

# “Thinking Spiritually” about the Last Tsar’s Murder: Religious Discourse and Conspiracy Theories in Late Soviet Russia

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*Sergei Shtyrkov*\*

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The concept of a conspiracy theory serving as a research object, especially given its close connection with the beliefs and practices of political eschatology, could be hardly listed as a popular theme among the social disciplines. Nevertheless, in this field there are some classic texts<sup>1</sup> and widespread conventional presuppositions.

One of the field’s central themes is set out as follows: religious conspiracy theories, like any other ones, along with related fields of knowledge about the world—eschatology, alternative history, and applied political science—are always a “work in progress,” and the most conservative religious groups often prove to be the most creative in this respect. For example, in the Russian Orthodox Church, until quite recently, many eschatological believers considered the Internet to be the main weapon of the “world government” and the easiest way for people who use it to embrace the Antichrist. Now, former opponents of the Internet find each other on the global network and discuss the spiritual harm caused by the most recent information technologies. For many years, fears over individual taxpayer numbers and social security numbers, as well as passports

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1 Barkun 2003.

and electronic cards, was the central point of vernacular Orthodox discourses in Russia. Nowadays, this concern has been displaced by upcoming discussions about climate weapons developed by enemy powers. In response, Orthodox believers from a Vladikavkaz congregation (North Ossetia), whom I know through my field work, applied to Patriarch Kirill with a request to fly around the entire border of the Russian Federation by airplane carrying icons to protect the country from “meteorological attacks” in the summer of 2017 (the Patriarch has not yet responded to this request). After several months, President Putin’s statement about American structures that are allegedly gathering “biological material” from Russian people for secret purposes (October 2017) engendered an avalanche of interpretations amongst the same believers, which led to the development of new narratives about a conspiracy of foreign special services. At present, the authors of the letter, as far as I am aware, are no longer interested in this “climate weapon” (or in the story about “biological materials”) but are instead interested in other conspiracy issues. This demonstrates that these attitudes are very transient.

At the same time, if we evaluate the entire repertoire of conspiracy narratives that have circulated amongst Orthodox believers in Russia for the last three decades, we can conclude that a number of ideas have remained popular for more than 25 years; moreover, they constitute part of the everyday knowledge of an average Orthodox Christian. They are related to certain stories about the history, current state and future of both Russia and the world and they are built primarily on the idea of a secret warfare enacted against the Russian people and the Orthodox Church.<sup>2</sup> This conspiracy theory’s basic ideas and images can be found in the works of the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, Ioann (Snychev). These ideas were published between 1992–95, reprinted in different formats and remain very popular among politically active Orthodox advocates.<sup>3</sup>

## **Perestroika and the Search for Russia’s True History**

The second half of the 1980s, the era of Perestroika, threw the USSR into a political and economic crisis. However, the party leadership assured themselves and the Soviet people that everything was not so bad, and that the country was able to change, driven by the political elite’s ability to reflect and analyze, to discover

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2 See Rossman 2002: 195–255; Mitrokhin 2007; Ahkmetova 2010: 176–214; Shnirel’man 2017.

3 Ioann 1992, 1992a, 1993, 1993a, 1994, 1944a.

and to use new resources. Given that institutions of religion—traditional Russian ones or some other—were almost totally prohibited under Communist rule, these resources were to be found somewhere outside of the USSR—in Western countries, in the Russian émigré community. The most socially significant aspect of this propaganda campaign was probably the persistent repentance for the Soviet regime’s crimes. Several years were enough to assure the Soviet audience that any narrative about the national past lay on the principle of a sad truth, previously hidden and then revealed, and that no Soviet historians could be trusted. All this was planted within the context of late-Soviet panic about the imminent loss of historical (cultural) memory. In that context, historical memory meant remembrance about the pre-Soviet national past. A distinguishing feature of this time was the concept of the *mankurt*, which became extremely popular in public discourse. Invented or at least introduced into public discussion by the well-known writer Chingiz Aitmatov, the word ‘mankurt’ referred to a story told in a novel from 1980, entitled *Burannyi polustanok* (*The Buranny Railway Stop*), another name for which is *I bol’she veka dlitsia den’* (*The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*). It was about one cruel tribe’s custom (most probably non-existent) in which they deprived their prisoners of their memory through an agonizing and complicated procedure, thereby turning them into hardy and disciplined slaves devoted only to their owners, without the slightest intention to flee. The story, told in the form of a legend, finds its dramatic peak when the main character—a young mankurt—not only fails to recognize his mother who sought him out to take him home, but kills her masterfully at his owner’s command who does not want the mankurt to return to his family.<sup>4</sup> This term’s popularity, and the image behind it, clearly reflects the common social imagination of the 1980s and early 1990s. Aitmatov’s thought captured many people’s attention throughout these years: a person can be true to himself only if he keeps ethnic traditions and treasures the national history.

Perhaps the most important consequence of the deepening reflection on the past and public representation of Soviet history was the fast and furious destruction of the Soviet regime’s legitimacy in the eyes of politically and economically active people. The memory of the GULAG, the huge losses of the Second World War and the eroding heroic etiological narrative of the October Revolution and Russian Civil War turned life under the rule of the CPSU into a kind of political pathology, catastrophic for the population of the country ruled by people who did not spare their population, or, rather, who systemically destroyed it. More and more popular dystopian narratives (the novels *1984* by George Orwell,

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4 Aitmatov 1981.

*My [We]* by Evgenii Zamiatin, the film *Pokaianie [Repentance]* by Tengiz Abuladze) were reasonably seen by people as allegorical descriptions of life in the USSR. Many people wanted to live in a completely different country. Some people (and there were more than a few) simply left the country. For instance, one hundred thousand evangelical Christians fled to the western parts of the USA and Canada. Some stayed in former national republics, which were rapidly gaining political independence. Some began to change their own country.

Almost all of the later initiatives for creating a new Russia (or for recreating some version of the previous one) involved a historiographic component, which, in its turn, was required to solve three tasks: 1. to determine some model period in Russia's history (either Pre-Petrine or pre-revolutionary time for example); 2. to correlate it with the Soviet era (which is not the right period for the country); 3. to tell us where we could find the "source" of the real Russia, in order to use it to replace the fake (but actual) one.

The third question was usually answered in the following way: the place in which the true Russia was preserved lay in emigration, or in the anti-Soviet underground, or—Russia was still there—it simply could not be seen from under the communist-international ideological veil, which masked authentic Russian life.

As for the first two questions, for many (especially Orthodox believers whose faith, or at least churchliness, was born a couple of years or, sometimes, months previously) the real Russia had existed before the Bolsheviks came to power. Accordingly, the Bolsheviks were considered the destroyers of Russia and the period of their rule was a pathology (in a variety of meanings of that term) of national development.

Driven by this obsession with history, the past, and distrust in the Soviet historiographical heritage, many people started to actively search for new sources of facts, and—what is more important for this chapter's purposes—they started to develop new ways to work with them, that is, they produced new methods of interpretation. One of the most influential discursive moves to remake Russian history can be found in Metropolitan Ioann's writings.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Speaking about the literary activity of Metropolitan Ioann at that time, it should be pointed out that the academic and an 'ecclesiastical publicity community' are still discussing the question of the real authorship of these texts. The fact is that in those years, the press secretary of the metropolitan was Konstantin Dushenov, who later became a well-known political publicist. He is often considered to be the author of the most vivid texts that are officially thought to be written by his patron (Verkhovskii 2003: 21). It is now difficult to assess the degree of Dushenov's participation, but it is

A general analysis of Metropolitan Ioann’s conspiracy texts<sup>6</sup> leads us to believe that they are built upon a different category of arguments. On the one hand, it is a philosophy of history in a general sense. According to the texts, the whole historical process is not just determined by, but really *is* the permanent struggle of Satan against his Creator, a plight which is doomed to eventual failure. Accordingly, the fate of all people is, in some way, connected to this struggle.

Considered from a different, but also rather general, perspective, the world historical process is almost entirely conditioned by what happened in the past with the Jewish race. These people, having misunderstood the idea of God about Jews as the chosen people (they thought God had chosen them to dominate the world), did not accept Christ as the Messiah. The Lord punished the people of Israel with dispersion. Then, according to this narrative about the global Jewish conspiracy, the Jews, scattered around the world, decided to fight for power over all of humanity. This plan was hampered by Christianity spreading around the world which liberated people from the power of their base passions. The plot organizers planned to stoke these passions in order to execute their plan.

Nevertheless, the worldwide conspiracy to establish the power of the descendants of the “scribes and Pharisees” is turning into reality, which can be clearly seen in the fact that the Western world is moving away from Christianity. However, this “mystery of lawlessness,” according to apostle Paul’s prediction, will not work, “until He [who now restrains] is taken out of the way” (2 Thess. 2:7). Specifically, this is something or someone that can and/or should prevent this plan from happening. This role is assigned to Russia, the Russian people, headed by an Orthodox monarch. They are the “natural” enemies of world Jewry. Russia’s entire history is considered from this perspective, but also the history of Russia in the twentieth century—the Revolution of 1917, and the collapse of the USSR particularly. These events are interpreted as attempts by the conspirators to remove Russia and its Tsar (or his functional deputy) from their path to world domination. In this context, the fate of the last Russian emperor is extremely important for understanding the entire history of the nation and mankind more generally.

The narrative about holy Russia, the wicked who seek to destroy it, and the heroes who sacrifice themselves for the good of others was well-known and appears throughout late nineteenth-century Russian literature and journalism and is

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obvious that Metropolitan Ioann knew something about these texts and understood them. He undoubtedly shared (or pretended to share) ideas published under his name.

6 One can find a brief and clear description of Metropolitan Ioann’s general ideas in an article by Konstantin Kostiuk (2002).

similar to some other conspiracy theories that were prevalent in different parts of the world (to give several examples, I might mention the anti-papistical narratives in seventeenth-century England, the Roman Catholic Church's anti-masonic theories in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the German Nazis' anti-Semitic meta-myth and the American right's anti-Communist myth in the twentieth century). These narratives are similar both in terms of the function of the historical drama heroes, and in terms of the nature of the relationship between them. So what is it that actually makes Metropolitan Ioann's theory interesting?

In trying to answer this question, I have to clear up a particular issue: how did Metropolitan Ioann (alone or together with Dushenov), being a child of the Soviet era, so skillfully create a specifically religious narrative about the destinies of the world and Russia on the basis of conspiracy ideas? How did he learn to present history in this very certain, analytical, and discursive way? It is pretty obvious that in order to represent history in such a manner, one must pretend to see the so-called spiritual sense of events in political, economic, and cultural life. It is supposed that a real sense of world history is beyond the understanding of people who do not have "spiritual vision"; alternatively, as opponents of this view would say, this includes people who are not inclined to interpretative activities of a certain type (paranoia for example). Of course, Metropolitan Ioann's history of the centuries-old secret war of the Jews against Christ, the Church, and Russia has its roots in the conspiracy thinking of Soviet times. But they did not delve any deeper than some general presuppositions. One such presupposition is the idea about Russia's (or the USSR's) responsibility for the destiny of the whole world, its leadership in the movement towards religious or secular salvation of all of humanity. That is why it is hated by those who do not want this salvation, but instead pursue their narrow self-serving interests. Ideas of this type are widespread at least from the time of Reformation. The second presupposition is related to mechanisms of historical interpretation and is referred to as teleology. According to this way of thinking about the world and national history, every historical event and phenomenon is a step or a stage toward the main aim of history in its entirety. This is the basic principle of most historical grand narratives, including Soviet ones. Usually such narratives are not intended to disclose the secret meaning of what is happening to man and the world. Of course, we can say that the Soviet philosophy of history, especially in its practical application, was based on quasi-religious ideas about the messianic potential of the proletariat or the Soviet people, but this view of historical events usually did not involve a disclosure of any secrets. Meanwhile, Metropolitan Ioann did not just examine secrets, but also the meaning of events that are inaccessible to participants themselves, because the real reason for what is happening cannot be found in the ma-

terial world. Marxists, as we know, tend to explain any immaterial phenomena by way of material theories. So, both Metropolitan Ioann and his secretary (a former member of the Communist Party and a former Soviet Navy officer) were more familiar with the discourse and argumentation of historical materialism than Orthodox historiography (or metahistory). However, unlike Metropolitan Ioann and Dushenov, these skills could be found in many representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church abroad (ROCA), where connection with the pre-revolutionary Russian tradition of spiritual interpretation of history went uninterrupted. By this tradition, I do not mean a high-flying religious philosophy, but rather a popular Orthodox literature, with its most vivid representative being Sergei Nilus—publisher of the classic conspiracy theory text *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It is ironic that this mysterious book published and interpreted by the mystic is not about mysteries, but instead concerns itself with very rational plans allegedly created by extremely practical people for material reasons. The very interpreter reveals the spiritual foundation of those rationalistic decisions. However, Nilus’s heirs benefited from his skill, as they saw the mystical in the rational and the seemingly understandable. In this search for meaning, both revelations and analytical methods, including search techniques, were used as sources of information. It is the ability to leap from the level of political analytics into the space of visionary discoveries that determined the discursive style of the post-Soviet Orthodox conspiracy, which is largely believed to have been founded by Metropolitan Ioann.

One problem arises from the fact that he and his secretary were almost entirely disconnected from the world of traditions set by Nilus and similar writers: specifically, they were quite remote from the representatives of the Russian Church abroad, which Metropolitan Ioann describes as absolute strangers in his early works. Of course, the Soviet Church stayed in contact with the so-called foreigners, but a whole range of different people were engaged in this communication. At the time of the Soviet system’s collapse only late-Soviet public and domestic anti-Semitism could be used from all of Metropolitan Ioann’s ideological and discursive baggage. However, this conception did not involve “mysteries of lawlessness” or any mysteries at all, except for state secrets and imaginary undercover operations by secret services, such as the CIA and the Mossad.

## Learning to Speak about History Spiritually

So, what might explain the origin of Metropolitan Ioann’s skills as employed for the analysis of historical events and processes from the point of view of spiritual

content, which usually boiled down to the struggle of Light and Darkness? This skill can be partly explained by his probable familiarity with the pre-revolutionary publications of Nilus's works. In any case, the Metropolitan believed that the *Protocols* were not a forgery and that the world was living according to the plans of their authors. But this was clearly not enough to create the so-called Russian Symphony—a doctrine that focused on the meaning of Russian history.

And here we must return to Dushenov's role in the creation of Metropolitan Ioann's theories. While Dushenov might not have written the articles, he did, in my opinion, introduce his patron to the basic skills of interpreting events of political and social life in the spirit of Orthodox conspiracy theories, and also told him several "important facts from Russian history" that were unknown to Soviet people, but which were actively discussed among emigrants. He seemed to take all this from the members of the Christian Revival Union, an Orthodox-monarchical organization (Dushenov communicated with them at meetings of nationalists).<sup>7</sup>

The original name of the aforementioned union was the "Christian Patriotic Union" (CPU), established at its First Congress in Moscow on December 17, 1988. It was, in turn, set up on the basis of an initiative by a group known as "For the Spiritual and Biological Salvation of the People" (July 23, 1988), chaired by an old Orthodox dissident and prisoner of conscience Vladimir Osipov. Osipov was elected chairman of the CPU. However, he was removed from leadership as a result of a number of intrigues. In the beginning of the 1990s, Osipov and the CPU members faithful to him created a new structure, which was developed, independently of Osipov, by publicist Viacheslav Demin and poet Aleksei Shiropaev to a large extent. They had close ties with the most anti-Soviet part of the Orthodox Russian emigrant groups and they had been actively mastering the lexicon and the ideology of radical conspiracy historiography and historiography since 1988. As of May 1990, they began publishing a semi-underground newspaper *Zemshchina* ("Realm, Land"), which was very popular among Orthodox nationalists and was published until 1993 (it had 97 issues in total). Close to *Zemshchina* in ideology and its team of authors, was *Tsar'-Kolokol* (*Tsar Bell*), an almanac published from 1990–1991. *Zemshchina* and *Tsar'-Kolokol* republished conspiracy materials from émigré and pre-revolutionary publications. For example, *Tsar Bell* published a book by the emigrant Mikhail Skariatin in 1990 entitled *Zhertva* (*The Sacrifice*), which contains very important materials to prove the ritual character of the royal family's murder. This information (or rather, translation and decipherment of mysterious signs from the

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7 LD 2003: 105.

house of Ipatiev, in which the Bolsheviks executed the family of the last emperor) was then actively used in other Orthodox nationalists’ conspiracy arguments.

In his memoirs, Viacheslav Demin describes the sources of information that formed the ideology of future members of the “Christian Revival.” Recalling the events of 1988, he writes:

I found the books by Nilus and other counter-revolutionary authors, Orthodox-convinced monarchists, banned in the Soviet Union, at the house of my friend Vadim Kuznetsov, whom I once met in Arbat. ... His house was always crowded, filled with: lamp oil, incense, candles, rare historical and modern photographs, icons, and, most importantly with ecclesiastical and monarchical literature, which he copied in large quantities. ... It was at his house that I first saw copies of icons of the Royal Martyrs, glorified by the foreign Church in 1981, and learned a lot of new and mysterious information about the Ekaterinburg crime, which, as it seems, was of a ritual nature.<sup>8</sup>

This narrative about the ritual murder of the royal family, developed by Russian emigrants, deserves a separate study. Here I will only point out that the narrative took shape as early as the beginning of the 1920s. It was based on the testimonies of those who were part of the crime investigation team, or somehow came to know about it (investigator Sokolov, General Dieterichs, and a British journalist referred to as Wilton), after the troops of Admiral Kolchak in 1918–1919 temporarily freed Ekaterinburg from the Bolsheviks.

This evidence laid the ground for the formation of a narrative about the killing of the Tsar and his family, which was said to be not just a political execution without charge of trial, but a religious or quasi-religious ritual.<sup>9</sup>

Dieterichs and Wilson generally formulated a picture of the murder of the royal family as follows: the execution of Nicholas II and his relatives was carried

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8 «Книги Нилуса и других запрещённых в советской стране контрреволюционных авторов православных убеждённых монархистов я нашёл у своего приятеля Вадима Кузнецова, которого однажды случайно встретил на Арбате. ... В его доме, доверху забитом лампадным маслом, ладаном, свечами, редкими, историческими и современными фотографиями, иконами, и главное церковной и монархической литературой, которую он размножал на ксероксе большими тиражами, всегда было многолюдно. ... Именно у него я впервые увидел копии икон Царственных Мучеников, прославленных зарубежной Церковью в 1981-ом и узнал много нового и таинственного о екатеринбургском злодеянии, которое, оказывается, носило ритуальный характер». – Demin 2008.

9 Slater 2007: 60–80.

out by “Jewish Bolsheviks” under the direction of Germany, which sought to destroy Russia, the evidence for which was that it was a black magic ritual. The main evidence for the involvement of religious Jews in the incident were four strange signs inscribed on the walls of the execution room. They were discovered during the investigation and later interpreted as secret Kabbalistic writings, deciphered by Enel (M.V. Skariatin) in 1925, as mentioned previously, to read as follows: “Here, by the order of mysterious forces, the Tsar was sacrificed for the destruction of the State—all people are to be notified about this.”<sup>10</sup>

The version of ritual murder was deeply rooted in some Orthodox émigré communities. It was repeated in sermons by certain prominent hierarchs of ROCA several times (for example, Archbishop Averkii of Syracuse [Taushev] and Bishop Nectarii of Seattle [Kontsevich]). It is important that the version received a new “spiritual” interpretation in this context and that its meaning was scaled up to an eschatological level.

This murder was thought out and organized and had to be carried out, by any means, by servants of the coming Antichrist—those who sold their soul to Satan and those who intensely prepared for the speedy triumph of the enemy of Christ—the Antichrist. They perfectly understood that their main obstacle was Orthodox Tsarist Russia. Therefore, it was necessary to destroy Orthodox Russia and arrange in its place an evil state opposed to God that would gradually spread its power over the entire world. And for the earliest and certain destruction of Russia, it was necessary to destroy the one who was the living symbol of the country—the Orthodox Tsar.<sup>11</sup>

This interpretation of the events of 1918 became the basis and source of inspiration for the Russian Orthodox historiosophy of the early 1990s.

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10 On this publication see: Panin 2017: 116–18.

11 «Это убийство было продумано и организовано никем другим, как слугами грядущего Антихриста – теми продавшими свою душу сатане людьми, которые ведут самую напряженную подготовку к скорейшему воцарению в мире врага Христова – Антихриста. Они отлично понимали, что главное препятствие, стоявшее им на пути, это – Православная Царская Россия. А поэтому надо уничтожить Россию Православную, устроив на месте ее безбожное богоборческое государство, которое бы постепенно распространило свою власть над всем миром. А для скорейшего и вернейшего уничтожения России надо было уничтожить того, кто был живым символом ее – Царя Православного». – Averkii 1975: 299.

Indeed, the texts by Demin and his companions demonstrate their knowledge of émigré nationalist literature, which was not available to the majority of believers in the Soviet Union. It was Demin and his followers who, taking the idea of Nicholas II’s holiness from emigrant books, began to collect signatures for his canonization in the ROC MP. This practice of collecting signatures was critiqued by the church leadership repeatedly, but persisted among believers wishing to canonize certain revered people.

Among the main methods of analysis of historical events and phenomena in this context was the discovery of “spiritual meanings” that lay behind certain actions, actions which, incidentally, were usually reduced to the fact that the authoritarian (ideally monarchic) form of governing Russia was the instrument of God’s care for the salvation of “the chosen” under the conditions of the Antichrist’s triumph. Here is what Viktor Shnirel’man wrote about this in his recent book:

The return of Orthodoxy to public discourse of nationalists was accompanied by a growing interest in eschatology, which helped them to comprehend the crisis phenomena unfolding before their eyes ... Moreover, it [the discourse] was recognized at two levels—phenomenological and metaphysical. The first dealt with current events and their discussion in political, social, and economic terms. But the second employed the traditionalist concept of involution, drawing a picture of inevitable swirl from the Golden Age down to decay, explained by the Christian eschatology as “satanic forces” clearing the way for Antichrist. These forces could only be confronted by “the Restrainer,” and therefore, from this point of view, the main world conflict arose between him and the “forces of evil,” whoever they were.<sup>12</sup>

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12 «Возвращение православия в общественный дискурс и обращение к нему национал-патриотов сопровождалось ростом интереса к эсхатологии, помогавшей им осознать развивающиеся на их глазах кризисные явления... При этом он [дискурс] осознавался на двух уровнях – феноменологическом и метафизическом. На первом речь шла о текущих событиях и их обсуждении в политических, социальных и экономических терминах. Зато на втором в дело вступала традиционалистская концепция инволюции, рисующая неизбежное движение от Золотого века к упадку и разложению, что христианская эсхатология объясняла действием “сатанинских сил”, расчищавших путь антихристу. Этим силам мог противостоять только “удерживающий”, и поэтому, с этой точки зрения, основной конфликт в мире возникал между ним и “силами зла”, кем бы они ни были». – Shnirel’man 2017: 264.

The members of the “Christian Revival” learned to “speak spiritually.” This means that they could use the conspiratorial language of Orthodox mysticism in the discursive context of modern Russian political eschatology.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Tsar’s Murder as a Ritual and Cosmic Drama**

In order to understand the working principle of that discursive and analytic method, let us analyze two of the first articles to appear in the newspaper *Zemshchina*. The first one is Aleksei Shiropaev’s article “Pobeda imperatora Nikolaia II” (“The Victory of Emperor Nicholas the Second”).

Shiropaev builds his picturesque narrative around the criticism of popular ideas about the personality of Emperor Nicholas II and the meaning of his murder.<sup>14</sup> He does not trust legal and, most importantly, ethical interpretations of the events of 1917–18. He tries to overcome common-sense logic, overturning the social reality interpreting method that Paul Ricœur meant when he wrote about the so-called “school of suspicion.”<sup>15</sup>

From this point of view, any attempts to remain in the practical domain when discussing those historical events are not just a mistake, but a malicious hoax: “Dark forces are trying ... to suggest that the Ekaterinburg crime was conducted under a moral and legal imperative in order to hide ritualistic and mystical meaning of what ‘happened’ on 17 July 1918.”<sup>16</sup>

Shiropaev puts forward a simple and seemingly non-ideological word “happened” in quotation marks. In so doing, he tries to point out that the events of Nicholas’s life cannot be interpreted using terminology which implies randomness. These events could neither have been caused by a confluence of circumstances, nor by hastily taken political decisions. These events were by no means a crime committed by some people against others. And here Shiropaev points out two secret (and hidden) meanings behind the execution of the royal family. The first relates to the disclosure of the murderers’ real motives. They did not just seek to kill the Tsar, who incidentally was no longer in power and who had no

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13 For some sources and details of this discursive tradition, see Hagemeister 2018: 428–33.

14 For a brief overview of different conspiracy versions of this event, see Rossman 1999.

15 Ricœur 1970.

16 «черные силы пытаются ... перевести Екатеринбургское злодеяние в плоскость нравственных и юридических оценок, дабы скрыть ритуально-мистический смысл того, что “произошло” 17 июля 1918 года». – Shiropaev 1990.

influence over the events of the Civil War. Instead, the organizers of that maleficent execution sought to destroy the metaphysical image of the Russian state and nation: “In the murder of the Anointed, there was a certain ritual, dark meaning: the destruction of the State and the desire to enslave the soul of people.”<sup>17</sup>

But the author does not stop at this level of interpretation (ritual-mystical crime). He believes that this simple meaning “lies on the surface.” Therefore, he goes beyond conspiracy theories. He not only understands the crime that the villains secretly committed, but he looks to go further when he brings in “non-random” mystical coincidences. For example, the murder occurred on the day commemorating St. Right-Believing Grand Prince Andrei Bogoliubskii who was killed by court conspirators in 1174. Prince Andrei is considered to be the creator of the Moscow state by some radical monarchists, so the parallel between the fate of the first and last rulers of Russia unites the entire history of the monarchy in an integrated narrative. Yet this is not enough, and Shiropaev aspires to go to the second level of interpretation—“to see in the Ural events” not just another political assassination, but “the Divine Providence, overshadowing all devilry.”<sup>18</sup> From this point of view, the death of the last Russian Tsar is not a tragedy, but a triumph of the forces of Light over the forces of Darkness. Here the author has likened the execution of Nicholas to the death of Christ on Calvary to promise the future resurrection of Russia. As the resurrection of the deceased Christ is a reliable guarantee of immortality to a Christian, so the death of Nicholas is a firm promise of the Russian nation’s immortality: “On 17 July 1918, the Russian Tsar and His Family gave their lives for their Motherland—a great, all-victorious sacrifice.”<sup>19</sup>

To convince the reader of such an optimistic view of the emperor, and of his family’s death, Shiropaev declares non-religious interpretations of Nicholas’s personality to be mythology. To eradicate this “false consciousness,” we must learn to see everything from the point of view of the “church’s mystical positions.” It turns out that multiple descriptions of the emperor’s weak will, given by his contemporaries, are nothing less than evidence of the Tsar’s great Christian humility, which can only be maintained by a very strong will. The Tsar’s shortsightedness, his inability to understand the current political processes also

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17 «В убийстве Помазанника был вполне определенный ритуальный, черный смысл: разрушение Государства и стремление поработить душу народа». – *ibid.*

18 «Увидеть в Уральских событиях ... смысл Божий, затмевающий всякую бесовщину». – *ibid.*

19 «17 июля 1918 года Русским Царем и Его Семейю совершена великая всепобеждающая жертва за Родину». – *ibid.*

evolves into his amazing gift to see the real meaning of the global historical process in political routine.

From this point of view, all of Nicholas's reign becomes not a failed ruler's career, but the path of Christ, who initially knew how and why he would have to go. Shiropaev easily finds biblical parallels in the life of Nicholas. He finds several individuals who betrayed their teacher and benefactor to play the part of Judas; he interprets the emperor's behavior during abdication as the Lord's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane and so on. In the latter case, the gesture of weakness and helplessness is an act of the greatest willpower—he could have changed everything, but he decided not to do so.

Thus, such behavior, which is understood by many secular historians as a forced one, is consecutively interpreted by Shiropaev as conscious and voluntary. For him, then, it was not a political murder, but a divine sacrifice.

In the Ipatievskii cellar there was a clash of Kabbalistic ritual with the indestructible force of the Christian sacrifice, which Emperor Nicholas II made to atone for the sins of the Fatherland, a sacrifice for which his whole life served as preparation. And the outcome of such a clash has always been, is and will be one and the same—the disgrace of dark forces.<sup>20</sup>

Three levels of historical process can easily be distinguished in this version of a “spiritual interpretation” of Russian history. The first presents the execution of the royal family as a political murder. At the second “secret” (or conspiratorial) level, this event is understood as a ritual sacrifice. Incidentally, the assumption that this was a ritual makes the event religious. This is no longer just a murder, but a sort of rite-of-passage that was carried out with the purpose of changing the course of world history. Finally, at the third “sacred” level, the event appears to be a sacred act of redeeming Russia and its people from the eternal curse expedited by the servants of the Antichrist.

Another example of historiosophical reflection about Russia's destiny as well as its place in global history, can be found in the article “The Orthodox kingdom and the false monarchy” by V. Kovalevskii, an author from the small town of Kostroma. Kovalevskii begins his argument by saying that God made Russia as an ideal model for a state and, thereby, endowed it with the role of savior of the

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20 «В Ипатьевском подвале произошло столкновение каббалистического ритуала с несокрушимой силой христианской жертвы, которую принес за грехи Отечества Император Николай II по которой Он шел всю жизнь. А исход такого столкновения всегда был, есть и будет один – посрамление сатанинских сил». – *ibid.*

world from satanic conspiracy. These intrigues are aimed at replacing the Russian monarchical state with an illusion, which looks like an Orthodox kingdom, but in fact is the realm of Antichrist.

The martyr’s feat of the last Sovereign and his victory over the forces that seek to capture the world is of cosmic significance. But the meaning of these events cannot be appreciated by the spiritually blind people of modern Russia. This meaning is revealed in its entirety only in the eschatological perspective of the triumph of the Antichrist’s kingdom.

The Emperor knew that the main goal of all efforts of Antichrist’s servants was not the destruction of the Russian monarchy and establishment of a different state system other than that bestowed by God, but the substitution of the source of power.<sup>21</sup>

The dark hierarchy, which had already come to power in Russia in 1917, pushed Nicholas II to unleash the terror of power against the people. Allegedly he was offered the possibility to install “fifteen thousand gallows on the Nevsky [prospect], and then for twenty years nothing would be heard about a revolution in Russia.”<sup>22</sup> But such an outcome would deprive the institution of monarchy of its sacral status and, accordingly, of the name of a role-model state system. “In a critical moment for the entire world ... the sovereign, after praying before the image of the Savior all night, decided to abdicate the Throne, with his whole family voluntarily treading the path of humility and sorrow destined to him from birth.”<sup>23</sup>

Loyal to his faith and ready to accept death voluntarily, like Christ, the emperor sacrificed his life for his people and all mankind, and “the world was released from the impending disaster.”<sup>24</sup>

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21 «Государь знал, что главной целью всех усилий слуг Антихриста было не уничтожение Российской монархии и установление иного, отличного от дарованного Богом России государственного строя, а подмена источника власти». – Kovalenskii 1991.

22 «Пятнадцать тысяч виселиц на Невском, и тогда двадцать лет о революции в России не будет и слуху». – *ibid.*

23 «В критическую для всего мира минуту... государь после молитвы перед образом Спасителя, длившейся всю ночь, принял решение об отречении от Престола, со всей своей семьей добровольно ступив на предначертанный ему от рождения путь смирения и скорби». – *ibid.*

24 «Вселенная была избавлена от надвигающейся катастрофы». – *ibid.*

Kovalevskii also reflects on the historical process, differentiating three levels. At the first level (the level of political history), some forces provoke Nicholas II to make tough political decisions, and he wisely rejects this scenario. At the conspiracy level, there was an attempt by conspirators to discredit the principle of monarchical rule (Nicholas II preferred to abdicate, rather than to tarnish the throne with the blood of his subjects). At the “spiritual” level of interpretation, the dark forces sought to replace the sacred Russian monarchy with the kingdom of Antichrist in order to condemn the whole world to eternal perdition. But the emperor repeated Christ’s feat, destroyed Satan’s plan and saved the world. Thus, the “external” aspects of the historical process come to light, and behind them we see the meanings that live beyond the material world, accessible only for “spiritually shrewd” people.

As we can see, Shiropaev’s and Kovalevskii’s mystical historical theories, like many of their followers, including Metropolitan Ioann, are not just a collection of ideas, but also a discursive skill of arranging arguments. Explanations of different natures—be they eschatological, soteriological or political—should clash within one text, should come into conflict, and then lead to the discovery of hidden meanings of well-known events. This kind of “spiritual speaking” presupposes the art of conspiracy thinking as a prerequisite to any statement about history.

The ability to see the invisible meaning of events makes it possible to create narratives about the past and the present state of affairs, which are alternative to an “official” interpretation of history. Those narratives are used by people who strive to see themselves as a counter-elite, a group that can compete with academic institutions in producing knowledge about the past. In order to do this, authors turn to traditional religion, which has its own way of presenting information about core values. One of those values resides in the “real meaning” of national and world history. Therefore, this alternative version of the past is presented as a genuine historical narrative, one wrongly disregarded by Soviet and post-Soviet secularists.

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## Abstract

Evaluating the repertoire of conspiracy narratives that have circulated amongst Orthodox believers in contemporary Russia, one might conclude that a number of ideas have remained popular for more than 25 years. These ideas are related to certain stories about the history, current state and future of both Russia and the world, and they are built primarily on the suggestion of secret warfare enacted against the Russian people and the Orthodox Church. This conspiracy theory’s basic ideas and images can be found in the works of the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, Ioann (Snychev). This chapter’s purpose is not just to investigate the source of these ideas but also to analyze the unique discursive presentation of events from the past (particularly the execution of the last Russian emperor and his family) which reveals “the real mystical meaning” of national and world history and supplies Orthodox intellectuals with a conceptual base to enable them to compete with secular academic institutions as they attempt to deepen our knowledge of the past.