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New book: Bessonov on Narodnaia eskhatologiia

by Daniel Waugh

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New book: Bessonov on *Narodnaia eskhatologiia*

I[gor'] A[leksandrovich] Bessonov. *Russkaia narodnaia eskhatologiia: istoriia i sovremennost'*. Moskva: Gnosis, 2014. 336 pp.+ ill. ISBN 978-5-94244-044-2.

For a non-specialist like me, Bessonov's book is very informative. The first part provides a systematic, chronologically organized exposition of the development of eschatological ideas primarily in the Abrahamic (and especially Christian) traditions. He starts with some pre-Abrahamic background; then, with selective but extensive quotation, explores scripture, apocrypha and the writings of Church fathers. Following this is a compact, almost too compressed, review of the transmission of these ideas in Rus down to the 18th century. He draws on a broad range of scholarship in Russian, English, and German.

Since he is a specialist in folklore, the remaining two-thirds of the book explore the subject of the title, popular eschatology, drawing on texts and interviews recorded from the 19th century down to very recent times (where the Internet comes into play in the dissemination of the ideas). Here the organization is thematic, which results in a certain amount of repetition, as he explores successively various aspects of eschatological beliefs ("the miraculous world," "eschatological war," "the antichrist," etc.). In each case he returns to the pre-modern textual basis for these concepts. Specific stimuli for eschatological interpretations range from Napoleon's invasion (where official propaganda encouraged people to think of him as the antichrist) to rumors about European Union computers taking possession of people's souls. In a period of American hegemony, some located the home of the antichrist there, something which in my gloomier moments nowadays seems not far off the mark. Since he has a broad comparative perspective, Bessonov notes occasionally that the expression of popular eschatological beliefs is not confined to Russia.

As he emphasizes, there is much more to be done on this subject: his intent here has been mainly to provide an introductory survey (based on his *kandidat* dissertation, defended in 2010). Even though it is possible to show how the modern views have, say, a scriptural basis, we are generally left with unstated assumptions as to how the individuals interviewed would have acquired their ideas. If asked, they seem to have responded merely with "from books" or something to the effect "everyone knows." Since much of the modern evidence comes from rural informants in the Russian North (and in particular Old Believers), one avenue for further study would be to contextualize the material with what has been learned about Old Believer libraries. He is aware of regional differences, which could be explored more fully. Furthermore, at least some of the modern material was recorded in urban settings, which makes for interesting comparisons (it clearly is not the case that modern eschatological beliefs are ideas to be found

only in the “traditional” countryside). The book has a few excellent color plates—a couple of miniatures from a 17th-century manuscript *Apokalipsis*, a propaganda poster produced by the Whites in the Civil War, and an icon of the Last Judgment. Such interesting visual evidence is another of the areas that invite further exploration.