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# A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion

Edited by  
Janice Boddy  
and Michael Lambek

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## Canonizing Soviet Pasts in Contemporary Russia: The Case of Saint Matrona of Moscow

*Jeanne Kormina*

If you happen to be in Moscow, take the subway to Marksistskaya (Karl Marx) station and, when you get off the train, ask people how to get to *Matronushka*. Everyone will be able to tell you. Or, if you want to find the place yourself, just follow the women dressed in long dark skirts and kerchiefs; they are probably pilgrims going to visit one of the most popular Russian saints, Matrona of Moscow. Follow them to the Pokrovsky convent where the relics and venerated icon of the saint are housed. You will see the women buy white flowers (an odd number, according to Russian custom, as if the saint were alive) from sellers or small shops on the way, then enter the gates of the monastery yard and join the long queue to the shrine. While in the queue you will have time, certainly several hours, to notice that fellow visitors are socially diverse; long-skirted women mingle with casually dressed urbanites, ordinary men and women of different ages, whom your eye would never take to be pilgrims in the city crowd. After several hours' wait you at last have a chance to mount the wooden platform in front of the icon on the wall of the convent and, observed by hundreds of believers and a dozen policemen guarding the shrine, you may kiss the icon and put your forehead and a palm to it for a while. After that you can also visit the convent to see the sepulcher containing relics of the saint, kiss it, pray with your own words and ask for help with problems large or small in spoken or written form.



You can leave your letter to the saint near her icon or tomb. But if you forget to do so, you can send your message to her via email or ordinary mail, as indicated on the convent's web site.<sup>1</sup>

Seemingly well-established, popular, and rooted in tradition, the cult of Matrona of Moscow is in fact strikingly new. Matrona was only canonized as a local saint in the Moscow diocese in 1999, and no evidence of intensive folk veneration of her before canonization is available. In a sense, the Church itself initiated the popular veneration of this saint.

The canonization of Matrona was the most successful project of its kind carried out by the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet period. The image of this saint owes its origin to the populist politics of the Russian Orthodox Church, and can tell us much about the specifics of popular Orthodoxy in contemporary Russia. However in this chapter I focus largely on another aspect of the veneration of St Matrona and several other new saints, namely that their hagiographies and cults are part of the process of making Soviet history usable in the post-Soviet context.

#### SOVIET PAST, POST-SOVIET PRESENT: RUPTURES AND CONTINUITIES

The Bolsheviks who seized power in 1917 had as their main goal to build a new, modernized state and society. There was no place for religion in this modernization project; the Bolsheviks believed that religion would disappear naturally, since this "opium of the people" would not be needed in the society of the future. Like others of their time who believed in progress and social evolution, they thought a science-based way of world-making would inevitably supplant religious ideologies. To hasten people through the transformation, soon after the Revolution they undertook deliberate antireligious measures such as opening reliquaries containing saints' bodies. Reports of these "openings" written in dry technical language were published in central and local newspapers. The body parts, relics, and other items found in the coffins were exhibited in churches or monasteries so that people could see with their own eyes that the bodies were not undecayed; in some cases the reliquaries were found to be empty (Marchadier 1981).<sup>2</sup> The Soviet regime thereby undermined the moral authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, and accused it of deceit. Moreover, in the course of "translating" religious discourses and practices into secular language, the regime made the sacred seem ridiculous. This kind of damage could hardly be reversed. It stimulated the objectification of religion, a "crucial byproduct of this modernist project" (Pelkmans 2009: 5).

The most visible result of the Soviet secularization project, what Luehrmann (2011) calls "secularism Soviet style", was the domestication of religion (Dragadze 1993). Religion disappeared from public spaces; instead, deinstitutionalized and marginalized, it moved into the domain of private life. Deinstitutionalization meant that believers performed their religious duties without the support and control of their churches, and religious professionals (priests) were replaced by amateurs (lay believers) who took care of believers' everyday needs. In the absence of priests, many of whom were killed or exiled, or chose a secular profession and left the church, pious village women baptized children, helped organize funerals, and performed other rites that are often labeled by researchers as "folk religion" or "religious superstitions"



(Rock 2007). Religion was moving from the center to the periphery, literally (geographically) as well as metaphorically (socially).

In the history of religions under the Soviet regime, which of course cannot be covered even briefly in this chapter, there was a short period when the state became interested in the potentialities of institutionalized religion, the Russian Orthodox Church in particular. This was in the middle of World War II, when the Soviet state began looking to the Russian Orthodox Church as a resource for mobilizing popular patriotism. A massive religious revival in the territories occupied by German troops also influenced Stalin's decision to meet in September 1943 with three chief hierarchs of the Church, including the future Patriarch Sergius of Moscow. The result was that Stalin gave the Church some freedom and support under strict control of the state (Chumachenko and Roslof 2002). As will be discussed later, this temporary change in the religious politics of the Soviet state became a source for speculation and myth-making in the 1990s.

The process of desecularization in the Soviet world started in the 1980s and took different forms in various parts of this not very homogeneous space. Yet one common characteristic can be noted, what Hann (2000) refers to as the "(de)privatization of religion" closely linked to economic liberation and the appearance of a religious market. This market attracted many churches, religious movements and missionaries who arrived to convert ex-Soviets to new religions (Pelkmans 2006). The missions were highly successful because their teachings about born-again individuals perfectly fit the cultural rupture between Soviet and post-Soviet claims for personhood experienced by the converts. Besides, as several researchers point out, people sought clear world-making strategies, and the new religions provided the needy with this possibility. Many of these churches belong to global Christian networks and organizations, such that joining meant acquiring new, extranational identities.

The religious market has developed in different ways in different parts of the post-Soviet world. While in some countries there exists a sphere of relatively free competition (Ukraine, for example; see Wanner 2007; Naumescu 2006), in Russia the state controls the market, openly supporting a religious monopoly of the Russian Orthodox Church. It does so because it appreciates the potential of the Church to help "the Russian people" overcome the rupture between Soviet and post-Soviet times by presenting them with an image of Russian history as logical, coherent, and unproblematic.<sup>3</sup>

#### SOVIET PAST, ORTHODOX VARIANTS

As I have written elsewhere, loyalty to the Soviet past has grown significantly in Russia within the last decade.<sup>4</sup> Nostalgia for the Soviet past is deliberately promoted by the Russian state but has also developed independently at the grass-roots level in the social memory of kin groups and local communities. Local museums in towns built by prisoners of the Gulag system tend to include this part of their history in the evolutionist narrative of progress, turning the dramatic story of the Great Terror into a positive narrative of industrialization.

These ideological tendencies presented a serious challenge to the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church, who had to clarify and reformulate their position

concerning the Soviet period of Russian history. From the late 1980s through the 1990s the Church – like the rest of Russian society – was enthusiastically involved in the process of rewriting Soviet history. The Church reproached the Soviet state for its militant atheism and especially for the murder of priests and devoted believers. Like many post-Soviets, Orthodox historians started doing research in the newly opened archives in order to write the tragic story of state–church relations during Soviet times and to rehabilitate those brothers in faith who were killed or who died in Soviet prisons and camps. The result of this “archival” period for Orthodox people was the mass canonization of so-called “New Martyrs” of Russia. In these canonizations and the public discourse surrounding them, the Soviet period is conceptualized as the “Russian Golgotha” (or Calvary). An Orthodox historian, Olga Vassilieva, writes:

Hundreds of thousands of innocent people were killed in the years of unprecedented persecution of the Church. For a period of long decades Orthodox Russia was on Golgotha. The light of the sacrificial love of the new Orthodox martyrs, confessors and *pravedniki*<sup>5</sup> shows to those who live today the path to salvation. . . . [D]ue to their suffering for Christ we gain the possibility of the church life. (Vassilieva 2008: 21)

The first martyr of the Soviet regime was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1989; it had canonized twelve more by 2000 when the Jubilee Bishops’ Council decided to canonize all martyrs and confessors of the twentieth century known by name (there were 1,071 at that time), as well as those who were still unknown. The last point means that for martyrs discovered later on, the canonization process has been simplified; by decision of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, they can be readily added to the existing list of new martyrs instead of having to go through the complicated full procedure of canonization. All in all, by the beginning of 2011 the list contained the names of 1,774 saints.<sup>6</sup> A commemoration day for the new saints was established and a special icon, *The New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia Known and Unknown*, was created (see Figure 22.1). The icon depicts crowds of people, some with written names, others without, concentrated around a central group of royal “passion-bearers” – Russian Tsar Nicholas II and his wife and five children, killed in Yekaterinburg by Bolsheviks in July 1918. The royals were not canonized as martyrs because, as the canonization commission concluded after long and tense debate, they had not suffered for the Orthodox faith but for other, political, reasons. In Church tradition, passion-bearers are saints who were tortured by fellow believers and compatriots rather than by those who persecuted Christians as martyrs. Their religious deed is to have endured suffering and faced death in a Christ-like manner. Yet, though the royal family was not canonized as martyrs in Russia, the discourse surrounding their canonization in the 1990s presents them as exemplifying all martyrs who suffered at the hands of their compatriots.

Some variants of the icon *New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia* have hagiographical border scenes where tortures of the martyrs are portrayed. The persecutors of the Orthodox Christians are depicted wearing gray military uniforms, signs of the “godless” state which they represented and served. Clearly, the canonization of these New Martyrs and Confessors was the product of a political agenda. It declared the

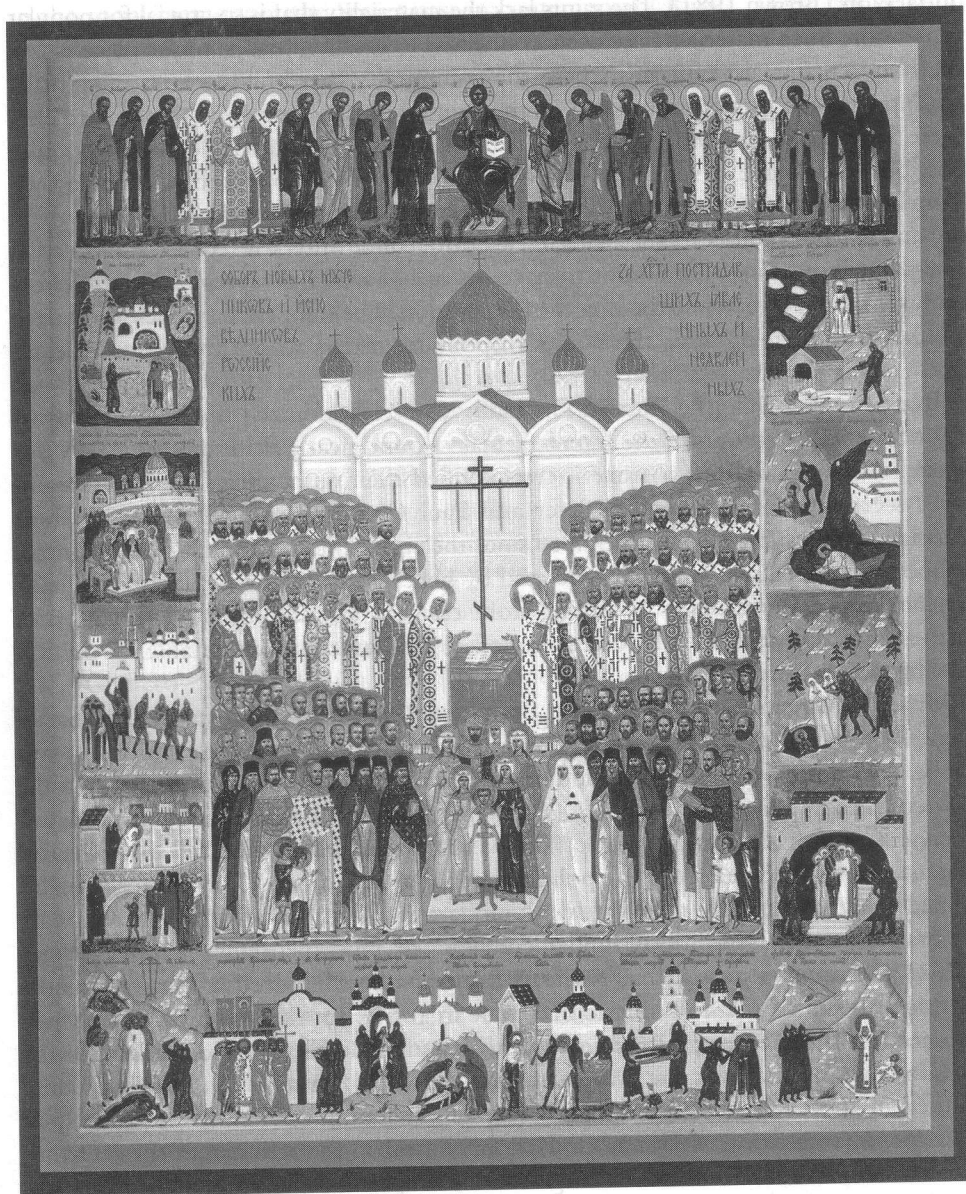


Figure 22.1 The icon *The New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia Known and Unknown*.

position of the Church toward the Soviet period of its history and blamed the state for the believers' suffering and persecution. In other words, these canonizations argued for a huge cultural rupture between the pre-Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Despite the efforts of those who organized the canonizations, the New Martyrs have not become objects of popular veneration. Their icons do not reveal the "potentiality" of wonderwork and their burial places have not become sacred sites attracting pilgrims. One reason for this failure is the absence of the saints' bodies and individual



burial plots (Brown 1981). The saints lack the materiality that is so crucial for popular veneration. Such materiality is closely connected to locality, that is, to the place where the holy remains are kept and where the community that builds a kind of spiritual kinship with the local saint exists. Whether buried in mass graves or somewhere else, these saints have no evident bodies. In the Russian Orthodox tradition it is quite possible to become a venerated saint without any biography and with unknown identity – these details can be clarified by the proposed saint himself or herself in dreams or appearances to the living (see Levin 2003; Shtyrkov 2012). However, it is absolutely necessary for a saint to have his or her material representation – a holy body – in order to become the object of veneration. The same logic applies to modern secular states that preserve the bodies of political leaders whom they have “canonized” as their creators (Verdery 1999).

Interestingly, while the Russian Orthodox Church canonized the Tsar’s family, it did not officially recognize the human remains found near Yekaterinburg in 1991 as theirs, even after a series of genetic tests verified their authenticity and the remains were solemnly buried in Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in St Petersburg where Russian emperors have been entombed since the eighteenth century. Without Church support, the remains cannot be venerated by believers as holy relics. Church officials explained their position as stemming from concern for the possible veneration of “false relics.” If verified, the potential of these remains was considerable, as the following makes clear.

In 1993 Patriarch Alexei II called upon the Russian people to repent the sin of regicide. In this way, as Rousselet (2011: 150) notes: “a new moral judgment was to be made on Soviet history. The understanding of the spiritual dimension of the Soviet tragedy and the subsequent repentance were considered to be grounds for reconciliation of all Russian people.” However, a decade later the call for collective repentance disappeared from the political agenda of the official Church, to be maintained only by groups of right-wing monarchist Orthodox dissidents who are pejoratively called “Orthodox fundamentalists” or more neutrally “zealots” (Rock 2002). These people insist that Nicholas Romanov be canonized as a martyr, as the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad had done in 1981. But they go further: for them Nicholas is the “Redeemer” (*iskupitel'*), who by his death expiated the sins of the Russian people in the same way as Jesus Christ did for the whole of mankind. Although the Church denounced this way of venerating new saints as a heresy of *tsarebozhie* (veneration of Tsar as God), it failed to stop the activities of these Orthodox dissidents. Icons and other images of the emperor depicted as a redeemer can be found in many parts of the country; one “underground” icon known as “Zealous sacrifice” depicts the head of Nicholas II in a Eucharist vessel.

By refusing to verify the royal remains, the Church deliberately sought to limit their veneration. The canonized emperor and his family are, however, popularized in contemporary Russian society as a model for ideal family life (Rousselet 2011). Yet another reason the New Martyrs have not become popular saints is that they cannot serve in this way either as “models for” or as “models of” contemporary Orthodox Christians (Macklin 1988).

By the late 1990s, voices critical of the Soviet past, which had been especially loud during the perestroika period, began calming down. The following analysis of the cult of the new saint – Matrona of Moscow – sheds light on recent tendencies

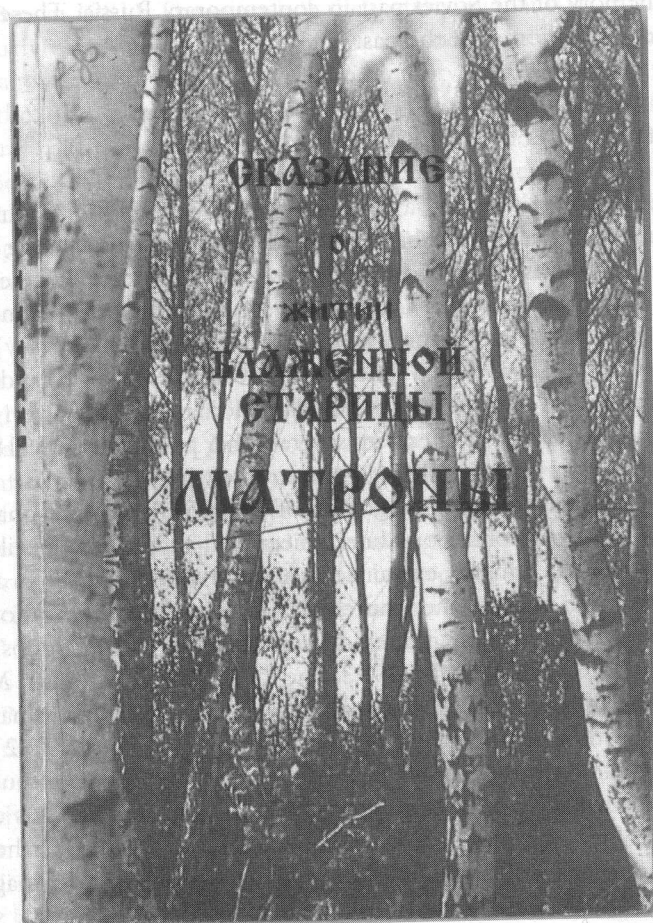


in the social memory of the Soviet past in contemporary Russia. These can be summarized as “reconciliation with the past.”

### RECONCILIATION WITH THE PAST: MATRONA

In July 1997, Afanasy Gumerov, a Moscow priest with a PhD in philosophy and theology, received an order from his Bishop Arseny to start collecting materials for the canonization of saints in the Moscow diocese, as some other dioceses had already started to do. Within a few weeks Gumerov had collected a list of some twenty-five names of proposed saints. He began with the Life of Makarius (Nevsky), Metropolitan of Moscow in 1915–1917.<sup>7</sup> While working on the second candidate – Ivan Vostorgov, a priest and a leader of the Russian Monarchist party who was publicly executed by the Bolsheviks together with several other politicians in 1918, and would be canonized as a martyr in 2000 – Gumerov was interrupted. He was ordered immediately to proceed to the hagiography of a very different personage who had nothing to do with either politics or Church hierarchy, an uneducated village woman, Matrona Nikonova. As Gumerov explained in an interview published in an Orthodox journal, this happened because the Church was anxious about veneration occurring at Matrona Nikonova’s grave as “it could be seized by one of the groups of schismatics” (Gumerov 2011). In fact, by 1993 one of the convents near Moscow had already published a collection of memories about Matrona. This small paperback newsprint book with a picture of birches on its cover (see Figure 22.2)<sup>8</sup> includes a short biography of Matrona and stories of her life told by people who used to know her, mainly her covillagers who migrated to Moscow in the 1930s as did she, and their children. The book was severely criticized by the famous Orthodox writer, polemicist, and professor of theology Andrey Kuraev for promoting “paganism” and “folk religiosity,” that is, a variant of religion practiced by “ignorant, superstitious people” (Kuraev 1998). Indeed, Kuraev’s book, “Occultism in Orthodox Christianity,” contains several vivid and ethnographically accurate descriptions of curse removals ascribed to Matrona, as well as other evidence that could hardly be included in the Vita of a Christian saint. Kuraev chastised the publishers of the memoir for the poor quality of the text and asserted to readers that even if Matrona were canonized, he could not pray to her sincerely.

Clearly, as representatives of Orthodox intellectuals neither Gumerov nor Kuraev was enthusiastic about the potential canonization of Matrona. Indeed they are among the exceptional few, almost exclusively religious professionals, for whom the New Martyrs serve as role models. However, the majority of believers, that is the laity, needed different saints. An example of a successful “lay saint” was another woman, Saint Xenia the Blessed of St Petersburg. Sainted during the first post-Soviet canonization campaign in 1988, she became an object of popular veneration as a helper and protector, especially in cases of social suffering, such as poverty, injustice, and loneliness (Kormina and Shtyrkov 2011b; Shtyrkov 2011). According to her Life, she lived in the city of St Petersburg in the eighteenth century, was married, widowed at the age of 26, had no children, and after her husband’s death decided to become a beggar. She is glorified as a holy fool, a sort of saint who deliberately hides her holiness from people and behaves asocially, or at least unconventionally (Ivanov



**Figure 22.2** Cover of the first published *Life of Matrona, Story of the Life of the Elder Matrona*, written and edited by Zinaida Zhdanova (Holy Trinity New Golutvin Convent, Kolomna, 1993; reproduced by kind permission of Hegumennes Ksenia).

2006). Xenia is depicted on her icons and by her devotees as a typical pensioner, a poor elderly woman who can understand the needs of simple people because she suffered herself. In other words, she is a “model of” the majority of contemporary Russian Orthodox Christians.

It could be said that Matrona appeared in part as a sort of replica of Xenia, a female protector for another capital city of Russia.<sup>9</sup> The two are often painted in one icon, and their Lives are sometimes published under the same cover. However, ideologically Matrona is distinct. Her suffering, a necessary quality for a proper Orthodox saint, was of a different kind. New Martyrs suffered violence at the hands of their ideological enemies and persecutors; St Xenia was a holy fool who deliberately chose physical suffering as a city beggar and experienced mental suffering from her loss; St Matrona was born already suffering physically.

Matrona Nikonova was born in 1885 to a poor peasant family in Tulskaia province. Her mother did not want to have another baby in the family and was thinking of

abandoning her. However, before her birth, her mother saw in a dream a white bird with a human face, eyes closed. The girl was born blind, but her mother decided to keep her at home. As a child, Matrona liked going to church on her own. At the age of 7 she revealed the gift of prophecy. People started consulting her, and instead of being a burden to her family, she became its main breadwinner. At the age of 17 she became paralyzed and did not move on her own for the rest of her life. She died in 1952.

In the mid-1990s, when Gumerov, the Moscow priest, started researching the biography of Matrona, there were few similar candidates for the role of this new type of saint – a simple woman who had managed to preserve her religiosity during the Soviet period. Remarkably, according to available documents (memories and variants of saints' Lives composed by amateur hagiographers) all who did so had physical disabilities. This new category of saints was called *staritsa* (female elder), a female parallel to *starets* (male elder).<sup>10</sup> The elder is usually an elderly monk or priest who has many spiritual children visiting him for confession. According to widespread opinion, the elders have special knowledge, a kind of inner spiritual sight that allows them to know the identity, sins, and problems of visitors without even asking them, and to give the right advice to these unasked questions. Some elders, especially women, are believed through their prayers to help their clients miraculously recover from incurable diseases, while other elders specialize in performing the ritual of exorcism for those thought to be possessed by demons. The believers, as well as some researchers, state that the social institution of *startchestvo* dates back at least to the eighteenth century, but in fact it looks very "post-Soviet" (Paert 2010).

Although the repertoire of deeds ascribed to the elders is quite rich and diverse, the main quality they share is their embodiment of the sacred. Venerated as living saints, the elders are an important part of the Russian religious revitalization movement that began in the late Soviet period. *Startsy* are not included in the official church hierarchy and represent, in the eyes of anticlerical believers from liberals to fundamentalists, a kind of alternative religious authority. In contrast to the official church hierarchs who are blamed for corruption or collaboration with the Soviet state, *startsy* are held to have lived truly ascetic lives in monasteries and remote parishes, beyond political intrigues and economic self-interest, and thus to have preserved an uncorrupted Orthodox tradition.

In contrast to male elders, however, *staritsy* seldom communicate actively with believers. Obviously, they cannot perform rituals of confession and absolution (this is allowed only to priests, and Orthodox Christianity does not allow women to be ordained); some of them cannot even speak because of their health problems. These "containers of charisma" are ideal "blank screens" onto which every group of believers can project its own imagination of "proper" sanctity and the religious way of life (Bornstein 1997).

#### A SOVIET SAINT

The Life of Matrona states that in the 1920s her two brothers became Communists and she had to leave her home village for Moscow. Otherwise, with her religiosity



and suspicious visitors, she could have caused trouble for her brothers' families. In Moscow she moved constantly from one place to another, lived with the families of her distant relatives and covillagers, and continued to receive visitors who found her via the network of her countrymen, but not only through them. She was consulted by different sorts of people, believers as well as nonbelievers, and, as her Life stresses, she helped them all.

In May 1946 one of Matushka's close friends, Tania, brought a woman-commissar dressed in a brown leather coat. She had just arrived from Berlin. Her husband had been killed during the war, and she was an atheist . . . Her only son went out of his mind. She said: "Please, help me! My son was treated in Basel. But European doctors cannot help. I came to you because I am in utter despair!" Matushka asked her: "If God heals your son, would you believe in God then?" "I don't know how it is – to believe!" (Khudoshin 2005: 241)

The unhappy mother-commissar is an atheist merely because she does not know how to believe. The narrator suggests she would likely be a believer if only she knew the way. In other words, her atheism is not her conviction or the result of her individual free choice but, in contrast to her "natural" religiosity, or readiness to become religious, it is artificial and false. This story is quite revealing in terms of how religiosity, in its Orthodox Christian variant, is often represented in contemporary Russian society. Considered to articulate the ethnic and national identity of "the Russian people," religious belonging is often understood as an ascribed social identity, rather than one that is acquired.<sup>11</sup> To put it differently, the episode with this mother suggests that rupture in religious transmission is artificial, while continuity is "natural." And of course it reminds readers that children suffer for the sins of their parents, in particular for their parents' nonbelief.

The Life of Saint Matrona is filled with ethnographic details of Soviet everyday life, such as *propiska* (local registration which every resident had to have; the saint did not have this registration in Moscow and, hence, lived in the capital illegally), dispossession of the kulaks (prosperous farmers), etc. Matrona's Life tells the story of Soviet modernization from the point of view of a village migrant to the capital city. The "social characteristics" of this saint, such as her peasant origin, experience of migration, and marginality, make her a typical Soviet person of her time, similar to the great-grandmothers of her current devotees.<sup>12</sup>

In the national mythology of contemporary Russia, World War II, always called the Great Patriotic War, has a special place. It is represented as an unquestionable moral victory for the Russian people, who saved the whole world from fascist occupation. Some variants of the Life of Matrona depict an episode of the saint being visited by the leader of the Soviet Union. It is thought that Joseph Stalin visited her at the critical moment in September 1941 when German troops were about to occupy Moscow and Stalin had to decide whether to leave the capital or not. Although omitted from the official Vita of the saint, the story is reproduced in productions of secular publishing houses, which, unlike church publications, are not censored. The internet is yet another way this apocryphal story is spread. Below is a "secular" variant published by a female writer in the book "Help of the saints: Matrona of Moscow" in 2009:



I cannot say whether this story is fact or fiction. But they say that Stalin himself visited Matrona in her room in Arbat [centrally located old district in Moscow] in the fall of 1941. He was told that there is a blessed clairvoyant *staritsa*, Matrona, who protects the city with her prayers from capture by the enemies. Stalin came to her to ask for advice on whether he should surrender Moscow, as Kutuzov once did, or not.<sup>13</sup> According to the legend, Matronushka blessed him to pluck up his spirits. (The same way St Sergius of Radonezh blessed Dmitry Donskoy for the Battle of Kulikovo.) She hit him on his forehead with her small fist and said: "Do not surrender Moscow, think well, and when Alexander Nevsky comes he will lead everybody [to the victory] . . . The entirety of our heavenly host helps you." (Serova 2009: 71)

In her variant of the story of the saint's meeting with the political leader the writer invokes other historical personages in similar situations. In this way she creates continuities between different historical episodes when "Russians" successfully defended their independence. In this picture, Stalin appears as an Orthodox leader similar to Prince Dmitry Donskoy, who struggled against Mongol domination and defeated Mamai, commander of the Golden Horde, at the battle of Kulikovo in 1380.<sup>14</sup>

The story of Matrona's meeting with Stalin is portrayed in an icon that was recently passionately discussed in different parts of Russian society (see Figure 22.3). The discussion focused on the phenomenon of so called "Orthodox Stalinism," that is, a version of Soviet history claiming that Joseph Stalin and other Soviet leaders were

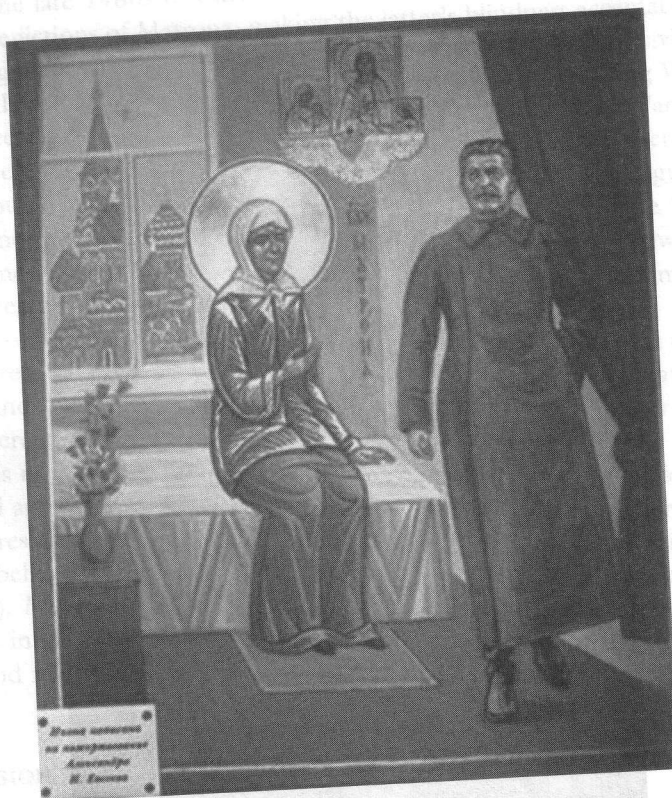


Figure 22.3 Icon Saint Matrona Blesses Joseph Stalin for Victory in the Great Patriotic War.

believers themselves and supported the Church, especially during the war. In this way, the Russian Orthodox Church is represented as a bridge connecting different episodes of Russian history and giving coherence to the national historical narrative. At the same time, in the folk historical imagination, Stalin appears as a political leader who won World War II. This makes him a hero in the eyes of many.

#### A FOLK SAINT

Matrona is not only an atypical saint for the Orthodox Christian tradition because of her deep embeddedness in routine Soviet life, which helps adherents to imagine the Soviet period as more religious, a time of spontaneous or primordial religiosity shared by the whole Russian people, ordinary citizens as well as political leaders. What makes her even more unconventional is that she is the only saint in the whole Orthodox Christian tradition to be pictured blind (Figure 22.4).

A saint is usually pictured on icons as he or she is present in the heavenly world. The saints on the icons are neither fat nor thin, tall nor short, too old nor too young. As the Russian émigré iconographer and theologian Leonid Ouspensky writes in his book on the theology of the Orthodox icon, icon painters depict not earthly faces,

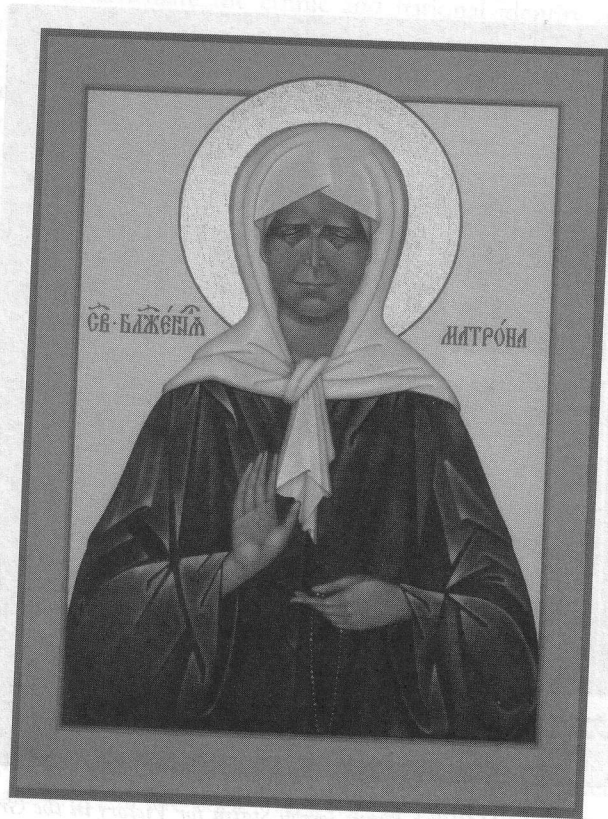


Figure 22.4 Icon of Saint Matrona.

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but heavenly images of canonized people (1989: ch. 9). The icon is understood as a window to the other world, and the saints as depicted on the icons are already in that other world, close to God. The reason why believers in need pray to the saints is because in the imagined landscape of heaven the saints are located near God. They are seen as mediators who connect God and believers, and as advocates for those who ask in prayers for their help.

Thus, when believers look at an icon, they see the other world. This approach reduces the attention paid to the materiality of saints' bodies to small individual details that help icon painters and believers distinguish among them. So why is Matrona depicted on the icons as blind? The question is especially intriguing because in Christian tradition, physical blindness has always had negative connotations. It is used either as a metaphor for the spiritual blindness of pagans who do not believe in God, or to signal miraculous punishment for a crime against a holy person, item (an icon, for example), or place (Shtyrkov 2012).<sup>15</sup>

In Slavic folk religious traditions, however, physical blindness usually indicates a person's inner spiritual sight directed to the other world. This gift of clairvoyance is often ascribed to local healers who are treated by the official Church as magicians, having nothing to do with Christianity. In recent times the most famous figure of this type was the Bulgarian prophet Vanga (1911–1996). Vanga lost her sight as a young girl and is always depicted as blind. She became a popular hero of Russian tabloids in the late 1980s to early 1990s, and it is possible that her popular image influenced depictions of Matrona, making the latter's blindness acceptable. There are many hagiographical parallels between the two personages, such as village origin, unhappy childhoods, and episodes of visits by political leaders during World War II (it is believed that Vanga was visited by Tsar Boris in 1942). Like Vanga, Matrona could foresee the future and perform healing miracles. In both cases there were strong debates about canonization, and, in contrast to her Russian colleague, Bulgarian Vanga has not been officially sainted. It is also true that during the Soviet period Vanga did not pretend to be a Christian; she was a charismatic "new age" person who was even appointed as a research fellow of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Iliev 2000).

As some researchers argue, Vanga had her own predecessor in Stoina (1883–1933), another blind clairvoyant from the same region who lost her sight at age 7 and is locally venerated as a saint. Stoina's enthusiasts have pushed for her canonization, but this has not happened yet (Ivanov and Izmirlieva 2003).

It would appear that the blindness of Matrona of Moscow is depicted in her icons so as to stress her folk origin and hence her authenticity, making her a sympathetic figure to believers "from the street" (not to call these mostly urban people "folk believers"). Moreover, the majority of saints gained holy status through suffering; Matrona's inborn suffering marks her faith and sanctity as "natural," as if both her sanctity and religiosity were not achieved but innate.

## CONCLUSION

Saint veneration is probably the most important and characteristic part of the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition as a lived religion. To become a "lived religion" again,



post-Soviet Orthodox Christianity needed new, up-to-date saints who would attract the attention of the community.

The canonization of a saint is always a political act. Every canonization is a political statement, whether openly articulated or not. In the post-Soviet period the recent history of relations between the state and church has been at the center of several levels of public debate. As a consequence, the official Church elaborated a number of projects in which its attitude toward the Soviet past was reformulated. On the one side, the New Martyrs project was promoted by the liberal Church establishment and inspired and initiated by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. The canonization of New Martyrs asserts that during the period of religious persecution, the Orthodox tradition in the USSR was interrupted and almost disappeared. The canonization of Saint Matrona, on the contrary, states that religious life continued under the Soviet regime, embodied in people such as this blind and paralyzed village woman.

Matrona is one of the most popular saints in Russia today. Frankly, this means that the decision of the Church to canonize her was politically wise and astute. Making their pilgrimage from the Karl Marx metro station to Pokrovsky convent in the center of Moscow, people meet a folk saint whose shrine is guarded by state police, and feel with their own bodies the history of their nation as it is taught by the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church has different kinds of narratives of Soviet history at its disposal, two at least, one told in the genre of a documented life history (Martyr saints), the other in the genre of a folk tale (St Matrona). While these are targeted to different groups, it is safe to say that the story of Matrona is published and purchased in many more copies by far.

#### NOTES

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- 1 At [www.pokrov-monastir.ru/](http://www.pokrov-monastir.ru/) (accessed Apr. 2013).
- 2 Between 1918 and 1922, sixty-two Christian saints were exhumed, with one Catholic among them (Marchadier 1981).
- 3 The law on freedom of conscience and religious associations passed in 1997 tried to restrict the presence of foreign as well as local new churches and religious movements by introducing an "age qualification." According to this law only those religious associations which could prove that they had been established for at least fifteen years (that is before perestroika) could be registered. New Pentecostal churches solved the problem of their legal status by, for example, joining one of the already existing unions of Pentecostal churches.
- 4 Some of the ideas presented in this chapter were first formulated in an article written with Sergey Shtyrkov (Kormina and Shtyrkov 2011a).
- 5 Vassilieva lists the categories of the new saints. *Pravednik* is a saint who did not take a monastic vow and was not tortured. These saints are quite rare; probably the most famous of them is John of Kronstadt (Kizenko 2000).
- 6 This number does not include those Soviet martyrs who have been canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad since 1981.
- 7 He was canonized in 2000 for his missionary work in Altai (Siberia).
- 8 Birches are a national symbol of Russia.
- 9 St Petersburg was built at the beginning of the eighteenth century as a new capital of the Russian Empire. In 1918 Moscow again became the capital of Russia.

- 10 In 2007 and 2009 two collections of biographies of the elders who lived in the twentieth century were published by one of the respected Orthodox publishing houses in Moscow. The first one included 115 male elders while the second one had 70 names of female elders.
- 11 This popular essentialist conception of religion (as well as of nation and ethnicity) explains also why some pilgrims whom I studied and who were not sure if they were baptized preferred to believe they had been secretly christened in their Soviet childhood (Kormina 2010).
- 12 Her Life looks so pro-Soviet that there is even speculation that it was fabricated by the KGB to promote political conformism among believers (Kahla 2007: 97–98).
- 13 Mikhail Kutuzov was a commander-in-chief in the first Great Patriotic War against the invasion of Napoleon in 1812–1813. He lost Moscow to save the army.
- 14 He was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1988.
- 15 Interestingly, in the church of St Nikodemus in Athens which belongs to the Moscow Patriarchate and has a Russian-speaking congregation, the icon of St Matrona hangs under that of a saint martyr of the second century, Paraskevi of Rome, who holds in her arms a vessel with eyes in it. According to her Vita, Paraskevi blinded the Emperor Antonius Pius who had imprisoned and tortured her, by throwing boiling oil into his eyes from a large kettle into which she had been put. Later, she cured him – or rather he was cured by God due to her prayers – and he put an end to persecution of Christians. No wonder that Paraskevi of Rome is invoked as a healer of the blind. By placing a new Moscow saint close to Paraskevi of Rome, believers include her in the assembly of traditional Christian saints and try somehow to “legitimize” her blindness.

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