

ARTICLES

As the Year 1900 Drew Near...

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Almost ten years ago when I was working in the Tenishev Archive in what was then the Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR in Leningrad, I stumbled on several files that reported rumors of the end of the world.¹ Though I was working on a different subject, I found these reports highly curious and jotted down a few notes for each of them. All were from 1899; evidently many peasants feared that the advent of a new century would bring the worst. In view of rumors now circulating about the approaching millenium, I thought might be fun to take another look at these reports from the Russian countryside of exactly a century ago.

Correspondent V. Beliaev of Penza Province (Gorodishchensk District) reported rumors that rocks would soon fall from the sky and signal the end of the earth. Some peasants were strongly under the influence of these rumors; some were not.² More elaborate information comes from Iaroslavl, Saratov, and Novgorod Provinces.

A. Balov, a correspondent the Danilovsk District of in Iaroslavl Province, wrote that many peasants expected the world to end either November 4th or 13th, 1899. Some believed that a star with a tail would appear and burn up the earth (*zemlia*); and some said that the earth (*zemlia*) would be destroyed but that the world (*mir*) would continue to exist. Other peasants thought that a fiery rain would fall upon the earth and destroy it "as was predicted in Holy Scripture." Rumors of one sort or another were pervasive throughout the district where Balov was working. He noted that some peasants of this region were familiar with the Apocalypse and that a large number were under the influence of a brochure translated from Polish entitled "The End of the World" ("*Konets mira*"), whose cover pictured a globe with a comet flying toward it. In addition, he attributed some of the rumors to pilgrims who, he believed, were always ready to tell terrifying stories for food and drink. Even so, some peasants reacted skeptically: they either cited the Gospels ("But regarding the day and the hour...only the Heavenly Father knows"), argued that the Antichrist had not yet appeared, as he must before the end of the world, or simply pointed out that all past rumors of this sort had proved false. Those who expected the end of the world spent the nights of November 4th and 13th in prayer before the icons while the more skeptical peasants mocked them. Balov added that more women than men tended to believe these stories.³

Particularly colorful accounts came from the provinces of Saratov and Novgorod. Correspondent N. Denisov, a teacher in the village of Bobylevka in the Balashovsk District of Saratov Province, attributed a good deal of his village's fear of the end of the world to an old spinster called "Mother Anis'ia." Mother Anis'ia lived in a cell dug into the earth; her walls were covered with icons and holy pictures. Though she had a good deal of money, she chose to remain there rather than build a better hut because she interpreted the Gospel passage saying "Woe to those living on earth" to mean that the Antichrist would have dominion over everything and everyone on the face of the earth, but those living *in* the earth could be saved. Denisov noted that she profited considerably from the superstitious villagers. Hearing rumors that rocks would fall from the skies and that the village of Bobylevka would collapse into the earth, peasants went to Mother Anis'ia for instruction. She told them to bring her offerings and added that she could not answer for what they had brought her previously. These earlier gifts, she claimed, had been sent to Mount Athos, but the monks had returned them with the message that they could not accept them because the end of the world was near. So, she said, she sent them to Jerusalem, but was not sure they would be accepted since she had received word from there that they did not have long to live: bronze gates which had never been opened had opened of their own accord and no one could shut them. People continued to bring offerings of gifts and money to Mother Anis'ia.

On November 14th there were processions of peasants praying and singing hymns. Some of them entered a church where, by chance, a forty-day memorial service was in progress. The priest, amazed at the large number of people who wanted to go to confession and communion, was unable to persuade them that the end of the world was not imminent. After the liturgy the religious procession continued on its way. One peasant, who happened to be returning to the village at 11:00 p.m. on a night when the end of the world was expected, noticed that there were lights in many huts and that people were sitting around in clean shirts doing nothing. When he tried to convince his own family to go to bed, his wife became angry at his lack of fear, and he was forced to spend the night with a neighbor. Another person, who believed the end was at hand, attempted to dig a well in his basement so that when the Antichrist placed all the water under his power, he would have something with which to quench his thirst.⁴

Working in the Cherepovetsk District of Novgorod Province correspondent E. Antipov also encountered rumors of the end of the world, which the Novgorod peasants, like those from Saratov and Yaroslavl Provinces expected to come November 13/14 1899. Peasants prepared for the end by praying, fasting, and going to confession and communion; many spent the night of

November 13th in church. When nuns from a local monastery panicked, a St. Petersburg abbess attempted to send them the reassurance of Fr. John of Kronstadt who insisted that the rumors were unfounded and that "anyone who believed in empty talk must be an empty person." The nuns continued to fear the worst, especially when the peasants started lighting bonfires in the woods.

Many of the peasants expected that the world would end when a comet or planet collided with the earth (in this file the peasants use the terms *kometa* and *planeta* interchangeably). A good deal of talk centered on the Antichrist who, they believed, would come and reign for three and a half years before the end; peasants reasoned that "every person who did not want to die from hunger or thirst would have to go over to the Antichrist. Only he would be able to give bread and water. It would not be possible any more to find food and drink anywhere else; Christian blood would flow in rivers and lakes instead of water."

All sorts of strange explanations were given for why the comet or planet did not collide with earth. Some suggested that the planet had fallen into the sea and had caused many ships and people to drown; in the place where the planet had fallen an island had formed, and from this island war would break out. But all rulers of the earth wanted to possess this island because from time to time the Lord would send his angel to inform people about the will of God. Some claimed that the planet had fallen into a swamp and a mountain had formed on which devils from all ends of the earth had gathered. Here the Antichrist would make his appearance. Peasants from the village of Stepanova heard a terrible sound on November 13/14. They interpreted this to mean that a comet (*planeta*) had collided with earth, but that the earth was stronger and only a little piece had broken off while the comet had shattered. One piece, supposedly, was in "Piter" (St. Petersburg) and was being displayed to the people.

One particular curiosity of Antipov's report was that various peasants of the province attributed a major role in saving the earth to the Americans, who supposedly had been preparing for a collision for a long time. They thought that Americans had cast gigantic cannons with huge balls, and as soon as the alien planet came close, they began to fire. On the first shot the planet stopped; on the second it split; on the third it splintered; and on the fourth the little pieces were scattered all over. The peasants announced that "if it weren't for the Americans, there would have been no way of coping with the planet." In a different village, peasants claimed that Americans had forged a thick, long chain with gigantic hooks at both ends. A few men had gone up to the threatening planet in a balloon and attached one end of the chain to the planet which was on course to fall on the earth and the other to still another planet which stood motionless. The Americans had stayed on this other planet to make

sure that these planets did not go off course.

One soldier from Archangel reported that in the north peasants went out with sticks to watch for the alien planet and push it away when it got near earth. They managed to push it away, but the peasants themselves disappeared; they got stuck to the planet and were carried out to sea. Now three ships were preparing to search for the peasants. Antipov, like Balov, mentions the presence in his area of a brochure entitled "The End of the World" (here, "*Konchina mira*"), which some Novgorod peasants thought had been written by a German. Everything in it was true, the peasants argued, but the printers had mixed up the numbers; only the German knew the combination that signaled the real date of the end of the world, but he was now in a madhouse. Other peasants claimed that the brochure had been written by an English student who started writing books and deceiving people because he needed money. Still others claimed that it had been written by a Frenchman or a Turk; they concluded that if a Russian had written it, he would have been sent to Siberia.

NOTES:

1. My research in the Tenishev Archive was supported in part by a grant from the International Researches and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the United States Information Agency.

2. *Gosudarstvennyi muzei etnografii, fond 7 (Etnograficheskoe biuro kn. V. Tenisheva — hereafter, GME-Tenishev]*), ed. *khr.*, 1284.

3. GME-Tenishev, ed. *khr.*, 1750.

4. GME-Tenishev, ed. *khr.*, 1481.

5. GME-Tenishev, ed. *khr.*, 806.