

The Discovery of Native “Mormon” Communities in Russia

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IN EARLY JUNE 1998, Sheridan Gashler, president of the Russia Samara Mission, felt moved to place missionaries in a small village called Bogdanovka. This was an exciting change in policy. Early LDS missionary work in Russia had been concentrated in large urban areas where most missionaries could enjoy such civilized luxuries as paved roads, frequent public transportation, telephone lines, and running water. In recent years missions branched into smaller cities, but the Russian *village* was an altogether new frontier. Bogdanovka, although it is only 100 miles or so from the large regional capital city of Samara, is a world apart.

On their first reconnaissance trip, President Gashler, with his assistants and the mission driver, set out east from Samara until gray, concrete, high-rise apartment buildings gave way to immense rolling fields of grain, corn, and sunflowers. The Soviet legacy of massive collective farming left no small homesteads to break up the horizons that stretched along the two-lane road connecting the towns and villages of the Samara province, a territory roughly the size of South Carolina.

1. This article is the fruit of close cooperation with a number of people. The author is especially indebted to Sheridan Gashler, president of the Russia Samara Mission (1998-present), Gary Browning, president of the Helsinki East and Russia Moscow Missions (1990-1993), Don Jarvis, president of the Russia Moscow and Russia Yekaterinburg Missions (1996-1999) as well as to James Scott, Heather Frushour, Alida Purves, Brent Van Every, Dan Jones, Dmitri Slinkov, and many others who willingly shared their time and stories. For funding research trips to the Samara province, the author thanks Richard Rands and Janet Brigham. And for invaluable detective work and editing assistance, the author is grateful to John B. Lyon and Cherie K. Woodworth. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Sunstone West Symposium in April 1999.

It was late in the day when they first drove down Bogdanovka's single paved road, and they caught the village mayor just as he was closing up the administrative building for the night. He agreed to hear them out, however, and was surprisingly open to having two Americans live and proselytize in his small jurisdiction. He asked a few questions about this foreign religion, and upon hearing the name of the church and being introduced to a copy of the Book of Mormon, he gently interrupted his guests: "Ah! Well you know," he said, "we already have Mormons here."

THE LOST BOOK

I first heard this story from a pair of missionaries over a homemade burrito dinner on the Fourth of July, 1998. I was living with a Russian LDS family in the city of Saratov, one of the larger cities in the Samaran mission, while I conducted research for my dissertation. I knew well that no LDS missionaries had ever proselytized in the countryside, so how could there be any Mormons in a place like Bogdanovka? President Gashler naturally dismissed the mayor's assertion as some sort of misunderstanding.

A week later, however, when they returned to the village to install two elders in their new area, the missionaries were approached by an excited, middle-aged woman who had seen the Book of Mormon in the village administrator's possession and wanted a copy for herself. She explained that she herself was a Mormon as her parents and grandparents had been before her. She brought them to her home, the elders' story continued, and showed them a large, heavy book weighing over twenty pounds, hand-written and very old, which she said was her family's "Book of Mormon."

I had heard several rumors of "Mormons" living in parts of southern Russia during the Soviet era, but nothing had ever been confirmed. Here was potentially hard physical evidence of something very exciting. The next night I called the mission president himself and had him tell me the story again. Was it true about the book, I asked? President Gashler described it again just as the elders had. With his permission I began to plan a research trip to Samara. I hoped most of all to find that book and see it for myself.

In late July, I took an overnight train to Samara and went immediately to the mission office to meet with President Gashler. It wasn't until that first face to face conversation that I learned an important detail: no one had actually *seen* the book. The woman in Bogdanovka had only described it to the missionaries. When they asked to see it, she said she had given it away the last time she moved and didn't know where it was anymore. I was crushed and even a little embarrassed. I felt I had fallen victim to the American fascination with a vast and tantalizingly mysterious Russia—a fascination amplified by Mormon folklore.

THE MORMON MYTHOLOGY OF RUSSIA

As the first missionaries to the Ukraine when the Soviet Union had just dissolved, we found our work building the Kingdom in the former "Evil Empire," in fact, sometimes weighted with portent and mystery. Stories of both confirmed and dubious origins circulated freely. Talk of bringing the restored Gospel to the land of Russia is documented as early as 1843. The prophet Joseph Smith, for example, enigmatically pronounced that a planned mission to Russia (left unfulfilled in his lifetime) would involve "some of the most important things concerning the advancement and building up of the kingdom of God in the last days, which cannot be explained at this time."²

In the Missionary Training Center we were barraged with questions like: "Is it true that your mission call is for three years?" and "Do you really have to stay in the MTC for six months because Russian is such a difficult language to learn?" Some people had heard that the letters we received announcing our mission calls were highly secretive, containing only instructions to telephone a certain Apostle for further details.³ In the mission field, we heard the apocryphal story of Elder Widstoe's 1932 prophecy in Czechoslovakia to a small group of missionaries. He purportedly proclaimed that Communism would break the Orthodox church, that Communism would one day pass away overnight, and that when it did whole towns and villages would be converted to the Gospel. Even though this "prophecy" was called into serious doubt as early as 1990, for years afterwards the story was passed among missionaries with appreciative reverence.⁴

2. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 132. Quinn suggests that the missionary certificate to Russia, signed by Joseph and Hyrum Smith as a commission from the Council of Fifty, was "a ministerial cover for a theocratic ambassador." Even more cryptic is Quinn's finding that Almon W. Babbitt, Joseph Smith's appointed ambassador to France, later told the Council of Fifty "that 'the Russian Mission' was connected with Uriah Brown's invention 'to destroy an army or navy.'" No other records shed light on this bizarre statement.

3. In spring 1999, these same rumors began circulating about church members being secretly called for three-year missions to mainland China by phone calls from general authorities.

4. Dennis Lythgoe attempted to trace this story to its roots and ascertained that the missionary who reported Elder Widstoe's prophecy apparently wrote it down decades after the event and the prophecy was not remembered or recorded separately by the other ten missionaries in attendance at the time. See "Widstoe 'Prophecy' Makes the Mormon Folklore Circuit." *Sunstone* 14, no. 1 (February 1990), 54. For a review of how Mormon faith-promoting stories originate and spread, especially among missionaries, see William Wilson's monograph, *On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1981).

Then there is the faith-promoting tale of a conversation between Andrew D. White, a non-LDS American professor from Cornell University, and Count Leo Tolstoj, the great writer and moral thinker of nineteenth century Russia. According to this account, Tolstoj voiced deep admiration for Mormonism, saying: "If the people follow the teachings of this Church, nothing can stop their progress—it will be limitless. There have been great movements started in the past, but they have died or been modified before they reached maturity. If Mormonism is able to endure, unmodified, until it reaches the third and fourth generation, it is destined to become the greatest power the world has ever known." In spite of a 1971 article by Russian historian Leland Fetzer deconstructing this reported conversation in well-researched detail, the story has been almost canonized by its reprinting in the LDS classic *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*.⁵ The Samaritan mission office had reprinted Russian translations of the story, presumably for circulation among members.

Many LDS Americans have expressed their belief that the ten lost tribes of Israel, in scattering to the north, had settled into the vast spaces of Russia and Ukraine. When I first met President Gashler and we surveyed a map of his mission boundaries, he swept the area with his hand and told me that here was where the ten tribes could be found. He then related to me that many of the young Russian converts who had made their way to BYU in the last few years have been told in their patriarchal blessings that they are of the tribes of Dan, Asher, and others.

Some LDS members have posted queries to internet chat groups about Russia's "Lost Cities" or "Secret Cities"—could they be home to the lost tribes? These were most likely references to cities dominated by large military-industrial complexes and closed to foreigners for security reasons; in Russian they would translate best as "closed cities." There are also rumors of a Siberian village so remote that when it was discovered in 1992 the residents, descendants of refugees from the oppression of tsarism, had never

5. In his article Fetzer explores fully the known relationship of Tolstoj to Mormonism in his writings and correspondence. Tolstoj expressed an ardent interest in religions all over the world and was well-loved by many for his championing of persecuted religious minorities in Russia, including the Jews. He was, however, extremely averse to the trapings and hierarchy of organized religion. His thoughts on Mormonism were not entirely positive, as evidenced by this 1889 entry in his journal: "I read both the Mormon Bible and the life of Smith and I was horrified. Yes, religion, religion proper, is the product of deception, lies for a good purpose. An illustration of this is obvious, extreme in the deception: The Life of Smith; but also other religions, religions proper, only in differing degrees." See Leland Fetzer, "Tolstoj and Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 13-29. For the full story of Professor White's purported conversation with Tolstoj, see LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1950), 412-414. The story first appeared in the February 1939 edition of *The Improvement Era*.

heard of the “Soviet Union.” Could we not stumble some day onto whole villages of Israelite descendants, complete with ephods⁶ and their own version of the Old Testament scriptures? Or if Christ indeed appeared to people other than the Jews and the Nephites, and if there are records of such a visit, certainly Russia could be harboring such secrets in its unexplored vastness, waiting to be discovered. And indeed, as President Gashler and I pondered the potential sources for this newly described Russian “Book of Mormon,” he suggested just such a possible origin—perhaps it was a third testament of Jesus Christ. The great Mother Russia, full of mystery, has always seemed poised to host the fulfillment of grand prophecies in Mormon folklore.

THE LDS CHURCH IN RUSSIA

The official LDS record of early Mormonism in Russia is very sparse, but we do have isolated references to missionary work before 1990 when Gary Browning became the first mission president to live there. In 1843 Orson Hyde and George G. Adams were called by Joseph Smith on a mission to Russia, the first non-English-speaking country to be selected for missionary work by the prophet and only the third foreign mission after Canada and Great Britain. The men were first delayed, apparently for lack of funds. After Joseph Smith was martyred, the calling was never filled.⁷

Decades later, the church found its first entry point into Russia through a Finnish couple living in St. Petersburg. Johan and Alma Lindelof had heard about the LDS church years earlier from Johan’s mother in Finland. They began corresponding with the Swedish Mission president, and in 1895 an elder was sent to baptize them—the earliest known baptism on Russian soil. By 1905, at least two of the Lindelof children and another Finnish woman living in St. Petersburg were baptized. In 1918 the Bolsheviks sentenced the Lindelofs with their seven children to prison labor camps where some of them died.⁸

In 1903, Apostle Francis M. Lyman dedicated Russia to missionary work by offering prayers in both St. Petersburg and Moscow. But the church was becoming embroiled in the Reed-Smoot hearings at home, and in spite of Russian freedom of conscience laws passed in 1904 and 1905, the climate for non-Orthodox religions was far from hospitable. Church leadership decided not to send missionaries at that time.

6. A richly embroidered outer vestment worn by priests in Jewish antiquity.

7. Gary Browning, *Russia and the Restored Gospel* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1997), 3-5. Browning’s book is one of the best available overviews of the history of the LDS church in Russia.

8. Browning, 10-12.

John Noble, an American survivor of Soviet labor camps in the decade following World War II made three mysterious references to Mormons in his memoirs. While imprisoned in Vorkuta, an infamous slave-labor mining camp near the Arctic Circle, Noble recalls meeting people from a variety of faiths: Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox priests, Lutherans, a Jewish rabbi, a Mennonite bishop, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, "and even a Mormon missionary."⁹ Later he writes of denominational gatherings behind the barbed wire of the camp: "Sometimes literally only 'two or three' men would gather in His name, as was the case with the Mormons."¹⁰ Finally he describes in slightly more detail:

Assisting the [Mennonite] bishop in the stockroom was another elderly man, a Mormon. The Mormons in Soviet Russia and its satellite countries are a very small group. They are also relentlessly persecuted, due to the fact that belief in the Book of Mormon originated in the United States and that the international headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day [sic] Saints is located in Salt Lake City, Utah. Therefore, [in] addition to persecution for the religious beliefs, they are further suspected of being actively pro-American.

Conversion to the Mormon faith was tantamount to a life sentence at the hands of the Communists, yet I noticed that this small group preferred to surrender worldly freedom than to give up their belief in Christ and in what they considered Christ's latter-day revelations. There were only a handful of Mormons in our compound but on their days off they would always meet for meditation and prayer.¹¹

We have no other official LDS records of pre-perestroika Mormons in Russia, and the identity of the "Mormon missionary" in Vorkuta is unknown.

THE 19TH-CENTURY RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

Any solution to the mystery of the Bogdanovka Mormons and the missing book would have to take into account Russia's own religious history. Orthodoxy is not the only religion "native" to Russia. Particularly in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Russia went through a period of religious revival comparable to the religious fervor that swept nineteenth-century New England. A large number of reformist religious groups emerged calling for unmediated personal relationships with God and the Spirit, a return to the Bible, and rejection of idolatrous icons. Some of these separatist groups were known as Khlytsy (Flagellants), Skoptsy (Eunuchs),

9. John Noble and Glenn D. Everett, *I Found God in Soviet Russia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1959), 118.

10. *Ibid.*, 126.

11. *Ibid.*, 141.

Dukhobors (Spiritual Warriors), Starovertsy (Old Believers), and of particular interest to this story, the Molokans, a sect which arose in the eighteenth century calling themselves "spiritual Christians" (*dukhovnie khristiane*). They were nicknamed "Molokan," most likely because they drank milk (the Russian word for milk is *moloko*) on their fast days, in contrast to the Orthodox who abstain from all dairy products during fasts. The Molokans readily accepted this nickname and added the spin that they were "drinkers of the spiritual milk of God."

The first Molokan village was founded in 1823 when a group of members was granted land by the tsar. This allowed at least some of them to live openly and separately from others although many thousands of Molokans continued to live in secrecy elsewhere in the Russian countryside. Due to a lack of centralization, Molokan beliefs changed considerably over time. Some of the basic tenets of their faith, however, remained more or less consistent and hold a few surprising parallels to the beliefs of the 19th century LDS church.

They believed that the true Christian church had lasted only until the 4th century A.D. after which the priesthood was corrupted. Molokans believed they were the only true "restored" Christian faith although they were tolerant of other religions. They turned away from "popes and bishops" but chose leaders in each community who conducted religious services, the reading of scriptures, the saying of prayers, and the shepherding of the believers. Each community chose one leader and two assistants. They did not recognize ordinances (such as baptism or sacrament) but believed in baptism by the Spirit. They believed in an "inexpensive church" and performed marriages and funerals for free in contrast to the Russian Orthodox Church, which collected tithes and contributions for religious rites. They formed strong communities with mutually supportive economic ties. They devoted themselves to studying the Bible and having direct experiences with the Spirit of God (as opposed to mediation through priests, icons, saints, etc.) and awaited the second coming of Christ. They did not believe in building temples and preached that the Old Testament should be taken figuratively in this regard.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Molokans spread mainly through southern Russia, Central Asia, and Siberia. This migration pattern to frontier areas of the Russian Empire was typical of most non-Orthodox communities. They were usually squeezed off their land by a state both anxious to minimize their corrupting influence in the more favored Russian Orthodox communities and frustrated by their pacifist resistance to military conscription.¹²

12. Sources for this description of the Molokan faith are N. I. Kostomarov, *Raskol* (Moscow: Charm, 1994); I. A. Malakhova, *O sovremennyikh Molokanakh* [About contemporary Molokans] (Moscow: Znanie, 1968); and I. P. Morozov, *Molokane* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1931). See also a contemporary Molokan website: <<http://staff.gc.maricopa.edu/~jstory/molokan/>>.

MORMONS IN BOGDANOVKA

Throughout the 1990s missionaries serving in Samara in the middle-Volga region of Russia heard rumors of people's ancestors being Mormon or rumors of groups of Mormons living nearby. It wasn't until 1998, however, that the story started to unfold and that missionaries stumbled into very clear evidence that such rumors might be more than confusion or misunderstanding. The village of Bogdanovka was the key.

The woman who had described her family's "Book of Mormon" to President Gashler said that it had been passed down from her grandparents and was "incomplete." Her grandmother, she said, did not drink tea or alcohol, did not smoke, did not pray to icons, and believed strongly in honesty. Her grandmother had studied from this "Book of Mormon" and had even read to her from it when she was a child, but she couldn't remember any particular stories or teachings. The woman explained that her parents were now deceased, and it had been many years since she'd lived with them. She knew very little about their faith. She had been waiting all her life for someone to explain what her religious heritage meant.

Within a week elders Justin Cooper and Brent Van Every were settled in Bogdanovka. They discovered a distinct religious split down the middle of the village: one half was Russian Orthodox, and the other half was described by residents as mostly Mormon or Molokan.

At first nearly everyone Cooper and Van Every talked to said they knew Mormons, and many claimed that their parents or grandparents had been Mormon. They would report, for example, that their grandmothers read scriptures, loved Jesus, didn't drink or smoke, and did not own or pray to icons. It was reported that Mormons do not believe in baptism, but live according to the teachings of the New Testament. Many claimed that the Mormons and the Molokans were basically the same religion. No one seemed to know anything about the origins of either faith.

The elders had great success at first: in only a few days, they gave away over eighty Books of Mormon and committed twelve people to baptism. But their work soon turned sour in the face of systematic and adamant opposition from Russian Orthodox believers. Two elderly women confronted them loudly on the streets, accused them of doing the devil's work, and systematically visited each home where the elders had been. Families who had warmed to the missionaries and their message on the first visit would be strangely cold and distant in subsequent discussions or turn them away with no explanation. Rumors spread that the two young men were passing out poisoned candy and that they took pictures of children for perverted reasons. After just two weeks, a honking car swerved towards the elders as they walked along the side of a village road with the obvious intention of hitting or at least badly scaring them. President Gashler promptly withdrew them from Bogdanovka, and the village was closed to missionary work.

Before their abrupt departure, the elders tried to learn more about Russian Mormons, and villagers referred them to an 85-year-old man named Nikolai, describing him as "the oldest Mormon in the village." When they met with him, however, Nikolai seemed a little confused, claiming first that he was Mormon and then that he was Molokan.

THE OLD MOLOKAN

When I visited Bogdanovka myself (about two months later in August 1998) I found Nikolai by asking villagers for "the old Molokan." He sat gripping a walking stick on a rough-hewn bench in front of his house, his face deeply lined. In our conversation Nikolai firmly identified himself as Molokan, but he said that in his late teens he had been close friends with a Mormon. Around 1930 he attended about five Mormon church meetings in spite of the fact that they were usually closed to outsiders.

Nikolai told me that these meetings were always secret, and only the Mormons would know where they were being held. They would begin by sitting in a circle on backless benches, and the main leader would conduct the meeting. They would sing a hymn and say a prayer. They prayed in their own words, no recitations. Then the leader taught a lesson followed by another hymn and prayer. At the end they would all stand and walk around in a circle, singing. He has no memory of a sacrament ordinance or of a Book of Mormon. He repeated several times that they taught "God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost." After the meeting, they would leave in pairs over a long period of time to avoid drawing attention to the site. They often kept icons in their homes to appear to be Orthodox and avoid persecution. He described them as having strong morals and being good, clean, honest, modest people.

Nikolai said that in the 1930s the Mormons began to scatter, and he implied that this was to escape persecution. Other people in the village told Elder Cooper that after the 1917 revolution, rumors abounded that Mormons were being killed or exiled to Siberia. This initiated a period of intense secrecy and disguise. Nikolai told me that there were no Mormons left in Bogdanovka, only a handful of seven or eight elderly Molokans who still meet together on Sundays to worship. He was aware that the younger generations had no interest in preserving the faith of their grandparents and that the Molokan religion was dying out.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE MORMONS? CAN YOU TELL US ANY MORE?

Newly sensitized by the reports coming out of Bogdanovka, missionaries began to pay more attention to "Mormon" rumors right in Samara. In June of 1998, James Scott and John Nielsen encountered a woman in their area of the city who claimed that there were many Mormons living in her sister's neighborhood. They took the story seriously and went to visit this

woman's sister, Ksenya. Ksenya lives in a cozy enclave of small houses in a region of the city called "Mekhzavod," after the large local fur factory. Although it is within city limits, the area looks much like a small Russian village: rows of cottages surrounded by vegetable gardens, separated by dirt roads, and bordered on one end by the dauntingly high-walled homes of the new rich.

Ksenya was receptive to talking about the Mormons and invited the two elders into her home. She explained that she herself was not Mormon, but she had lived among them since birth, and her mother-in-law had been Mormon. Ksenya described the Mormons to Elder Scott in a confusing mix of the familiar and the strange. She said that the Mormons are very supportive of each other and always help the poor. For instance, they were helping each other build a house down the street, and whenever someone does not have money or food, they always provide for each other. Whenever possible, they buy houses and land so as to live closer to one another. In this way, much of the neighborhood is made up of Mormons. They do not drink alcohol or smoke, nor do they have icons. Family life is very important to them, and most have two children (in a country where one child is the norm).

According to Ksenya, Mormons use the sign of the cross, but with one variation: their cross has a small peaked roof on the top. They bury their dead in the same cemetery, which is located some miles down the road in the forest. They wear white at funerals. When they eat together, they always bring their own dishes and always eat all of the food on the table. When a Mormon marries someone of another faith, that spouse must join the Mormon faith. Many people join their religion in this way, the majority of which are converted from the Molokans. Lastly, Ksenya said that the Mormons do not speak with others about their faith. Thus, what they believe or how they practice their beliefs is poorly understood, even by their neighbors.

As the elders walked through the neighborhood looking for Ksenya's house, Russians on the street recognized them as religious figures and suggested that they talk to Yurii, a very religious man in the community. When the elders located him, they learned that Yurii had invited other foreign missionaries to his home before and evidently led a small religious group of his own. He also claimed to know about the Mormons and shared the following information.

Yurii said that he knew of about 200 to 300 Mormons, all living in the general area of Samara. He said that they meet on Fridays to pray, only twelve or thirteen people at a time, and in different locations. Although he wasn't sure, he believed they have prophecies or preaching at their meetings and sing long monotone hymns (similar to the Molokans, but unlike the Russian Orthodox church, where singing is restricted to trained choirs). He had not heard of or seen a Mormon baptism.

Yurii claimed to have seen a large, red book with the title "Book of Mor-

mon" written in Russian on the cover. He was not allowed to open it. When the LDS elders introduced their Book of Mormon to him and gave him a copy, he said that the other book was much larger, very old, and greatly revered. These Mormons read the Bible, but not as seriously as the Book of Mormon: Yurii gave them many copies of the New Testament once, but they said they didn't really need them. They look to a man in the community called the *starshii* (Elder), although Yurii could not describe his role. The last Elder died recently, and there is only one Elder at a time. Yurii thought that they are an old group, possibly dating back to Catherine the Great (who died nine years before Joseph Smith was born) that migrated to the Samara region from somewhere else. They were persecuted before and after the Communist Revolution. He said this might explain their secrecy about their religion.

Elder Scott wasn't sure what to make of this confusing account and neither was I. Scott noted, however, that Yurii had only lived in this neighborhood for thirteen years and that he appeared to be elaborating generously on very little actual knowledge of the subject. Ksenya seemed to be a more reliable source of information. What we really needed was a clear, firsthand account from an insider willing to talk.

From Ksenya, the elders obtained the names and addresses of two men in the area reputed to be Mormon "elders." But their visits to these homes proved frustrating. The men and their wives adamantly denied being Mormon and sidestepped questions about their religious beliefs.

"YOUR AMERICAN COUSINS"

I visited one of these homes and spoke at length with Shura, the wife of one of the "elders." She said that her husband was away that day tending their beehives. She was anxious to be kind and hospitable but was clearly uncomfortable talking about Mormonism and denied any affiliation with or knowledge of such a religion. She claimed to believe in God and Christ and to attend church, but she never named a religious denomination. There were no visible icons anywhere in her home.

My experience followed a pattern encountered by missionaries in several areas of Samara: neighbors would identify certain homes as belonging to "Mormon" families, but it was difficult to find these Mormons at home. Without exception, they would deny being Mormon and avoid lengthy questioning.

President Gashler himself made a visit to this neighborhood and found a group of men working on the construction of a large building at the end of one of the streets, just as Ksenya had reported. He approached them boldly with his assistant as translator, introducing himself as their "cousin from America." He told them that he knew they were Mormon, that he was Mormon too, and that he wanted to talk to them about religion. The men

shook their heads and denied such an identity. President Gashler continued in good humor: "No, no, we know that you are Mormon." He told them he would like to come to one of their religious services and speak to their group. This proposal was met with silence. Eventually, the men took a break and invited President Gashler to join them for some cold soda, but the hospitality did not lead to any further disclosures.

Elders Scott and Nielsen also followed up with a visit to the cemetery that Ksenya had described. There they found a large section with graves marked by the roofed cross she'd mentioned. Scott estimates there to be about 60-100 such graves with the most recent burial date of 1997 and the oldest of 1955. Most burial dates were in the 1970s or later. I confirmed this finding with a visit of my own to this cemetery. The last names of some of the families identified as Mormon in the Mekhzavod area appeared frequently among the grave-markers. We wondered if this distinctive cross, easily spotted in cemeteries, might be a way to locate the presence of other Mormon communities in Russia.

Another Mormon community in Samara was discovered towards the end of June 1998. This part of the city, unpoetically called "9th Micro-region," is closer to the city center than Mekhzavod, but similar in appearance. It is a large expanse of acreage surrounded by high-rise apartment buildings visible in the distance but with a village feel to it. Like Mekhzavod, it has small cottages with outhouses, bathhouses, and vegetable gardens as well as some surrounding larger fields partitioned by dirt roads. Two elders tracting the area encountered reports of Mormons living in the neighborhood. About the same time, Sisters Heather Frushour and Alida Purves had a conversation with an inactive LDS member, Zoia, who recalled knowing Mormons in the Samaran area long before LDS missionaries first arrived in 1992.

ZOIA'S STORY

Zoia moved to Samara in 1982 at the age of 39. She lived in the city center but spent a great deal of time at her sister's home in the 9th Micro-region. It was there that she became acquainted with a man named Peter Makarov. Peter was a Mormon, as his parents and grandparents had been before him. Zoia recounted that the Mormons of the neighborhood would all gather on Sundays at the Makarov home for a worship service which included singing hymns. She knew that they did not drink alcohol, tea, or coffee, and did not smoke. She also reported that these Russian Mormons did not practice polygamy, unlike the American Mormons. Peter eventually asked Zoia to marry him but she refused. Assuming that she had concerns about his faith, he reassured her that their lives would be normal; they simply wouldn't drink vodka. But she turned him down for reasons unrelated to religion and gradually lost contact with him.

Shortly after this conversation with Zoia, a native Russian LDS missionary, Elder Dmitri Slinkov, befriended Peter Makarov and asked him about his religion. Peter said he was Mormon because his parents, who came from the neighboring province of Orenburg, were Mormon and had baptized him as a young man. He said that no books or texts had survived as far as he knew. Their meetings were closed to outsiders for fear of persecution, and they consisted of ritually greeting each other, sitting in a semi-circle, having lessons, and singing hymns. Peter estimated there to be about 200 Mormons in the Samaran area. He said that he himself had become disaffected from his faith after their leader attempted to initiate a form of polygamy. The leader reportedly informed women in his community that they needed to sleep with him to ensure their salvation.

In July, Sisters Frushour and Purves visited with an elderly woman about 70 years old, calling herself Babushka ("Grandma") Shura. This woman told them that her first husband and his family had been Mormon and had lived in the 9th Micro-region. She learned very little about this faith from her husband because he was not very active. One day, however, Shura had had a long talk about religion with her more devout father-in-law. He explained that they did not drink and did not pray to icons. She said she felt the Holy Spirit so strongly that from that day on she never entered an Orthodox church nor prayed in front of icons. Babushka Shura reported that the Mormons met every Sunday to sing and pray and listen to one person read from a book although she did not know which book. During their meetings they would keep guards at each end of the street to warn of possible intrusions. She also mentioned that these Mormons had communications with other Mormons in Moscow.

Could it be that all along there had been Russian Mormons right in the center of LDS missionary activity, lost or deliberately hidden among the millions of Muscovites? The twisted trail of the *mormoni*, first discovered in Bogdanovka, was leading in ever more directions.

THE ORENBURG "MAFIA"

Based on conversations with Ksenya, Shura, and Peter Makarov, it seems that most Samaran Mormons trace their immediate origins to the triangular province of Orenburg, which stretches east from Samara and south to the Kazakhstan border. This information confirms a curious report made in 1992 to Moscow Mission President Gary Browning. A member of the LDS church, Viacheslav Postnov, came to President Browning saying that he knew of thousands of "Mormons" living in the city of Orenburg. President Browning, a professor of Russian literature and culture at BYU with extensive experience in Russia, supported a fact-finding trip by Postnov to Orenburg, but only a few "Mormons" would speak with him. They did so reluctantly, claimed to have acquired their name as followers of a Russian

Orthodox monk named Mormon, and professed to know nothing of Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon.¹³

Six years later (October 1998) Orenburg opened to missionary work, and within a few months LDS elders began hearing consistent stories of a community of Mormons living on the east side of the city. Almost everyone in the city knew of them. Some referred to them as a “mafia” group,¹⁴ and some described them as a religious group. As with the Samaritan Mormons, they were often described by their lifestyle of abstention from drinking, smoking, and swearing. They were also reported to own a string of gas stations and to have a meetinghouse, built entirely of wood, in a small town outside Orenburg.

A visit in spring 1999 by LDS missionaries to what they were told was the Mormon neighborhood revealed a row of houses behind tall fences and locked gates. These “cottages” (*kotezhi*—as they have been dubbed in post-Soviet terminology) were built in the style of old Communist Party elites and boasted expensive German cars in the driveways. The elders, however, were unable to find any Mormons to speak with them and were actually yelled at and threatened by one of the men they approached.

In late June Dmitri Slinkov, the same native Russian elder to encounter *mormoni* in Samara, arranged through an LDS convert to speak with the Mormon leader in Orenburg, Ivan Ivanovich Zhabin, by telephone. In the course of a brief conversation Slinkov was told that Mormons do practice baptism by immersion and use the cross with the peaked roof.

Ivan Ivanovich knew nothing of the origins of any Book of Mormon but offered an interpretation of his religion’s name: “Mormon” signifies “God and man” because, he explained, “mor” means God and “mon” means man—although Ivan Ivanovich did not say in which language he found these equivalencies. In any case, it is unlikely to be Russian as a quick look in the bible of Slavic etymology (Vassmer’s four-volume dictionary) shows no entry for ‘mormony,’ or anything remotely similar.¹⁵ Slinkov was also told that although many people in Orenburg identify as Mormons, not all of them fully practice their religion. Those who do tend to

13. Browning, 344-345 [Chapter 2, footnote 16].

14. The word “mafia” is a ubiquitous term among Russians that carries a much broader meaning than it has in English. The mafia might refer to any group of people collaborating for mutual economic gain, but almost always implies some sort of illegal activity, from tax evasion (a Russian national pastime) to extortionist protection rackets.

15. The closest entries are “mordofilia” (a conceited person), “mordovat” (to suffer torment), “morkii” (easily dirtied), “morkov” (a carrot), “mormotat” (to mutter or murmur), “morok” (fog, darkness), “morokovat” (to do something slowly and hesitantly), “morosit” (to drizzle) and, not to be forgotten, “morzh” (walrus). There is an all-purpose Slavic root “mor,” which can stand alone in Russian as “an epidemic die-off,” and also occurs in other words, including a number of English ones deriving from the same Indo-European root (murder,

live more modestly than other, more “cultural” Mormons. Either way, the Mormons are so well known in the city of Orenburg that LDS missionaries have incorporated a clarifying disclaimer into each introduction: “we’re Mormons, but not *those* Mormons.”

GROWING RUMORS

More rumors and reports of Russian Mormons continue to surface. A reporter from Kazakhstan, Arkadi Shubin, asserted to President Browning in 1992 that his grandmother had told him of seeing “several hand-written copies of a ‘Book of Mormon’ among Mormons living in Samara.”¹⁶ An elderly member of the LDS church living in Volgograd claims her mother had a printed copy of a Book of Mormon before it was confiscated by the KGB in the 1930s.¹⁷

An LDS member told a sister missionary that she owns land in a village outside Samara named Kinelskii where a small community of Mormons lives. She described them as being very different from the LDS Mormons with distinct religious ceremonies. They live close together in one part of the village and eat together at one big table. They meet every Sunday and are a very close-knit group. She said that there are about five Mormon families left in the village and at least one 97-year-old Mormon woman. The member was reluctant to divulge more specific answers once pressed for more information and emphasized repeatedly that these Mormons were very different from “our” Mormons.

Another LDS member, Nadezhda Galiaeva, who now lives in northern Siberia (Surgut), related to me in a telephone conversation that her great-uncle’s wife was a Mormon who led prayer meetings for friends and family in the Ural region during World War II.

In a particularly striking report, an elderly LDS member in Krasnodar, Lyubov Sergeevna Korol, remembers her father holding secret worship meetings for Mormons in their home in Omsk. She said that her

morbid, and Tolkien’s Mordor). In English, “mor” by itself means “forest compost.” This eclectic list shows the perils of seeking (or forcing) an etymological meaning onto the word which, unlike the name “molokan,” seems to have no native Russian explanation. It should be noted, however, that Joseph Smith once set forth his own etymology for the word “mormon.” In an 1843 letter to the editor of *Times and Seasons*, he reminded readers that the Book of Mormon had been translated from “Reformed Egyptian” and then proceeded to expound on the roots of the word “good:” “We say from the Saxons, ‘good’; the Dane, ‘god’; the Goth, ‘goda’; the German, ‘gut’; the Dutch, ‘goed’; the Latin, ‘bonus’; the Greek, ‘kalos’; the Hebrew, ‘tob’; and the Egyptian, ‘mon.’ Hence with the addition of ‘more,’ or the contraction, ‘mor,’ we have the word ‘mormon’; which means literally ‘more good’” (Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1976], 300).

16. Browning, 344.

17. Reported by President Don Jarvis of the Yekaterinburg Mission.

parents had been baptized as Mormons in 1910 and believes her maternal grandparents were baptized even earlier.¹⁸ This is unusual as one of the few reports to suggest the existence of Mormon communities very early in the century in places as far away as Omsk, a city deep in Siberian territory.

THE WRITTEN RECORD

Given this range of oral reports, where were the written references to Mormons? My own exhaustive search through the holdings of the Samara Regional Library and the Saratov State University Library for mention of Mormons finally yielded a single brief citation. In a book on Protestant sects in Siberia, the author states that in 1930, 150 Mormons arrived in the region of Omsk.¹⁹ This date corresponds with a growing intensity of persecution against religious believers under Stalin.

The most detailed written reference I have encountered to *mormoni* in Russia by a Russian was brought to my attention by Don Jarvis, mission president of the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission. It is found in a 1912 handbook for Orthodox church workers republished in Moscow in 1994.²⁰ In his long and detailed section on sects and heresies, the author lists (and condemns) such non-Russian religious movements as the Baptists and Methodists, as well as Russian sects, including the Molokans. "Mormons" are given two consecutive entries. The first describes the church founded by Joseph Smith and transplanted to Utah. The author credits the church with borrowing such tenets as Buddhist reincarnation, a pagan belief in witchcraft, and a Jewish belief in theocracy. The basis of Mormon doctrine is the value of work and, consequently, "the highest goal of the religion," according to the author, "is the pursuit of worldly materialism." Aside from passages which strike us as quite unfamiliar, a good deal of the author's description echoes wording in the Articles of Faith.

The author concludes, "Notwithstanding their material prosperity and appearance of higher culture, the life of the sect is founded on despotism and polygamy and is, therefore, not fundamentally different than barbarism. At present, the Mormon sect is in a state of decline." Clearly, the au-

18. From a telephone conversation with Amy Rolly who interviewed Lyubov Korol while serving in the Russia Rostov mission. See also Paul Rolly, "Russian Saints," *Salt Lake Tribune* (December 19, 1998), B1.

19. N. A. Kostenko, *Protestantskie sekty v Sibiri* [Protestant Sects in Siberia] (Novosibirsk, 1967), 4.

20. S. V. Bulgakov, *Pravoslavnii prasniki i posti; Bogosluzhenie treby; Raskoly, yeresi, sekty protivnyie Khristianstvu i Pravoslaviyu ucheniya* [Orthodox Holidays and Fasts; Requirements for Worship Services; Schisms, heresies, sects that go against Christian and Orthodox teachings] (Moscow: Sovremennik, 1994 [1912]), 361-363.

thor's sources mixed fairly accurate factual information about basic LDS church history with more unreliable reports of its doctrines.

The author's second entry is "Mormoni samarskie" (Samaran Mormons). This, he reports, is a sect which arose in the 1840s in the province of Samara as a "strange mixture" of various other sects. They share many characteristics with the Molokans and engage in "whirling," sometimes half-undressed, and "rapture" during which the Holy Spirit descends on them and they sing. The author contrasts them with the "Methodists," writing that the two groups differ most in their views of marriage and in their way of life: *mormoni*, "having rejected marriage, have introduced among themselves polygamy, but they lead an abstemious, sober life. The Methodists are notorious drunkards and libertines." The *mormoni* can also be found in the provinces of Omsk, Astrakhan, and in the northern Caucasus. Furthermore, the Caucasus *mormoni* deny the resurrection, believe in reincarnation, and preach that every person, upon reaching perfection, can become a god. Converts to the *mormoni* swear an oath of silence.

As for the name of the Russian Mormons, the author gives a thoroughly confusing explanation: "they are called 'Mormons' only because, like the American Molokans [sic] they allow polygamy." This description provides powerful evidence that a native Russian religious group called *mormoni* has existed in the Samar region for at least a century and predates any possible contact with the American-based church. If they indeed formed in the 1840s, this would have been far too early for any contact with LDS missionaries; information about LDS Mormonism was not widely available in Russian publications until the late 1850s. Unfortunately, given the author's transparent purpose to discredit any non-Russian Orthodox religious movements, it is difficult to evaluate his mix of seemingly accurate fact, outright error, unsubstantiated speculation, and potentially deliberate slander.

It would seem from these oral and written reports that Russian Mormons were scattered quite broadly and lived as communities, not isolated family groups, although they did not attract the notice of Soviet researchers in the way that Molokans and other more prominent religious sects did. Perhaps this was the result of their small numbers, their intense secrecy, or both. Their efforts to stay undiscovered were evidently successful as they scarcely register anywhere on the documented Russian religious map of tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet times.

WHO ARE THESE MORMONS?

With such scant and contradictory information from sources of variable reliability, it is very difficult to draw any conclusions. We are left with few facts and many questions.

Prior to 1989, the church has record of only five baptisms on what was

then Russian soil; none of these were ethnic Russians. A link between these LDS Mormons in cosmopolitan cities on the far western edge of the Russian empire and Russian *Mormoni* communities of hundreds deep in the Russian countryside barely a generation later would be implausible.

Who were the Mormons that John Noble encountered in the Vorkuta prison camp? Were they of LDS origin as he presumed them to be? Or did he inaccurately assume the connection to the American-based church when he heard the word “Mormon”? We know of at least two young LDS Germans who spent time in Soviet labor camps as POWs after WWII although they were never in Vorkuta—could Noble have encountered others like them?²¹ Noble’s account, however, implied Russian nationality for at least some of these Mormons since he described the persecution their religion faced in Russia, yet their identity remains a mystery. Could they have been descendants of the Lindelofs who were baptized fifty years earlier in St. Petersburg? Or were they Russian *mormoni*?

What are we to make of murky rumors of polygamy among Russian Mormons? The Orthodox reference book cited earlier suggests that polygamy was the reason they were branded with the name of the scorned nineteenth-century American religion, and Peter Makarov reported a contested form of polygamy in recent years among at least one Samara Mormon community. Yet other informants like Ksenya, who grew up among Mormons, are careful to point out that the Russian *mormoni* do *not* practice polygamy unlike their American counterparts.

Perhaps some of the contradictions about Russian “Mormons” can be attributed to confusing them with other religious groups. For example, Ksenya reported that Mormons bring their own dishes to public meals. I found a reference to this practice among the Dukhobors, another reformist religious movement that came out of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And residents in the village of Bogdanovka certainly conflate Mormons with Molokans. Or perhaps the seeming confusion is based more on fact: these non-Orthodox religious groups, often pushed into exile together, may have gradually adopted some of each other’s teachings and practices through intermarriage or other social mixing.

If we are to believe the author of the 1912 Orthodox reference, these Russian Mormons have no relation to the American church and its mis-

21. The two LDS Germans who survived their years in Russia had been arrested for helping another LDS youth, Helmuth Hübener, distribute anti-Nazi propaganda during the war. Hübener was beheaded for treason. His friends Karl-Heinz Schnibbe and Rudolf Wobbe were sentenced to work camps in Germany and Poland then captured by the Russians. They each published their memoirs. See respectively: Blair R. Holmes and Alan F. Keele, *When Truth Was Treason: German Youth Against Hitler* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995) and Rudi Wobbe and Jerry Borrowman, *Before the Blood Tribunal* (Salt Lake City: Covenant Communications, 1992).

sionaries. Perhaps they comprise just one of the dozens of reformist religious movements to grow up in Russia as an alternative to Orthodoxy, and they adopted the Mormon name by strange coincidence or by similarity to what was known of American Mormonism. Russians certainly had access to information about Mormons through many articles, usually sensationalistic and condemnatory, published from the 1860s on. Tolstoi took an interest in Mormonism for a time as a potentially utopian success story and even corresponded briefly with Susa Young Gates, daughter of Brigham Young. An English copy of the Book of Mormon sits on the bookshelf in his house-museum. But ultimately Tolstoi spent far more of his efforts publicizing the plight of the persecuted Dukhobors than pursuing American Mormonism. It would be helpful if we could ascertain when the term "Mormon" was first used to identify this group, but this remains a mystery for now.

It is the multiple rumors of a "Book of Mormon" which particularly complicate the story. Where did these books come from when the official Russian translation for the LDS church was not completed until 1980? LDS Books of Mormon in other languages could certainly have found their way into Russia, especially in the years preceding the 1917 revolution. But would we recognize the Samaritan books that have been described as "our" Book of Mormon or are they another text altogether? Beginning in the 16th century, the tsar and the Russian Orthodox patriarch maintained a monopoly on printing scripture and religious books. Russian religious groups that rejected these printed books began a rich and secretive tradition of underground hand-copied scripture and religious writings that survives to this day. Could these "Books of Mormon" actually be biblical or other sacred texts that were dubbed with the name of those who studied them? And why do some Russian Mormons or their descendants refer to such a book, while others claim to have studied only the Bible or to have no texts at all?

In order to learn more about the origins of these Russian Mormons, we would need to find: (1) practicing Mormons more willing to talk openly about their faith, (2) Mormons who have retained records or memories of their ancestors and the origins of their religion, or (3) an actual physical copy of a pre-1980 Russian "Book of Mormon."

Unfortunately, the distinctive roofed cross, which might have acted as physical evidence for the presence of *mormoni*, turned into a dead-end lead. Scholars of Russian culture and practicing members of Russian Orthodoxy point out that this cross is a common variant in the Orthodox church. It is called a "chapel cross" (*chasovnii krest*) or a "kiot," and the roof has two possible functions. One is to symbolize a chapel when believers wish to revere a site (perhaps a shrine or to mark the place of a violent death) but do not have the means to build a full structure. The other purpose is to act as an umbrella. The little wooden roof functions as a shield for the icons and

images of the deceased commonly affixed to the body of the cross when used as a grave marker.²²

If we are to believe reports on the geography of the Mormons, we may expect to encounter more of them or their descendants in the countryside between Samara and Orenburg and in Siberia (particularly in the Omsk and Altai regions where LDS missionary work is recently underway) as well as in the Caucasus Mountains region. We might also look for evidence among other non-Orthodox religious groups (for example, among the Molokans, Dukhobors, Khlysti, Skoptsi) who seem to have shared similar migration patterns and possibly similar doctrines with Mormons and who would have faced equivalent pressures from the Soviet state. Unfortunately, it seems likely that Russian Mormons, like their cousins the Molokans, are dying out with the older generation.

"SIMPLY UNTHINKABLE"

The most exciting breakthrough for my research came in late July 1998 when I visited Samara's 9th Micro-region myself with Sister Heather Frushour as a companion. As in Mekhzavod, neighbors (especially the neighborhood children playing in the streets) would identify certain homes as belonging to Mormons, but those few who were home would never admit to being or knowing anything about Mormons. In one case, a woman Sister Frushour believed to be Mormon was sitting in front of her home, but she got up and went inside when she saw us approaching. We chose not to pursue her. We finally made our way down one dirt road, stopping to chat with anyone out enjoying the warm summer evening. Soon we approached a group of two elderly women and a younger woman sitting on log benches in front of a gate under an apple tree.

I introduced myself as a sociologist interested in learning about the history of the Russian Mormons in this area and asked if they knew anything about the Mormons or could they refer us to anyone who might be able to tell us about them. The immediate response was firm: "No—there are no Mormons around here. We don't know any, and we don't know anything about them." Undaunted, we continued chatting. They began asking questions about our religion, and soon we were settled in on the benches for a gradually warmer and friendlier conversation. They explained that they themselves were Russian Orthodox, and we continued to discuss religion and America. Before long, the younger woman stood up,

22. From a telephone conversation on August 15, 1999, with George Pahomov, professor of Russian at Bryn Mawr College. A simple "chapel cross" adorns the grave of Russian writer Anton Chekhov, for example, since his widow resisted plans to build him a monument.

told us she would be right back, then disappeared into the house across the road.

She re-emerged with her mother-in-law, a woman in her 60s, who introduced herself as Babushka Nadia. She was a large woman with strong arms, a kindly face, and knowing eyes. Her gray hair was pulled back into a bun, and she wore a comfortable, colorless housedress. She looked us over and cheerfully pronounced: "Well, you don't seem nearly as scary as they made you out to be!" I could only guess who the "they" and the "you" referred to in her statement, but it was clear she had been introduced into our conversation for a reason. We took the cue, and I asked her if she could tell us anything about Russian Mormons. She answered, "You see, we don't know very much about our ancestors. No one kept records." I had finally found a practicing Mormon who seemed willing to talk.

We asked about what she believed, and she spoke about Christ and the importance of prayer and listening to the Spirit. The arrival of a drunken neighbor allowed her to share her disgust for drinking alcohol. When we pushed for information about other doctrines, she kept coming back to the importance of prayer and the fundamental teachings from the Gospels. We asked about church meetings, a question that Nadia avoided until Sister Frushour asked point blank if she could attend their next prayer meeting. "No—it is not allowed" came the firm reply. As it grew late and we had to head home, Sister Frushour drew Nadia aside and again asked privately if she could attend a prayer meeting with her. Again the answer was unequivocally negative.

Meanwhile, I remained seated with the Orthodox women on the bench who had begun by so staunchly defending the privacy of their neighbors. Now they leaned in conspiratorially toward me. One woman said, "yes, they hold meetings in different houses—sometimes there, sometimes in that house down the road." The other told me, "my mother-in-law was Mormon, and I was invited to the funeral, and they have a rule that no noise should be made at the funeral meal—we were even provided with wooden spoons to prevent any clinking sounds against the dishes."

The next evening I returned alone to visit Nadia and her family. I found Nadia kneading sweet dough with her great forearms to make *pirozhki* (deep-fried pastries), her kitchen buzzing with family members and neighbors dropping by to chat. At her suggestion I began by having tea with her son and daughter-in-law, who lived in the rear of the house with their two children. Nadia's son said he had grown up with almost no information about his mother's faith and does not consider himself to be religious. Although his mother was devout, he said that she never made an attempt to draw her children into her beliefs and practices. This may well have been a deliberate decision not to risk exposure to authorities through their children, however unwittingly. It could also be related to es-

pecially stern laws against transmitting religion to children. As one historian reported: during the 1960s “there were many cases in which parents who were found guilty of teaching religion to their children were denied parental rights, and the children were forcibly removed to atheistic boarding schools.”²³

When we were finally alone at her kitchen table, Nadia told me about her life. She was born in 1931 in the Orenburg region and lived in a small village of about 120 residents, 30-40 of whom were Mormon. Frustrated by state limitations on private land and livestock holdings, she and her husband followed her brother to Samara in search of more lucrative work when she was 25 years old. She says she doesn’t know the origin of her faith—its name or traditions. It was simply how she was raised. Her father left the family when she was two years old, and her mother said very little about religion. It was her aunt, who moved in with her family when her father left, who was strict about keeping the Mormon faith. To Nadia, being a Mormon basically means no drinking, no smoking, no swearing, and “no marrying five times over.” This last comment seemed less a reference to polygamy than to the undesirability of divorce and the importance of family life. She said they did not have any ordinances like our baptism by immersion, but sidestepped further questions about the subject.

I asked about the “Mormon cross.” She laughed and said it was just another style of cross called a “chapel cross” and was perfectly common with no special meaning to Mormons. Later, I saw a photograph of her mother’s grave in the same forest cemetery we had visited near Mekhzavod, marked with a “chapel cross.” Her older son lives in Mekhzavod, and I learned that Nadia knows Shura, the wife of the “elder” with whom I had spoken in Mekhzavod and who had refused to acknowledge any connection with Mormons. Both families keep bees, and Nadia and Shura sell their honey together at the market.

Babushka Nadia made it clear that she was not interested in reading the Book of Mormon offered to her by Sister Frushour or in learning more about “American Mormons.” Whether or not the two religions had the same origins, she believed her religion to be very different from ours. She was happy with it and had no desire to change her life at the ripe age of 67.

Based on the Mormons’ systematic avoidance of LDS missionaries and on Nadia’s comments, it would seem that Russian *mormoni* have little interest in embracing their possible namesakes from America. Rather than open curiosity about the possible connections between faiths, Russian Mormons seem inclined to respond with the same survival instincts that no doubt preserved them during the Soviet era: they close ranks and avoid disclos-

23. William C. Fletcher, *Soviet Believers: The Religious Sector of the Population* (Lawrence, KS: Regents Press of Kansas, 1981), 3.

ing information. As with many Russians, especially those in rural areas, the driving forces in their lives are tradition and community rather than any independent search for new light, truth, or knowledge from outside sources. Identifying themselves as Mormon seems to have more to do with “the way things are” than with any connection to the origins or meaning of the name. Nadia pointed out that in her youth, to have any kind of tie to America was considered treasonous and was very dangerous. Now having ties to America represents danger of another kind: it evokes associations with wealth and privilege—not the most popular of traits in rural Russia where wealth and privilege remain linked in people’s minds to corruption and selfishness. In communities where everyone knows everyone else’s business, to step out of the traditional role prescribed for you and link yourself to Americans is to invite jealousy, resentment, gossip, and—in this disturbed day and age (as Nadia put it)—violence.

Nadia’s comments seem borne out by the LDS missionaries’ frustrated efforts in the village of Bogdanovka. Russians in these smaller, more tight-knit communities who do show interest in “American” Mormonism will likely face enormous pressure from their neighbors to conform to more “native” traditions.

As the hour grew late and I felt I had a more personal connection with Nadia, I asked if I could come to a Mormon meeting. Her reaction was immediate and vehemently negative. Such a thing was “simply unthinkable,” she said. She explained that even if they invited a trusted, non-Mormon neighbor to their meetings, he or she could easily get drunk the next day and tell who knows what to others. Visitors might misrepresent them, laugh at them behind their backs, or cause trouble for them. “Do *you* have open meetings?” she asked. When I replied affirmatively, she shook her head in mild disgust and incomprehension. Then I made a sudden connection to LDS temples. I explained that we also had a separate form of worship closed to all but committed insiders and that we did not talk about these ceremonies with non-participants. She seemed to grasp this immediately. Leaning toward me intently with a finger pressed emphatically into the table, she declared “Yes—now you understand.” It would seem that *mormoni* meetings have the same private “sacredness” to them as our temple worship does to us.

THE GREAT DIVIDE

One puzzle left after so many unsuccessful attempts to make contact was the indifference on the part of the Russian Mormons we met toward the LDS church, their foreign name-sharers. A possible explanation for such a lack of curiosity presented itself when I learned the story of a returned missionary from Samara, Dan Jones.

In May 1993, less than a year after Samara was opened to missionary

work, two Russian *mormoni* bumped into LDS elders on the street and seemed excited to learn of American Mormons. They invited the elders to their home in Mekhzavod. There Dan Jones and his companion met with a small group of adults in their thirties and forties and one elderly woman. From their introductions, Elder Jones understood that they were all related to one another and that they represented only a small part of a larger group of Mormons. Many of the others had been strongly opposed to meeting with the LDS missionaries at all. He also learned that they kept their religious beliefs from their children and did not include them in religious worship until they became adults.

The Russian Mormons wanted to know what the elders believed and became especially intrigued with the temple. In fact, it soon became clear that they were far more interested in learning what went on inside the temple than they were in hearing the first discussion. The elders felt uncomfortable discussing such matters in much detail. They tried in turn to learn something about their hosts, but when they questioned the Mormons about their weekly meetings, the elders met a comparable wall of silence. There they sat at an impasse, each side hungry to know if there were deeper commonalities between them in the worship they held sacred, but unwilling to divulge their own secrets. One or two of these Mormons came to a few Sacrament services after this visit, but never pursued the LDS church any further. By the time LDS missionaries "rediscovered" them in 1998, the *mormoni* had already come to their own conclusions about American-based Mormonism. Apparently they are reluctant to pursue any further ties.

It is, however, likely that more information will unfold in the coming years as LDS missionaries gradually expand into more remote areas and encounter more of these *mormoni* communities. BYU professors Gary Browning and Eric Eliason have continued to explore the origins and practices of this native "Mormon" religion and culture in Russia; interested readers should look to their forthcoming findings based on research conducted in the summer of 2000.