
History Unclassified
St. Xenia and the Gleaners of Leningrad

XENIA CHERKAEV

XENIA THE BLESSED IS A ST. PETERSBURG SAINT, for whom, I like to think, I was named. The story is that around 1760, when she was about twenty-six, her husband died, and she gave away all her possessions, took his name, and left the house dressed in his clothes. From then on, she lived a life of vagrancy and answered only to the name Andrei Fedorovich, miraculously helping resolve desperate situations, and secretly helping build churches, carrying loads of bricks at night up the scaffolding.

Aside from this very brief vita, St. Xenia is known through her miraculous works—some recorded in official registries, others told and retold by the grateful, and many more marveled at intimately, as stories of impossible coincidence and crossed paths, of lives taken and deaths evaded. Until very recently, her thaumaturgy had been strictly informal. Revered since her lifetime, she was canonized only in 1988, as the atheist state that had destroyed the Christian state was collapsing into a new systemic grafting of religion and politics.¹ She was canonized as she had been revered, as a fool for Christ: as one who renounced everything, down to reason itself, in an act of ascetic self-annihilation for the glory of God. And today, even as “a new type of holy foolishness endorsed and popularized by the Russian Church” rationalizes her public image in terms of self-sacrifice and spousal love, “devoid of any hint of folly, subversion, or nuisance,” her miraculous works remain excessive of such rationalized explanations.²

My sincere thanks to the Wenner-Gren Foundation and to the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies for providing the financial support that allowed me to write this essay, and to the friends and colleagues who read its many drafts—particularly Elena Tipikina, Amiel Bize, Mikhail Lurie, Holly Bromley, Joshua Hardyman, Marwan Saredidine, Erin Yerby, Natalia Mendoza, and everyone at Mick Taussig's 2018 workshop in High Falls. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers at the *American Historical Review* and at the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, where this essay won an Honorable Mention for Creative Non-Fiction. I am grateful to Kate Brown, for telling me about “History Unclassified.” And I am grateful, above all, to St. Xenia.

¹ For a discussion of Soviet atheism, see Sonja Luehrmann, “Was Soviet Society Secular? Undoing Equations between Communism and Religion,” in Tam T. T. Ngo and Justine B. Quijada, eds., *Atheist Secularism and Its Discontents: A Comparative Study of Religion and Communism in Eurasia* (London, 2015), 134–151. For a discussion of post-Soviet Orthodoxy, see John P. Burgess, “Orthodox Resurgence: Civil Religion in Russia,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 29, no. 2 (2009): Article 1, <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol29/iss2/1/>. For a lyric account of the mystics of Soviet collapse, see Werner Herzog, *Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in Russia* (documentary film, Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, 1993).

² Svitlana Kobets, “From the Tabennisi Nunnery to Pussy Riot: Female Holy Fools in Byzantium and Russia,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 60, no. 1–2 (2018): 87–107, here 98.

This essay is a serendipitously written hagiography, a grateful testament to St. Xenia's continued vitality. And it is a kind of stockpile. The stories collected here were not gathered through the deliberate study of post-socialist miracles, but gleaned from many years' conversations with people who lived through the unraveling of Leningrad. They are held together only loosely, bound by the chance relationships their tellers formed as they scavenged the ruins of what had once been the Soviet state, as they built lives and spun ventures from a planned economy's rubble.

Most of these stories can be circumscribed to one neighborhood—a place that today is a stop on the eight-lane Western High-Speed Diameter toll road, but that a decade ago still was an island, cut off from the mainland every night of the navigational season when the bridges were drawn.³ The island had everything: cemeteries, morgues, hospitals, factories, warehouses, scientific research institutes, universities, schools, maternity wards, shipyards, and an international port. One could live one's whole life on the island and never leave it. One could be born, be accredited, work, get sick, be cured, and in due course die and be buried, all without ever needing to drive. Home to Russia's first stock exchange and first university, to its first museum and to the Academy of Sciences, to Peter the Great's taxidermied horse and two dogs, the island was a central node of imperial Petersburg, the city that was remade into Petrograd, which was in turn overthrown into Leningrad, whose ruins were then repainted rococo and are now called St. Petersburg again.⁴ It is here, on the island, that St. Xenia is buried, in a cemetery next to the church that was built with the bricks that she carried, beneath this inscription:

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Here is placed the body of the servant of God Xenia Grigorievna, wife of the court chorister in the rank of colonel Andrei Fedorovich, being widowed at 26, she wandered for 45 years; lived a total of 71 years; was called by the name Andrei Fedorovich. Who knew me, may you remember my soul for the salvation of your soul. Amen.

This, at least, was the text inscribed on the Leningrad, Petrograd, and pre-Soviet St. Petersburg plaque.⁵ The post-Soviet version is slightly more wordy. The narrative details of this brief hagiography have also shifted and altered as the name of the city has changed.⁶ But the grateful, hopeful, faithful, and curious people seeking something here at the chapel keep coming.

I found my way to the island in the 2010s for a different and wholly secular reason—to ask people about the city's last name change: about the scavenging, bartering, and moonlighting by which they survived it. The stories I was told are legion; they wrap and rewrap around overlapping places and people, and they can be retold from a number of origin points. I will start rather arbitrarily, from a basement office almost smack in the middle of the island, where today Ilya runs a rundown publishing house.

³ This, of course, is the Vasilievskii ostrov.

⁴ The mummified animals are first mentioned as display exhibits in a 1793 guide to the Kunstkamera museum. Nadezhda Slepikova, "Tiran Petra Velikogo" [Tiran of Peter the Great], *LEV*, no. 1 (April 2005): 8–11. Today they can be seen at the Zoological Museum of the Russian Academy of Sciences, to your left as you enter.

⁵ Nikolai S. Gordienko, *Novye pravoslavnye sviatye* [New Orthodox Saints] (Kiev, 1991), 260.

⁶ Sergei Shtyrkov, "The Unmerry Widow: The Blessed Kseniia of Petersburg in Hagiography and Hymnography," in Priscilla Hunt and Svitlana Kobets, eds., *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* (Bloomington, Ind., 2011), 281–304.

Now a self-identified hereditary Cossack, with a handlebar mustache and an aspergillum on his wall overhanging a whip, in the late 1980s Ilya was simply the son of two Soviet bureaucrats, looking for something to do. He had graduated from the Leningrad Mining Institute—also there on the island—which was once the Russian Empire’s first technical college, and had a job in a geological scientific research institute nearby. But, he told me, it suddenly seemed boring. And when he was unfairly passed over for a pay raise, in favor of his boss’s nephew, he quit. He then got a job in a construction cooperative, but the same thing happened there: he was passed over for a raise, and he quit. And after that, he got involved with an electrical engineer, a man named Misha, who had a foundation for saving the Leningrad Underground, but who was coming to realize that more money could be made on Orthodox Christians than on aficionados of little-known art.

A discursive explosion of all things unseen was then radiating from the ruins of the atheist-secular Soviet state. Healers, magicians, clairvoyants, and all sorts of prophets offered privileged access to the Secret that lay just out of reach, obscured by state censorship, foreclosed by the scientific establishment, precluded by prudish morality and bankrupt habitual thought. Extra-sensorial healers held mega-séances in stadiums and through TV broadcasts. Orthodox parishes sprang up like mushrooms after a rain. Buildings that had been made to serve as factories and ice-skating rinks were refurbished and converted back into churches. And hardly anyone was selling anything to quench the new Christians’ deep-pocketed thirst. The market was empty in 1990: no prayer books, no icons, not even Bibles. Unmistakably Jewish Misha wasn’t much of an Orthodox salesman, but he pulled in Ilya, and they had great success: they pushed out 250,000 prayer books in under three months, and thousands of paper icons.

But then they had a falling-out over a deal that went bad, and Ilya was once again looking for something to do, hanging around with geologists. It all seemed like a string of coincidences at the time, he told me later, but he has since come to realize that there are no coincidences in life—that everything happens for a reason, even if it isn’t apparent to us.

His friends were trying to make money harvesting White Sea krill to turn into chicken feed. They had all been coastal marine geologists, mostly working in the Indian Ocean. But then oil bottomed out at \$10 a barrel. And now, with the chicken-feed plan falling through, they were looking for ways to pay rent. While hanging around their office, Ilya met Kostya, whose friends at the Mining Institute had access to the cartography department’s printing machines. For years, Kostya told me, they had used the machines to run off samizdat copies of friends’ hard-to-find titles: nothing major, just a few dozen copies here and there, for a copy to keep. But as the planned economy fractured and sputtered and stalled, it exposed more than unseen spiritual power. It also exposed riches of formerly “socialist property,” made infinitely gleanable by the fuzzy nature of post-socialist property rights.⁷ The personal relationships that had lubricated the Soviet economy, maintaining it through its stockpiles and shortages, now came unmoored from their place on the fringes: no longer were just the field’s edges left to the gleaners, but entire fields.⁸ The markets were empty, but fallen grapes lay abundant

⁷ For “gleaning” as a category of social analysis, see Amiel Bize, “The Right to the Remainder: Gleaning Fuel Economies along Kenya’s Northern Corridor,” forthcoming in *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (2020).

⁸ Plagued with distribution problems, Soviet enterprises relied on managers to secure materials through personal ties, and this hustle was itself lauded as a task of good management. Already in Stalin’s day,

amidst unrealed sheaves, and the gleaners were many. In the ruins of what had been the Soviet state, the scavenging of mispriced material stockpiles had become a national calling. Distribution collapsed, the wheat was left standing, and everything was up for grabs, including the combines.

In 1991, through people he knew at the Lenfilm film studio, Kostya managed to obtain industrial reels of paper, which he ran through the cartography department's printing machines to produce 70,000 copies of a pamphlet titled *Protection of the Mother of God over Russia* (along with some greeting cards that promptly expired after Easter; see Figure 1). Ilya helped sell the pamphlet, and the venture took off. Friends of theirs had by then made a small fortune setting up shadow firms that allowed state enterprises to turn cashless funds into actual money by existing only on paper.⁹ Needing something to do with their profits, these shell-company entrepreneurs invested 100,000 rubles in the printing business. And that is how, in 1992, Ilya and Kostya bought a used Solna offset press and registered a publishing house. They got their first order through their chicken-feed business connections: a run of canned-fish labels for Vladivostok.

They took whatever orders they could: advertisements, political campaign flyers, self-published poetry. They printed hundreds of thousands of paper icons to sell to the multitudes pilgriming to St. Xenia's chapel. But their main focus was on religious and historical books, which they distributed to churches and monasteries all over the country, through traveling regional managers. These managers had been schooled in various Soviet professions. Former biologists, geologists, physicists, and teachers, retired military officers, and former horse trainers and unemployed engineers, they found themselves scavenging the ruins of the socialist state as it collapsed, their excessive educations now much less useful than their personal ties. And as they traveled, many of these traveling salesmen also traded in metal.

Lena, one of these managers, later told me that she never touched gold—you could do serious prison time for that. But, she said, the Soviet Union had had large reserves of industrial silver. To legally be used for silver jewelry, the metal needs to be alloyed, made into a thing, and stamped by the tax commission. But that tax stamp was not necessary or even desirable for most Orthodox buyers. And so Lena and a friend of hers had a small operation through which they cut out the state and made sacred objects

there was “a positive exhortation to the manager to show ‘initiative’ and to take vigorous measures to safeguard his flow of materials. The manager who is content to submit his statement of requirements and then sit back is considered to be ‘bureaucratic’ and to lack energy.” Joseph S. Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the USSR* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 222. Such personal “initiative” gained even wider public acceptance following the 1961 Third Party Platform. Khrushchev's major reform program encouraged citizens to strive for the collective good, bypassing formal rules and regulations if need be. Xenia Cherkayev, “Self-Made Boats and Social Self-Management: The Late-Soviet Ethics of Mutual Aid,” *Cahiers du Monde russe* 59, no. 2–3 (2018): 289–310. During perestroika, similar practices of management by personal initiative quickly split up the economy into personally mediated monopolies of distribution and barter. Michael Burawoy and Pavel Krotov, “The Soviet Transition from Socialism to Capitalism: Worker Control and Economic Bargaining in the Wood Industry,” *American Sociological Review* 57, no. 1 (1992): 16–38.

⁹ This is a well-known perestroika scheme. As Simon Clarke explains, “A state enterprise could not spend the money it held in the bank at will, since the money was merely money of account held in earmarked funds. A co-operative was subject to no such restrictions, so the enterprise could transfer bank credit to the co-operative, which could then withdraw the funds in cash and return the money to the state enterprise, or make purchases on its behalf.” Clarke, “Privatisation and the Development of Capitalism in Russia,” in Simon Clarke, Peter Fairbrother, Michael Burawoy, and Pavel Krotov, eds., *What about the Workers? Workers and the Transition to Capitalism in Russia* (London, 1993), 199–241, here 214.



FIGURE 1: Easter card printed in still-Soviet Leningrad by Ilya and Kostya's press in 1991.

from scavenged silver directly through personal ties. Her friend was a biologist, who knew another biologist, who was an Armenian, who had come to Leningrad to study, had stayed, and now knew many silversmiths through the Armenian church. They bought silver for scrap metal prices from the employees of former state enterprises; they paid museum employees to cast molds of medieval crosses; they provided the silversmiths with these molds and silver; and they commandeered friends and family to package and label the jewelry. And then Lena sold these old sacred things newly wrought from Soviet industrial stockpiles to Orthodox parishes from Orenburg to Kazan to Voronezh. Ilya once threatened to charge her a commission, she told me, for transporting the metal on his truck. “And who do you think,” she told me she told him, “will buy your books then?” Churches made three times as much on the silver as they made by selling books: they bought books with the money they made selling silver.

A small river bisects the island, running between its three cemeteries. On one side is the Smolensky Orthodox Cemetery, where St. Xenia the Blessed of St. Petersburg lies buried. On the other side is the Armenian Cemetery, adjacent to the Armenian Church of the Holy Resurrection. And next to it is the Lutheran Cemetery, the final resting place of many renowned Europeans who sought their fortunes in imperial Russia. Among them is Alfred Nobel's brother Ludvig, who founded the nineteenth century's largest petroleum company, based in Azerbaijan and headquartered in St. Petersburg.

The Lutheran and Orthodox cemeteries were feral throughout the 1990s—places that decent people avoided at night unless they were walking large dogs, places in which indecent people slept when they had nowhere else to go. Lena's dog once found a boy thus passed out beneath a roofed tombstone, a few hundred yards from Ludvig Nobel's grave. The kid looked to be about twelve. It was cold outside, and he wouldn't wake up, so Lena carried him home. He woke up fast in a corner of her room the next morning, hung over and startled, and she welcomed him to the lair of pedophile cannibals: “We fuck children here, and then we eat them.” In the harsh light of sober morning, the kid went white and jumped for the window, but was intercepted. “Lady, are you going to kill me?” She told him that she wouldn't, but the next person who found him passed out in the cemetery might.

One of the thousands of children left to the streets as the Soviet economy folded, as enterprises stalled and shut down, and as residences became sellable property, this boy

was not really homeless. His parents had traded their Leningrad flat for a room in a barracks out past the city limits, and for some cash, which they were steadily drinking their way through.¹⁰ His grandmother still lived on the island, however, and he typically stayed in her room. But she had neighbors who objected to him living there, since he was supposed to be living with his parents out in a faraway *sovkhos*, so there were times when he had to stay somewhere else. Once he realized that Lena wouldn't kill him, he stayed with her sometimes. (And he turned out all right: he grew up to become a veterinarian.)

When state-owned residences suddenly became private property, many people found themselves living in great market value. And so they cashed out: they scavenged the fields that might have been theirs, sold off their own tractors for scrap metal. With mafias, murder, and spiraling markets, deals often came down to human trust and miraculous turns. Lena got her room in 1995. She'd had \$5,000 in cash, as her rightful share of an apartment that her parents had sold, her claim to twelve meters of residential space. But the market had gone out from under her, and she was living with friends, unable to buy anything, increasingly desperate. She was not yet a traveling salesperson, but Kostya and she and Ilya were friends: they had printed a journal that she'd worked on, and she sometimes took boxes of their paper icons to her grandmother's Siberian city, for a cut of the proceeds. (See Figure 2.) Kostya's friends in the realty business had tried to help her find a room, but the deals kept falling through. And after the third room she bid on fell through because of bad documents, the agent assigned to her case rescinded their contract and begged her forgiveness: "I know," he told her, "that you've lost a grand with me, as the market has spiraled around us, but I swear I was trying my best." And it's true that it wasn't his fault. So what ill-will could she harbor toward him? Still, she was growing resigned, drinking beer by St. Xenia's chapel and crying, sure that there was nothing left in the city for her.

And then he called back. He showed her a room down the street from the Smolensky Cemetery, offered cheap by two sisters who needed cash fast: they had borrowed money from the Azeri mob to smuggle in clothes from Turkey, but the shipment had been stopped at the border, and now their loan-shark investors wanted their money. The agent had orders to purchase the room for the realty, but he was sorry for having screwed up the previous deals, so he gave Lena four hours to come up with the money. The room cost \$8,000 and she only had \$5,000, but Ilya and Kostya made up the difference from the safe in the publishing house. Lena ran to the room with the cash, to give it to the girls, to give to the armed men waiting for them in a parked Lada-9. "You'll give us the money just like that, with no notary?" they asked, relieved to settle their debts before the timer clicked up the balance another \$500. And then they cut her a break, grateful for her unprompted neighborly trust: they charged her \$6,500 instead of \$8,000. Just enough to pay back their debts to the mob and start smuggling again.

Ilya nods as he listens to Lena tell me this story: he would never have gotten his room on the island without St. Xenia, either.

As the secular centralized state with its "friendship of nations" fell apart into personal, regional, ethnic, and professional mycelial networks of power, common symbols of status remained. The publishing house had its own guy working security. A "roof,"

¹⁰ For a discussion of such machinations, see Tova Höjdestrand, *Needed by Nobody: Homelessness and Humanness in Post-Socialist Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2009), a moving account of homelessness in late 1990s St. Petersburg.



FIGURE 2: Paper icon of St. Xenia of St. Petersburg, printed by Ilya and Kostya's press in the mid-1990s.

as such “security engineers” are known in the Russian vernacular: a defense against, or a variant of, the racketeering bandits that were then ever-present on the post-Soviet Leningrad market. The guy was the size of a large kitchen fridge, a veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan; and like all the other bandits who had attained a certain standing, he had

risen above pit bulls and Lada-9 cars: he owned a Rottweiler and drove a black Jeep Cherokee.

So this is a story I heard many times, in many renditions:

One evening, a group of people were sitting around the office, having a drink after work, when the Afghan vet came in, his eyes vacant: someone had jacked his Cherokee. There was no way of finding it. He had tried everything—he'd gone through the cops, he'd gone through the criminal underworld, and no one had seen his Cherokee. Sighing their condolences, they poured him a drink. And then they all left the office together and wandered out into the white summer night, splitting off in different directions. Walking back with the vet, Ilya said to him: "Why don't you go ask St. Xenia? She helps people."

"But I'm not baptized!" the vet protested.

"Oh, she helps the unbaptized."

"But I don't believe!"

"Oh, she helps those, too."

It's true that the chapel was on his way. He was, for lack of a car, walking back across the island, toward the port, and the shortest path lay through the cemetery. And the next morning he came into the office, demanding to be baptized immediately. Because after he had left the cemetery that night, wandering aimlessly, distraught about his loss, walking through former industrial zones, through yards that used to be useful as factory lots and now stood empty, useful to anyone who would salvage and make something of them, he ran into his black Jeep Cherokee, wheeled out in front of a chop-shop.

And the happy return of this man's Cherokee, I am told, has been recorded in St. Xenia's official registry of miraculous works.

The ledger of miracles thickens, and St. Xenia's glory shows no sign of abating. Federal television now reports on her saint's day, showing the Smolensky Cemetery packed and surrounded for blocks on all sides with parked tour buses and cars: hopeful pilgrims, grateful locals, and religious tourists crowd into the cemetery with candles and flowers in the bright winter cold of February the 6th. But only until 6 P.M. Today the Smolensky Cemetery is secured by fencing and cameras, and the vagabond crossdressing saint is bound to keep visiting hours. Today she can also be reached at all times on the information superhighway: a convenient webpage lets petitioners send in donations and request miracles with a few easy clicks.¹¹

Jealously centralizing, the state closes loopholes; it privatizes access to infrastructure, to local saints, to the surplus profits from oil sales. Loopholes are now opened and closed as imperceptibly as leftovers are set aside and picked back up into waiting arrangements: the marble figure mourning atop Mary and Ludvig Nobel's grave is still missing its nose, and the \$40,000 set aside for its restoration is also noted to be missing.¹² Reconstituting the ruins of Leningrad, the city is once again called St. Peters-

¹¹ St. Xenia can be reached at Sait polnoi informatsii o Sviatoi Ksenii, <http://svyatayakseniya.ru/otpraviv-zapisku-svyatoy-ksenii/>. Such "miracles by correspondence" are part of a longer history with its own market logics, a phenomenon that has itself been well researched by social science. See Jeanne Kormina and Sergei Shtyrkov, "Believers' Letters as Advertising: St Xenia of Petersburg's 'National Reception Centre,'" trans. Edmund Griffiths, *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, no. 6 (2010): 115–143.

¹² Roman Shleinov, "Nobelevskaia premiia Kudrina" [Kudrin's Nobel Prize], *Novaia gazeta*, no. 59 (August 15, 2005), <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2005/08/15/24723-nobelevskaia-premiya-kudrina>.

burg; students at the Mining Institute now wear uniforms adorned with two hammers crossed beneath an imperial crown, and Orthodox books are now published with federal grants, earmarked to be won by the church's own publishing house, which undercuts everyone else on the market. (Ilya still has his press, but it's seen better days.) Budgets come padded with kickbacks, predestined for their determined recipients, and the small river's banks are built high with new condo developments. Money is easier to stockpile than paper; it rarely piles up as scrap to be scavenged.

But St. Xenia the Blessed of St. Petersburg still resolves desperate situations, taking no compensation for her miraculous labor. Having willfully given away everything in her life in her lifetime, she obtained inexhaustible incorruptible wealth, inviolable before the changing configurations of status and money.

Xenia Cherkaev is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Social Anthropology at the Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg. Her work focuses on the relation of legal ownership and customary use rights, particularly concerning socialist property law. She is presently working on two projects. The first is a book-length study of the Soviet Union as seen through both the popular historiography of "soviet times" and the property definitions of socialist civil law. The second is a collaborative study of Stalin-era mine-detection dogs: of how systems of political economy structure images of scientific objectivity, how sentimental interspecies relationships trouble them both, and who bred pedigreed German shepherd dogs in Leningrad during the World War II siege.