

REPENTANT TSARS AND SACRED NARRATIVES: MONARCHIST COSMOLOGY IN INOCHENTIST HAGIOGRAPHIES AFTER THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1917

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Abstract: This article examines the emergence of monarchist cosmology within the Inochentist movement through a comparative analysis of two hagiographies of Hieromonk Inochentie of Balta, published in 1918 and 1924. One of the hagiographies examined in this study is a 1918 booklet recently discovered in a police investigation case file. By analysing the differences between these two hagiographies alongside archival documents, the article demonstrates how the 1917 Revolution, the emergence of a new border along the Dniester, the destruction of monastic centres, and the Revolution of the Russian Orthodox Church reshaped the sacred narratives of Inochentism within a short period of time.

Keywords: Inochentism; hagiography; monarchism; peasant religion; Bessarabia; Russian Revolution.

Introduction

This article examines the emergence of monarchist cosmology within the Inochentist movement through a comparative analysis of two hagiographic accounts of the life of Hieromonk Inochentie of Balta, produced in 1918¹ and 1924² respectively. By analysing the differences between the two hagiographies, this paper traces the transformation of Inochentie's life narrative in relation to the Russian Revolution of 1917, the emergence of the Dniester as a new international frontier, the destruction of the Inochentist spiritual centre by the Bolsheviks in 1920, and the Revolution of the Russian Orthodox Church. One of the hagiographies examined in this regard is a 1918 booklet recently discovered in a police investigation case file. Hieromonk Inochentie was the

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¹ *Zhizn' i deyatel'nost' ieromonakha Innokentiya Baltskogo* (Odessa: Tipografia Fesenko, 1918); in Arkhiv Upravlinnia Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukraïny v Odes'kii Oblasti [Archive of the SBU Office in Odesa Oblast] (ASBUOO), file 27146, 290-300.

² *Pre Scurt, Viața și Faptele Sfântului Părintelui nostru Inochentie dela Balta* (Bârlad: Tipografia Constantin Lupașcu, 1924).

charismatic founder of the religious movement known as Inochentism, a vernacular form of Eastern Orthodox Christianity that became widespread among the peasantry of the former tsarist provinces of Bessarabia, Kherson, and Podolia, and was associated with mass exorcisms, charismatic embodiments of saintly and monarchic figures by believers, apocalyptic preaching, and asceticism.

The first section of the paper presents a brief history of the Inochentist movement and the context in which it emerged. The second section provides a comparative analysis of the hagiography produced in 1918 and the one published in 1924. By analysing the differences between the two booklets, the paper reconstitutes the emergence of Inochentist apocryphal narratives and the profiles of their authors. The third section identifies the passages in the 1924 hagiography concerning the last Tsar and examines them in light of information contained in Soviet police investigation case files and Inochentist oral tradition. The final chapter explains the emergence of the monarchist tradition among the Inochentists in relation to the 1917 Revolution of the Russian Orthodox Church, the union of Bessarabia with Romania, and the victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War.

The article draws on several types of sources. The first consists of the hagiographical accounts of the life of Inochentie of Balta, published in 1918 and 1924. The second comprises files produced by Soviet authorities in connection with the repressive campaigns against the monastic community at the Inochentist spiritual centre in Lipețcoe in 1920, 1921, and 1923. These files contain numerous documents that are used to reconstruct the events that took place in Lipețcoe between 1918 and 1923. Finally, the article draws on a range of archival sources and published studies concerning the history of Bessarabia, Podolia, and Kherson between 1917 and 1924. The author employs a classical historical approach to explain the differences between the 1918 and 1924 hagiographies by examining the events that occurred in Lipețcoe and the wider region between 1917 and 1924.

Inochentism

Inochentism was a religious movement that developed within Orthodox Christianity in regions of the Russian Empire inhabited by Romanian-speaking populations, particularly Bessarabia, Kherson, and Podolia. From around 1909 onward, large numbers of Moldavian peasants began to adhere to the teachings of the charismatic monk Inochentie of Balta, after whom the movement was named. The monastery of Balta became a major pilgrimage site, attracting thousands of followers who came to hear Inochentie Levizor preach a message centred on repentance, strict fasting, and celibacy as preparation for the imminent End Times. He also conducted collective confessions and performed

exorcisms³. A significant number of peasants were drawn to the teachings of Monk Inochentie. For instance, according to reports from the Railway Administration in 1910, approximately 800 to 1,000 pilgrims were departing daily from railway stations across Bessarabia, all travelling toward the Balta Monastery⁴. In the final decades of the Tsarist period, the expansion of transport infrastructure significantly eased long-distance travel for pilgrims, particularly through the use of railways and steamships. Robert Greene argues that these technological advances played an important role in enabling the broader religious revival that characterized Russian society during the late imperial era⁵. In 1912, the Russian authorities exiled Inochentie, an event that contributed to a strengthening of apocalyptic expectations among his followers. In response, many believers sold their possessions, embraced celibacy, and relocated to Lipetcoe, near Balta. There, they constructed an underground monastery and founded a utopian communal settlement known as “Grădina Raiului” (“Garden of Paradise”), frequently abbreviated in contemporary sources as “Rai.” Inochentie was released following the amnesty issued after the February Revolution of 1917, but he died shortly thereafter, in December of the same year⁶.

Despite the persecution of Inochentists by the Tsarist authorities, the movement’s belief system retained a pronounced monarchist dimension, with the last Russian Tsar occupying a central position within Inochentist sacred narratives. According to local hagiographic tradition, Nicholas II is said to have survived Bolshevik assassination attempts and to have taken refuge in the Inochentists’ underground monastery at Lipetskoe, where he allegedly sought forgiveness from Inochentie for persecuting him⁷. Likewise, according to Soviet secret police investigation files from 1920-21, Inochentists preachers propagated monarchist ideas⁸. According to James Kapaló, Monk Inochentie was influenced by contemporary Russian political thought, and the early Inochentist sacred writings reflect broader concerns with the social and spiritual crisis affecting Russian society at the time⁹. At the same time, Inochentist sacred

³ James A. Kapaló, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity: Religious Dissent in the Russian and Romanian Borderlands* (London: Routledge, 2019), 90, 94–95.

⁴ Nicolae Popovschi, *Mișcarea dela Balta sau inochentismul în Basarabia: Contribuții la istoria vieții religioase a românilor din Basarabia* (Chișinău: Tipografia Eparhială „Cartea Românească,” 1926), 158.

⁵ Robert H. Greene, *Bodies Like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 14.

⁶ Kapaló, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 95.

⁷ Interview by James A. Kapaló with Damian Pavlovich Obrejenko, 2014.

⁸ Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Odes’koi Oblasti [State Archive of Odesa Oblast] (DAOO), Fond P-12233, Inventory 1, File 22, 11; ASBUOO, file 27146, 12.

⁹ Kapaló, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 23.

texts criticize the official church intensely¹⁰. The prominent place accorded to the last Tsar within Inochentist religious narratives and sacred texts can be understood through a symbolic dualism that contrasts the heavenly order embodied by Inochentie with the earthly empire represented by the monarch. This opposition forms a key element of early Inochentist eschatology, which anticipated an approaching Apocalypse marked by the collapse of the earthly realm and the eventual victory of the celestial order. At the same time, the Tsar is not portrayed as an embodiment of evil. Rather, the Tsar signifies the earthly domain itself, which is ultimately destined for redemption through Inochentie of Balta¹¹.

Lipetskoe served as the main Inochentist religious centre. Following the anti-Inochentist campaign of September 1920, which led to the dispersal of part of the community from Rai, the settlement's population in 1921 is estimated to have comprised roughly 800 adults¹². After the forceful closure of the monastery in September 1920, the authorities established a state farm in Lipetcoe and, in order to limit the influence of the Inochentist spiritual leaders, banned them from joining the farm and from living in the settlement¹³. Numerous Inochentist communities existed in other parts of the tsarist provinces of Bessarabia, Podolia and Kherson. In general, Russian and Soviet authorities associated the Inochentism with Moldavian ethnicity, although the spread of this movement and certain documents suggest that Inochentist beliefs also became common among other ethnic communities, especially Russians and Gagauz¹⁴. Numerous Ukrainians from Kherson and Podolia, as well as a group of Russians who followed Inochentie to Lipetcoe after his release in 1917, contributed to the ethnic diversity of the Inochentist communities¹⁵. The geographic origins of the pilgrims to Rai were not restricted to Bessarabia, Podolia, and Kherson. Already in 1921, Soviet files mention pilgrims coming as far as from the northern regions of Russia and Dobruja¹⁶.

The two hagiographies of Hieromonk Inochentie

This paper draws on a comparative analysis of two hagiographic accounts of the life of Inochentie of Balta. The first was written in Russian and published in Odessa in 1918 by the Fesenko printing house. The booklet, titled *Life and Activity of Hieromonk Inochentie of Balta*, displays only the initials of its

¹⁰ *Pre Scurt, Viața și Faptele Sfântului Părintelui nostru Inochentie dela Balta* (1924).

¹¹ Kapaló, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 23, 100.

¹² ASBUOO, file 27146, 237.

¹³ ASBUOO, file 27146, 11.

¹⁴ Kapaló, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 43, 242.

¹⁵ ASBUOO, file 27146, 22-23.

¹⁶ ASBUOO, file 27146, 12.

author, D. V. B-ov. A copy of the booklet was confiscated by the Soviet secret police from the Garden of Paradise in 1921¹⁷.

The second hagiographic account is in Romanian and was published in Bârlad in 1924 by the Lupașcu Printing House and is entitled *On the Short Life and Deeds of Father Inochentie of Balta*. The authors of this hagiography are P. Filimon, Gh. Ariton, and A. Ghimpu¹⁸, Inochentist leaders from Bessarabia. There are significant differences between the two hagiographic accounts. The first difference is the length of the booklets. The 1918 booklet is only 19 pages long, whereas the 1924 one contains 73 pages, with each page containing approximately the same number of words. The difference is the result of a more detailed description of the life of Inochentie in the 1924 booklet, which contains more hagiographic scenes.

Another difference between the two booklets is that the 1918 edition does not contain as many explicit descriptions of miracles performed by Inochentie. Moreover, some of the events presented as miracles in the 1924 version are described in a non-miraculous manner in the 1918 hagiography. One example is the clash between the Inochentists and the tsarist soldiers, during which one of the soldiers stabbed Inochentie with a bayonet. The 1918 hagiography states:

On 7 February [1913], between the village of Nedizhimo and the settlement of Pudozh, a sled carrying a convoy of soldiers was travelling toward the people [led by Father Inochentie]. The road was narrow, and disputes arose over who should yield in the snow. At that point, one of the soldiers struck Father Inochentie with a bayonet. Initially, Father Inochentie endured the injury, but he subsequently weakened from blood loss and fell. He was lifted up and his wound was bandaged. Nevertheless, he again continued on foot, thereby setting an example of endurance and patience for his people¹⁹.

This early account of the Inochentist exodus from Murom, where Inochentie was detained in a monastery, does not correspond to the image of Inochentie as a healing saint characteristic of later accounts. The author of the 1918 booklet presents Inochentie as a spiritual leader with strong faith who set an example for his followers. The 1924 hagiography describes the same event in a different way. It states:

A sled came out of the market pulled by two horses with two Muscovites [Russian soldiers] on it. When the two Muscovites drew close, the people were driven into the snow. Father Inochentie ran to see what was happening but seeing him, one of them took his rifle and shot him about three times. But the gun did not go off. Believing that the rifle had a defect, he fired a

¹⁷ Zhizn' i deyatel'nost' ieromonakha Innokentiya Baltskogo.

¹⁸ *Pre Scurt, Viața și Faptele Sfântului Părintelui nostru Inochentie dela Balta* (1924).

¹⁹ Zhizn' i deyatel'nost' ieromonakha Innokentiya Baltskogo (1918).

shot into the air. And the gun fired. Furious, he stabbed Father Inochentie with the bayonet: he stuck the whole blade in his left side, from where a stream of blood flowed onto the snow. The Muscovite, believing the priest to be dead, climbed onto the sled and fled back into the market. The Father was not harmed and he raised his eyes to Heaven and said, "Thank you, Lord Father of Heaven that you gave me Your strength. I have waited for this Cup a long time, and now you have sent it to me." And the blood flowed like a spring. He took a wafer and broke it into two, he poured holy oil onto it and put it into the wound to stop the bleeding. And, tying the wound with a kerchief, set out on the road again praising and glorifying God²⁰.

The 1918 description of Inochentie's wounding by soldiers does not include any accounts of miraculous events or supernatural explanations, nor does it draw any parallels between the biblical scenes of the Passion of Christ and Inochentie's life, whereas the 1924 account is full of such details and parallels. The interviews conducted in 2019 in Balta with members of the local Inochentist community suggest that the oral tradition of Inochentism includes accounts of the same event involving the instant, miraculous healing of Inochentie after the wafer was applied to the wound.

Another important difference between the two hagiographies is in how the two booklets describe the appearance of a dove over the Onega Lake. The 1918 account states:

On 6 January, on the eve of the Feast of the Epiphany of the Lord, the following event occurred: above Lake Onega, a bright light appeared among the clouds, descending over the lake three times. At the centre of this light, a dove was observed, flapping its wings. The population was profoundly struck by this phenomenon²¹.

The 1918 hagiography presents the descent of the dove as an unexplainable occurrence rather than a miracle. The 1924 hagiography presents the same event as a miraculous revelation, suggesting that Inochentie was the third hypostasis of the Holy Trinity. The 1924 *Life and Deeds* states:

Early in the morning when the sun was rising, together with my wife Axentia from Coșnița and another ten to fifteen people, we were praying with Father Inochentie on the shore of Lake Onega. Suddenly a cloud came to rest above Onega, and in the middle of the cloud there was a bright light, which rested above Onega three times. In the middle of the light there was a shining dove. And as Father Inochentie stood praying on the shore of the lake, the dove flew with its wings directly to Father Inochentie and entered him and was

²⁰ *Pre Scurt, Viața și Faptele Sfântului Părintelui nostru Inochentie dela Balta (1924)*, translation from Romanian to English by Kapaló, in *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 37–38.

²¹ *Zhizn' i deyatel'nost' ieromonakha Innokentiya Baltskogo (1918)*.

no longer visible. And Father Inochentie was transformed into a column of fire from Earth up to Heaven²².

Apart from describing the miraculous entrance of a dove into Inochentie, which made him “a column of fire from Earth up to Heaven,” the 1924 *Life and Deeds* mentions a series of witnesses. The witnesses are identified by name and by the villages in which they lived.

Another witness mentioned in the same booklet is Nadejda Stamate. She is also mentioned in the 1918 booklet, as a believer miraculously healed after receiving Inochentie’s blessing. The difference in the way the last witness is presented in the two accounts is that the 1918 hagiography emphasizes the fact that Stamati received an education at a gymnasium, a detail intended to lend greater authority to her testimony. This detail suggests that, unlike the authors of the 1924 hagiography, the author of the 1918 account of Inochentie’s life was most likely not a peasant and had received a formal education himself. D. V. B-ov knew Russian, which was rare among the Moldovan peasants who did not receive formal education. Likewise, the files related to the Soviet repression against the Inochentists working on the state farm organised by the authorities in Lipetcoe after the 1920 closure of the monastery, in 1921 and 1923, do not contain the name of any Inochentist corresponding to the initials “D. V. B-ov.”

D. V. B-ov was very careful to describe events in a way that would not easily allow them to be categorized as apocryphal. The 1918 hagiography states that:

His [Inochentie’s] renown aroused envy among members of the clergy, and a false denunciation was submitted to Bishop Serafim of Podolia accusing Father Innohentie of allegedly teaching doctrines that distorted the dogmas of the Orthodox Church. In reality, however, his preaching remained in strict accordance with the spirit of the Orthodox faith²³.

The content of the 1918 booklet suggests that D. V. B-ov was a person well acquainted with Orthodox dogma and tradition and attached great importance to them, whereas peasant religious practices and beliefs are frequently less attentive to the rules and dogmas formulated by institutionalized religion. Last but not least, the greater number of details contained in the 1924 booklet suggests that its authors were among the believers who followed Inochentie into exile.

The use of Russian in the 1918 booklet suggests that D. V. B-ov wrote his work for a broader audience than the 1924 account published in Romanian. As a lingua franca, Russian made the 1918 hagiography accessible to a larger segment of readers, whereas Romanian was a language spoken by a

²² *Pre Scurt, Viața și Faptele Sfântului Părintelui nostru Inochentie dela Balta (1924)*, translation from Romanian to English by Kapáló, in *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 63-64.

²³ ASBUOO, file 27146, 289.

marginalized ethnic group consisting mainly of peasants. There is probably a direct relationship between the use of Russian and the less apocryphal character of the 1918 booklet, which made it more appealing to a wider readership.

The differences between the two booklets suggest that the Inochentist movement was diverse not only from an ethnic point of view, but also from a social perspective. The account published in 1924 in Bârlad was a version of the hagiography of Inochentie of Balta enriched with narratives and motifs produced within the cultural horizon of peasant society. The 1918 hagiography was written by a person who had a good command of Russian, a solid knowledge of Orthodox dogma, and who regarded formal education as lending greater credibility to a witness. Although the 1924 hagiography is most likely a new version of the 1918 hagiographic account, enriched with numerous peasant legends and narratives, the two accounts pursue different agendas. The 1918 booklet aims to promote the cult of Inochentie as a righteous Orthodox monk deserving the status of a venerated holy father. The 1924 booklet, by contrast, promotes a more radical discourse, portraying Inochentie as a harbinger of the impending end times and as an embodiment of the Holy Spirit. The image of the last Tsar was one of the central motifs added to Inochentie's 1924 hagiography through peasant rumours and oral narratives. The next section examines the scenes from *Life and Deeds* involving the figure of the last Tsar.

Monarchism and leadership crisis in Rai

While the 1918 hagiographic account does not contain any narratives involving the monarchic figure or monarchism, the 1924 booklet assigns a central place in its narrative to the figure of the last Tsar. The *Life and Deeds* of 1924 introduces the figure of the last Tsar through a scene depicting the trial of Inochentie, in which Nicholas II appears as a member of the tribunal. Despite Inochentie's conviction by Nicholas II, in a later scene the last Tsar is assigned a central place in the Inochentist religious narrative. The *Life and Deeds* describes the conversation between Inochentie and Nicholas II as follows:

Tsar Nicholas, in front of the Synod, said to him: Inochentie, why are you disturbing the people? They sell their farms and follow you. Women leave their husbands and children, men also leave their women and children, their possessions and follow you, but Father Inochentie said, ask the people if I told anyone to do this and to follow me, you can do what you like to me, but if not, you will be numbered as of the just of the Lord. Can it be that a man on Earth, through his own power, has done this? The Synod replied that no one on Earth could do what he has done. The Emperor said: Cast them [the people] aside! But Father Inochentie said: I will not leave the people as long as I live, and neither they me. The Emperor: Why don't you listen to me? I am the emperor, and I have the power to do what I like with you. Father Inochentie: Which kingdom is greater, that of Heaven or on Earth? The Synod: The Kingdom of

Heaven! Father Inochentie: If it is the Kingdom of Heaven, then I will listen to Him! The Emperor: I'll have you arrested! Father Inochentie: Today you [arrest] me, but tomorrow or the day after tomorrow I will [do the same to] you! Then the Emperor screamed to arrest him but Inochentie said: Know this Nicholas, I will put you under the bench. This was told by the Emperor Nicholas' daughter Tatiana²⁴.

This passage of the 1924 *Life and Deeds* reflects what Oleg Kharkhordin defines as the origins of the Russian ideas about civil society. Besides the Protestant way of seeing civil society as an initial congregation that delegated a set of powers to a minimal state, or the Catholic concept according to which the Church or a set of associations defend the people against a powerful state, there is a concept developed in Russia. Kharkhordin quotes the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Dostoevsky's character Ivan exposes his opinion regarding the church courts, which were a highly debated issue in Russia of that époque. Instead of the liberal project of empowerment of secular courts with prerogatives on judging all kinds of matters, Ivan advances the idea of a new type of relations between the church and the rest of society. He proposes the church courts to substitute the secular authorities and, by this, eliminate the "bloody justice". The church courts would not apply punitive measures, and all social relations would be re-established according to the New Testament. Ivan's interlocutor, Father Paissy, added that the Church should not become a state like in Rome, but rather the state should become a Church²⁵.

As in the case of the social order described in Dostoevsky's works, in the dialogue described in *Life and Deeds*, Inochentie proposes to the Tsar the dissolution of society and the state into the spiritual realm. Additionally, the passage quoted above describes the way in which the narrative about the conversation between Inochentie and Nicholas II entered *Life and Deeds*, according to which "this was told by the Emperor Nicholas' daughter Tatiana"²⁶. Charismatic embodiments of saintly and monarchic figures by believers were one of the common themes in Inochentist religious practice, and after the Russian Civil War, exactly between the publishing of the two booklets, the Soviet secret police made investigations in Lipetcoe regarding Princess "Tatiana Nikolaevna", who was hiding among the Inochentists²⁷. The

²⁴ *Pre Scurt, Viața și Faptele Sfântului Părintelui nostru Inochentie dela Balta* (1924), translation from Romanian to English by Kapáló, in *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 97-98.

²⁵ Oleg Kharkhordin, "Civil Society and Orthodox Christianity," *Europe-Asia Studies*, 50, no. 6 (1998): 949-968.

²⁶ *Pre Scurt, Viața și Faptele Sfântului Părintelui nostru Inochentie dela Balta* (1924), translation from Romanian to English by Kapáló, in *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 97-98.

²⁷ ASBUOO, file 27146, 12.

differences between the two booklets, and the presence of the legends about the last Tsar in the 1924 edition of the Inochentie's hagiography, reflect the leadership crisis experienced by the Inochentists after the death of Inochentie in December 1917, and after the destruction of the Monastery in September 1920. The leadership crisis was the result of state policies. After the forceful closure of the monastery, the authorities established a state farm, and Inochentist leaders were denied the possibility of becoming members²⁸. Another source of the crisis that led to the practice of impersonating saints and monarchs was the seizure of the relics of Inochentie of Balta by the Soviet authorities from Lipetcoe in 1920²⁹. In this context, numerous believers underwent the experience of impersonating different monarchic and saintly personages. The impersonation of monarchic figures by Inochentist believers contributed to the narratives about the last Tsar repenting in the Inochentist underground.

Another piece of evidence supporting this explanation of the sudden appearance of the figure of impersonated Tsars and princesses is that the sacred oral tradition of the Inochentists adds even more accounts about the last tsar:

Nicholas and his daughter came to Father Inochentie and he took off his hat. His hat was torn. And yes, he took his hat off his head. And my father stood not far from Father Inochentie, and when he saw him, he called out "Nicholas!" But părintele said, "Be quiet!" And after this Father Inochentie called his brother Simion and had him take Nicholas to his house. And my father took him to the house of părintele. And the Tsar stayed one week with Father Inochentie in his house, but he didn't go amongst the people. Then Father Inochentie chose two men who knew the river Dniester well, and he said, "Take them from here and go to the man that lives next to the Dniester," and he said his name. And they took them there and the man had a boat and they crossed the Dniester, that's how Nicholas went. He crossed into Bessarabia³⁰.

This sacred legend is widespread among the Inochentists, but it was not recorded in the 1924 *Life and Deeds*. The differences between the two written accounts of Inochentie's life and sacred legends suggest that the 1918 booklet constituted a core narrative to which numerous oral accounts were later added. Some of these accounts, such as the one quoted above, remained sacred legends passed down orally from one generation of Inochentists to another.

The monarchist dimension of Inochentism has been studied by James A. Kapaló, who argues that rural society in Bessarabia was shaped by imperial colonial structures that economically and politically marginalized Moldovan

²⁸ ASBUOO, file 27146, 11.

²⁹ ASBUOO, file 27146, 351.

³⁰ *Pre Scurt, Viața și Faptele Sfântului Părintelui nostru Inochentie dela Balta (1924)*, translation from Romanian to English by Kapaló, in *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 99.

peasants, while at the same time fully incorporating them into the Orthodox Tsarist spiritual order. In this setting, the broader phenomenon of Russian peasant monarchism is crucial. Peasants tended to idealize the Tsar as a ruler sanctioned by divine will, often imagining him as a hidden protector or even a redeemer. According to Kapaló, followers of Inochentie drew on this tradition, expressing mixed and often contradictory perceptions of Tsar Nicholas II, whom they saw both as a worldly sovereign and as a figure destined for salvation, a belief reflected in Inochentie's prophecies and oral traditions. This form of "naive Tsarism" allowed Russian peasants (and Inochentists) for open criticism of corrupt local officials without undermining loyalty to the Tsar himself. The Tsar thus remained a foundational symbol within a broader religious and moral worldview, while Inochentie was sometimes portrayed as a saviour of the Tsar and a cosmic arbiter of earthly authority. Ultimately, the figure of the Tsar came to represent a future heavenly order, sustaining Inochentie's utopian expectation of a spiritually reconfigured Russia³¹.

James Kapaló's explanation of Inochentist monarchism draws on elements of Russian peasant culture that are well reflected in the literature and that persisted in rural communities long after the 1917 Revolution. Nevertheless, in order to identify and analyse the particularities of the emergence of Inochentist monarchism in the south-western part of the Russian Empire, a few questions must be addressed. The first question is to what extent the political cosmology of Russian peasants was similar to that of Moldovan, Ukrainian, and Gagauz peasants from Bessarabia, Kherson and Podolia? The second, and more important question, is why the Inochentists chose monarchism at a time when the Revolution of the Russian Orthodox Church drew most believers away from monarchy, while promoting a more critical attitude towards the clergy—an attitude similar to that of the Inochentists toward the priesthood? The next section of this paper will address these questions.

Inochentist between monarchism and crisis

The synodal model of church–state relations in Russia was established by Peter I and became a source of tension not only within those relations, but also between laypeople and clergy. The tradition of Symphonia, or the rule of the Orthodox Church over spiritual matters while the Russian state was in charge of the earthly realm, underwent significant changes under Peter I, who abolished the institution of the Patriarchate in 1721 and imposed state control over the Church. The assertive policy of the Russian State ended the old tradition of election of priests by parishioners. This tradition was replaced by a new procedure of selection of clerics, who were now elected and appointed by

³¹ James A. Kapalo, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 95-103.

the bishops. The increasing economic pressure on the parishes that were the main contributors to the eparchial budgets, which lacked other sources of income, created additional tensions³².

The loyalty of the Orthodox subjects of the Russian tsars toward their sovereigns had been eroded long before the 1917 Revolution. For example, the opening of fire on the peaceful procession led by the priest Georgy Gapon in 1905 shook the trust and loyalty of both laypeople and clergy toward Nicholas II as a protector of the Church and Orthodox faithful³³. After the February Revolution of 1917, when Nicholas II abdicated and numerous freedoms were granted, diocesan councils were held with the participation of elected lay and ecclesiastic representatives of each parish who addressed the problem of the reorganisation of Church administration³⁴. The Russian Orthodox Church strived for self-determination after two hundred years of state-control which had eroded its identity, role and mission³⁵. This strife for reforms was bottom-up oriented. In the power vacuum produced by the February Revolution, the believers took the administration of their parishes into their hands, cast off the unpopular priests, and replaced the bishops with newly elected ones. The Sobor was the highest representative forum of the Russian Orthodox Church, to which each eparchy delegated two ecclesiastics and three lay representatives. The Council opened its sessions on August 18th, and included 91 bishops, 20 monks, 170 priests, and 288 lay believers. On November 18th, Metropolitan Tikhon was elected as Patriarch, a role defined by the Council as „the first among the equals”. Between the sessions of the Council, a Church Soviet formed of elected lay and ecclesiastic representatives was in charge of the administrative, financial, and educational issues, while the Holy Synod included the bishops who were responsible for religious and canonical issues. The Patriarch chaired the Soviet and the Synod, but did not dominate them³⁶. These reforms were associated with strong criticism of the old synodal system, whose elimination brought back its freedom to the Church.

³²Gregory L. Freeze, “From Dechristianization to Laicization: State, Church, and Believers in Russia,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57, nos. 1–2 (2015): 6–34.

³³ Daniel Scarborough, *Russia’s Social Gospel: The Orthodox Pastoral Movement in Famine, War, and Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 26, 50, 138.

³⁴ Scott Lingenfelter, “Empowering the Faithful: The Unintended Consequences of Bolshevik Religious Policies,” in *The Dangerous God: Christianity and the Soviet Experiment*, ed. Dominic Erdozain (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 15–17.

³⁵ Vera Shevzov, “The Orthodox Church and Religion in Revolutionary Russia, 1894–1924,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 42–45.

³⁶Scott M. Kenworthy, *The People’s Patriarch: Tikhon Bellavin and the Orthodox Church in North America and Revolutionary Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 135–145.

The three provinces where Inochentism achieved its widest popularity, Bessarabia, Kherson, and Podolia, were among the territories where the aforementioned processes were most widely manifested. An easily measurable indicator of the spread of these processes is the large number of official lists placed in eparchial newspapers and containing the names of the members of democratically elected councils at the parish, diocesan, and eparchial levels. Most of the names contained belonged to lay believers of humble social origins. Likewise, the eparchial councils of Kherson and Bessarabia elected representatives who participated in the Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. During the spring of 1917, in all three provinces the number of vacant parishes increased, reflecting the high frequency of parishioners expelling unpopular priests. Likewise, the newspapers placed detailed descriptions and stenographs of the meetings of eparchial congresses, attended by representatives elected at the local level. The eparchial congresses of representatives of the laity and clergy were forums in which the old synodal system was criticized and where the February Revolution and abdication of Nicholas II were praised as the events that led to the liberation of the Church³⁷. The same events gave the peasantry the opportunity to seize and redistribute the land.

A key question of this paper is why the Inochentists chose monarchism during a period when the Church regained its freedom through the elimination of Tsarist autocracy, and when anti-tsarist sentiments were at their height? Peasant monarchism is a clear source of inspiration for the Inochentist sacred legends about the last Tsar. The difference between the 1918 booklet and the 1924 one reflects how *Life and Deeds* became an apocryphal text through the incorporation into Inochentie's hagiography of a rich set of vernacular narratives and motifs produced within the peasant cultural horizon. Nevertheless, two more important factors contributed to the emergence of the monarchist narratives among the Inochentists.

Firstly, the repressive policies applied by the tsarist authorities and by Russian Orthodox Church against the movement before 1917 produced a significant distancing from the official Church. James Kapaló demonstrates that in 1918, the Inochentist community from Lipetcoe was on the track of separating itself from the Orthodox Church, through specific beliefs and practices³⁸. Remaining faithful to a "repented tsar" constituted a way of marking that distance from the rest of the Orthodox communities, experiencing numerous democratic reforms associated with the revolutionary events which led to the abdication of the last tsar. At the same time, the choice of not joining the Revolution of the Church was, most probably, made with the participation

³⁷ See *Pravoslavnaia Podolia; Khersonskie Eparkhial'nye Vedomosti*; and *Kishinevskie Eparkhial'nye Vedomosti*, 1917–1918.

³⁸ James A. Kapaló, *Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity*, 110.

of Inochentie himself, because his death was preceded by approximately nine post-revolutionary months in which the democratic process within the Russian Orthodox Church reached their peak at both parish and eparchial levels. While the democratization of the Russian Orthodox Church eroded the authority of the clergy and increased the power of the laity, within the Inochentist community the figure of Inochentie acquired increasingly saintly attributes, including the idea of the submission of the last Russian Tsar to him. Additionally, the Revolution within the Church unfolded primarily in parish life, whereas Inochentism drew its inspiration from monastic traditions. By distancing itself from the democratic movement, Inochentism also embraced stricter monastic discipline, ascetic practices, and celibacy, all of which were far less common among members of Eastern Orthodox parishes. After Inochentie's death, believers' charismatic embodiment of monarchical figures served as a means through which the community preserved its unity and responded to the leadership crisis it experienced.

Bessarabia is a second explanation for why the Inochentists embraced the narrative about the repentant Tsar. Although Inochentism was a creolizing movement that brought together people of different cultural backgrounds from various regions, Bessarabia occupied a special place in the history of the movement. The largest share of believers and Inochentie himself were Bessarabians. Sacred sites in Bessarabia are mentioned in all hagiographic accounts and sacred legends about Inochentie. Many of the social networks created through pilgrimages to Balta and Lipetcoe crossed the Dniester, which in 1918 became a state frontier between Romania and Soviet Russia. The union of Bessarabia with Romania disrupted Inochentist social networks and pilgrimage routes and removed from the territory of the former Russian Empire a province rich in sacred sites central to the events narrated in Inochentie's hagiography. Remaining loyal to a repentant tsar frequently impersonated by spiritual leaders was a way of rejecting these changes and a cultural resource of resistance towards assimilation with the Romanian nation and Romanian Orthodox Church.

Another change produced by the union was that Bessarabians became subjects of a new sovereign who was not Orthodox. Refusals to offer prayers during liturgical services for the Romanian King Ferdinand, who was Catholic, were recorded in Bessarabia by Romanian military courts, which convicted Orthodox clergy and laypeople who expressed such attitudes³⁹. Likewise, the Russian press in Romanian Bessarabia published articles about rumours that the Romanian Orthodox Church was going to unite with the Catholic Church⁴⁰. In this context, continuing to praise a "repented Tsar" was a way of expressing „a more authentic form" of Orthodoxy than the one promoted by the Romanian

³⁹ Agenția Națională a Arhivelor (Chisinau) (ANA), F. 738, Inv. 3, d. 53.

⁴⁰ ANA, F. 680, Inv. 1, d. 3352, 130.

Church and state. Last, but not least, monarchist narratives were a way of distancing oneself from the Bolshevik regime, which promoted an anti-religious agenda and destroyed the Inochentist spiritual centre in 1920.

Conclusion

The 1918 booklet is a hagiographic account that seeks to integrate the veneration of Inochentie of Balta into Orthodox Christianity. At the same time, it targets a broad readership. The 1924 hagiography pursues a different agenda, aiming at distancing the Inochentist movement from the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, the 1924 booklet appears to have been inspired by a hagiographic account published in the 1918 booklet, which was enriched with numerous sacred narratives produced within the cultural horizons of peasant societies from Bessarabia, Podolia, Kherson, and beyond, brought together through mass pilgrimages and the resettlement of believers in Lipetcoe.

The emergence of monarchist sacred legends among the Inochentists was a response to the leadership crisis experienced by the community in Lipetcoe after the closure of the monastery and the forced expulsion of its spiritual leaders. After Inochentie's death, believers' charismatic embodiment of monarchical figures was an important means through which these narratives developed. The impersonation of Princess Tatiana in early 1920 was a response to the banishment of Inochentist spiritual leaders from settling in Lipetcoe and the destruction of their Monastery.

The representation of the repentant Tsar in *Life and Deeds* reflects older narratives of collective redemption in Russia, which drew on the idea of dissolving the social order and the state into the Church. Nevertheless, the adoption of monarchist convictions at a time when the popularity of monarchism had declined as a result of the freedoms brought by the February Revolution and the abdication of Nicholas II represents another important aspect of the processes underlying Inochentist monarchism. Remaining faithful to a repentant Tsar who symbolised the subordination of the secular to the sacred was a means through which the Inochentists marked their distancing from the official Church. This distancing from the Russian Orthodox Church, which underwent numerous democratic reforms, occurred during the final months of Inochentie's life. It was shaped by the experience of persecutions carried out by the Tsarist state and the Russian Church against Inochentie, as well as by the emergence of new religious practices and beliefs among the Inochentists.

Monarchism also functioned as a cultural resource for resisting the assimilation of Bessarabians into Greater Romania and its Church. The union of Bessarabia with Romania transformed the Dniester into a state border and an obstacle to Inochentist pilgrimages, thereby disrupting the social networks established through pilgrimages to Balta. At the same time, remaining faithful to

a repentant Tsar served as a means of distancing the movement from the Romanian King, who was not an Orthodox Christian. Last but not least, monarchism also functioned as a cultural resource for resisting the repressive policies of the Soviet regime, which destroyed the Inochentist monastic complex in 1920 and implemented numerous anti-Inochentist measures.