Contested Victims:
Jehovah's Witnesses and the Russian Orthodox Church,
1990-2004

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ABSTRACT

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(Under the direction of Donald J. Raleigh)

This essay analyzes how two religious organizations in post-Soviet Russia, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), grappled with the legacy of the Soviet past in light of Russia's emerging democracy. Unlike other post-authoritarian states, the Russian government did little to address state repression, instead leaving society to sort out the victims from the collaborators and perpetrators. Witness and Orthodox versions of Soviet religious repression emerged in this climate of fractured narratives. The Witnesses made their Soviet-era repression into a rallying point for their international movement, and within Russia, into a platform for demanding equal rights. The ROC responded by contesting both the Witnesses' depiction of Soviet repression and their right to practice in Russia. The Witnesses exposed a major fault line in Russia's transition to democracy. The battle for control over religion's Soviet legacy demonstrates the malleability and instability of Russia's relationship to its Soviet past.

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“May the Russian field remain ripe for spiritual harvesting, and may thousands more there join in the precious privilege of helping yet others on the road to life.”¹

“The rebirth of a strong Russia and of life worthy of the people can occur only through the restoration of Orthodoxy. As the Apostle Paul said, ‘If God is with us, then who is against us?’”²

An American Jehovah’s Witness penned the first passage for a 1995 issue of *Awake!*, the Witnesses’ bimonthly magazine, after visiting Moscow and talking to his Russian compatriots. He had reason to celebrate. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Witnesses had emerged as one of the fastest growing religions in Russia, proving remarkably adept at adjusting to the changing social and political situation. The second passage appeared in a booklet published by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in 2002, attacking religious “sects,” including the Jehovah’s Witnesses. While the ROC had experienced a strong revival in the post-Soviet period, many members expressed deep concerns over the sudden growth of American religious organizations. The “spiritual harvesting” of both the Witnesses and the ROC took place in the turbulent environment of Russia’s transition to democracy. During a time of uncertainty, religions offered Russians comparatively stable communities based on long-standing traditions and beliefs. They also provided their members with strikingly different views on the emerging democratic state and the legacy of the Soviet Union.

This essay analyzes how two religious organizations in post-Soviet Russia, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Russian Orthodox Church, grappled with the legacy of the Soviet past in light of Russia’s emerging democracy. I focus on the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Russian

¹ “A Return Visit to Russia,” *Awake!*, February 22, 1995.

² *Sekty: Kak ne popast v kapkan* (Moscow: Blago, 2002), 102.

Orthodox Church, two organizations that wrote extensively on their communities' persecution by the Soviet state after its collapse in 1991. How did the Jehovah's Witnesses cast their organization's repression in the Soviet Union and what did they hope to gain from their particular portrayal of the past? I also address how the ROC responded to the Witnesses and contested both their depiction of Soviet religious repression and their right to practice in post-Soviet Russia. Why did the ROC feel the need to challenge the Witnesses and how did it do so? Most importantly, what does this fierce contestation suggest about the relationship between religion, the Soviet past, and the emerging democratic state?

Current scholarship on the post-Soviet religious climate has been conducted almost entirely through the lens of the Russian state and Russia's "traditional religions," while rarely taking the views of nontraditional religions into account.³ Yet it was precisely these groups that fueled intense debate about the proper margins of religious toleration in post-Soviet Russia. Perhaps more than any other religious organization outside of the ROC, the Witnesses sparked discussion over the role of religion in post-Soviet society. In a 1999 survey of Russians' attitudes toward various religious organizations, respondents were more likely to recognize the Witnesses and to have a negative impression of them than almost any other religion.⁴ The Russian state found nontraditional religions so threatening that it

³ "O svobode sovesti i religioznykh ob"edineniiakh," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, September 16, 1997. For current scholarship on the post-Soviet religious climate, Nathaniel Davis's work, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy*, contains an excellent discussion of major issues confronted by the Russian Orthodox Church (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003). Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism*, discusses the post-Soviet politics of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the church's role in the development of post-Soviet civil society (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005). Michael Bourdeaux and John Witte Jr. have produced an edited volume on the problem of Christian missionaries and the Russian Orthodox Church. *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999). John Anderson has written about the intersection of religion and politics in post-Soviet Russia, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Michael Bourdeaux has also produced an edited volume on this subject, *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995).

enshrined a legal distinction between traditional and nontraditional religions in its 1997 *Law on Religious Freedom and Religious Associations*. The law legally defines “traditional religions” as Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism. In order to understand why many Russians, particularly members of the Russian Orthodox Church, felt the Witnesses must be excluded from Russian religious life and from Russian society, we need to understand what the Witnesses were saying and doing that was perceived as so offensive.

To accomplish this task, I give close textual study to official Witness literature.⁵ Owing to the lack of published sources by individual Russian Witnesses, this essay addresses only the official views of the Jehovah’s Witnesses expressed by the central organization in Brooklyn, in particular in their two bimonthly magazines, *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, from 1990 through 2004. These publications serve a dual purpose: to convey a consistent message to the flock, and to appeal to the uninitiated. The two magazines form the basis for their missionary work, providing topics of discussion with potential members. *The Watchtower* is the Witnesses’ primary means of conveying their basic doctrines and beliefs. *Awake!* covers a range of human interest stories from a Witness perspective. Both magazines are published simultaneously in English and Russian. Yearbooks provide annual reports of the organization’s activity worldwide as well as statistics on membership growth. Lastly, the Witnesses maintain two websites, one for members and potential members that consists largely of online versions of their publications, and one run by their Office of Public

⁴ Thirty-eight percent of respondents said they were not familiar with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, while forty-seven percent had a negative attitude toward them. In comparison, ninety-four percent of respondents had a favorable attitude toward the Russian Orthodox Church. Kimmo Kaariainen and Dmitri Furman, “Religiosity in Russia in the 1990s,” in *Religious Transition in Russia*, ed. Matti Kotiranta (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2000).

⁵ A note on transliteration: When Jehovah’s Witnesses’ names appear in the original text in English, I have used version. In all other instances, I have followed the Library of Congress’ guidelines.

Information and geared toward researchers and journalists, which focuses primarily on the persecution of Witnesses in various countries.⁶

To discuss how the Orthodox community reacted to the Witnesses, I tap a wide range of sources that convey the views not only of church hierarchs, but also of the larger Russian Orthodox community. These include materials distributed by numerous Orthodox “anticult” organizations, which the church formed in the 1990s to combat the growth of new religious movements, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses. In particular, I draw on the work of Aleksandr Dvorkin, the head of the church’s most prominent anticult organization, the Saint Irenaeus of Lyon Information-Consultation Center.⁷ I also analyze books and pamphlets written by lay members and clergy, articles from the Orthodox daily newspaper *Pravoslavnaia Moskva* (Orthodox Moscow), and the *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* (Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate), the church’s monthly magazine. Lastly, I examine court transcripts of a civil trial in Moscow (hereafter, “Moscow trial”) from 1998 to 2001, in which city authorities attempted to deny the Witnesses local registration. The trial provides a valuable window into one particular site of conflicting representations.⁸ The views of the

⁶ The Witness website for members and potential members is available at <http://www.watchtower.org>. The Witness website for researchers and journalists is available at <http://www.jw-media.org>. A final note: biblical citations in the text refer to the *Witnesses’ New World Translation*.

⁷ Dvorkin’s biography deserves brief mention. Dvorkin emigrated to the United States in 1977, where he received US citizenship and was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church. He returned to Russia in 1992 to work at the Department of Religious Education at the Moscow Patriarchate. Since 1993, Dvorkin has become the church’s unofficial spokesperson on the alleged dangers of new religious movements, publishing numerous articles and books on the subject and appearing frequently in the Russian mainstream media. See Alina Dal’skaia, “Vozvrashchenie iz N’iiu-Iorka v Moskvu beceda s Aleksandrom Dvorkinym,” interview with Aleksandr Dvorkin, *Foma*, May 20, 2003, <http://www.fomacenter.ru/> (accessed March 10, 2005).

⁸ The civil trial of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Golovinskii Intermunicipal Court (Moscow), from 29 September 1998 through 27 February 2002, has been transcribed from audio recordings by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and is available online at *The Authorized Site of the Office of Public Information of Jehovah’s Witnesses*, <http://www.jw-media.org/region/europe/russia/index.htm> (accessed 21 March 2005). All subsequent citations are listed as “Moscow Trial.”

ROC presented in this paper should not be taken as representative of the entire Russian Orthodox community, but rather of a significant contingent of members, who generally enjoyed the approval of the official church hierarchy and whose works were often published and sanctioned by the church.

Witnessing to Russia and the Soviet Union

The Jehovah's Witnesses formed in the 1870s in the United States, when founder Charles Taze Russell began publishing tracts proclaiming Christ's return and the coming of the Apocalypse. Russell's prophecies attracted followers, who met informally and preached his message, forming a loose-knit organization and calling themselves simply "Bible Students." In 1879, Russell established the magazine, *Zion's Watch Tower* (later changed to *The Watchtower*), whose distribution became the focal point of the Bible Students' organizational work. In 1908, the organization moved its offices to Brooklyn, which remains its headquarters today. Following Russell's death in 1916, his lawyer, Judge J.F. Rutherford, took control of the organization, overseeing a shift toward a more hierarchical and centralized structure, and giving the movement a new name, the Jehovah's Witnesses, in 1931. Throughout the twentieth century, the Witnesses consistently managed to extend their reach into new locales by making resources and literature available in almost every country and in every major language.⁹

⁹ Official 2004 data put their total membership at just over six and a half million worldwide. For historical background on the Witnesses, see former Witness M. James Penton's fairly comprehensive, if biased work, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of the Jehovah's Witnesses*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). For an official Witness account, see: *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 1993).

The Jehovah's Witnesses date their rather inauspicious arrival in tsarist Russia to 1891, when Russell visited Kishinev as part of one of his many tours of Europe. Russell expressed strong disappointment with the visit, seeing "no opening or readiness for the truth in Russia."¹⁰ Nonetheless, beginning soon thereafter, both the Bible Students organization in Germany and the central Watch Tower Society office in Brooklyn received sporadic letters from Ukrainians asking for materials.¹¹ In the wake of the Revolution of 1905, the state allowed limited religious toleration, as a result of which the Jehovah's Witnesses received official registration in Russia in September 1913.¹² The onset of World War I, and the subsequent Revolution of 1917, however, made it impossible for the Witnesses to establish any serious presence. Prior to World War II, the Witnesses had little success gaining a toehold on Soviet territory.

World War II had lasting effects on the fate of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. In the neighboring territories of western Ukraine and Moldavia, German and Romanian Bible Students managed, despite strong opposition from the state and local Orthodox and Catholic Churches, to win a small community of adherents by the late 1920s. Border changes during the war brought these fledgling Witness communities under Soviet control. In 1946, the Witnesses estimated their total membership in the Soviet Union at 4,797.¹³ The state regarded the local population in these annexed areas, and the Witnesses in particular, with deep suspicion as to their loyalty to the Soviet Union. The Witnesses were often targeted for

¹⁰ *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers*, 406.

¹¹ *2002 Yearbook*, 122. See also: N.S. Gordienko, *Rossiiskie Svideteli Iegovy: Istoriia i sovremennost'* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Pravda, 2000), 22.

¹² Gordienko, *Rossiiskie Svideteli Iegovy*, 223-24.

¹³ *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers*, 508.

their strict political neutrality, which bars members from serving in the military, working in the government or civil service, voting, signing petitions, or singing the national anthem. The location of the organization's center in the United States made the Witnesses particularly suspect and vulnerable to accusations of disloyalty. Further, the Witnesses illegally printed and distributed organizational literature throughout the Soviet period. They also held meetings and organized missionary work in their communities. These actions often brought them into conflict with the state, which quickly became aware of this new community within its borders. Arrests of Witnesses started in earnest in 1947.¹⁴

In March 1951, the Council of Ministers issued a decree for the permanent exile to Siberia of all Baltic, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Moldavian Witnesses and their families, an order that affected roughly 8,500 people.¹⁵ In 1965, the Supreme Soviet lifted the special conditions of exile and allowed Witnesses to leave the resettlement areas, while placing restrictions on their ability to return to their home villages.¹⁶ According to Witness sources, this restored freedom of movement allowed the organization, through secret communications

¹⁴ A February 19, 1951, report from the Ministry of State Security to Stalin on the Jehovah's Witnesses asserts that from 1947 to 1950 the police made 1,048 arrests and confiscated five printing presses and more than 35,000 pieces of literature. *Zapiska MGB SSSR* "O neobkhodimosti vyseleniia iz zapadnykh oblastei Ukrainy i Belorussii, Moldavskoi, Latviiskoi, Litovskoi i Estonskoi SSR uchastnikov antisovetskoi sekty iegovistov i chlenov ikh semei," *Archive of the President of the Russian Federation*, f. 3, op. 58, d. 180, l. 52-53, reprinted in Gordienko, *Svideteli Iegovy*, 196-99. The Witness organization also drew attention to their Soviet compatriots in 1949 by sending an official request for legal recognition to the Ministry of the Interior, through a delegation of Witnesses to the Supreme Soviet in Moscow. "Svideteli Iegovy v Rossii," *The Authorized Site of the Office of Public Information of Jehovah's Witnesses*, <http://www.jw-media.org/region/europe/russia/index.htm> (accessed 16 November 2004).

¹⁵ According to the MGB, the Witness community in February 1951 included a total of 8,576 people and 3,048 families. *Zapiska MGB SSSR*, "O neobkhodimosti." The Jehovah's Witnesses place the number of exiles at 9,500; this number may reflect the inclusion of those previously arrested in the total. *2002 Yearbook*, 166, 169.

¹⁶ Prior to this, the death of Stalin in 1953 resulted in the release of some Witnesses from settlements and prisons. *2002 Yearbook*, 174. *Ukaz Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR* "O sniatii ogranichenii po spetsposeleniiu s uchastnikov sekt 'svideteli iegovy,' 'istinno-pravoslavnye khristiane,' 'innokent'evtsy,' 'adventisty-reformisty' i chlenov ikh semei," Moscow, Kremlin, September 30, 1965. No 4020-VI. Reprinted in Gordienko, *Rossiiskie Svideteli Iegovy*, 207.

between Brooklyn and local leaders, to strengthen their organizational structure, appoint members in the community to spearhead missionary drives, and to print and distribute literature among the flock.¹⁷ Nonetheless, harassment, police searches, and arrests continued through the early 1980s.¹⁸ Official Witness statistics estimated the organization's membership in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s at 26,905.¹⁹

Creating a Post-Soviet Reality

The first sign of a thaw in repression came in 1989, when authorities allowed thousands of Witnesses to travel to Poland for an international Witness convention.²⁰ In the wake of a new religious law granting broad religious freedoms, the Witness organization was registered in the Russian Federation on March 27, 1991.²¹ Members were now able to conduct their missionary work openly and to distribute literature. With strong financial and personnel support from Brooklyn, the Witness organization grew rapidly in the post-Soviet period. In addition to building numerous local Kingdom Halls (Witness meeting places), the organization finished construction in 1997 of a central headquarters in the Saint Petersburg suburb of Solnechnoe.²² Jehovah's Witnesses also held numerous regional, national, and international gatherings on Russian territory. The organization often rented out conference

¹⁷ *2002 Yearbook*, 224-25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 228, 230.

¹⁹ This figure may underestimate Witness membership in the 1980s, as the Witnesses lacked comprehensive records of their members at this time. Given this uncertainty, the Witnesses did not include Soviet membership totals in the organization's yearly service reports until 1991. "Motivated By My Family's Loyalty to God," *Awake!*, February 22, 1998, 17.

²⁰ *2002 Yearbook*, 232.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 233-24.

²² *1998 Yearbook*, 26.

halls and stadiums for these events, using the Olympic swimming pools of Soviet sports centers to stage mass baptisms of new members.²³ The scale and prominence of the conventions, which were often held in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, brought the Witnesses a great deal of media attention. Public, mass gatherings of religious believers in previously secular places represented a new and startling phenomenon to Russians, a stark contrast to the Soviet period.

Through 1995, official Witness statistics grouped Russian membership totals with those of the other states of the former Soviet Union, making it difficult to gauge growth in the Russian republic. In 1996, Witness data put the total membership in Russia at 61,843 members, with 493 congregations.²⁴ By 2003, membership had grown to 126,896, with 1,246 congregations.²⁵ Who joined the Witnesses during this period? The lack of empirical data on the organization's Russian membership makes it difficult to offer a definitive answer. Sociological studies of the organization in other contexts have shown that the Witnesses attract members mainly from those in the lower-middle and working class, those employed in clerical and white-collar work, those who are self-employed, and those without advanced degrees.²⁶ It is unclear whether these generalizations hold for the Russian Witness community, although the organization has not attracted any prominent Russian intellectuals

²³ "East and West, Jehovah Strengthens His People," *The Watchtower*, January 1, 1994, 8.

²⁴ *1997 Yearbook*, 37-38. In calculating active membership, I am relying on the Witness's yearly service reports. The reports provide totals of "average publishing," or the average number of members who participate in witnessing over the year. The average statistics may reflect slightly lower membership totals than the total number of baptized Witnesses, on which the Witnesses do not provide statistical data. The Witnesses also do not provide figures on those who have left the organization.

²⁵ *2004 Yearbook*, 26-27.

²⁶ Andrew Holden, *Jehovah's Witnesses: Portrait of a Contemporary Religious Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 42-45, and James A. Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: A Sociological Study of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 136.

or members of the Russian government. What is certain about the Witnesses' membership is that by the mid-1990s, it had fundamentally changed from a small, committed group of long-standing, clandestine believers to a membership dominated by neophytes, who had joined in a climate of relative religious freedom. At the same time, the preexisting community of believers offered a strong foundation on which to build a base of support in Russia for further expansion.²⁷

Examining the Past Through Witness Eyes

Beginning in 1989, the Witness organization made the stalwart resistance of its Soviet members to state repression into a powerful example for Witnesses worldwide of how to remain faithful despite state and societal opposition.²⁸ In numerous articles in *The Watchtower* and *Awake!*, the organization characterized the Soviet experience as an affirmation of its core beliefs. Witnesses believe that in 1914, Christ cast out Satan from heaven, sending him down to earth, where he is the cause of earthly suffering. Since that moment, Witnesses have waited for Armageddon to occur, when Christ will reveal himself to humanity, defeat Satan, and establish his reign on earth.²⁹ Witnesses preach that worldly governments, along with all other secular institutions, having been irreparably corrupted by

²⁷ Long-time members occupied positions of authority both on a local level as elders (leaders) of their congregations, and on the national level. The head of the Russian Witnesses, Vasilii Kalin, was a third generation Witness and survivor of the 1951 exile.

²⁸ For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses have produced a film for members and the broader public on the Soviet experience, entitled *Faithful Under Trials: Jehovah's Witnesses in the Soviet Union* (Administrative Center for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 2001). The Witnesses also devoted a 136-page section of their 2002 Yearbook to an account of their organization in Ukraine from the turn of the century to the present day.

²⁹ Witnesses have made numerous predictions as to when Armageddon would occur, most recently in 1975. For an overview of Witness doctrine, see *Knowledge That Leads to Everlasting Life* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 1995), and *What Does God Require of Us?* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1996).

Satan, will be destroyed by Christ in Armageddon. Viewed through this framework, the Soviet state represented an attempt by Satan to destroy God's organization and its supporters, the Jehovah's Witnesses. This was one reason why Soviet Witnesses refused to cooperate with the state. Witnesses frequently cite Christ's description of his followers: "They are no part of this world, just as I am no part of this world" (John 17:16).³⁰ Witnesses must demonstrate their faith by remaining "no part of this world."

Given the corruption of worldly government, Witnesses teach their members to expect and prepare for persecution by states hostile to the organization's message.³¹ Victor Popovych, born in a Soviet prison to an arrested Jehovah's Witness, offered this testimonial: "When the government changed, the officials changed loyalties, but we remained the same. We realized that the real source of our troubles was revealed in the Bible."³² This disillusionment with government was reinforced by numerous biographical sketches of Soviet Witnesses that appeared in official publications. Many of these men and women were Ukrainians and Moldavians who had already been persecuted under Romanian and Polish rule and by the Nazi occupying forces before ending up in the Soviet prison system.³³ The consistent harassment under multiple regimes, justified by strikingly similar charges of political treason and disloyalty, offered evidence for the Witnesses of the rightness of their message. Indeed, historian Walter Kolarz noted in 1961 that "had the Soviet communists a better knowledge of Jehovahist theology, they would leave them alone, for persecution is likely to confirm them in

³⁰ *Knowledge that Leads to Everlasting Life*, 49.

³¹ "Defending Our Faith," *The Watchtower*, December 1, 1998, 13.

³² *2002 Yearbook*, 203.

³³ Vasilii Kalin's father, for example, was assaulted by the Germans as an alleged communist. He was later exiled to Siberia by the Soviet Union and accused of being an American spy. *Ibid.*, 141.

their views that the ‘satanic powers’ will stop at nothing to destroy ‘Jehovah's theocratic organization’ in the final stage of world history.”³⁴

If Witness beliefs helped members make sense of repression, they also provided a clear and consistent strategy for members worldwide on how to respond to such persecution should a similar situation arise in the future. The organization reminds members of Christ’s suffering and encourages them to rejoice in the chance to follow in Christ’s stead and to act as witnesses of true Christianity in the face of persecution, even death. Since 1991, *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* have frequently included testimonials of Witnesses, most often from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, who defended their faith in hostile conditions. Mariya Popovych, the mother of the aforementioned Victor, was arrested in 1950 while five months pregnant. She recounted her prison sentence in the 2002 Yearbook: “Well, when I was in prison, I didn’t get discouraged. I had learned from God’s Word, the Bible, that you will be happy if you suffer for being a Christian, not a murderer or a thief. And I was happy. I had joy in my heart. They put me in solitary confinement and I walked back and forth in my cell and sang.”³⁵ The belief that true Christians proclaim their righteousness by witnessing their faith to others bars Witnesses from retreating underground in the face of outward pressure to conform. For the organization, silent faith is no faith at all. A 1991 *Watchtower* enforced the idea that Witnesses must proclaim their faith even from inside prison walls: “After the [second world] war, the authorities mistakenly viewed the Witnesses as a threat, and many were imprisoned. But this did not stop their preaching. How could it, when they truly

³⁴ Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1961), 344.

³⁵ 2002 Yearbook, 167.

believed that the message about God's kingdom is the best of news for mankind?"³⁶

Witnesses were told to see their persecution as both a test of faith and an opportunity to preach God's Word.

If the Witnesses saw Soviet persecution as a confirmation of their values, they also saw in it proof of the falsity of other religions, which, in the Witnesses' estimation, failed God's test of faith under trial. Again, this condemnation of other religions formed a major part of long-standing Witness doctrine. For Witnesses, Satan's power on earth extends not only to worldly governments, but also to other organized religions, particularly "Christendom," a term they use to distinguish themselves, "Christians," from other faiths. A central tenet of Witness theology holds that Satan gradually and irreparably corrupted the Christian faith in the centuries after Christ's death. Witnesses refer to modern Christendom as "Babylon the Great," a reference to Revelation 17:4-6 and 18:24.³⁷ In contrast, Witnesses proclaim themselves to be "true Christians," bound by God to continue the work of the early Christians, and to expose the falsity of Babylon. Not surprisingly, this stance has made the Witnesses one of the most persecuted religions in the western world. If the state doubted the loyalty of citizens who proclaimed to be "no part of this world," then most other Christians saw the Witnesses as heretical and offensive.

Many testimonials from Soviet Witnesses describe their disillusionment with other organized religions, particularly Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy. Mikhail Savitskii recounts how his grandfather always warned him that priests frighten and rob poor people, and how he saw the truth of his grandfather's words during World War II, when a

³⁶ "Thrilling Report from the Soviet Union: Joyful Climax to One Hundred Years of Witnessing," *The Watchtower*, July 15, 1991, 9.

³⁷ "Is Religion at the Root of Mankind's Problems?" *The Watchtower*, February 15, 2004, 6.

local Catholic priest in Ukraine helped incite a pogrom in their village.³⁸ Konstantin Morozov, born in 1936 with severe physical disabilities, describes how his mother appealed to the Russian Orthodox Church for a healing miracle, taking him to the medicinal springs in the village of Merenki in the Chuvash Republic. He recalls the experience:

The church was full of people. While Mother was carrying me through the crowd, an old woman handed me a piece of candy. I took it and put it in my pocket. When my turn came to receive Communion, the old woman cried out, "Father, don't give Communion to him! He just ate a piece of candy!" I explained that the piece of candy was in my pocket, but the priest shouted: "You insolent freak! Must you lie as well? Remove him from the church!" The next day, however, another priest performed the Communion ritual and washed me with "miraculous" water. Yet, there was no miracle. My infirmities remained.³⁹

Disappointment with Christendom runs through almost all Witness narratives published in the organization's literature. Acceptance in the Jehovah's Witnesses is consistently tied to the discovery of organized religion's false and violent nature.⁴⁰

Examining the Past through Russian Orthodox Eyes

In Russia, the Witness's message that Christendom had conspired with the state to destroy true Christianity ensured a strong reaction from the Russian Orthodox community.

Beyond the heretical threat of the organization's teachings, the Witness's construction of a narrative of themselves as Christian martyrs in a hostile atheist state represented a direct affront to the church's attempts to construct a viable narrative of its own Soviet past. The

³⁸ "Bolee 40 let pod zapretom v kommunisticheskoi strane," *The Watchtower*, March 1, 1999.

³⁹ "A Bright Outlook Despite Infirmities," *Awake!*, February 22, 2000, 19.

⁴⁰ *The Watchtower* frequently devotes entire issues to discussion of how other Christian organizations have failed mankind. Issue titles for recent *Watchtowers* include: "What Worship Does God Accept?" (July 1, 1996), "Why Are Religions Asking Forgiveness?" (March 1, 1998), "Why Are They Leaving the Churches?" (July 1, 1998), "Do All Religions Please God?" (September 15, 1996), "What Has Happened to Spiritual Values?" (April 15, 2003), "Is Religion at the Root of Mankind's Problems?" (February 15, 2004), "Can the Churches Be Saved?" (March 1, 2004).

church already faced increasing scrutiny of its tacit endorsement of Soviet power and reticence to act as a moral or political opposition. In particular, beginning with glasnost in 1986, the burgeoning free press published reports on the previously taboo matter of Soviet repression and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church. Numerous articles divulged the KGB connections of many church hierarchs and questioned whether the church's primary allegiance lay with the police or the church.⁴¹ The church deeply resented such criticism of its Soviet-era behavior.

The ROC had received harsh criticism for its relationship with the Soviet state since 1927, when the highest-ranking church official and future patriarch, Metropolitan Sergii, issued the *Declaration of Loyalty*, recognizing and pledging loyalty to the Soviet state. Having just been released from prison in 1927, Sergii hoped that his action would lead to greater church freedoms and the election of a new patriarch.⁴² His oath of allegiance began a church policy of compromise with the Soviet state in hope of winning concessions. The declaration internally divided the church, with many refusing to recognize the statement and forming organizations independent of the official church.⁴³ The declaration had little if any effect on state policy toward the church, which intensified its persecution of the church beginning in

⁴¹ For a good overview of Russian media reports on KGB-Church connections, see John B. Dunlop, "The Russian Orthodox Church as an 'Empire-Saving Institution,'" in *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. Michael Bourdeaux (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 30.

⁴² Dmitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982* 2 vols. (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 108-09.

⁴³ Pospelovsky provides detailed discussion of the 1927 Declaration of Loyalty and its effects on the church, including the various schisms of the church, some of which resulted in part from this oath. *Ibid.*, 106-10.

1929 with the passage of a more restrictive religious law, and continued to launch periodic antireligious campaigns throughout the 1930s.⁴⁴

World War II ushered in a new phase in Soviet church-state relations. During the first two years of the war, the state allowed the church increased freedom to rally citizens and raise funds for the war effort.⁴⁵ In 1943, Stalin met with Sergii and granted him permission to convene a church *sobor*, or council, to elect a new patriarch, and to restore a skeletal institutional structure.⁴⁶ In exchange for maintaining the institutional base of the church, the church relinquished its right to criticize the state, which saw in the ROC a powerful diplomatic tool for silencing international criticism of the state's religious repression. Stalin also hoped to use the church as a force for religious unity in newly occupied Eastern Europe, as well as in the country's recently annexed western lands, particularly Ukraine, where religion provided a potential rallying point for nationalist sentiments.⁴⁷

The 1943 agreement, however, was never formalized into Soviet law and depended largely on, as Tatiana Chumachenko has put it, "the length of one person's life—that of Joseph Stalin."⁴⁸ Following N.S. Khrushchev's rise to power after Stalin's death in 1953, and the

⁴⁴ Out of 73,963 churches before 1917 in Russia, only 1,200 of these churches remained open in 1939. See Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution, 1905-1946* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 185, 190. Equally devastating, the state imprisoned and executed an estimated 42,000 members of the clergy, including almost all of the church's pre-1917 bishops, during this period. Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church*, 174-75. Pospelovsky's figures, produced before the opening of the Soviet archives, are based on Western estimates and Soviet sources.

⁴⁵ Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, ed. and trans. by Edward E. Roslof (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 4-5.

⁴⁶ Stalin also promised to release several hierarchs from prison and exile, and to allow the church to reopen several seminaries to train new clergy. Pospelovsky, *Russian Church*, 302.

⁴⁷ For an overview of recent historiography on the 1943 settlement, see Chumachenko, *Church and State*, 4-10.

⁴⁸ For the first four years after 1943, the ROC did indeed benefit through the reopening of 1,270 churches and the establishment of a handful of seminaries to train new clergy. The institutional revival stagnated by 1948, in part due to strong resistance from local officials. *Ibid.*, 125.

defeat of his opponents in 1957, church-state relations became noticeably more strained. In 1958, the state launched an antireligious campaign geared at strengthening atheistic education and propaganda, as well as destroying the institutional foundations of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁴⁹ Despite the decreasing dividends from the 1943 agreement until the late 1980s, the Russian Orthodox Church kept faithful to its half of the unofficial bargain, refusing to defend more dissident elements in its faith and dismissing internal and external allegations of religious repression by the Soviet state.⁵⁰

Church hierarchs greeted their newfound freedoms under glasnost with caution, publicly celebrating the church's one-thousand-year anniversary in 1988 with the support of the state. At the same time, the church also increasingly felt itself under attack from parties dissatisfied with what they saw as toadying conservatism on the part of church hierarchs. Close cooperation with the state, previously an unspoken and largely unquestioned policy, proved less and less tenable in the climate of the late 1980s into the early 1990s. Recognizing the changing political environment, the church began to respond to its critics by creating a defensible narrative of its past.⁵¹ The church argued that collaboration had been necessary to

⁴⁹ From 1960 to 1964, five of eight functioning seminaries, two-thirds of convents and monasteries, and 5,457 churches were closed, the majority of which were located in western Ukraine. Ibid., 150-56, 187-88.

⁵⁰ Church hierarchs issued statements praising Soviet leaders and their efforts toward peace and international disarmament, while condemning Western imperialism. Protests against the state's religious repression by dissident clergy such as Father Gleb Iakunin, and attempts to promote awareness of this issue abroad won no support within the church hierarchy. Michael Bourdeaux, *Gorbachev, Glasnost, and the Gospel* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), 6-10.

⁵¹ In line with this shift, the newly-elected Patriarch Aleksii II broke with tradition, foregoing the loyalty oath upon his assumption of the position in 1990. Previously, all patriarchs had sworn loyalty under Sergii's declaration upon assuming their position. "Sviateishii Patriarkh Aleksii II: Priniimaiu otvetstvennost' za vse, chto bylo," *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* 10 (1991): 5. At the same time, Aleksii defended the oath, arguing that while freer circumstances allowed him to take this stance, his predecessors had not had this luxury, having done what they felt was necessary to save lives and preserve the church in times of great uncertainty and violence. "Svet vo t'me: Interv'iu sviateishego Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseia Rusi Aleksiiia II ot 6 aprelia 1991 goda korrespondenty gazety "Komsomol'skaia pravda," *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* 7 (1991): 5.

save the Orthodox faith from complete annihilation under the atheistic Soviet state. Furthermore, doing so prevented bloodshed by diffusing state suspicions about the loyalty of Orthodox citizens. Through the eyes of the church in the late 1980s to early 1990s, their Soviet predecessors had offered themselves as a sacrifice so that the larger community of believers might survive. A 1992 article in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* described the church's "dilemma" as a choice between "a more pure (sovershennoe) Christianity for a few or a less pure Christianity for all."⁵²

Unlike other religions, which could afford to retreat underground, the Orthodox church maintained that it lacked this option. For the church, preservation of the Orthodox faith meant protection not only of individual members, but also of its churches, seminaries, monasteries, and sacred relics.⁵³ In 1990, Patriarch Aleksii II offered a strong defense of the church's actions:

The Church, with its many millions of members, cannot descend into the catacombs in a totalitarian state. We sinned. But... [f]or the sake of the people, for the sake of preventing [many] millions of people from departing this life for good... the hierarchs of the Church took the sin upon their souls, the sin of silence, the sin of nontruth. And we have always done penance before God for this.⁵⁴

The church bristled at notions that it had acted out of fear or self-interest, particularly since many of these critiques came from abroad, from those who, in the church's view, had no right to question their actions when they had not personally experienced Soviet repression. Like the Jehovah's Witnesses, the church felt it had earned the right to speak in the new

⁵² E.S. Polishchuk, "Kapitulatsiia ili kompromiss?" *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* 11-12 (1992): 68.

⁵³ Deacon Andrei Lorgus, "Kesariu kesarevo: Istoricheskaia apologiia," *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii* 11-12 (1992): 57.

⁵⁴ Patriarch Aleksii II's statement is quoted in Harold Berman, "Freedom of Religion in Russia: An Amicus Brief for the Defendant," in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls*, eds. Michael Bourdeaux and John Witte Jr. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 271.

Russian state through its baptism by fire during the Soviet period. The unbaptized critics deserved no such consideration.”⁵⁵

In a climate of heightened sensitivity on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Jehovah’s Witnesses offered strong criticisms of the church’s “collaboration.” For the Witnesses, true Christianity reveals itself in its disengagement with the corrupt world, while false Christianity betrays itself by actively participating in worldly affairs. Criticism of false religion plays an unusually large role in the Witnesses’ recruitment strategy. Numerous issues of *The Watchtower*, from 1990-2004, stressed how false Christianity has shown its corruption by supporting wars and repressive governments.⁵⁶ A 1995 article in *Awake!* entitled “No Part of This World?” took note of the recent evidence of the ROC’s ties to the KGB, depicting a church concerned more with its own power and survival than with the spiritual growth of its members.⁵⁷ For the Witnesses, Orthodox “collaboration” with the Soviet regime spoke to its allegiance to the corrupt, Satan-controlled world. A 2001 issue of *Awake!* devoted to Russia condemned the church, citing passages in Revelation: “The church made itself a religious harlot with whom ‘the kings of the earth committed fornication.’”⁵⁸ Another article in the same issue expounded further on this theme: “the future of this great

⁵⁵ The Patriarch responded to a question about the church’s conflict with the Russian Church Abroad by saying, “It is easy from a position of bookish moralism to accuse us of paying Caesar too big a tribute. How is it possible not to understand that it is we who paid that tribute, and we who survived an incomparably larger moral pain and torture than our distant judges?” “Svet vo t’me,” 3.

⁵⁶ For example, under the heading, “Bloodguilt in the 20th Century,” a 1999 *Watchtower* article tells readers, “The clergy have backed wars that have taken tens of millions of lives, the worst wars in all history. They supported both sides in the two world wars, in which people of the same religion, ‘brothers,’ killed one another.” “God’s Judgment Against ‘The Man of Lawlessness,’” *The Watchtower*, February 2, 1999, 19. Similarly, in a 1998 *Watchtower* entitled, “Why are Religions Asking for Forgiveness?,” a picture of the Pope is superimposed on an image of concentration camp prisoners. “The Churches Confess,” *The Watchtower*, March 1, 1998, 3-4.

⁵⁷ “No Part of This World?” *Awake!* January 9, 1995, 25.

⁵⁸ “How Religion Survived,” *Awake!* April, 22, 2001, 11.

symbolic religious harlot is sealed. ‘In one day,’ the Bible says, ‘her plagues will come, death and mourning and famine, and she will be completely burned with fire, because Jehovah God, who judged her, is strong.’”⁵⁹

Creating a Russian Orthodox Counternarrative

The harsh attacks on the Russian Orthodox Church, combined with the Witnesses’ narrative of unflinching resistance, struck a raw nerve in a community already sensitive to allegations of collaboration. Like the Witnesses, some in the church viewed their competitors as Satanic forces intent on destroying true Christianity.⁶⁰ The possible demonic origins of the Witnesses, however, played a comparatively less prominent role in Orthodox publications. The ROC saw a much greater threat from the Witnesses in their narrative of victimization, which suggested that only the Witnesses had resisted and suffered under the Soviet regime and thus, only they deserved to be called true Christians. By allowing for no competing claims of victimization, the Witnesses made it highly improbable that the ROC would recognize their persecution. The rapid growth of the Witnesses made it equally difficult for the church simply to ignore the Witnesses’ message. To protect the ROC’s legitimacy, many of its members felt they needed to respond to the Witnesses by offering a counternarrative challenging their claims to Soviet victimization.

On the most basic level, many Orthodox publications painted the Witnesses as outsiders to Russian culture and history. They wrote the Witnesses out of late tsarist and early Soviet

⁵⁹ “What is the Future of Religion?” *Awake!* April 22, 2001, 15.

⁶⁰ For references to the Witnesses as Satanic, see for example, Ieromonakh German Dvortsov, *Lzhesvideteli: Kratkaia istoriia obshchestva Svidetelei Iegovy*, in which he reprints an Orthodox pamphlet on the Jehovah’s Witnesses in circulation in the city of Ivanov in 1996, entitled, “The Danger at Your Door.” The pamphlet warns: “The Society of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is an organization of false prophecy, and because of this, is not from God but from Satan, who is a ‘liar and the king of lies.’” (Moscow: Pravoslavnaia Moskva, 1998), 35.

history by scrutinizing the Witnesses' claim to have arrived in Russia in 1891, arguing that the first Witnesses showed up only as a result of border changes during World War II. Not without justification, they noted the flimsy nature of Witness proofs of their earlier arrival, which amounted to little more than letters from interested Russians asking for Witness literature.⁶¹ Russian Orthodox literature also frequently emphasized the organization's American connections. From this perspective, Americans from afar pulled the strings, using Russian puppets for their political aims, with no interest in their members' suffering or in the preservation of "Russian culture."⁶² Some Orthodox journalists suspected a more direct connection between the Witnesses and the American government, accusing the United States of using sectarians like the Witnesses to destabilize Russia by destroying Russian Orthodoxy.⁶³ Many in the church felt that as the Witnesses' central organization was based in Brooklyn, its American leaders had not personally endured Soviet repressions and thus had no right to question those who had.

In contrast to the perceived foreignness of the Witnesses, the Russian Orthodox Church depicted itself as Russia's historic religion and the foundation of Russian culture. During the only other period of relative religious freedom in Russian history, following the 1905 Edict of Toleration by Tsar Nicholas II, the church had used a similar argument to defend its position as Russia's national religion. Heather Coleman has written about how the growth of

⁶¹ Aleksandr Dvorkin, *Psevdokhristianskaia sekta "Svideteli Iegovy"* (St. Petersburg: Formica, 2002), 53. Also: Father Igor' Efimov, *Lozhnye svidetel'stva Svidetelei Iegovy: Istoricheskii ocherk, kriticheskii razbor veroucheniia, polozhenie v nastoiashchee vremia* (Moscow: Educational Committee of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, 1997), available online under chap. 3, sec. 1, <http://www.wco.ru/biblio/books/efimov1/Main-Con.htm> (accessed 16 September 2005).

⁶² The preface to one work on the Jehovah's Witnesses praised the book as a warning to Russians who welcome everything bearing the stamp "from the USA." Father Maksim Kozlov, preface to Efimov, *Lozhnye Svidetel'stva*.

⁶³ See for example, Mariia Kozlova, "Eshche odni 'Svideteli' rvutsia v Moskvu," *NG. Religii*, December 8, 1999. Also: V. Vasil'ev, "A u sebja ne vidish' i brevna," *Pravoslavnaia Moskva*, March 15, 2000.

Russian Baptists during this period challenged the church's notion that Russian and Orthodox were synonymous categories.⁶⁴ The Russian Orthodox Church revived this historical argument in the post-Soviet state, seeking to regain what it saw as its flock by claiming exclusive rights to Russian spirituality as its birthright. A 2000 article in *Pravoslavnaia Moskva* declared that "Russia lives as long as the Russian spirit is alive," while without Russian Orthodoxy, "Russia will not survive."⁶⁵ Father Oleg Steniaev, who has worked extensively since 1991 in the church's missionary activities, has frequently urged the church to make better use of its home turf advantage.⁶⁶ In his work on the Witnesses, he noted, "We are at home, while he [a Jehovah's Witness] is on foreign soil. He is among foreigners even at his own meetings, while we are among our own, even though they have left us."⁶⁷

The church saw the Soviet period in the context of its larger history in Russia. The Soviet-era repressions represented only one of many challenges the church had faced since its establishment as the official religion of Kievan Rus in 988. Like previous tests of faith endured during its long tenure in Russia, the church ultimately prevailed. While the Witnesses saw their suffering as evidence of their triumph over Soviet atheism, the church

⁶⁴ Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

⁶⁵ Vasil'ev, "A u sebia."

⁶⁶ Steniaev heads the Russian Orthodox Church's Rehabilitation Center for Victims of Non-Traditional Religions, which provides religious guidance to former members of religious "sects" and urges them to convert to Russian Orthodoxy. In his numerous publications, Steniaev has encouraged using open debate and dialogue between sectarians and Orthodox clergy. Steniaev has often debated leaders of various religious organizations, including the Jehovah's Witnesses. Father Oleg Steniaev, *Disput so "Svideteliami Iegovy"* (Moscow: Lepta-Press, 2004), 10, 16.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 25.

focused on its institutional survival.⁶⁸ Orthodox publications often did not acknowledge Witnesses' suffering in the Soviet Union or blamed the Witnesses for provoking persecution. One work mentions the Soviet persecution of the Witnesses in a single sentence, while noting that, "In their propaganda today, the Jehovahists skillfully use their persecution by the Nazis and Communists to achieve certain political gains."⁶⁹

The Witnesses' claim to have never yielded in the face of persecution stood in contrast with the Russian Orthodox Church's narrative of necessary cooperation. For many in the church, the Witnesses' resistance, far from a symbol of noble Christian suffering, indicated a callous disregard by the central organization for its members' lives. Unlike the ROC, which "protected" its flock by working with the Soviet state, the Witnesses "provoked" the Soviet state into confrontation, resulting in otherwise avoidable persecution of rank and-file members. Russian Orthodox publications described the Brooklyn leadership as sacrificing its members in order to win sympathy for their cause and prove their claim that true Christians suffer persecution.⁷⁰ In the eyes of the church, its leadership, unlike that of the Witnesses, did not have the luxury of observing the Soviet regime from outside its borders, and thus had to temper its actions much more carefully than foreign observers.

Witnesses as Fascists, Witnesses as Martyrs

Orthodox publications understood that the Witnesses' claims to Soviet persecution constituted only part of a larger Witness narrative of victimization, whereby all true

⁶⁸ A 1992 article in the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* entitled, "Capitulation or Compromise?," noted that every church still standing thanks to "difficult compromises" provides a base for Orthodoxy's revival in post-Soviet Russia. E.S. Polishchuk, "Kapituliatsiia ili kompromiss?," 70.

⁶⁹ V. Antonov, "Sakta 'Svideteli Iegovy,'" in *Sovremennye eres i sekty na Rusi*, ed. Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg and Ladoga (Zhitomir: NI-KA, 2001), 128, 130.

⁷⁰ Efimov, *Lozhnye Svidetel'stva*, chap. 1, sec. 3.

Christians suffer persecution by hostile states and religions. Thus Orthodox literature frequently challenged a parallel narrative of persecution promoted by the Jehovah's Witnesses, that of the organization's repression by Nazi Germany. The Nazi state had targeted the Witnesses for their refusal to say "Heil Hitler" or to perform military service, arresting roughly ten thousand of its members and interning them in concentration camps, where an estimated two to five thousand of them died.⁷¹ Witnesses have made extensive use of their experience in Nazi Germany, heralding it as another example of their commitment to be "no part of this world" even in the most dangerous circumstances.⁷² Their actions, they argue, set them apart from other Christian organizations as "the only religious group to take a consistent, organized stand against the Nazi regime."⁷³ For Russian Witnesses in particular, persecution by the Nazis linked them to an antifascist tradition despite their noninvolvement in politics, granting them membership in the community of Soviet victims of fascism. The Witnesses classified their actions as nonviolent "spiritual" resistance against political tyranny, and as a powerful example of personal integrity particularly relevant to modern society.⁷⁴

⁷¹ For further reading on the Witnesses in Nazi Germany, see Michael Reynaud and Sylvie Graffard, *The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Nazis: Persecution, Deportation, and Murder, 1933-1945*, trans. James A. Moorhouse (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 44. Michael Berenbaum, *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis* (New York: New York University Press, 1990); Christine King, "Strategies for Survival: An Examination of the History of Five Christian Sects in Germany, 1933-1945," *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 2 (1979): 211-33; Christine King, *The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity*, Studies in Religion and Society 4 (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982); Hans Hesse, ed., *Persecution and Resistance of Jehovah's Witnesses During the Nazi Regime, 1933-1945* (Chicago: Edition Temmen, 2001). For statistics on numbers of Witnesses killed, see: "Jehovah's Witnesses: Victims of the Nazi Era," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, <http://www.ushmm.org/> (accessed 22 October 2005).

⁷² "They Triumphed Over Persecution," *The Watchtower*, March 1, 2003, 5-7.

⁷³ *Study Guide for the Documentary Video: Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 1997), 5.

⁷⁴ *Study Guide: Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault*, 20-21.

In refuting this narrative, Orthodox publications joined a growing debate in the 1990s regarding the accuracy of the Witnesses' portrayal of their Nazi experiences.⁷⁵ In particular, several Orthodox publications pointed to a controversial letter known as the *Declaration of Facts*, distributed to the public by German Witnesses in June 25, 1933, and addressed to Adolf Hitler. Written in response to recent attacks on German Witnesses and temporary police confiscation of Witness property in Magdeburg, the letter stressed the organization's political neutrality and denied its having any ties to Bolshevism or the Jews. More problematically, it claimed that the Witnesses supported the same "principles" as the Nazi Party, while arguing that their "realization" would only come through God's intervention. The letter also made reference to the harmful influence of "commercial Jews" in Great Britain and the United States.⁷⁶ The 1933 letter contained no invitation for joint efforts between the organization and the Nazis, nor promises to modify Witness beliefs or practices to suit the new political situation. The Witnesses have called the letter a "declaration" of the organization's "ministry and its objectives."⁷⁷ A 1998 article in *Awake!* further defended the letter's references to Jews, reprinting the offensive portions and claiming that they were meant as a critique of "unfair practices of big business" and "did not refer to the Jewish people in general."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ The debate centered on the 1996 worldwide release by the Witnesses of the documentary video, *Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm Against Nazi Assault* VHS (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. and International Bible Students Association, 1996). While some saw the video as an accurate portrayal of Nazi repression of the Witnesses, others saw it as at best, biased, and at worst, religious propaganda. Hesse's edited volume devotes an entire section to the debate: Hesse, *Persecution and Resistance*, 294-386. See also: M. James Penton, *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Third Reich: Sectarian Politics Under Persecution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

⁷⁶ Letter reprinted and translated into English in Penton, *Jehovah's Witnesses*, 275-84.

⁷⁷ *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers*, 693.

⁷⁸ "Jehovah's Witnesses: Courageous in the Face of Nazi Peril," *Awake!*, July 8, 1998.

Orthodox publications made repeated reference to the 1933 letter as damning proof that Jehovah's Witnesses, far from being victims of fascism, were would-be perpetrators of Nazi atrocities, kept from participating in the war against Russia only by the lack of interest shown by Hitler, who did not need such a weak ally.⁷⁹ At a Witness gathering in Barnaul in 1999, members of the local Orthodox community picketed the events with signs reading, "We will subject Russia to Jehovahist teachings—Adolf Hitler."⁸⁰ Russian Orthodox publications often used the Nazi experience to support their argument that the Jehovah's Witness organization bears responsibility for its own victimization, and seeks out persecution to garner sympathy and retain members. In this vein, Dvorkin wrote, "The board of directors needed martyrs, and they got them. To this day the Jehovahists cynically exploit these events, crying out about the heroism of their innocent victims and accusing any person who speaks the truth about the sect of thirst for Jehovahist blood."⁸¹ Another Orthodox source directly blamed the 1951 exile of Witnesses on their support of fascism during World War II.⁸² For many in the ROC, as with the Soviet repression, it was the Witness organization that provoked persecution, and then watched from Brooklyn while local members were arrested and killed.

⁷⁹ See for example, Pavel Chilin, "Kto vinoven v stradaniiakh 'Svidetelei Iegovy?'" *Official Website of The Saint Irenaeus of Lyon Information-Consultation Center*, <http://iriney.vinchi.ru/sects/witness/003.htm> (accessed 9 July 2003).

⁸⁰ Natal'ia Trofimova, "Vybravshie Boga Iegovy v deviatii raz sobralis' v Barnaule," *Svobodnyi kurs*, August 7, 2003.

⁸¹ Many Orthodox publications refer to the Jehovah's Witnesses as "Jehovists," a term which dates back to the Soviet period. Dvorkin, *Psevdokhristianskaia sekta*, 52-53.

⁸² A. Egortsev, *Totalitarnye sekty: Svoboda ot sovesti* (Moscow: Informatsionno-missionerskii tsentr "Sektor," 1997), 68.

Making Witnesses a Threat to Democracy

If the Russian Orthodox Church frequently depicted the Witness organization as cynically manipulating its members to win international sympathy, it also viewed their beliefs as fundamentally antagonistic to the alleged pacifism and neutrality the organization claimed it stood for. Where the Witnesses saw a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, some members of the ROC saw the organization's views on Armageddon as a masked endorsement of mass murder.⁸³ Father Oleg Steniaev spelled out how Witnesses code their violent plans in religious language, interspersing the Witnesses' beliefs with his own commentary: "This war will destroy all traces of Satan's earthly organization (in other words—all civilization —O.S.) and give surviving humanity (that is the faithful remnant of Jehovah's Witnesses—O.S.) the opportunity to delight in unending blessings (on the corpses of more than six billion people!—O.S.)."⁸⁴ Through this lens, the long-suffering Witnesses plot their revenge on the world that has rejected them, gleefully awaiting a bloody battle when their enemies will be eliminated and they alone will rule the world.

Much Orthodox literature bears strong similarities to American and European critiques of the Witnesses, and many Orthodox publications cite Western sources. Both Orthodox and Western works stress the psychological damage of belonging to an insular community that strictly controls members' actions.⁸⁵ Dvorkin, for example, cites Dr. Jerry Bergman, who suggests that Witnesses exhibit abnormally high rates of mental illness, which he blames in

⁸³ Dvorkin has used the term "genocide" to refer to the Witnesses' doctrine of Armageddon. *Psevdokhristianskaia sekta*, 33-34.

⁸⁴ O.S. refers to Oleg Steniaev. Initials are in original. Oleg Steniaev, *Svideteli Iegovy: Kto oni?* (Moscow: Pravoslavnaia Moskva, 1996), 41.

⁸⁵ For example, former American members' memoirs often recount the organization's strict control over all aspects of their life. See W.J. Schnell, *Forty Years a Watchtower Slave: The Confessions of a Converted Jehovah's Witness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956); Diane Wilson, *Awakening of Jehovah's Witness: Escape from the Watchtower Society* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2002).

part on the damaging effects of the Witnesses' apocalyptic doctrine and numerous false prophecies.⁸⁶ While works such as Bergman's stress the psychological dangers of the Witnesses' doctrine of Armageddon, they do not suggest, as many Orthodox publications have, that this belief amounts to support for genocide. Nor have Western scholars supported the common Orthodox perception that Witnesses use religious language as a mask to disguise their hidden desire for violence and revenge against their enemies. In making these accusations, Orthodox literature deviates from standard Western arguments against the Jehovah's Witnesses.

According to many Orthodox publications, the Witnesses' alleged endorsement of violence also spoke to the authoritarian nature of their organization. In this view, fear of eternal damnation keeps members loyal to the organization and silences criticism. This sentiment was most frequently expressed by Dvorkin:

The Jehovah's Witnesses are interested in provoking negative feelings toward themselves because this is how they manage to maintain their "siege mentality." This is how they keep their members in the organization and this is how they maintain their opposition to society—they frighten people. They say, look how they hate us, see how badly people treat us, this is why you can't leave us, because only we will be saved, and this is how they develop in people such a great hatred toward the surrounding world and satisfaction that the whole world will be destroyed in Armageddon.⁸⁷

In 1993, Dvorkin coined the term "totalitarian sect" to describe religious organizations like the Witnesses that exercised what he saw as undo control over their members, denying them

⁸⁶ For Dvorkin's citation, see *Psevdokhristianskaia sekta*, 149-156. Jerry Bergman, "Paradise Postponed...And Postponed: Why Jehovah's Witnesses Have a High Mental Illness Level," *Christian Research Journal* (Summer 1996), available online at *Apologetics Index*, <http://www.equip.org/free/DJ601.htm> (accessed 11 November 2005). For other Western critiques of the Witnesses, see: Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience* (Atlanta: Commentary Press, 1983) and *In Search of Christian Freedom* (Atlanta: Commentary Press, 1991); also Heather and Gary Botting, *The Orwellian World of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

⁸⁷ Moscow Trial: March 5, 1999.

freedom of choice by using psychological and physical pressure to maintain loyalty.⁸⁸ This label had particular meaning for the Witnesses. By using the term “totalitarian,” previously applied primarily in reference to the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, to describe the Witnesses, Dvorkin disputed their claims as victims of totalitarianism, instead making them into competitors of the Soviet state for control over its citizens. In addition, the term made the Witness organization seem antithetical to the democratic ideals of the new Russian state. Numerous Orthodox publications drew comparisons between Witness beliefs and Soviet or Marxist ideology, all of which stressed alleged similarities between Christ’s one-thousand year kingdom and Soviet promises regarding the achievement of communism.⁸⁹ In framing the Witnesses as totalitarian, Orthodox literature not only equated the Witnesses with the repressive Soviet state, but also made their existence in post-Soviet Russia into a serious threat to the state’s fledgling democracy.

Contesting Victims in the Moscow Courts

The Witness organization watched the growing Orthodox animosity toward their organization in the 1990s with concern but little surprise. The visceral reaction of Russian Orthodoxy tended to reinforce the rightness of the Witnesses’ message. A 2002 *Watchtower* reminded members that “all who serve Jehovah make themselves targets of his archenemy, Satan the Devil.”⁹⁰ In Witness descriptions, Russian Orthodoxy was continuing the persecution of true Christians that began with Christ’s crucifixion. *The Watchtower* reminded

⁸⁸ Dvorkin, *Sektovedenie: Totalitarnye sekty*, 3rd ed. (Nizhnii Novgorod: Bratstvo vo imia sv. Kniazia Aleksandra Nevskogo, 2002), 44.

⁸⁹ See for example: Dvorkin, *Psvedokhristianskaia sekta*, 132. Also: A.N. Shvechikov, *Rai zemnoi: Novaia skazka o religioznoi, sotsial’no politicheskoi i ideologicheskoi doktrine Iegovizme* (St. Petersburg: Kairos, 1997).

⁹⁰ “They Coped With Thorns in Their Flesh,” *The Watchtower*, November 2, 2002, 13.

members to “expect opposition,” noting that “in a world where Satan's influence reigns, why would we *not* meet opposition?”⁹¹

Beginning in 1993, the political climate in Russia grew increasingly hostile to “nontraditional religions,” largely due to pressure on the state from the Russian Orthodox Church.⁹² The church repeatedly asked the government to pass a new religious law to protect Russian Orthodoxy and other traditional religions, and to restrict the growth of nontraditional religions. The State Duma complied in 1997 with the passage of the *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations*. The law gave federal and local authorities the power to “liquidate” religions for a number of vague reasons, including inciting religious, ethnic, or social discord; threatening state security; compelling the destruction of families; endangering the health of members; and inciting members to refuse to fulfill their civic duties.⁹³ In the aftermath of the 1997 law, the federal government renewed the Witnesses’ registration, while the organization faced an uphill battle in Moscow for citywide registration.⁹⁴ The resulting civil trial over Witness registration in Moscow, brought at the behest of the Committee to Save Youth from Totalitarian Sects, a group of mostly Russian Orthodox parents of

⁹¹ “Christian Neutrals in the Last Days,” *The Watchtower*, February 15, 2002, 19

⁹² For discussion of the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state, see Michael Bourdeaux, ed., *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995).

⁹³ “O svobode sovesti i religioznykh ob’’edineniiakh,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, September 16, 1997. For a discussion of the Russian Orthodox Church’s role in passing the legislation, see Marat Shterin, “Church-State Relationships and Religious Legislation in Russia in the 1990s,” in *Religious Transition in Russia*, ed. Matti Kotiranta, 218-50 (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2000). Also: Marat Shterin, “New Religions and the Changes in Religious Legislation in Russia,” in *Beyond the Mainstream: The Emergence of Religious Pluralism in Finland, Estonia, and Russia*, ed. Jeffry Kaplan, 361-72 (Helsinki: Studia Historica, 2000).

⁹⁴ The Witnesses received federal registration on April 29, 1999. “Russia: Jehovah’s Witnesses Test Religious Freedom,” *Authorized Site of Public Information of the Jehovah’s Witnesses*, <http://www.jwmedia.org/rights/russia.htm> (accessed 15 October 2005).

Jehovah's Witnesses, carried the battle of words between the Orthodox and the Witnesses into the legal arena.

The Jehovah's Witnesses vigorously defended their right to practice on Russian territory, as they have in many other countries. Their publications claim that in democratic states, the organization uses the court system to make states more conducive to their message by eliminating legal barriers to the community's operation.⁹⁵ Many scholars have noted how the boundaries of freedom of conscience in Western countries, particularly the United States and Canada, have been shaped by court decisions involving the Jehovah's Witnesses.⁹⁶ The Witnesses have adopted this argument as their own, seeing their legal status as a barometer of religious freedom in general. A 1998 *Watchtower* described how the Witnesses have built a "legal wall of protection" for their organization by using the courts to protect their right to practice in many countries.⁹⁷ The Witnesses argued that by recognizing their organization's right to practice and recruit new members, the state was simultaneously protecting freedom of conscience for all citizens.

Throughout the trial, which began in 1998 and dragged on for more than two years, both sides called upon the specter of the Soviet past to condemn their opponent. The defense lawyers, all but one of whom were themselves Witnesses, repeatedly referred to their client's

⁹⁵ "Defending Our Faith," *The Watchtower*, December 1, 1998, 18.

⁹⁶ For scholarship on freedom of conscience and the Jehovah's Witnesses, see Shawn Francis Peters, *Judging Jehovah's Witnesses: Religious Persecution and the Dawn of the Rights Revolution* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000); Merlin Owen Newton, *Armed With the Constitution: Jehovah's Witnesses in Alabama and the U.S. Supreme Court, 1939-1946* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995); James M. Penton, *Jehovah's Witnesses in Canada: Champions of Freedom of Speech and Worship* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976); and William Kaplan, *State and Salvation: The Jehovah's Witnesses and Their Fight for Civil Rights* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

⁹⁷ "Legally Protecting the Good News," *The Watchtower*, December 1, 1998, 19.

Soviet-era repression.⁹⁸ In his opening statement, defense attorney A.E. Leont'ev called on the judge not to let "history repeat itself."⁹⁹ The defense argued that the outcome of the trial would determine whether or not Russia was moving beyond its repressive past by guaranteeing religious freedom for all of its citizens. It cast refusal to recognize the Witnesses as an endorsement of the Soviet political order, asserting that this process would determine if Russian citizens could indeed now choose which God to worship, what faith to practice, and what literature to read.¹⁰⁰

The prosecution, in turn, dismissed the notion that the Soviet legacy had any bearing on the case, while nonetheless branding the Witnesses as "totalitarian."¹⁰¹ For the prosecution, not all victims were created equal, nor all faiths. When Dvorkin was asked by the defense if he was aware of the Soviet persecution of Witnesses, he responded: "I am aware of the fact that millions of Orthodox believers were executed for maintaining their faith to, as the Jehovah's Witnesses so elegantly put it, a phallic symbol. I am referring to the cross," a reference to the fact that Witnesses believe Christ was crucified on a stake, not a cross.¹⁰²

Dvorkin's response illustrates the unwillingness of the church to acknowledge competing

⁹⁸ To avoid confusion, "Witness" refers to members of the Jehovah's Witness organization, while "witness" carries the legal sense of someone testifying in court.

⁹⁹ Leont'ev further remarked: "The prosecutor says that, if previously *The Watchtower* was anti-Soviet, now it incites religious discord, and demands that this literature be banned. My question is what is the difference?" Similarly, John Burns, a Canadian Witness and legal specialist in international human rights, began his remarks with a comparison of the prosecutor's statements to those of Hitler's order banning the Jehovah's Witnesses. Moscow Trial: February 16, 1999. For similar statements, see also February 7, 2001; February 9, 2001.

¹⁰⁰ Burns chided the prosecutor for allegedly dismissing the Soviet experience as "history." He pointed out that sitting in the courtroom that day were people who experienced those repressions, remarking, "It is not history for them, for them it is the present day." Trial: February 16, 1999; February 23, 2001. Likewise, Leont'ev in his closing remarks, argued that the prosecutor sought to return Russia back to a time where religious freedom existed "only in the kitchen." February 23, 2001. In addition, numerous Soviet Witnesses took the stand for the defense, bearing state-issued certificates of rehabilitation as victims of political repression.

¹⁰¹ Moscow Trial: February 9, 1999.

¹⁰² Moscow Trial: March 5, 1999.

claims to suffering when the party in question refuses to recognize the church's own hardships, and even denigrates them. In general, the prosecution attempted to place the Witnesses' experience within the larger context of Soviet suppression of all religions. For Dvorkin and others, as the largest religion in Russia, Russian Orthodoxy was the focus of Soviet repressions, while Witnesses served as a sideshow to the larger event.¹⁰³

The prosecution hoped to delegitimize the Witnesses in the eyes of the court by painting the organization as dangerous extremists. Prosecution attorney T.I. Kondrat'eva questioned the defense about its knowledge of the 1933 letter to Hitler.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Dvorkin cited the letter in his testimony, noting that while the defense had made frequent reference to the Witnesses' persecution under the Nazis, it failed to mention how they had appealed to Hitler on the basis of mutual anti-Semitism.¹⁰⁵ To counter the Witnesses' portrayal of themselves as victims of Soviet repression, the prosecution used their belief in Armageddon to paint a starkly contrasting portrait of a violent and dangerous organization. Kondrat'eva called in expert witnesses to testify on the allegedly psychologically damaging belief in Armageddon. Expert witness Metlik testified that the organization intends to set up "work camps" after Armageddon and that Christ's thousand-year kingdom closely resembles the "theory and practice of totalitarian governments."¹⁰⁶ Numerous family members also testified to the

¹⁰³ Similarly, when cross-examined about his views on the Armageddon, prosecution expert witness I.V. Metlik responded that he was unaware of the Witnesses' experience, noting that "as a part of society, they suffered along with everyone else." Moscow Trial: February 24, 1999.

¹⁰⁴ When the judge withdrew the question, Kondrat'eva argued for her right to bring in historically relevant material just as the Witnesses had done in their statements. Moscow Trial: February 22, 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Moscow Trial: March 5, 1999.

¹⁰⁶ In 1996, the Committee to Save Youth from Totalitarian Sects had asked Metlik, through his work at a governmental institution on family, youth, and children matters, to conduct a study of the beliefs and practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Metlik testified that the Witnesses suffered from what he termed "apocalyptic psychosis." Moscow Trial: February 24, 1999.

psychological damage of the Witnesses' belief in Armageddon on their relatives.¹⁰⁷ Through such testimony, the prosecution presented a picture of the Witnesses as a serious threat both to their members and to Russian society as a whole.

The court proceedings more broadly reflected a society in transition, attempting to construct a democratic system on Soviet foundations. Both sides continually argued over procedural rules, each criticizing the process and at different points, the judge, E.I. Prokhorycheva. References to European precedents and the European Court of Human Rights seemed to bewilder Prokhorycheva, who was likely not accustomed to having to weigh decisions with a mind to international law. Religious matters proved even more confusing. The trial took a nearly two year hiatus to allow an expert panel to examine Witness literature, deemed necessary in part due to the unfamiliarity of the judge with the religious matters under consideration. When prosecution witness Metlik referred to the Apocalypse as largely "symbolic in character," Prokhorycheva interrupted, "Then what is the Bible for?" As Metlik attempted to explain that the Bible is open to varying interpretations, Prokhorycheva interjected, "Well then, our Christian faith, for instance—does it speak about the end of the world?" Metlik replied that it did.¹⁰⁸ Prokhorycheva's remarks reflect the religious climate after 1991, where most Russians considered themselves Russian Orthodox

¹⁰⁷ One witness, A.P. Savinkin, whose ex-wife had joined the Witnesses and begun taking their young son to meetings, testified that his son had trouble sleeping one stormy night, and repeatedly mumbled "Armageddon" to himself. His son later told him that he had been frightened that night because he thought that Armageddon had started and that people would begin to kill one another." Moscow Trial: February 25, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Moscow Trial: February 24, 1999.

as a matter of birth, but often had little understanding of what this meant in terms of beliefs or practices.¹⁰⁹

The trial concluded in February 2001 in favor of the Jehovah's Witnesses. That decision was overturned on appeal in 2004, and the Witnesses have filed an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights, which has yet to take action on the case. The court process offered a platform for both the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Russian Orthodox community to present their contrasting narratives of Witnesses' Soviet experience. The Moscow court, in turn, seemed reticent to offer a solid endorsement of either side, given that the federal government had already registered the Witnesses as a recognized religious organization. Although the Witness organization claims that the 2004 decision has made it more difficult for them to operate in Moscow, the inability to register in Moscow has certainly not kept Witnesses from practicing their faith, and how could it?¹¹⁰ The Witnesses themselves have consistently cited their vow to stand firm in the face of hostility. When the defense asked S.V. Levitskii, a Witness since 1953, whether he would continue to proselytize regardless of the outcome, Levitskii responded that the Soviet period taught him how to respond to state repression. Should a similar situation arise in Russia, "Not one Jehovah's Witness will leave his service. Whatever the regime, he will continue to preach his faith."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ According to a 1999 survey, a majority of Russians considered themselves Orthodox, but only seven percent attended church at least once a month. Further complicating matters, many Russians identified themselves as both atheists and Orthodox. Kaariainen and Furman, "Religiosity in Russia in the 1990s," 39, 53, 54.

¹¹⁰ *Effects of Moscow Ban on Jehovah's Witnesses* (London: Office of Public Information for Jehovah's Witnesses, 2005).

¹¹¹ Moscow Trial: March 3, 1999.

Conclusion

A decade after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, the role of religion in society continued to be a matter of public and private debate. The opposition of the Russian Orthodox community to the Witnesses, and vice versa, in and of itself, is not particularly surprising. The two organizations' differences over Christian doctrine ensured that both would find the others' beliefs heretical.¹¹² Every religion believes itself to be the one, true faith, and certainly the Witnesses and the Russian Orthodox are no exceptions, although their attacks on one another may be considered unusually hostile. Orthodox critiques, however, moved beyond criticism of the Witnesses on grounds of religious differences into attacks on the Witnesses' narrative of Soviet-era victimization and resistance.

What is significant about the growing conflict between Russian Orthodoxy and the Jehovah's Witnesses? First, the Witnesses made their Soviet repression into a rallying point for their international movement, and within Russia, into a platform for demanding equal rights as a religious organization. The central leadership recognized the stirring symbol that Soviet Witnesses could provide to their international coreligionists, many of whom faced varying degrees of hostility in their home country. By 2004, the Witnesses' six and a half million members worldwide had become familiar with their Russian compatriots' experience in the Soviet Union, using it as a discussion topic with potential members, and as an inspirational symbol of resistance for current members. Within Russia, the organization used the Witnesses' experience as victims of Soviet oppression to justify their right to practice their religion and to recruit new members in the post-Soviet state.

¹¹² Indeed, many Orthodox publications on the Witnesses focus largely on religious matters, particularly the Witnesses' disavowal of the Holy Trinity, the immortality of the soul, the existence of Hell, the immaculate conception, and veneration of icons. For example, see: Vladimir Rumiantsev, *Svideteli Iegovy: Sarancha iz bezdny* (Ufa: Izdatel'stvo Ufimskogo eparkhial'nogo upravleniia Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi, 2002).

Second, the Witnesses exposed a major fault line in Russia's transition to a democratic, post-Soviet state. Linking their post-Soviet existence to the emerging democracy, the Witnesses cast their ability to operate openly as a barometer of the status of religious freedom in general in Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church, in turn, viewed the Witnesses as undermining the traditional religious foundations of Russia and as exploiting their Soviet victimization in order to lure citizens away from Russian Orthodoxy. Seeing the role of religion as central to Russia's transition to democracy, both organizations looked to the state to confirm their map of Russia's religious boundaries. For the Witnesses, there could be no democracy without freedom for their organization to practice their faith. For the church, allowing the Witnesses to operate freely would mean endorsing a distinctly totalitarian worldview of violence and destruction in the guise of religion. Ironically, by focusing so much attention on the Witnesses, the Orthodox church has given credence to the Witnesses' claim that they provide the standard for religious toleration in democratic states.

Most importantly, the battle for control over religion's Soviet legacy demonstrates the malleability and instability of Russia's relationship to its Soviet past. The contested legacy of the Soviet experience remained woven through discussions of Russia's religious heritage. Unlike other post-authoritarian states, the Russian government took little action to address state repression, offering little legal redress and no public forum for Russian society to deal with this issue. Witness and Orthodox versions of Soviet religious repression emerged in this climate of fractured narratives. Neither Witnesses nor Russian Orthodox could agree to a Soviet narrative where *both* were victims, yet both saw their Soviet experiences as critical in shaping their post-Soviet actions. Each felt that their persecution gave them certain rights to speak as members of Russia's faith community, while denying that right to others who did

not endure the same level of perceived hardship. Both in their publications and in their testimonies at the Moscow civil trial, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Russian Orthodox community offered mutually exclusive narratives of victimization by the Soviet state. Clearly then, Russia's reticence to address the crimes of the Soviet past did not make this issue disappear, but rather left society to shoulder the responsibility of sorting out the victims from the collaborators and perpetrators.

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