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“Millennarianism in the Soviet Union and Maoist China”

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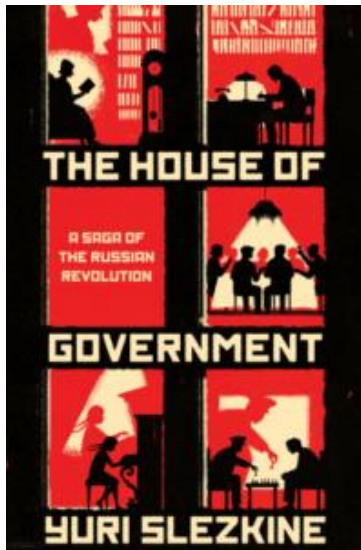
Published by *The Immanent Frame* in a series of commentaries on the book *The House of Government* (2017), by Yuri Slezkine.



*A scene of the Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1864, Wu Youru [Public domain],
via Wikimedia Commons*

The Old Testament’s chosen people were proletarians among nations, who were promised a tribal victory that was also a revolutionary transformation of slaves into masters. The New Testament equated the social revolution with the national one. Babylon (or Egypt, or Rome, or whatever imperial “whore” was oppressing the chosen people) was going to fail and receive “as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself,” but the same thing was going to happen to the Israelites who were too fat to squeeze through the eye of the needle.

—Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government* (2017)



This epigraph sums up Yuri Slezkine’s compelling argument: The Communist Revolution in Russia was an unconscious restaging of earlier moments of Judeo-Christian millenarian culture. Slezkine’s discovery of passages in the diaries, letters, and novels of students, workers, and revolutionaries who mounted the October Revolution of 1917, and moved into the House of Government in the 1930s, shows the hidden millenarian thinking that fueled the Revolution. If we follow Emile Durkheim’s minimal [definition of religion](#) as something that relies on the distinction between the sacred and profane, and his important point that religions, their senses of the sacred and their rituals and holy objects (“totems”), inaugurate and produce social solidarity, then there is no reason to restrict this insight to premodern societies. We can also say that the Communist Revolution was “religious,” in the sense of instilling a strong sense of sacred historical mission and unity. However, we would need to distinguish between at least two types of religiosities: a conservative one that sacralizes and bolsters existing social order, and an insurgent movement that seeks to topple a perceived oppressive order.

Slezkine links up the Communist Revolution with Christianity’s many apocalyptic moments: the ancient Exodus out of Egypt; the Jesus movement that challenged, then took over the Roman Empire; Thomas Müntzer and the fiery massacre of his Anabaptists in sixteenth-century Germany; and the Russian Protestant radical sects at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when over eight thousand burned themselves to death. Certainly the secular discourses of social evolutionism, class

struggle, Communist utopia, and the atheistic Communist Party are quite different from the religious rhetoric of God's will, the Savior and the Second Coming of Christ, the Chosen people and Promised Land, and Armageddon. However, what these millenarian movements shared with the modern Revolution were the desire for a sudden overthrow of the powerful and rich; the vision of a new egalitarian society; the readiness for martyrdom in pursuit of transcendent goals; a sacred charismatic leader; a prophecy of salvation and end-time, or Communist utopia; and a tendency to persecute those inside or outside the movement who are seen as impure, sinful, or "counter-revolutionary." Slezkine even finds that "Marx, like Jesus . . . succeeded in translating a tribal prophecy into a language of universalism" and science. Certainly, the linear history in Marxism that develops toward a teleological endpoint of human emancipation possesses the hallmarks of Judeo-Christian prophetic vision and eschatology.

The Taiping Rebellion in China (1850-1864),¹ which combined evangelical Christianity with ancient Daoist millenarianism, shares features with the Communist Revolution of 1949: peasant rebellion, charismatic leader, calls for justice and equal distribution of land, even equality between men and women and banning of bound feet, military confrontation, and visions of a prosperous and just society on earth, whether establishing the "Celestial Kingdom of Great Peace" (*Taiping Tianguo*), or Communism. The Taiping Rebellion's scholar leader, Hong Xiuquan, was exposed briefly to Christian missionary teachings. He had a vision of being taken up to Heaven, meeting an old man who was God the Father, and and being disemboweled by angels who inserted new internal organs. Declaring himself the younger brother of Jesus Christ, Hong led an armed peasant rebellion that spread rapidly from Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces all the way north to the imperial capital of Beijing, establishing their Celestial City of Great Peace in Nanjing along the way. The Taiping Rebellion resulted in an astounding twenty to thirty million deaths in total wars with Qing Dynasty imperial troops. With the notion of "Great Peace," nineteenth-century Taiping rebels invoked a much earlier rebellion at the end of the Han Dynasty. The Yellow Turban peasant rebellion of 184 CE was the culmination of a shamanistic-Daoist religious movement that galvanized around the [Scripture on Great Peace](#), a sacred text that was miraculously handed down from Heaven. It called on the ruler to cultivate himself and care for the welfare of the people, and for the people to repent for their sins and prepare for an apocalypse, after

which the virtuous would enter into a period of Great Peace. Zhang Jue, the rebel leader, converted huge numbers through healing the sick and transmitting the teachings of the gods Yellow Emperor and Laozi. Despite impressive military gains, this rebellion of landless peasants met a bloody end at the hands of the Han imperial army.

Thus, the Chinese Communists resonated with a Chinese *longue durée* of religious peasant rebellions. Indeed, Chinese Communist scholars were obsessed with studying the rich history of peasant rebellions. However, these scholars always ignored the religious dimensions, focusing on secular issues of land redistribution and “class struggle.” Nevertheless, their obsession with peasant rebellions confirms their declared feelings of special kinship with them, and self-recognition in these rebels.

As late modernizers, both Russian and Chinese societies urgently catapulted themselves into modernity, not through the gradual capitalist rationalization process in the West, but through a violent overthrow of the old order. Moreover, their revolutionary inspiration extended beyond Marxist discourse, deep into their collective unconscious of millenarian religious rebellions. At the same time, in order to conform to modernity, both revolutions actively repressed the religious inspiration with state-led secularization drives.

Having affirmed Slezkine’s argument, I also take issue with his too-literal identification of millenarianism with revolution. The thrust of his book is to equate these different moments in history; not enough attention is paid to the manifold ways they are different. Slezkine does argue that the Soviet Union ultimately failed to last as long as Christianity and Islam because it was not totalitarian enough: its doctrines failed to penetrate the family, and were restricted to schools, workplaces, and Party organizations. However, this still assumes that Revolutionary and Christian millenarianism differed only in degree.

I would like to see more discussions of qualitative differences. Although the revolutionaries drew upon older religious impulses, their actions took place at a different time: in a modernizing, industrializing, secularizing, and increasingly capitalist world. Questions need to be asked, such as: How did Soviet religio-political subjects

relate to or internalize the sacred leader Lenin in a different way from how earlier Russians related to Moses who led the escape from slavery, Christ who martyred himself, or to the old tsar? How did new forms of mass media (newspapers and radio) reconstruct these relations between the people and the leader or the Party? Did the new secular Soviet rituals and festivals adhere closely to Christian ritual life, and were they a satisfactory replacement?

Slezkine's book argues convincingly that, since Christian doctrines and embodied rituals have been embedded in Russian life for over a millennium, their unconscious values, cosmology, and habituses will not disappear in merely one or two generations. What structuralists call the "deep structures" and categories of thought and language are slow and difficult to change. However, the meanings and values are continuously reproduced in changing historical contexts, thus there must be differences. For example, when challenged to make Levi-Straussian synchronic structures historical, Marshall Sahlins worked out a way to mediate the durability of deep structures with historical flow. He suggested that structures and basic categories of thought stay the same, but their contents, meanings, and social valuations experience shifts that, when accumulated over time, may eventually alter the structures themselves. As Sahlins [notes](#), "Every reproduction of [cultural categories] is an alteration, insofar as . . . the categories by which a present world is orchestrated pick up some novel empirical content." Thus, the reproduction of a millenarian ethos by the Russian Revolution can be theorized through this epistemology of historical structures or structural history: basic categories of millenarian Christian thought endured, even while their contents and meanings shifted to secular revolution and class overthrow.

Alexei Yurchak's [work](#) on the embalmed body of Lenin notes a qualitative change, even as it acknowledges continuities with an earlier Orthodox Christian culture of preserving the relics of revered saints. With Lenin's body, one immediately notes the salience of religiosity in a secular revolution, and what [Claude Lefort](#) calls the "sacred personalization" of modern doctrines and the state. In a supposedly atheistic society, the leader's body is still preserved like the mummified pharaohs of ancient Egypt. However, Yurchak shows that unlike saints' relics, which focus on the bones or internal organs of the original organic body, Lenin's body has undergone repeated sophisticated scientific

treatments that bathe the body in chemical solutions, making it a continuously renewed and chemically reconstituted body. Lenin's body today is no longer his original body. For Yurchak, this shift away from the Christian focus on the fixity of the original body marks a correlative shift in Soviet culture from the religio-charismatic person to what he represents—the impersonal collective agency of the Party, whose sacrality and authority must be continuously renewed.

Shortly after the death of Chairman Mao on September 9, 1976, a planeload of medical experts was dispatched from Beijing to Moscow to learn Russian embalming techniques. When I filed past Mao's body lying in a glass coffin in his mausoleum in Tienanmen Square, I noted the unnatural rosiness of his cheeks and bright red lips, perhaps to make him look lifelike. I have [also addressed](#) the continuities and differences between the modern cult of Mao and the old reverence for the semi-divine Chinese emperor. The emperor was generally invisible to the people, hidden away in the Forbidden City and behind his palanquin curtains when he traveled. His voice was never heard by commoners. However, the images and texts of Mao were ubiquitous, plastered on walls, given as busts for weddings, viewed on newsreels, worn as badges, with his voice over loudspeakers or his words memorized for political rituals. In the modern age of mechanical reproduction, [noted Walter Benjamin](#), the photographic portrait is “the last refuge for cult value,” and “the last time the aura emanates.” Before the capitalist media or consumer economy fully take hold, mechanical reproduction and hyper-visibility may actually intensify the aura of a leader. Unlike the emperor, who was distant and invisible, the omnipresent images and words of Mao created a direct line of psycho-emotional communication and access to Mao for each individual. With the destruction of the late imperial gentry class and Confucian scholar-officials, mediators between the people and the emperor, and the constant purges of Mao's Party officials, the Mao cult no longer had to deal with intermediaries of its charismatic power. Like the Protestant Reformation's dismantling of the Catholic Church hierarchy, Mao was directly inserted into each individual as their beating “red heart,” both destructive id and watchful superego.

Slezkine's work is the latest in theorizing the relationship between traditional religiosities and modern nationalism. While I have stressed noting distinctions, [Talal](#)

[Asad](#)'s insistence on the radical difference between religion and nationalism perhaps goes too far. Focusing on modern Islam, Asad argues that nationalism is not a secularized religion, but a break with religion. Whereas Islam envisions an *umma*, or transcendent Islamic community, the nation-state is committed to sovereign borders and a this-worldly temporality. To my mind, religion and nationalism are ideal-types for scholarship, and less the actual practice in the world today. The nation-state has mostly captured traditional religiosities, and harnessed them to their new temporality and territorialities. I do not see major movements of Muslims overcoming their national differences and interests, nor of Confucians, Buddhists, or Hindus across their Asian nations. We have Hindu nationalism in India, Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, and Shi'a nationalism in Iran. In the United States, Christianity has recently moved significantly from what Robert Bellah called "[civil religion](#)" to a white-American evangelical nationalism.

In conclusion, modernity has produced religio-nationalist hybrids: whether explicitly as religious nationalism or as the suppressed religious unconscious that lend a sacred aura to the nation. Modernity, it seems, has not escaped what [Lefort](#) calls the "permanence of the theological-political" or what [Carl Schmitt](#) observed about the modern state, that it is based on "secularized theological concepts." We may wish for the modern divorce of the theological from the political, but so long as we experience divisiveness and conflict, we resort to religion to internalize unity. Slezkine's book adds another layer: religious impulses not only continue to constitute and undergird modern state formations (visibly and invisibly), they can also shift gears into insurgent movements that seek radical change in the power system, for better or worse.

[China](#)

[civil religion](#)

[communism](#)

[communist revolution](#)

[Marxism](#)

[Soviet Union](#)

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