2) fraternal, kind and generous;<sup>31</sup> 3) shaped by centuries of injustice and suffering which it has endured and overcome;<sup>32</sup> 4) schismatic in temperament;<sup>33</sup> and 5) apocalyptic by nature, as evidenced by widespread, temporal unrest and desire for an eternal home.<sup>34</sup> Together, says Berdyaev, these cultural characteristics pre-dispose the Russian people to interpret current events eschatologically (opting for either active or inactive nihilism, or optimistic or pessimistic apocalypticism). The first four characteristics inform, but do not directly relate to this eschatological study. The fifth characteristic--the apocalyptic predisposition of the Russian soul--is its focus.

The concept of the Russian soul (of which apocalyptic is characteristic) in the intellectual history of ideas is not individualistic but corporate, not static but dynamic, not preexistent but historic. It originated in the Apocalypse of 988 (the Christian baptism of Rus') and was shaped by centuries of community sufferings, catastrophic events, apocalyptic expectations, millennial hopes and spiritual illuminations. This conviction led Berdyaev to examine the evolutionary development of Russian apocalyptic thought through five historical epochs, each with apocalyptic beginnings and ends.

The Russian soul, according to Berdyaev, "is by nature apocalyptic." The Russian people, "in accordance with their metaphysical nature and vocation in the world, are a people of the End."<sup>35</sup> Berdyaev engages Russian cultural apocalyptic as a social critic as well as a religious philosopher. He challenges popular interpretations which he regards as passive, fatalistic or non-responsible. The alternative he offers is a mystical but socially responsible Christian eschatology--one that looks beyond the crisis and despair of the moment and toward the spiritual and political resolution in the age of the Spirit.

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<sup>29</sup>As Tyutchev said, "Russia is not to be understood by intellectual processes. You cannot take her measurements with a common yardstick, she has a form and stature of her own; you can only believe in Russia," quoted by Berdyaev, The Russian Idea (NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), p.19.

<sup>30</sup>This is what Khomiakov called sobornost.

<sup>31</sup>Universal brotherhood, fraternity, comaraderie--are the messianic dreams of Russia.

<sup>32</sup>Berdyaev identifies five epochs of catastrophic suffering and insight in Russian history which have shaped the Russian soul. These are presented and discussed in Part II of this presentation.

<sup>33</sup>Schism is "a deep-rooted trait in our national character." Berdyaev, The Russian Idea (NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), p. 28.

<sup>34</sup>"Among the Russians there is always a thirst for another life, another world; there is always discontent with that which is. An eschatological bent is native to the structure of the Russian soul." Either actively or passively, the Russian expects that "everything finite will come to an end, that ultimate truths will be revealed, that in the future there will be something extraordinary." Ibid. p. 212.

<sup>35</sup> Berdyaev uses the term "Russian" as inclusive of Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians; he uses "apocalyptic" primarily to describe popular conceptions of the end of the world and intellectual attitudes toward it over several epochs. Nikolai Berdyaev, The Russian Idea (NY: Lindisfarne, 1992), p.208.

Applying Berdyaev's Russian apocalyptic eschatology to the Chernobyl Prophecy in Revelation 8:10-11, it can be argued that the Chernobyl catastrophe of 26 April 1986 was a decisive apocalyptic event in the history of Rus, marking the end of an age. It fueled the reformist policies of glasnost and perestroika, broke the back of Communism. It serves an eschatological marker for the end of the Soviet Union, the end of the modern age of the "peaceful atom" and fail-safe technology, as well as the beginning of a postmodern age in the newly independent states. Regardless of authorial intent and historical-critical interpretations of Revelation 8:10-11, the Chernobyl prophecy is understood widely, in the context of post-Soviet Ukraine and Belarus as pre-ordained and prophetically fulfilled, presenting a fascinating case study of Russian apocalyptic eschatology.

### III. RUSSIAN APOCALYPTIC HISTORY

In The Russian Idea, Nikolai Berdyaev describes how the Russian idea of apocalypse developed during a thousand years of psychological and mythological history. His perspective is that of a religious philosopher and social critic, not as a strict cultural historian, and requires supplemental historical detail and application. Although it can be argued that Berdyaev's 'sense of history' is not historically valid, the fact remains: cultural mythology is part of interpreted Russian history, and many Russians (past and present) think about historic events apocalyptically. To understand their mind set, one must enter into their historic sense and interpret events in light of religious meanings.

Russian philosophy of history is decidedly different from that of the modern West. It tends to be a history of interpreted meanings and ideas more than literal facts, dates and social events.<sup>36</sup> Historic facts and dates are important only as they interpret the deeper meaning of the age. Russian apocalyptic reveals itself most intensely during periods of national crisis and catastrophe,<sup>37</sup> often linked to specific dates of *millennial expectation* which<sup>38</sup> "correspond to

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<sup>36</sup>For example, the "baptism of Rus'" on August, 988, meant that Prince Vladimir formally accepted Christianity and thus the empire with him, rather than a literal fact that the citizens of Rus' were all baptized in one day.

<sup>37</sup>In times of national catastrophe, Berdyaev argues, apocalyptic mentality dominates, not just in Russia but in the West. Dates are set for the end of the world and revised after the crisis passes. "Such was the case after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. At that time Jung-Stilling prophesied the near appearance of Anti-christ." Similarly, as the year 1000 C.E. or 1500 C.E. approached, masses of Europeans felt that the end of the world was at hand. "Nearer to the Russians were the prophecies of Joachim of Fiore about a new era of the Holy Spirit, an era of love, friendship and freedom. . . " Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) witnessed the European upheavals in church and state during the Crusades, and interpreted the Apocalypse as providing an outline of current and future historical events. Joachim's vision of the coming new age of the Spirit appealed to Berdyaev who related it to his own thought. Nikolai Berdyaev, The Russian Idea, (NY:Lindisfarne Press, 1992), pp. 209-210.

<sup>38</sup>Millennial Expectation: the belief that the end will come at the completion of the current period of 1000 years by whatever calendar (annus mundi, anno domini, annus ab urbe condita: 5000 AM, 6000 AM, 1000 AD); by extension, millennialism represents 'date-based' apocalyptic expectation and can derive from some widely accepted date which is the culmination of several generations of anticipation (1260 AD, 1300, 1500, 1666)." Richard Landes, While God Tarried: Disappointed Millennialism and the Genealogy of the West "Glossary" (Houghton-Mifflin, 1997) <<http://www.mille.org/glossary.htm> (26 February 1997).

certain signs in the heavens” and on earth, according to Berdyaev.<sup>39</sup> By examining the rise and fall of identifiable historic epochs and their correspondence to key events and cosmic phenomenon, Berdyaev charted what he considered the evolution of the “Russian soul” which developed in predictable patterns and rhythms of millennial hope and apocalyptic despair.

Writing from Paris during World War II, Berdyaev divides Russian “psychological” history into five epochs: 1) Russia of Kiev; 2) Russia under Tartar yoke; 3) Muscovite Russia; 4) Russia of Peter the Great; 5) Soviet Russia. He also predicts a sixth epoch--the new or true Russia. Each of these ages, he claims, had a providential beginning and a catastrophic end. In the process of forming and falling, distinctive qualities of the Russian soul were forged and manifest.

**A. *Rus’ of Kiev and the Apocalypse of 1240 A.D.*** Rus’<sup>40</sup> was the name given to the eastern Slavic tribes which came together during the ninth century along the river systems of territories now belonging to Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and Lithuania. “Russian history” begins around 850 with the arrival of Nordic invaders in the ancient land of the Slavs, according to the twelfth century Primary Chronicle.

Beginning in 988<sup>41</sup> and continuing until the end of the First Millennium of Christendom, Vladimir and his subjects submitted to Christian baptism by decree that the land of Rus’ would adopt Christianity in its Greek rather than Latin form. The Prince forced all his people to be baptized in the Volga. The great images and statues of Peron (the Norse god of thunder), Yaryla (the sun god) and Stryboh (the wind god) were pulled down and destroyed. Civic laws were changed to forbid punishment by mutilation, torture and death. “It was said that after his conversion Vladimir became an exemplary ruler,” writes Erdoes, “gentle where before he had been cruel, chaste and decorous instead of insatiably lecherous. . .”<sup>42</sup>

After Rus’ was “christianized,” a tremendous impetus was given to the culture for the development of language, literature, architecture and iconography, according to Berdyaev. The Russian soul in this fertile period sought integration, wholeness and universal significance.

The Kievan empire was short lived. Tartars, Lithuanians and finally Poles submerged the culture and conquered the land of Rus’ in 1240. . Russian apocalyptic mentality, according to Berdyaev, can be said to originate from this period. Numerous apocalyptic narratives (both Patristic and apocryphal) were preserved in cloistered libraries, like Lavre Monastery, in the land of Rus’.<sup>43</sup> Slavic eschatology, states Fedotov, “remains, for all time, an outstanding feature of the

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<sup>41</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, The Meaning of the Creative Act, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1955), p.320.

<sup>40</sup>“The term Rus’ (from a grammatical point of view a Slavic collection noun derived from Rus; the singular form being Rus-in) is derived from the name of the Norman Varangians, who in the middle of the ninth century became soldiers of fortune and later, rulers of all Eastern Europe. Kiev became the center of their rule, and the Kiev territory came to represent the land of Rus’ par excellence.” Omeljan Pritsak and John Reshetar, Jr., From Kievan Rus’ to Modern Ukraine (Cambridge: Ukrainian Studies Fund, Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 24.

<sup>41</sup>The comet of 989, now known as Halley’s , marked for many the apocalypse of national conversion, the “twilight of the gods” and the “years of terror.” See Richard Erdoes, AD 1000 Living on the Brink of Apocalypse (SF: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 160.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Hippolytus, Methodius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ephrem and Palladius; aswell as several original  
[www.mille.org/confprodec98/christensen](http://www.mille.org/confprodec98/christensen)

Russian religious mind. . .”<sup>44</sup>

Just as the “pagan” world of Rus’ ended in Apocalypse 988 (“the twilight of the gods”) so the new world of Kievan Christianity ended in 1240 with the invasion and splintering of the empire into semi-independent principalities. Christianity and culture managed to survive in fortress-like monasteries such as the Cave Monastery in Kiev and Holy Cross Monastery in Smolensk. Soon after the Tartar take over, a new confederated state consisting of east Lithuanian and west Belarusian territories was formed--the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Rus’.

**B. Rus’ under Tartar Yoke (1237-1492) and the Apocalypse of Tsargrad**<sup>45</sup> “The Mongol conquest is the most fateful catastrophe suffered by Russia during her entire history,” Fedotov records. “The whole character of her life--social, political, and cultural --changed during this period.”<sup>46</sup> According to contemporary chronicles and legendary tales composed under the immediate shock of invasion: flourishing cities were razed; their populations massacred or enslaved; their princes slain in battle; cultural artifacts destroyed.

The religious reaction and interpretation of the “Mongol yoke” was predictable. God was punishing Russia for her sins. As the Laurentian Chronicle records:

It was no longer possible to withstand the wrath of God. In ancient times when the Lord led the Jews into the promised land he said to Joshua, the son of Nun: “I will send before you vacillation and terror, fear and trembling.” In like manner the Lord today has taken away from us our strength, and for our sins has visited us with vacillation and terror, fear and trembling. . .<sup>47</sup>

For the next century, the Lithuanians succeeded in subjugating several city principalities, including Polotsk and Smolensk in Belarus. Thus began an enduring strife between Moscow and Lithuania-Poland (which controlled Ukrainian and Belarusian territories).<sup>48</sup>

“Christians” witnessed not only the victory of the Golden Horde (as the “pagan” Tartar state was called), but over time the decline of the Byzantine empire that was unable to defend its domain. In 1453, the Second Rome, Constantinople, fell completely under Turk control and Hagia Sophia became a mosque. The Russian Church interpreted the fate of Tsargrad<sup>49</sup> as “God’s

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Russian literary works of the time (e.g., St. Abraham’s “Sermon of the Celestial powers”), are preserved in cloistered libraries.

<sup>44</sup>George Fedotov, The Russian Mind Vol 3 and Vol 4 in the Collected Works (Belmont, Mass: Nordland Publishing Co., 1975), p. 158.

<sup>45</sup>Constantinople or Byzantium

<sup>46</sup>George Fedotov, The Russian Religious Mind (II) “The Middle Ages The 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries Vol IV in the Collected Works (Belmont Mass: Nordland Publishing Co., 1975), p. 1.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 15. “(T)he Roman Catholic princes of Lithuania and the kings of Poland were heretics in the eyes of the Russian people.”

<sup>49</sup>Constantinople, revered throughout the eastern Christian world as the site of St. Sophia’s  
[www.mille.org/confprodec98/christensen](http://www.mille.org/confprodec98/christensen)

just punishment to those who consorted with schismatics” (a reference to the earlier Greek Orthodox who entered into negotiations with Rome for reunification at the 1439 Council of Florence).<sup>50</sup> “After the fall of Constantinople the Great Prince of Moscow considered himself the only Orthodox monarch in the world,” writes Fedotov, “and the ideologists of Muscovite nationalism made great capital of his unique position.”<sup>51</sup>

In the mid-fifteenth century, the Muscovite prince collaborated with Tartar rulers and began a campaign to “unify” all Russian territories through peaceful treaties of protection, aggressive military campaigns and even by purchase of land. After consolidating political power, Ivan III turned on the Tartar rulers, and in 1480 achieved complete independence for “Holy Russia,” after over 200 years of foreign domination. From the Russian perspective, the liberation was by divine providence. From the Ukrainian and Belarusian perspective, it was an apocalypse for the Grand Principality of Lithuania.<sup>52</sup>

Russian Christian scholars at the end of the fifteenth century, Miliukov explains, believed that the world was created in 5508 B.C. E. and would end in 1492 C.E. (7000 Annus Mundi). Contemporary liturgical calendars abruptly ended on that date. According to theological reasoning, “Scripture states that ‘a thousand years are a single day for God,’ and because the year 1492 would be the 7,000th since creation, the cosmic week would therefore come to an end in 1492, with the final judgment following.”<sup>53</sup>

Ivan’s “triumph” over the Tartars and Lithuanians, in the minds of the Russians, assumed a prophetic dimension. Apocalyptic predictions that once applied to the fall of Kiev or Constantinople were now referred to the successor state of Moscow: The “Rusyi family” of Greek eschatology, destined to conquer the “Ishmaelites”<sup>54</sup> and take possession of the seven hills of “Tsargrad”,<sup>55</sup> was now changed to the “Russkii (Russian) family”--a spelling error, says

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basilica--the mother church of Orthodoxy.

<sup>50</sup>Paul Miliukov, Outlines of Russian Culture: The Origins of Ideology Vol III, ed and trans. Joseph L. Wiczyński (Gulf Breeze, Florida: Academic International Press), p. xviii.

<sup>51</sup>George Fedotov, The Russian Religious Mind (II) “The Middle Ages The 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries Vol IV in the Collected Works (Belmont, Mass: Nordland Publishing Co., 1975), p. 22.

<sup>52</sup>Ivan Kasiak, Byelorussia: Historical Outline trans. Clarence Augustus Manning (London: Belarusian Central Council, 1989), p. 41. Between 1494-1500, Ukraine and Belarus lost major territories to Moscow, as well as their relative independence under Tartar rule.

<sup>53</sup>Paul Miliukov, Outlines of Russian Culture: The Origins of Ideology, Vol III trans. of Ocherki russkoi kul'turi Paris, 1930-1937 ed. and trans. Joseph L. Wiczyński (Paris: Academic International Press, 1975) p. 148; c.f. Keller’s eschatological treatment of Columbus’ exploitive discovery of the “new world” in October 1492 in the West. pp. 155ff.

<sup>54</sup>Originally used by Russians to designate the Tartars, the term eventually was applied to all who practiced Islamic faith.

<sup>55</sup>Constantinople, revered throughout the eastern Christian world as the site of St. Sophia’s basilica--the mother church of Orthodoxy.

Miliukov, “that gave rise to Russia’s ‘historic mission’.”<sup>56</sup>

If all the signs foretold by Methodius of Olympos and Leo the Wise concerning this town were realized. . . then the last days have not yet come to pass, but will soon be realized; for it is written: The Russian family will conquer all Ishmaelites and will take the City of the Seven Hills and therein will be enthroned.<sup>57</sup>

**C. Muscovite Russia (1493-1666) and the Old Believers’ Apocalypse of 1666** The world did not come to an end in its seven thousandth year after creation, as expected in 1492. On the contrary, the eighth millennium began eight years early with a new epoch known as Muscovite Russia. Metropolitan Zosima extended the cycle of the new Russian liturgical calendar (Paskhaliia) for another millennium.<sup>58</sup>

In 1493, Ivan III triumphantly assumed the title “Sovereign of all Russia” and claimed a divine-right to rule as both head of the State and the Church of the Third Rome. Ivan married a Greek princess (Sophia Padeologos), constructed a genealogy linking him to Caesar Augustus, making it possible for him to call himself “Tsar” (Slavonic for “Caesar”). During this time, another apocalyptic figure, Filofei (Philotheos), a monk of Pskov, recognized Moscow as the “Third Rome” and its prince as the holy emperor. In a prophetic epistle he penned for the occasion, Filofei proclaims:

. . . our Lord (the Muscovite grand prince) is the only Christian tsar in the whole world. . . All Christian kingdoms have been united in this one single kingdom (snidoshasia): two Romes have fallen, the third one stands, and fourth one there shall not be.<sup>59</sup>

Ivan’s successor was Feodor (who established the Moscow patriarchate in 1581), followed by Boris Godunov. During Boris’ reign, Russia was visited by the calamities of drought, famine, civil war and a usurper to the throne. By 1606, after a series of ineffective rulers, Muscovy was “in a state of complete disorder. . . “ It was a time in Russian history filled with

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<sup>56</sup>Paul Miliukov, Outlines of Russian Culture: The Origins of Ideology, Vol III trans. of Ocherki russkoi kul'turi Paris, 1930-1937 ed. and trans. Joseph L. Wicznski (Paris: Academic International Press, 1975), p. 21.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 20. The Russian adaptation is from Nestor-Iskander’s apocalyptic account of the capture of Constantinople by the Turks which concludes with prophetic citations from Methodius (a third century patristic writer whose treatises on the antichrist were translated into Slavonic) and Leo the Wise, Byzantine Emperor from 886-912 who composed prophetic poems. Ibid. p. 148.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 22. The Paskhaliia were calendars by which the seasons of Easter were calculated by the Russian Church. Inasmuch as the end of the world was expected in 1492, the liturgical seasons of the Church were compiled only to that date. When the last judgment failed to materialize, Metropolitan Zosima. . . extended the liturgical cycle for another millennium.

<sup>59</sup>Dmitrij Tschizewskij, Russian Intellectual History trans. John C. Osborne, ed. Martin P. Rice (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1978), p. 92.

popular movements, peasant uprisings and upheavals in religious life.<sup>60</sup> In 1649, a major revolt broke out in Belarus when 10,000 Cossacks from Ukraine stirred the peasant masses against Polish rule. Near Chernobyl in 1653, fifteen thousand nationalists fought the Poles and enabled Moscow to take complete control of Belarusian territories.<sup>61</sup> By 1667, the Russian-Polish war had ended, and Belarus and Ukraine were divided: Smolensk and Kiev remained under Muscovite sovereignty; the rest of Ukraine returned to Poland. The Belarusian/Ukraine cultural apocalypse of 1666/1667 coincided with the Old Believer's apocalypse that same year.]

The Old Believer's apocalypse of 1666 was the Great Schism that split the state into two opposing factions, each claiming to be the true "Holy Russia." Patriarch Nikon (1605-1681), a friend of the tsar, became an unrelenting liturgical reformer in his desire to make Moscow the global center of Orthodoxy. In 1653, he introduced Greek rites into the Russian church. He forbade worshipers to bow all the way down to the ground, and prescribed the proper (Greek) way to make the sign of the cross in church: with three fingers extended instead of two as had been sanctioned in Russia since the sixteenth century. To "improve" the quality of religious reading and reduce heresy in Russia, Nikon forbade reading any books printed in Ukraine or Belarus. Those who opposed the reforms were severely persecuted (burned at the stake or banished to Siberia).

Nikon was confronted by the powerful archpriest, Avvakum, who declared the Patriarch to be the Antichrist. If the Patriarch was the Antichrist, and the Tsar his servant, then there could be no legitimate priesthood, patriarch or tsar. Truly the end had come. Old Believers read the Apocalypse of John and Book of Faith (a compilation of Ukrainian eschatological works), and calculated that the end of the world would come in 1666.<sup>62</sup> Millions fled to the forests, hills, and remote areas to avoid persecution and await the end.

"In the year 1666 the reign of antichrist began in Russia," states Berdyaev. "The Schism imbued the Russian people with an expectation of antichrist, and from that time they will see Antichrist both in Peter the Great and in Napoleon and in many other figures."<sup>63</sup> In the Year of the Beast, calculated from Apocalypse 13:18 by Old Believers to be 1666,<sup>64</sup> the Russian Orthodox Church Council met in Moscow and condemned the "schismatics" (Old Believers) as heretics.

The world of the Old Believers did not absolutely end in 1666,<sup>65</sup> nor did Ukraine and

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>61</sup>Ivan Kasiak Byelorussia: Historical Outline. trans. Clarence Augustus Manning (London:Belarussian Central Council, 1989), p. 85. According to Kasiak, the "Muscovite intervention did not improve the situation in Byelorussia at all. The Tsar did not keep his promises (of local autonomy). In cities and districts Russian tsarist *vayavodas* were appointed as leaders and they enslaved and persecuted the Byelorussian people."

<sup>62</sup>Dimitrij Tschizewskij, Russian Intellectual History trans. John C. Osborne. ed. Martin P. Rice (Ann Arbor, MI:Ardis, 1978), p. 123.

<sup>63</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, The Russian Idea (NY:Lindisfarne Press, 1992), p. 31.

<sup>64</sup>"... let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six." (Apoc. 13:18)

<sup>65</sup> Despite the persecution and condemnation, the 'Old Church' grew to over twenty million  
[www.mille.org/confprodec98/christensen](http://www.mille.org/confprodec98/christensen)

Belarus cease to exist as distinctive cultures in 1667. However, the unified Muscovite Church-State had come to an abrupt end. Filofei's declaration--"Two Romes have fallen, but a third one stands; and a fourth there shall not be"--was a prophecy fulfilled. But a new modern Russia would powerfully emerge in the next century under Peter the Great (1682-1725).

**D. *Imperial Russia (1700-1905) and the Apocalypse of the Tsar*** The story of Peter's "Europeanization" of a medieval Asiatic country is a modern achievement that characterized Russia for two hundred years. In 1697, Peter traveled incognito through Europe with an official Russian delegation, to recruit Western technicians to work and teach their crafts in Russia. Fifteen months later, after visiting England and Vienna, the Tsar returned to Moscow to squelch a new rebellion. In the process, he established himself as the absolute monarch of all Russia.

Peter punished rebels with unusual cruelty, forbade clerks and nobles from wearing beards or traditional Russian garb (he wanted his subjects to look like Europeans), stopped attending church and demanded that all in his court smoke, dance and drink as he did. "Even before his trip to Europe, Peter had led a dissolute life," writes Tschizewskij. Now they were shocked by how the Tsar amused himself. Peter's "All Fools' Synod," for example, was considered a sacrilegious parody of traditional church liturgies and sacramental rites. Apparently, Peter saw traditional Orthodoxy as the enemy of his modern innovations.<sup>66</sup>

Peter positioned Russia to take advantage of the European Enlightenment. He succeeded in reorienting Russia from a theocracy, looking backwards toward Byzantium, to a monarchy, and by looking westward toward modern Europe. "In Russia, the Enlightenment did not grow out of the Renaissance and Reformation, but invaded a foreign and medieval realm," Kornblatt and Gustafson remark.<sup>67</sup> Predictably, there was a significant religious backlash against the modernist government by the Old Believers.

The church of the Old Believers had preserved Greek apocalyptic writings (Hippolytus, Ephrem the Syrian, Basil the Younger and Palladius), as well as Russian apocryphal sources. Applying the latest *apocalyptic chronology*,<sup>68</sup> Old Believers pinpointed the exact year when the Antichrist would appear and the end of the world occur. According to one apocalyptic figure, Kuzma Kosoi, in 1687, the end of the world would come in the year 1692. Kosoi attracted some 2,000 followers and established a para-military camp on the left bank of the Volga and prepared to overthrow the Antichrist. Kosoi's apocalyptic movement gave rise to the Khlysty sect which

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members in the twentieth century. Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>66</sup>Dmitrij Tschizewskij, Russian Intellectual History trans. John C. Osborne ed. Martin P. Rice (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1978), p. 146.

<sup>67</sup>Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson, eds. Russian Religious Thought, University of Wisconsin Pres, 1996), p. 7.

<sup>68</sup>Richard Landes, When God Tarried: Disappointed Millennialism and the Genealogy of the West "Glossary" (Houghton-Mifflin, 1997) forthcoming <<http://www.mille.org/glossary.html> (26 February 1997). defined by Landes as "a set of calculations which triggers an apocalyptic moment."

taught a doctrine of continuous incarnations of Christ.<sup>69</sup> Another sect calculated the year of the end to be 1699.<sup>70</sup>

Within three years of 1699, the Tsar of Russia had abandoned his wife, changed the official calendar, left Moscow and founded a new capital along the Finnish gulf which became St. Petersburg. In 1711, he introduced secret police (*fiskal*) into the Russian state. In 1721, the patriarchate was abolished. His social and ecclesial reforms were total and unrelenting. Opposition came from many quarters, especially from the Old Believers, who concluded that Peter was the “Antichrist.”

An old Ukrainian pamphlet, originally directed against the Pope of Rome, was interpreted to mean that the Antichrist would appear “in the name of Peter.” The Russian Tsar certainly fit the profile: indeed his name was Peter, he had destroyed religious customs and profaned the sanctuary, he had branded subjects with the “mark of the beast” in the form of passport identification numbers, and he consulted astrologers (biblically forbidden, according to Old Belief). Peter’s birth had not been a blessed one (the son of widowed Tsar Aleksei’s second wife), he suffered from a facial tic (a sign of demonic possession) and the numerical value of the imperial title “Emperor” was the number 666.<sup>71</sup>

[In 1725 the great Tsar died unexpectedly from a common cold at fifty-three years of age. Because no arrangements had been made for a successor to the throne, there was a rapid succession of weak and reluctant rulers. The influence of the European Enlightenment continued to spread throughout Russia, as well as continued persecution of Old Believers who resisted reforms. In 1764, the Belarusian settlement of Vetka (the center of the resistance movement) was destroyed. Most of the community’s icons were confiscated, their churches burned, and their leaders killed. An “Apocalypse of the Old Believers,” written sometime after 1764, identified “the Roman woman” (Catherine I, an alleged Roman Catholic) and “the new Venus” (her successor, Elizabeth) as false prophets of the “Golden Age” (worshippers of Saturn), and concluded that the end of the world was at hand.<sup>72</sup>]

### **1. The Apocalypse of the Chernobylites in 1789<sup>73</sup>**

In 1775, a group of Old Believers under the leadership of Ilarion Petrov, established a monastic community in Chernobyl, north of Kiev (then part of Poland). According to the Orthodox archpriest, Andrei Ioannov, writing in 1855: the “Chernobyl’tsy” rejected the use of Russian internal passports (introduced by Peter the Great) as the seal of the Antichrist; refused to

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<sup>69</sup>Paul Miliukov, Outlines of Russian Culture: The Origins of Ideology Vol III ed. and trans. Joseph L. Wiczynski. (Gulf Breeze, Florida: Academic International Press, 1974), p. 64.

<sup>70</sup>Dmitrij Tschizewskij, Russian Intellectual History trans. John C. Osborne. Ed. Martin P. Rice (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1978), p. 155.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>73</sup>The French Revolution in 1789 has been nominated by Thomas Oden as the end of the premodern age and beginning of the Modern Era. (See *On Two Worlds* by Thomas Oden.

take oaths, pray for the tsar in the manner of the official church, or shave their beards; and preached the imminent end of the world.<sup>74</sup> Whether they migrated to Chernobyl because they believed the end centered around that town, we do not know. What historians have recorded is that the Chernobylites were persecuted in Russia and eventually migrated to Austria at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the end did not come.<sup>75</sup>

Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (1730-1797) was given the office of town preacher by the Jewish community of Chernobyl during the same period that Petrov was apocalyptic leader in the Christian monastery. Rabbi Menahem Nahum is a well-known figure in the Hasidic movement. Nahum of Chernobyl was a follower of Ba'al Shem Tov--considered the messianic founder of the Hasidic movement which originated in eighteenth-century Ukraine and Poland. In Nahum's published text, The Light of the Eyes, the rabbi teaches the community what it means to "walk with God" as Noah did when the waters of judgment covered the earth (Gen. 8:4):

About those times when there is fear [of great disaster] in the world, God forbid, Scripture says: 'Learn not the ways of the nations and be not dismayed at signs in the heavens' (Jer. 10:2)--since you are doing the will of God. The nations of the world fear only calamity; the zaddiq is not afraid of the thunder, however. He takes it as a sign to awaken and strengthen his fear of God. This is NOAH WALKED WITH GOD.<sup>76</sup>

The cultural revolution (and religious persecution) of Peter the Great continued under Catherine II (1762-1796). The new Russian culture of the eighteenth century was largely imported from the West, typified by Catherine the Great's capacity to dabble with the ideas of Voltaire and Freemasonry while bringing miseries upon the Russian serfs. During Catherine's reign, the French Revolution of 1789 occurred and had its apocalyptic impact in Russia. Modern rationalistic and skeptical philosophies of Europe assumed radical or reactionary forms in Russia and brought an end to outdated, premodern ideologies. For example, two Enlightenment-inspired groups--the Freemasons and the political "independents" comprised the Russian intelligentsia as a class. The independents championed the plight of peasants and serfs, and consequently were condemned by the State. The Freemasons were considered heretical mystics, and forced

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<sup>74</sup>Dr. Eugene Clay, Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Arizona State University <Eugene.Clay@asu.edu> provides the following detail: Nikolai Subbotin (d. 1905), a professor at Moscow Theological Academy, mentions Ilarion Petrov in his history of the Belaia Krinitsa Old Ritual Church in Austria. (Ref. Ilarion Petrov personal E-mail, 11 March 1997.) Subbotin notes that Petrov did not remain long in Chernobyl, but created another monastery in Belaia Krinitsa (then part of Austria, but now in Ukraine). He was awarded a gold medal from the Austrian government in 1817. Petrov's spiritual descendants are the adherents of the Old Believer Metropolitanate of Moscow.

<sup>75</sup>Andrey Illesh, Chernobyl: A Russian Journalist's Eyewitness Account (NY: Richard and Steirman, 1987), pp. 69-73.

<sup>76</sup>The Classics of Western Spirituality. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: Upright Practices, The Light of the Eyes: trans. Arthur Green (NY: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 99. (Author's capitalization)

underground.<sup>77</sup> What prevailed was a peculiar form of Russian Enlightenment rationalism which justified the persecution of independent scholars and freedom-loving serfs.

2. In 1812, another apocalyptic figure emerged on the scene in the person of Napoleon Bonaparte. "In Napoleon, both the Old Believers and the people as a whole were able to find once more a living 'Antichrist'," Tschizewskij reports. Numerologically, "his name, when rather fantastically spelled 'Napoleontii,' made a total of 666, the number of the 'Antichrist'!"<sup>78</sup>

After defeating Austria and Prussia, Napoleon moved against and occupied Russia's buffer state of Belarus; then attacked Russia. Ultimately he lost the war. While the invasion served to solidify the nation which had found new unity and purpose in a patriotic war, this unity was short-lived, says Berdyaev. The nation that had westernized itself under Peter's reforms had become by stages nihilistically, atheistically and finally materialistically Marxist.

With the liberation of Belarus, following Russia's defeat of the French, Moscow consolidated its rule over southwestern territories. According to Kasiak,

After the Napoleonic War the relations of the tsarist Russian officials with the Byelorussians grew even worse. Russification was increased. The military operations and the passage of the French and Russian armies had completely ruined the country. . . . But Byelorussia did not die. . . .<sup>79</sup>

Belarus, in fact, followed Russia's lead in assimilating French ideas and European ideals based on the Enlightenment: "the ideas of freedom, equality and the brotherhood of all peoples came to us from the far west, from France."<sup>80</sup>

In reaction to the nineteenth-century Europeanization of Russia, "Slavophilism" emerged as a nationalist movement in the 1830's. Its leaders asserted that Russia had its own unique spirit surpassing that of Europe, and ought to go its own historical way in order to realize its national mission. A.S. Khomiakov (1804-1860) may be the most important representative of this anti-European ideology.<sup>81</sup> Peter the Great was the hero of the Westernizers. Solovyov and the

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<sup>77</sup> Dmitrij Tschizewskij, Russian Intellectual History trans. John C. Osborne ed. Martin P. Rice (Ann Arbor, MI:Ardis, 1978), p. 175. The Russian Freemasons were intellectuals who banded together in masonic lodges to satisfy their need for philosophical discussion. Rejecting contemporary "Voltairianism," they desired direct knowledge of God and spiritual perfection. They strove to achieve an inner "gnosis" through selected reading and initiation rites leading to spiritual enlightenment. They made many translations of works of Western European mystics--particularly Jacob Bohme and Johann Arndt. A short commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Colossians, written by Philipp Mattaus Hahn, in the hands of mystic freemasons, marks the beginning of Russian utopianism. On the order of the Empress before the French Revolution, the Freemasons were persecuted, their publications confiscated and the movement forced underground.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>79</sup>Ivan Kasiak, Byelorussia:Historical Outline trans. Clarence Augustus Manning (London:Belarussian Central Council, 1989), p. 94.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>81</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, The Russian Idea (NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), p. 178.

Slavophiles looked back to the "golden age" of pre-Petrine Moscow. Dostoevsky, in the last years of his life, referred to himself as a Slavophile.<sup>82</sup>

As the nineteenth century neared its end, so did the once invincible Russian Empire. Both nihilistic engagement and apocalyptic passivity were expressed by the masses in the final years of the century: The populist movement begun by Herzen and Bakunin culminated in the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in March 1881.<sup>83</sup> The revolutionary activity which followed was somewhat abated by the "catastrophic famine of 1891" which affected large areas of Russia. The peasants, instead of rebelling as the nihilists encouraged them to, remained passive in the face of their destiny, effectively destroying the ideal of "agrarian socialism."<sup>84</sup> ]

### 3. The Revolutionary Apocalypse of 1905 and 1917

Tsar Alexander III died in 1894, at the age of fifty, and his son Nicholas II ruled as the last Russian emperor. In 1895, the "Militant Union for the Liberation of the Working Classes" arose in St Petersburg, and in 1898, at a secret meeting in Minsk which Lenin attended, the "Social-Democratic Party of Russia" was founded.<sup>85</sup> The political apocalypse was still seven years away.

This time around, in church circles, no Antichrists were identified and no dates were set for the end of the world. According to Tschizewskij:

The Church had absolutely no premonition of the upheavals which were approaching, while the intellectuals expected them, looked forward to them, and were firmly convinced that they were necessary. These expectations, when placed in the context of religion, could not help taking on an eschatological, "apocalyptic" character.<sup>86</sup>

The Revolution of 1905 rocked the pillars of Russian society, but not enough to bring

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<sup>82</sup>Dmitrij Tschizewskij, Russian Intellectual History trans. John C. Osborne ed. Martin P. Rice (Ann Arbor, MI:Ardis, 1978), p. 219.

<sup>83</sup>Ivan Kasiak, Byelorussia: Historical Outline trans. Clarence Augustus Manning (London:Belarussian Central Council, 1989), p.104. Ihnat Hrynyavitski of Minsk supplied the bomb that killed the tsar in retaliation "for the death of the Byelorussian rebels. . . for his hostile policy toward Belarussians and the workers of all Russia."

<sup>84</sup>Dmitrij Tschizewskij, Russian Intellectual History trans. John C. Osborne ed. Martin P. Rice (Ann Arbor, MI:Ardis, 1978), p. 229. Supporting Berdyaev's theory that Russians respond to crisis on a continuum between two extremes: engaged nihilism and passive apocalypticism.

<sup>85</sup>Michelle Carter and Michael J. Christensen, Children of Chernobyl: Raising Hope from the Ashes (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), p. 202ff. The "little green cottage" near Victory Square in Minsk, Belarus, where the Second Congress met, became known as the "cradle of Communism." In 1992, after the end of the Soviet Union, the cottage which housed the Socialist museum was rented to CitiHope International (a Christian humanitarian relief organization) as its Belarusian headquarters. See Michelle Carter and Michael J. Christensen, Children of Chernobyl, p. 202ff.

<sup>86</sup> Dmitrij Tschizewskij, Russian Intellectual History trans. John C. Osborne ed. Martin P. Rice (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1978), p. 236.

down the aristocracy. Bowing to mounting opposition, the Tsar published a manifesto promising his subjects civil liberties and a new constitution. The October revolution was suppressed for twelve years, but it was the beginning of the end of the Russian aristocracy. The 1917 revolution and the grand experiment of Soviet communism following World War I was about to begin.

**D. Soviet Russia (1917-1991) and the Chernobyl Apocalypse** Russian revolutionary nihilism, in Berdyaev's view, represented the end of Renaissance humanism and a new transitional 'dark ages.' A converted Marxist, he welcomed the social revolution but quickly became disillusioned with the totalitarian results. "Only a spiritual renewal would return the light," wrote Berdyaev in exile in Paris.<sup>87</sup>

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Berdyaev declared the arrival of a new cultural renaissance in Russia. "Only those who themselves lived through that time know what a creative inspiration was experienced among us and how the breath of the Spirit took possession of Russian souls."<sup>88</sup> What he witnessed and participated in was a flowering of poetry and philosophy, an intense religious inquiry and a mystical frame of mind represented by a cultural elite. Writing about this moment in his autobiography, he identified it as "a time of the awakening of independent and original philosophical thought.

. . .it was a time marked by a profound spiritual disquiet and religious "a searching, and by widespread interest in mysticism and even occultism. We saw the glow of a new dawn, and the end of an old age seemed to coincide with a new era which would bring about a complete transfiguration of life."<sup>89</sup>

Concurrent with this cultural renaissance was an escalation of social and political unrest erupting on the streets. Between 1905 and 1917, Russia was permanently transformed by three revolutions, civil war and foreign intervention. In Belarus alone, one out of four citizens were killed. In Ukraine, Berdyaev's home, similar casualties were endured.

As a Marxist, Berdyaev believed that out of the dialectical process of contradiction and opposition, a new creative synthesis would emerge and bring into conjunction partial truths formerly in conflict. In other words, revolutionary Marxism over time would evolve into democratic socialism and a free society. As a Christian, Berdyaev hoped that Russia's experiment with Communism was a transitional working out of the inherent possibilities of the Russian soul. Russia's messianic mission in the world, the dream of universal fraternity, the desire for an all-embracing faith, required provisional revolutionary measures in the interest of a permanent social and spiritual transformation. The Soviet period, he predicted, would be surpassed by other stages in the process of co-creating the new world. Seen in this light, the achievements of Marxist-Leninism could be recognized, its faults corrected, and its essential vision carried forward into the

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<sup>87</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, The Russian Idea (NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), p. 17.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>89</sup>Nikolai Berdyaev, Dream and Reality trans. Katharine Lambert (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), p. 141.

age of the Spirit still to come (for Russia and the entire world).

From his prophetic perspective in 1947, Berdyaev envisioned the new epoch in Russian history, as one built on the dialectical foundations of previous epochs and infused with the Spirit. The true Russia would rise again--not patterned after any historic epoch but after divine intentions revealed in the human spirit. The new Russia would emerge, but he did not foresee it happening in his own lifetime. What did occur in his lifetime (although he only witnessed it from afar from his exile in Paris) were Stalinist atrocities that could only be described in the most negative apocalyptic language.

The United Soviet Socialist Republic came to an abrupt end five years after the Chernobyl catastrophe of 26 April 1986.<sup>90</sup> In retrospective dating, the Chernobyl Prophecy is understood in Belarus and Ukraine to have forecast this apocalyptic end or an era.

Applying Berdyaev's Russian apocalyptic eschatology to the Chernobyl Prophecy in Revelation 8:10-11, it can be argued that the Chernobyl catastrophe of 26 April 1986 was a decisive apocalyptic event in the history of Rus, marking the end of an age. The Chernobyl Apocalypse fueled the reformist policies of glasnost and perestroika, broke the back of Communism. It serves an eschatological marker for the end of the Soviet Union, the end of the modern age of the "peaceful atom" and fail-safe technology, as well as the beginning of a postmodern age in the newly independent states. Regardless of authorial intent and historical-critical interpretations of Revelation 8:10-11, the Chernobyl prophecy is understood widely, in the context of post-Soviet Ukraine and Belarus, as a pre-ordained and prophetically fulfilled moment, presenting a fascinating case study of Russian apocalyptic eschatology. It meets the criterion of the Millennial Marker Methodology (MMM) for identifying an end-date or *apocalyptic moment* through triangulation: 1) a local apocalypse had a global impact; 2) the event is interpreted widely as a sign of imminent catastrophe or apocalyptic warning; and 3) the historical event is "confirmed" by cosmic signs or astronomical phenomena--a lunar eclipse the night before in conjunction with Pluto, while Halley's Comet (the Wormwood Star?) was shooting through the sky.

In any event, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster served as a *revelatory* moment in Russia and around the world, a ringing of the bell that called the world to attention, as Mikhail Gorbachev recorded in his Memoirs:

*Chernobyl was a bell calling mankind to understand what kind of age we live in. It made people recognize the danger of careless or even criminally negligent attitudes towards the environment. ...Chernobyl shed light on many of the sicknesses of our system as a whole. Everything that had built up over the years converged in this drama...*<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Astronomically, according to J. Adams' astro-apocalyptic website, Halley's Comet visited planet Earth during the Spring of 1986, and was interpreted by some as the Chernobyl star of Rev. 8:11. There was a total eclipse of the moon in conjunction with the planet Pluto the previous night (April 24). Interestingly, the English term "Pluto" (the root of pluto/niium) is said to represent explosive events. (J. Adams, "Kremlin Astrology" September 26, 1996.) <<http://www.ucc.uconn.edu/~jpa94001/j33.html> (28 Feb. 1997).

<sup>91</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, Memoirs (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 193. Emphasis mine.