

Maria Devi Khristos:

## A Post-Soviet Cult Without Personality

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Every country and every culture has its defining moments, its events that either shape or reflect group identity for years to come. For the peoples of the former USSR, the most recent such episode would be the failed coup in August 1991, or, perhaps, for the Russian Federation, the shelling of the Parliament Building in October 1993. Yet as commentators and scholars rush to examine the repercussions of such obviously significant moments, it is all too easy to miss the opportunities presented by less clearly historic, but no less intriguing, events. While in Russia politicians argued over the finer points of a constitution that referred to a country (the Russian Federated Soviet Socialist Republic) that was now no more real than Oz or Narnia, events on the street conspired to create an elaborate parody of the region's post-imperial angst and latest self-conscious attempts to transform itself and break with the past. As Russia, Belarus and Ukraine met with more frustration than success in their attempts to salvage some semblance of unity within the precarious structures of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), common ground (and a shared problem) was provided by an unlikely source: an apocalyptic cult calling itself the Great White Brotherhood, nominally headed by a woman who had modestly assumed the name "Maria Devi Khristos" (Christ).<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of such a cult is, in and of itself, a milestone for the successor states of the Soviet Union. Though the old Russian empire produced more than its share of schismatics and millennial movements (from the pre-Petrine Schism resulting in the Old

Believers to the Flagellants and Castrates), the only cult that thrived in the Soviet Union was Stalin's infamous cult of personality. Besides the occasional Hare Krishna or Baptist, who were likely to be shunted off to the *gulag* or the psychiatric hospital with totalitarian efficiency, sectarians played only a minimal role in the spiritual life of the Slavic region of the USSR.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in a country where attending the church or synagogue could lead to troubles at work or school, "mainstream" religion was daring enough.<sup>3</sup> Thus it should be no surprise that the appearance of the Great White Brotherhood, along with its rival, the Center of Our Lady, should cause a stir. Where the Hare Krishnas, scientologists, and followers of the Reverend Moon have all made some inroads into the former Soviet Union, these groups are nonetheless easily identifiable as "alien" or "imported," thus limiting their appeal and significance and leaving them open to charges of cultural imperialism.<sup>4</sup> But the Brotherhood and the Center, despite their eclectic borrowings from a variety of Eastern and Western religious traditions, hold the dubious distinction of being the first "native" cults in the post-Soviet era.

Of the two, however, it is the White Brotherhood that has garnered the lion's share of media attention and public hand-wringing. Though the Center of Our Lady initially appeared to be as antagonistic and extremist as the Brotherhood, over time the Center's leader, Ioann Bereslavsky, has distanced himself from his earlier doctrine, which, based on the hatred of one's biological mother in favor of the Mother of God, called for the total abolition of sexuality and the family (Kolosovskaia, 1994). Certainly, the phenomenon of the Center of Our Lady deserves further study, if for no other reason than that the Center's anti-family posture fits within a cultural tradition that, as Marcia A.

Morris (1993) has recently demonstrated, runs from Christian ascetics to utopian Bolsheviks. But the story of the Center for Our Lady is far less dramatic than that of the Brotherhood; more to the point, it is a story that has yet to reach its conclusion.<sup>5</sup> The White Brotherhood, by contrast, has not only apparently come to an end, but in fact existed only for the sake of the end. Indeed, the Brotherhood owes its fame (or infamy) at least partially to its eschatology: one of the central tenets of Maria Devi's teachings was that in November of 1993 the world would come to an end. That November, Kiev was swept with a panic verging on hysteria, thanks to the rumor that thousands of cultists were converging on the city to commit mass suicide.

As one might imagine, a number of interpretations of the cult's significance were offered in the CIS media, and some of them will be touched on below. I would argue, however, that the phenomenon of Maria Devi is most fruitfully examined in light of two of the Brotherhood's most salient features: its mystical pseudo-science and its emphasis on transformation. Each of these aspects can be connected to national traumas of the post-Soviet period: the Chernobyl disaster and the collapse of a coherent, though stagnant, national identity.

First, however, some history is in order.

### **A Goddess is Born**

Most Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians became aware of Maria Devi only in 1993, thanks in part to the Brotherhood's massive campaign of self-promotion. Though it was the Krishnas who first took advantage of the publicity opportunities inherent in the Soviet mass transit system, the Brotherhood made up in persistence what it lacked in originality. Where the Krishnas officially purchased advertising space in order to display their striking, multi-colored posters on metro cars in the major cities of the Slavic region, the Brotherhood dispensed with both legal

niceties and aesthetic standards, plastering photo-copies of Maria Devi's portrait on practically every window of every metro car in the cities, as well as on the walls of metro stations and other public buildings. Millions of people all over the Slavic region of the CIS quickly became acquainted with the picture of a young, stern-looking woman who held the middle and index fingers of her right hand pointed toward heaven as her eyes gazed placidly back at her observers. As one commentator noted, the ubiquitous pamphlets were one of the few things that united the citizens of these newly-independent states: "A man from Kiev travels to, say, Moscow, sees [Maria Devi's] photo pasted on a subway car or on a shop window, and it's as though he never left the Ukrainian capital" (Kisilev, 1993). The portrait of Maria Devi, which deliberately evokes the traditional religious art of Russian Orthodoxy, is both a post-Soviet and a post-modern icon: dressed in a white robe, headdress, and shawl, with jewelry and a headband, she has a vaguely eastern look, but her crucifix, shepherd's staff, and iconic pose point to the Christian tradition. If the portrait is supposed to supplant its Christian predecessors, as claimed by one young woman who tried to sell me "an icon of the Lord God Jesus-Maria Herself," it is an icon for a less domestic age, displayed in public transportation rather than in a corner at home.

Though Maria Devi Khristos was the official head of the Brotherhood (and without a doubt its primary object of worship), the movement was founded by Yuri Andreevich Krivonogov, a scientist who was born in the Voronezh region of the Russian Republic in 1941. While Oleg Karmaza (1993) describes Krivonogov as a technician and factory worker who changed jobs annually, other sources claimed that Krivonogov was a researcher in a top-secret laboratory that did experiments in artificial intelligence for the military (Lapikura, 1993). At some point not long before the establishment of the Brotherhood, Krivonogov abandoned his scientific career (in substance, if not in terms of discourse; see below) in favor of more mystical pursuits. After deciding that he was

"Adam and the Sun," he took the name "Ioann Swami" and founded the "Atma Institute of the Soul" in 1990.

Though he had by this point deserted his family, Krivonogov would not be alone for long; what followed was a romance that proves the old adage that there is, indeed, someone for everyone. While lecturing on psychic phenomena and "healing" the sick in Donetsk, Ukraine, Krivonogov met Marina Tsvigun, a married, thirty year-old woman whose life before her "godhood" was as mundane as her later exploits were sensational. In "The Earthly Path of Maria Devi Khristos," Tsvigun describes herself as a journalism graduate of Kiev State University, who, as a reporter, "openly fought with the mafia, lawlessness, and the party *nomenklatura*." Eventually she became a democratic member of the Congress of People's Deputies, before finally leaving behind earthly cares upon discovering her true divinity (*Ia esm' liubov*, 1993). Karmaza (1993) paints a less flattering portrait, noting that her degree in journalism was earned through a correspondence course, and that she had spent most of her career as a functionary in the Communist Youth League (Komsomol). Karmaza also claims that Tsvigun had worked as a waitress and a security guard, allegations which Tsvigun hotly denied (*Slovo Boga Zhivogo*, 1993).

Before meeting her future prophet, Tsvigun had recently undergone an experience that put Krivonogov's own mystical exploits to shame. Two weeks after her birthday, "with the help of a crisis that was created especially for me by Jesus Christ," Tsvigun's spirit traveled to the "Heavenly Sphere" during a near-death experience on the operating table (*Uchenie*, 1993, p. 71). The result, according to Tsvigun, was the "Day of the Great Explanation of the Planetary Logos of Jesus Christ into the body of the Mother of the World (Mother of God) MARIA DEVI KHRISTOS,"<sup>6</sup> after which she glowed with heavenly light and performed miracles (*Uchenie*, 1993, p. 77). Tsvigun's mother, however, told a different story: "Marina was having an abortion, and the doctors

overdid it with the anesthesia." After they managed to bring her back from clinical death, Tsvigun "suddenly raised her arms and started talking about God" (Marsiuk, 1993, p. 2). Though both Krivonogov and Tsvigun would come to view their meeting as a match made in heaven (they were, after all, the reincarnations of Adam and Eve), Tsvigun's family took a dimmer view when Tsvigun ran away with Krivonogov, leaving behind a mother, a husband, and a son (Marsiuk, 1993).

Soon Tsvigun and Krivonogov began to develop a following. Their first converts became, naturally enough, their "apostles," whose rank in the Brotherhood's hierarchy allowed them to serve as leaders in Krivonogov's and Tsvigun's absence. Though rumors about "brainwashing," "hypnosis," and "zombification" abounded, the stories told by most grieving parents suggest something far more mundane. While many commentators, particularly those who claimed to speak for the Russian Orthodox Church, regaled their readers with descriptions of Satanic "initiations" involving "psychotropic substances" and inverted crosses, none of the cultists who were detained after the Kiev incidents confirmed such rumors, even after they had been "cured" by Ukrainian psychiatrists and released into the custody of their parents (Vyzhutovich, 1993; Kolpakov, 1993). Apparently, however, even the "experts" involved could not come to agreement about the mental health of the members of the Brotherhood: according to Vyzhutovich, one group of "expert psychologists" who examined the detained "Brothers" for the Kiev Attorney General's Office spoke of the "difficulties" involved in curing "zombified" patients, but Oleg Nasinnyk, the "head psychiatrist of Kiev," pointed out that "religious fanaticism is not a psychosis," and that "zombification" and "brainwashing" are not part of the standard diagnostic repertoire of contemporary psychiatry.

In an article published under the eye-catching headline "I Was Among the 'White Brothers': The Confessions of a Young Man Who Managed to Break Out of the Trap,"

Larisa Alimamedova (1993) interviewed Sasha Viatkin, a university student whose matter-of-fact description of his life in the Brotherhood belies the hysterical tone of the article's title. Viatkin's story is similar to that of many cited in various newspaper articles. Like Viatkin, almost all of the members of the Brotherhood were young, many of them teenagers, and their first contact with the group was either at their school or during an organized social event. A young man or woman would start attending prayer meetings, and, after becoming more and more involved in the Brotherhood, leave his or her family to become a full-fledged member of the group. Sasha Viatkin came from a well-educated family of "romantics," including a brother who joined the militia in order to "cleanse our lives of all sorts of filth." Compared to his parents and his brother, Viatkin was the "most rational" member of the family, and he was moved to find out about the Brotherhood by his "curiosity." Viatkin joined the group with his girlfriend, with whom he immediately lost contact. According to Viatkin, the Brotherhood made sure to separate those who had close ties before joining the faithful, as well as forbid all contact with those relatives who had not joined the movement.

While Viatkin did accuse the cult of manipulating its members in order to "turn them into blind followers of their will," the methods he described involve neither drugs nor otherworldly forces. Viatkin claimed that all the "Brothers" (with the exception of the "apostles" and the leaders themselves) were on a strict starvation diet, which forbid all animal products, as well as nuts and beans. He himself felt the "exhaustion" and "apathy" brought on by protein deficiency, but found the "spiritual hunger" to be far worse: members of the Brotherhood were forbidden to read books and newspapers, listen to the radio, watch television, or speak about anything "earthly." Like many reporters and parents, Viatkin did not believe that the Brotherhood wanted "zombies" for followers, but he used the word figuratively, and did not suggest that the "fanaticism" of the cultists had a supernatural or even pharmacological cause.

## The Road to Kiev

Though specific aspects of the Brotherhood's doctrine will be discussed below, one key point is essential for understanding what happened in November of 1993: Maria Devi's apocalypticism. According to Tsvigun and Krivonogov, the appearance of Maria Devi rounded out a set of trinities that had been left incomplete by Judaism and Christianity: God the Father and God the Son were at last joined by God the Mother, and the Old and New Testaments were superseded (or fulfilled) by the Final Testament of Maria Devi Khristos (*Iusmalos* 8, 1993).<sup>7</sup> Tsvigun herself is the final incarnation of God, "Jesus-Maria," at times Christ, and at times the Mother of Christ (*Uchenie*, 1993). The "program" of IUSMALOS (an acronym formed from the names "Ioann Swami" and "Maria Devi Khristos" and used as alternate name for the Brotherhood) was "activated" on June 1, 1991, and would culminate in the apocalypse 1260 "biblical" days later. Maria Devi, the "Woman Clothed in the Sun" featured prominently in Revelations, would fulfill the prophesies of the New Testament, and fight the Antichrist Emmanuel, whose power held most of the world in its sway (*Uchenie*, 1993). On November 24, 1993, Tsvigun was to crucify herself in Kiev, which was now the "New Jerusalem" of the "promised land" located in the "Slavic region of the CIS" (*Iusmalos* 8, 1993). Tsvigun usually referred only to her own sacrifice, but Krivonogov repeatedly claimed that he would die on the cross along with his "wife," Maria Devi (*Iusmalos* 11, 1993). Three days later, Tsvigun and Krivonogov would rise again, taking the faithful with them into heaven, while leaving her enemies to perish by fire in a world-wide cataclysm.

Such talk made many in Kiev understandably nervous, especially since Tsvigun's and Krivonogov's (literally) inflammatory rhetoric was compounded by popular misunderstandings of the "program" of IUSMALOS. Reporters and government officials expressed the fear that Maria Devi's followers, who were repeatedly told by Tsvigun and Krivonogov to be prepared for

martyrdom, would commit mass suicide, turning the streets of Kiev into a slaughterhouse that would make Waco and Jonestown look tame in comparison. Indeed, the government and the media had no idea as to the scope of the problem which faced them. The literature of IUSMALOS repeatedly referred to the 144,000 "saints" who comprise Maria Devi's following, and who would watch her be crucified in Kiev. Most reports took Tsvigun and Krivonogov at their word, neglecting to mention that the figure of "144,000" came directly from Revelations 7:4, and should therefore not necessarily have been considered an accurate assessment of the Brotherhood's size. When all was said and done, only about seven or eight hundred cultists were arrested, and there is no evidence to suggest that a significant number of "Brothers" remain at large.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to dismiss the White Brotherhood as an insignificant disturbance to the peace; after all, as headline after headline would eventually declare, the end of the world did not take place. But the story being told in November was quite different, as Kiev nervously awaited the anticipated onslaught of 144,000 death-crazed, brainwashed cultists. By the beginning of November, "Brothers" from all over the former Soviet Union began answering Maria Devi's call to come to the Ukrainian capital, and President Kravchuk authorized "emergency measures" (Ignatov, 1993). Their arrival exacerbated tensions between Ukraine and Russia, since "the great majority" of Maria Devi's followers were Russian citizens (Ignatov, 1993), and because a truck from St. Petersburg had been stopped in Ukraine with three tons of White Brotherhood literature. One correspondent reported that many Ukrainians saw "the hand of Moscow" in this threat to Kiev, and that the Russian ambassador to Ukraine was called to a meeting at the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), where he was reproached for not doing anything to stop the flow of cultists from Russia into Ukraine (Lapikura, 1993). On November 6 the Russian Interior Minister vowed to cooperate with his Ukrainian counterparts in order to

solve the problem and capture Krivonogov. Numerous appeals for calm and cooperation were made by various Ukrainian government officials in the first week of November, but to little effect. Approximately 250 cultists had been arrested on November 1, and many of them declared a hunger strike, but these cultists so tried the patience of the medical personnel dealing with them that some hospital workers declared a "counter hunger strike to protest the hunger strikers' outrageous behavior" (Ignatov, 1993, p. 1). With the announcement that Maria Devi had moved the end of the world ahead to November 14, the panic grew. Schoolchildren were given special lessons on how to defend themselves from the Brotherhood, and schools rearranged their class schedules so that children would not have to walk home at night.

The denouement of the whole affair was more comic than tragic, much to the relief of Kiev's citizenry. By mid-November, guards had been posted all around St. Sophia square, the site of Maria Devi's intended crucifixion. On November 11, in a move reminiscent of their earlier infiltration of one of the Center of Our Lady's meetings in St. Petersburg, a group of cultists managed to enter the St. Sophia Cathedral disguised as tourists. Once inside, they threw off their robes, approached the altar, and tried to hold a service; when the OMON (special forces) attempted to force them out, the cultists used fire extinguishers to attack them, slightly injuring the police officers and causing approximately \$2000 in damage to the iconostasis. This clash proved to be far more significant than it initially seemed; when reinforcements arrived, a militiaman looked at the face of one of the cultists and shouted, "That's her—Maria Devi Khristos!" (Alekseev, 1993, p. 8) Though Tsvigun's face was by this point familiar to millions of people, no one had expected to see her dressed in a simple sweater and skirt. Also discovered among the group was the "new Adam," Krivonogov. So great was the fear of Krivonogov and Tsvigun that some feared that these were merely "doubles" of the cult's leaders, but they were later positively identified at militia

headquarters by Nikolai Tsvigun, Maria Devi's abandoned husband.

After her arrest, Tsvigun continued to behave in a manner that suggested that she truly believed in her own godhood. The MVD videotaped an interview with her two hours after her arrest, in which she claimed to have fulfilled her prophecy: "This is my scenario, and that is why I am here today" (Musafirova, 1993, p. 1). When asked about the son she deserted, Tsvigun cut off this line of questioning with the words, "Don't try to stage a melodrama with me, Satan!" (Musafirova, p. 1) During the entire interview, Tsvigun stared straight ahead into the camera, "lifting two fingers of her right hand every time she spoke of herself as God" (Kolomayets, 1993, p. 15). At the time of her arrest, it was unclear whether or not any charges would be brought against Tsvigun, since it was widely assumed that she would be declared unfit to stand trial. Krivonogov behaved calmly after his arrest, and continued to maintain that Tsvigun was the living God. On January 14, 1994 Krivonogov was found fit to stand trial on charges of disturbing the peace, compelling suicide, and seizure of property.

Though many feared that there would be riots or bloodshed on November 14 and possibly November 24, the days passed quietly, and, with the exception of a November 19 anonymous threat, the month proved uneventful. November 1993 did not bring the end of the world, but it did, for all intents and purposes, see the end of the White Brotherhood. It remained only to "rehabilitate" the arrested cultists, bring the leaders to trial, and try to understand exactly what had happened.

While the responses and interpretations of the Maria Devi phenomenon in the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian mass media range widely, most of them have focused on the spiritual vacuum left by the collapse of communism. A number of commentators called on the Russian Orthodox Church to take a more active role in the moral education of young people, implying that perhaps the Church could step in where the Party

had failed. The media response to the White Brotherhood is a topic of its own, and will be treated in a separate study. Here, however, I propose a brief examination of Maria Devi not only in terms of the undeniable moral vacuum reigning in the former Soviet Union, but also as a means of coping with (or perhaps playing upon) a variety of national traumas, from the collapse of empire to the Chernobyl disaster.

### God's Own Radiation

Though the eclectic mix of Orthodoxy, Buddhism, the Kabbalah, Hinduism, Theosophy and even music theory that comprise the doctrine of IUSMALOS complicates any attempt to connect Maria Devi's mysticism to anything so prosaic as recent history, one aspect of Krivonogov's and Tsvigun's teaching cannot help but appear particularly intriguing in the (post) Soviet context: the divine radiance called "Fokhat." While it may initially appear that Krivonogov borrowed this from the Theosophists merely to pepper his new age goulash of chakras, karma, Ein-Soph, and Adam Qadmon, the prominence of Fokhat in Tsvigun's and especially Krivonogov's writings makes the concept difficult to ignore. It is not only central to the theory of IUSMALOS, but it is also one of the relatively few features of the Brotherhood's doctrine that suggests a specifically Soviet connection.

When examining nearly any publication of the Great White Brotherhood, it is impossible not to notice the continual emphasis on light, or, as Tsvigun and Krivonogov would have it, "Light." All of Tsvigun's writings either begin or end with the phrase, "Let their be light!", which turns out to have more than Old Testament significance. As Tsvigun writes:

Light is a state of the Soul! Light is a state of the Heart! Light is a state of the Flesh! Light is a state of the Spirit! I Am Constantly Flowing Light: into the space of the world, the Universe... (*Ia esm' liubov'*, 1993, p. 120)

Maria Devi's light is connected both to the creation of the world and, implicitly, to the Transfiguration of Jesus in the New Testament. Tsvigun writes that she is the source of "Light," and that when her followers are "penetrated" by her, they become part of the "Flow of My Light," spreading it everywhere. When her body is finally destroyed through crucifixion, her subsequent resurrection will transform the world through light, resulting in the "Transfiguration" of her 144,000 "saints" into "Logoi of Light" (*Ia esm' liubov!* pp.120-122). The "coarse material membranes" of their bodies will fall away, leaving only luminous bodies composed of the seven-colored rainbow spectrum that comprises "universal light" (*Uchenie*, 1993, p. 7).

When Tsvigun and Krivonogov refer to this radiance simply as "Light," there would appear to be little to distinguish it from the standard metaphysical fare. But "Light" is only a simpler word for "Fokhat," a phenomenon that the Brotherhood's leaders repeatedly explain at length. The book-length *Teachings of Maria Devi Khristos* begins with the chapter, "The Nature of Fokhat," which is, indeed, as instructive as the book's title promises to be. For it is in such detailed explanations of IUSMALOS doctrine that we see Krivonogov's scientific background at work. This is not to suggest, as some commentators do, that Krivonogov actually used discoveries made during his career as a researcher in order to "brainwash" his followers (Lapikura, 1993; Alekseev, 1993; Burbyga and Grigor'ev, 1993); rather, Krivonogov's familiarity with scientific terminology allows him to add impressive-sounding words to his already esoteric repertoire. In "The Nature of Fokhat," the writers explain that, "[t]hanks to the saturation of space with luminous quantum energy," bodies and beings move, causing the "movement of the luminous ray and the vibration of sound." Such vibration is a sign of life, which means that everything that contains "quantum energy" is alive. This quantum energy is Fokhat, which is "constantly renewed in the earth's atmosphere." But there also exist four "black holes" that are utterly devoid of life, into which all those who reject Maria Devi will be plunged after

Judgment Day (*Uchenie*, p. 5).

This rather abstract definition of Fokhat appears to be somewhat at odds with the more popularized explanation provided by Krivonogov in the eighth issue of the Brotherhood's newspaper *Iusmalos*. Though he continually refers to the book of "Teachings," Krivonogov focuses instead on Fokhat as an aspect of Maria Devi that is absent among non-believers. According to the article "The Most Powerful Radiation is the Light-Bearing Fokhat of the Lord!" Fokhat begins to function only after the Living God Maria Devi Khristos has come to earth. Now Fokhat is a gift from Maria Devi to her 144,000 saints, who have become "carriers" of this divine light. By spreading Fokhat around the world, the Brothers are fighting a battle against the forces of the Antichrist Emmanuel, who cannot hope to combat Maria Devi's strength ("There is no power that can neutralize the radiation of Fokhat" [*Iusmalos* 8, p. 5]).

It is, of course, Fokhat's status as "radiation" that is so intriguing when one considers that the Great White Brotherhood was founded in Ukraine, whose capital it considered the "New Jerusalem." The people of Ukraine and the surrounding areas (Russia and Belarus) are justifiably "radiophobic" after the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, especially since the Soviet government took so much time to reveal the extent of the damage that Ukrainians have every reason to suspect that they have not been told the whole story (Gale and Hauser, 1988). Fears of cancer and mutations are widespread, and at times it seems that everyone has his or her own personal interpretation of what radiation is and how it works.<sup>8</sup> While I by no means intend to suggest that fear of radiation was a conscious motivation for joining the Brotherhood (one doubts that the teenagers who attended IUSMALOS events out of curiosity had radiation or Chernobyl on their minds), Krivonogov's discourse of Fokhat managed to incorporate widespread anxiety over radioactivity with the possibility of a "positive" energy that could counteract all "evil" or harmful forces.

Unlike the malignant radiation of Chernobyl, Fokhat is a two-edged sword: it is beneficial for those who wield it, but harmful to those who deny its power. The 144,000 "saints" who emit Fokhat are part of the general plan of IUSMALOS, which calls for the "Fokhatization" of the entire earth (*Uchenie* 10), an event that will take place after all 144,000 "open their hearts" and cause the earth to tremble (*Iusmalos* 8, p.5). The heart of each of these "saints" is a "bioaccumulator" that is filled with Fokhat when the heart is opened to Maria Devi. Every cell in the physical body (as well as in the various spiritual bodies each human being is supposed to have) is transformed by Fokhat. These "Fokhatized" saints then transmit the divine Fokhat to the rest of the "living and unliving world, irradiating everything in its path" (*Iusmalos* 8:5; emphasis in the original). The "Brothers" are never to stay long in any one place for two reasons: because they must "actively irradiate (!) with Fokhat the entire Promised Land" (*Iusmalos* 8:5; emphasis and exclamation point in the original), and because the strength of their Fokhat would be too dangerous if it built up in any one place (*Iusmalos* 8:8).

Krivotnogov writes that "demons cannot withstand Fokhat." Such "demons" quickly perish when they try to hurt a "Brother," particularly when they attempt to kill him, because they are infected with a "disease" that is "incurable." Krivotnogov adds that it is not only people who can fall victim to this "disease," but "entire regions" (*Iusmalos* 8:5). Essentially, Krivotnogov is describing a mystical version of radiation poisoning, but one that is much more discriminating than the after-effects of Chernobyl. With good reason Krivotnogov calls Fokhat a "weapon" of the faithful (*Iusmalos* 8:5); not only is it an essential part of carrying out the Brotherhood's "program," but it provides a built-in defense system against one's enemies. Thus in his article "How to Behave in Prisons, Detention Cells, and Mental Hospitals...(Instruction)" (apparently Ioann Swami was indeed enough of a prophet to foresee such an eventuality), Krivotnogov exhorts his followers to remain silent when

questioned by police, and to refuse to cooperate with the authorities in any way. The Brothers must be prepared to die, but can take comfort in knowing that their deaths are "necessary" in order for the "Forces of Vengeance" to be activated; the place of their torture will become the source of "famine and terrible diseases" for the torturers. In any case, the longer they stay in one place, irradiating their captors with Fokhat, "the sooner [the captors] will be visited by death and terrible suffering and agony" (*Iusmalos* 8:8).

By translating the reality of radiation into the discourse of mysticism, Krivotnogov and Tsvigun achieve two effects simultaneously: they assure their followers of their inherent power and invulnerability to harm, and they also neutralize radiation-related anxiety by turning Fokhat into a talisman that is beneficial to its bearer. The repeated use of radiation-related words to describe Fokhat reinforces the connection to the normally-terrifying effects of real radiation, but only to remind the faithful that they are now immune. In turning to nuclear power for a source of imagery, Krivotnogov was probably performing with atomic physics the same rhetorical tricks he accomplished with Theosophy and the Kabbalah: that is, he was simply borrowing from an easily available source.

Yet, though it is doubtful that such concerns played any serious role in the conscious decision to join the Brotherhood, the lexicon of radiation definitely left its mark on the Maria Devi phenomenon. The vocabulary of atomic energy "irradiated" the discourse not only of the cult, but of those who analyzed it. Lapikura (1993) refers to the Great White Brotherhood as a "Spiritual Chernobyl" (p. 5); Tsvigun's mother comically misunderstands the meaning of Krivotnogov's "Atma Institute of the Soul" and told a reporter that her daughter was promised "work in some institute of the soul and the atom" (Marsiuk, p. 2). On perhaps a more disturbing note, the cultists themselves took advantage of radiation-related fears after the arrest of their leaders; on November 19 UNIAN reported that "unidentified persons,



calling themselves members of the 'White Brotherhood,' are ringing up the law enforcement bodies...of Ukraine [and] threatening sabotage and terrorist acts at atomic and thermal power stations" (UNIAN, 1993, p. 53).

### **Maria Devi as a Soviet Joke**

The doctrine of Fokhat is also connected (albeit obliquely) to a broader interpretation of the Maria Devi phenomenon: the cult's preoccupation with "transformation" or "transfiguration" can be viewed as a parody of the "restructuring" (*perestroika*) of the Soviet Union begun by Gorbachev. This is not to say that the leaders of the Brotherhood (despite Tsvigun's "democratic" past) sympathized with the forces of political reform; quite to the contrary, the Brotherhood claimed that Yeltsin and Kravchuk have been "zombified" by the forces of evil, and that Khasbulatov's forehead was surrounded with a "dark aura" (*Stupaite za mnoi*, 1993, p. 1).<sup>9</sup> Instead, Krivonogov's and Tsvigun's response to the Soviet past is twofold: first, the omnivorous, indiscriminate discourse of IUSMALOS reclaims Soviet cliches for its own purposes; second, IUSMALOS offers one possible way to transform an unpleasant past into a heavenly future.

Though the concept of Fokhat is integral to the Brotherhood's conception of transfiguration, its strongest link to the old Soviet Union is through parody. With Fokhat, Krivonogov's adaptation of Blavatsky's Theosophy becomes comical to the ex-Soviet ear, for seventy years of slogans have inevitably had their effect on the linguistic consciousness of Russian speakers. The Brotherhood's call for the "Fokhatization" of the CIS is oddly reminiscent of "electrification" in one of Lenin's famous slogans: "Socialism = Soviet Power + the Electrification of the Country"<sup>10</sup>; once again, Krivonogov combines the languages of science and sorcery. The emphasis on light and radiation also evokes one of the essential cliches of Stalinism: Stalin's "radiant future" now becomes an "irradiated future."<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, much of the Brotherhood's salient features can be seen as post-totalitarian camp. The term IUSMALOS itself is a rather clumsy acronym, reminiscent of such infelicitous Soviet-isms such as GOSSTRAKH ("Government Insurance") and GOSSELPROM ("State Agricultural Industry") that were the butt of so many Soviet jokes. Even the announcement that the end of the world would be moved ahead from November 24 to November 14 was reminiscent of Stalin's appeal to fulfill the first Five-Year Plan in four years. The countless portraits of Maria Devi can be seen not only as an attempt at a twentieth-century icon; they also serve as a substitute for a more recent transposition of the icon into the secular world: the countless posters of Soviet leaders that used to adorn every office in the pre-Gorbachev era, especially under Stalin.

Indeed, the comparison to the Stalin era is particularly instructive. For if Stalin founded what the Soviets referred to as the "cult of personality," Tsvigun and Krivonogov gave birth to a cult *without* personality. Here again we must venture into the realm of Soviet political humor, this time pertaining to the era in which Tsvigun spent her formative years. A popular joke of the 1970s concerned Brezhnev and Stalin: "Is there a cult of personality under Brezhnev?" The answer was: "Yes, there's a cult, but there's no personality." Curiously, despite the continued efforts in the press to portray Krivonogov as a Svengali or a Rasputin, the joke holds true for Maria Devi as much as it did for Brezhnev. Whether or not Krivonogov was the genius behind the Great White Brotherhood, it was Tsvigun who was the official object of worship.<sup>12</sup> And it was Tsvigun who presented the greatest mystery. We must recall that Tsvigun was never reported to have made a public appearance in the months before her arrest; she apparently did appear in public during the formative months of the cult, but that was before the Brotherhood had gained any media attention. Even after reports by Karmaza and Marsiuk filled in the details of Tsvigun's background, the present-day Tsvigun (that is, Maria Devi Khristos)

was only a face in a photograph. This lack of information about Maria Devi supported the notion that Tsvigun was merely the first victim of Krivonogov's powers of "zombification." Thus Maria Devi's image became a cross between the icon of a self-aggrandizing pretender and something akin to a lost teenager's face on a Western milk carton. The cult had no center; to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, there was no "there" there.

And yet it is the very malleability of Maria Devi's image that suggests the heart of the Brotherhood's appeal: the ability to define oneself anew. This ethos of transformation certainly suited its times; as the Soviet system collapsed at an astoundingly rapid pace, and as previously held beliefs were questioned and perhaps discarded, the slogan *perestroika* was taken literally by people around the country. Teachers of Scientific Marxism now began to lecture on the history of religion; politicians left the Communist Party and distanced themselves from their *apparatchik* past; in Tsvigun's own native Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk barely managed to turn himself from a communist into a nationalist in time to cling to power.

Tsvigun, though defensive about what she considered misrepresentations of her previous "earthly" existence, was noteworthy for making her "unenlightened" past public. In May of 1993, a new brochure replaced the familiar photos of Tsvigun on the windows of the Moscow metro: a condensed version of *The Earthly Path of Maria Devi Khristos*. This curious document, also published in various issues of *Iusmalos* and in Tsvigun's poetry collection *Ia Esm' Liubov'*, tells the story of Tsvigun's life before she became aware of her divinity. With its list of previous education and places of employment, the story of Tsvigun's first thirty years is striking precisely because it is so banal: it is a generic hybrid of the saint's life and a resume, God's *curriculum vitae*. Even the style reflects both influences: "Before Her Coming to the World as the Lord-Messiah, MARIA DEVI-KHRISTOS received a journalism degree at Kiev University. Worked

in a newspaper, in radio. Was a member of the Journalists' Union (of the former USSR), openly fought with the mafia, lawlessness, and the party *nomenklatura*" (*Ia Esm' Liubov'*, p. 128). A footnote also provides a capsule biography of Ioann Swami, a "famous computer scientist." It ends by telling the reader where more information can be found, thus rounding out the impression that one has been reading nothing more or less than an advertisement.

While it is easy to laugh at such a clumsy attempt at auto-hagiography, there is still a message to be found: Tsvigun had a life like any other life in the old Soviet Union, but managed to transform herself completely. Rather than deny or hide the past, she has simply made it irrelevant. Thus Maria Devi, who, as Marina Tsvigun, had been just as much a part of the "system" as had the parents whose children joined her cult, saw no contradiction in telling her followers that their parents had been corrupted by their participation in Soviet society. In the doctrine of IUSMALOS, the Christian tradition of sacrifice and absolution becomes essentially "Soviet." The Brotherhood's promise of a new life is essentially a religious attempt to improve on one of the more prominent tricks in the arsenal of political reformers: initiation into the White Brotherhood did not mean being "born again," but rather being "posthumously rehabilitated" through the promised sacrifice of the cult's leaders.

#### Notes

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<sup>2</sup>This is not to say that the Soviet Union was devoid of sectarian movements; the European USSR was home to Protestant groups such as the Pentacostalists. But since proselytizing of all kinds was forbidden, the impact of such

movements was necessarily small.

<sup>3</sup>In fact the lines between “mainstream” and “fringe” were thoroughly blurred by the Soviet opposition to organized religion. The leaders of both of the movements treated in the present study claim to have once been part of the underground or “catacomb” Russian Orthodox Church, which did not accept the authority of the state-sanctioned Moscow Patriarch.

<sup>4</sup>Though it is difficult to gauge the following such groups have attracted, Western missionaries have clearly devoted no small amount of effort to attempts at filling the post-Soviet spiritual vacuum. American Christian programs such as the “Hour of Power” and the “700 Club” can be viewed throughout the region, and Billy Graham’s 1992 visit to Moscow was preceded by an advertising campaign whose scope was rivaled only by that of the manufacturers of the Snickers bar. In July 1993, protests from the indignant Russian Orthodox Church led the Supreme Soviet to ban the activities of foreign missionaries in the Russian Federation.

The efforts of less traditional religions are no less intensive. The Unification Church has established summer camps outside of Moscow, and, according to a professor at Tomsk State University, has also financed a small exchange program for students from Tomsk. Moscow State University’s Journalism School sports an “L. Ron Hubbard Reading Room,” thanks to donations from Scientologists. But the most thorough publicity campaign was waged by the Society of Krishna Consciousness, which was perhaps the first group to exploit the commercial possibilities of the metro in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Posters calling on Russians to read *The Bhagavad-Gita As It Is* adorned every metro car; thanks to a model of capitalist efficiency, those who were intrigued by the advertisement only had to step off the train and walk up the stairs in order to buy the book, which was sold in most major metro stations.

<sup>5</sup>In this sense, of course, the Center can claim victory over its arch-rival, the Brotherhood. Apparently, the leaders of the Brotherhood had at some point attempted a rapprochement with Bereslavsky, only to denounce the Center when

Bereslavsky failed to accept that Maria Devi was, indeed, the Mother of God (Kolosovskaia, 1993). Bereslavsky became a special enemy for the Brotherhood, and was repeatedly denounced in their literature (*Iusmalos* 10:4; *Stupaite za mnoi*) and even in Maria Devi’s poetry (*Ia Esm’ Liubov’!* pp. 102-104). On June 14, 1993, members of the Brotherhood disrupted a St. Petersburg meeting of the Center and started shouting “Church of Satan!” Bereslavsky, whom Maria Devi had earlier insulted by referring to him as “kike filth,” responded by calling her a “village cow” and suggesting that, while her soul was on one of its many voyages into space, an evil spirit had been “cleaning out” a certain area of her anatomy (Shchipkov, p. 2).

<sup>6</sup>In an apparent effort to make their words seem weightier, the leaders of the Great White Brotherhood capitalize with abandon. The name Maria Devi Khristos is always written by Tsvigun and Krivonogov in all capital letters; more often than not, their sentences end in exclamation points. The result is sentences that have scarcely a single word starting in the lower case. The word “Fokhat” is also frequently spelled in all capital letters, but since some of Tsvigun’s writings capital only the first letter of the word, I have chosen the less irritating alternative.

<sup>7</sup>Though the idea of “God the Mother” could be considered simply an obvious addition to the Christian “divine family,” it seems, like much of the Brotherhood’s doctrine, to have its roots in the Theosophy of Helena Blavatsky. Blavatsky wrote of the three “Logoi” (Father, Mother, and Son) who were the “antetype” of the Christian trinity (Blavatsky X:332). For a thorough history of Theosophy in Russia, see Carlson.

<sup>8</sup>One well-educated, middle-aged Muscovite woman informed me that she would never have a thick carpet in her apartment, since that would be inviting radiation poisoning. She reasoned that radioactive particles are lighter than air, and therefore mix with everyday dust. Dust enters apartments through windows, and naturally settles into heavy carpets. If one has a wooden floor or a thin

carpet, one can dust regularly and avoid undue exposure to radiation. Thick carpets are impossible to rid of dust completely, and therefore keeping them in one's home is tantamount to asking for lung cancer.

<sup>9</sup>Tsvigun and (particularly) Krivonogov were certainly never reticent about criticizing post-Soviet governments. One of Krivonogov's articles is entitled "'Privatization' is New Criminalization, and the 'Constitution' is the Same Old Prostitution" (*Iusmalos* 10:7). In another article, Krivonogov denounces "democracy" and "Russian capitalism" as words unknown to the Living God (*Iusmalos* 8:7). Though the Brotherhood originated in the Ukraine, most of its pre-November anti-government harangues were directed at Moscow rather than Kiev.

<sup>10</sup>The chances that an ex-Soviet would think of this slogan in connection with "Fokhatization" are rather high, because the slogan is memorable thanks to the jokes it later inspired: if Socialism = Soviet Power + the Electrification, then by commutativity we can say that Soviet Power = Socialism without Electricity.

<sup>11</sup>"Radiant" here is *svetlyi*, which comes from the word *svet* (light), itself a key term in the lexicon of IUSMALOS.

<sup>12</sup>According to Alekseev, early versions of the cult's materials featured photos of both Tsvigun and Krivonogov, usually standing together. But after a warrant was issued for Krivonogov's arrest, Ioann Swami's visage was superseded by that of Maria Devi ("Khishchniki v belykh odezhdakh, ili patriarkh sbezhal," p. 8).

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