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REVIEW – MORMONY V ROSSII: PUT' DLINNOI V STOLETIE

Reviewed by Jeffrey Hardy

Sergei G. Antonenko, *Mormony v Rossii: put' dlinnoi v stoletie* (Moscow: Rodina, 2007), Hardback: \$45.00.

Beyond Gary Browning's *Russia and the Restored Gospel* (1997) and Howard Biddulph's less informative *The Morning Breaks* (1996) on the opening of missionary work in Ukraine, those interested in history of the Church of the Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Russia have been largely limited to a few chapters in broader works—such as Van Orden's *Building Zion* (1996), Cannon and Cohen's *Unto Every Nation* (2003), or Kahlile Mehr's *Mormon Missionaries Enter Eastern Europe* (2002)—and a couple of articles by Mehr (1986–87) and Zachary Jones (2009) in the *Journal of Mormon History*. The Russian-language historiography, meanwhile, is devoted almost exclusively to the question of Mormon missionary work in contemporary Russia rather than the intersections of Mormonism and Russia over the past 150 years. Beyond the work under review, the lone monograph on Mormons in Russian, I. V. Devina's *Mormony: filosofiiia, religiia, kul'tura* (1994), is unfortunately short, misinformed, and makes no mention of Mormonism in Russia. Thus, as the first Russian-language monograph devoted to the history of the LDS Church in Russia and really only the second such work in any language (after *Russia and the Restored Gospel*), Antonenko's work is certainly a welcome addition to the slim historiography on the subject. Yet the title of the book—*Mormons in Russia: A Century-Long Journey*—is a bit misleading. First, the book spans much more than a century, and second, although Antonenko provides some history of Mormons in Russia, the majority of the text is devoted to two related subjects: the (primarily early) history and doctrine of the Church at large and the treatment of Mormonism in the Russian scholarly (and to a lesser extent clerical) press.

Because of the sparse and often slanderous information available in Russian on the LDS Church, Antonenko devotes approximately one-third of the book to explaining to the reader the origins, doctrine, and contemporary state of the Church as a whole. His aim in this, he ex-

plains, is to “not praise and not disgrace, but to understand,” yet in his discussion of early LDS history and Mormon doctrine, Antonenko is more than fair to his objects of study (9). Indeed, believing Mormons could not hope for a more favorable presentation of their history and doctrine from a (presumably non-Mormon) scholar. Summarily dismissing the Church’s critics at every turn, he accepts largely at face value Church history and doctrine as presented by McConkie, Talmage, and Bushman. Even the apologetics of FARMS is recited without questioning. This is certainly a departure from, if not reaction to, traditional treatments of Mormonism in Russia, and much of the rest of *Mormony v Rossii* is devoted to uncovering precisely such accounts.

Antonenko’s discussion of the reception of Mormonism in Imperial Russia begins with a series of articles published in 1857 in the journal *Otechestvennye zapiski* and concludes with Lev Tolstoi’s famous proclamation on the Church’s potential to become “the greatest power the world had ever known.” He covers several articles and their authors in detail, including a few that have not been previously noted by Browning or others, and it is here that Antonenko is at his strongest. Although his ultimate conclusion that Russian authors more than Western ones were more perceptive and less drawn in by blatant anti-Mormon propaganda is not tenable with the evidence he musters, the level of detail that accompanies his analysis of the “Mormon” writings of such notable figures as N. N. Krasnov, A. I. Benni, F. M. Dostoevsky, P. L. Lavrov, and V. L. Solov’ev is without parallel. In the case of Duma member Solov’ev’s 1896 encyclopedia article, for example, Antonenko perceives that his harsh treatment of Mormonism lay in its implicit challenge to his own vision of a universalizing theocracy under the Russian monarch, who would also be prophet and high priest. Thus, Solov’ev saw Mormonism as the “thwarting of an ideal” (176). When the encyclopedia was revised in 1916, however, the well-known historian M. M. Kovalevskii gave a much more positive view of the Church, accepting the argument that polygamy was necessary to boost the population and crediting the Church for turning a barren desert into a state full of flourishing settlements. On Tolstoy, we learn that his copy of the Book of Mormon occupied a central position on the shelf in his home in Yasnaya Polyana, that he also possessed a biography of Joseph Smith (George W. Cannon’s *Life of Joseph Smith*), and he corresponded with one of Brigham Young’s daughters.

A briefer discussion on Soviet reactions to Mormonism in the 1970s and 1980s is likewise illuminating. Largely in response to a spread

on Utah and Mormons in the American propaganda vehicle *America*, which was distributed in very limited quantities in the Soviet Union, a 1978 monograph on American religious life claimed that Mormon missionaries sent to other countries were primarily not proselytizing, but spreading the political propaganda of and “defending the interests of colonialists and neo-colonialists” (195). Likewise, a 1982 article in the atheistic journal *Nauka i religiia* (*Science and Religion*) painted Mormonism in terms of class antagonism, arguing that it offered “the illusion of ‘salvation’ to the petty bourgeoisie” (198). Ironically, the author notes, just ten years later the same journal, by then devoid of its militant atheism, published one of the first favorable articles about Mormonism in post-Soviet Russia.

Antonenko’s final survey of Russian reactions to Mormonism treats the post-Soviet period. Similar to his previous sections, the author chooses here to relate in detail the works of a few authors as representative samples rather than provide a more comprehensive overview. He begins with the observation that whereas the usual slander soon followed, early press reports of the post-Soviet period were on the whole neutral, or even positive in their treatment of the Church. But the press is not of primary interest to Antonenko; rather, much of the ensuing section deals with attempts by Russian religious scholars to classify the LDS Church and its doctrines within (and sometimes outside) the traditional Orthodox-Protestant framework. Similar to their predecessors in the nineteenth century, Antonenko finds, post-Soviet intellectuals engaged in “Mormon studies” (*mormonovedenie*) also paid significant attention to the social and cultural aspects of Mormonism. Not surprisingly, Orthodox clerics and apologists in the 1990s and 2000s attacked the Church as a fundamentalist sect that had no proper place in Russia, but even some of these, the author discovers, were forced to acknowledge many positive traits shared by Mormons: devotion to family, abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, a strong moral code, regular church attendance, and so forth. To conclude this section, Antonenko provides a brief review of Russian-language discussion on Mormonism on the Internet.

In the midst of his lengthy discussion of Church history and doctrine and reactions to Mormonism from Russian intellectuals, the author, almost as an afterthought, relates the actual history of Mormons in Russia. With the exception of a few notable details—such as a long passage from a letter from Joseph Cannon during his brief visit to Russian in 1903 and the baptism of an American servicemen near

Vladivostok in 1919—most of the early history of Mormons in the Russian Empire related by Antonenko has been covered already by Browning and others (and Browning is indeed cited as a source). And whereas his recognition of Latter-day Saints in the Kaliningrad (Königsberg) area who converted to Mormonism under German rule but who after World War II found themselves in Soviet territory is certainly this, this makes the author's omission of the history of Mormonism in the Grand Duchy of Finland, part of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century, all the more unfortunate. As Zachary Jones shows in a recent essay, LDS missionaries proselytized (for a time illegally) and converted some 200 subjects of the Russian Empire to the faith beginning in 1875 before abandoning such efforts in 1895 in the face of government repression. Antonenko also fails to discuss for the sake of clarification the Orthodox sectarians in Samarra Province who were given the label *Mormoni* in the mid-1800s, a nickname that has persisted to this day.

In relating the reemergence of the Church in Russia at the end of the Soviet period Antonenko likewise provides an underwhelming account of the spread of the Church into Russia and the other satellite states. Devoting only several pages to the subject, he all but ignores developments in Russia outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg and provides no information on the growth of the Church past the early 1990s. There are, however, a few interesting details not found in *Russia and the Restored Gospel*. We learn, for instance, that Beverly Kimball took a keen interest in spreading the gospel in Russia and to this end befriended Yuri Dubinin, Soviet ambassador to the United States, and his wife. Although this friendship may not have born direct fruit in relation to Mormon proselytizing in Russia, it appears to have played a significant role in the extension of Church aid to earthquake-ravaged Armenia and the subsequent opening of Armenia to missionary work. At the end of the post-Soviet section Antonenko provides a list of four accusations that have inhibited the growth of Mormonism in Russia: denigration of women (including, most prominently, polygamy), the anti-ecumenical stance of the Church, aggressive missionary work by foreigners, and invasive genealogical work. (A fifth, church-state relations, is also provided, but it is unclear what the author is referring to). For each of these “hot” issues, Antonenko recites the general accusation before demonstrating their falsehood using LDS scripture and contemporary Church leaders and scholars such as Gordon B. Hinckley and James A. Toronto.

Included in *Mormony v Rossii* are thirty-two pages of illustrations, among which are quite a number showing Russian Church

members performing service or providing humanitarian aid. Footnotes, unfortunately, are extremely sparse, even by the low standards of referencing maintained by Russian academia, and there is no bibliography (or index, for that matter). The book has a mostly chronological, though at times convoluted and ineffective, organizational structure.

In sum, Antonenko's *Mormony v Rossii* is a valuable addition to the historiography (and history!) of Mormonism in Russia. It is neutral when not outright favorable toward the Church and it serves the important purpose of summarizing the early history of the Church and its doctrines for a Russian-language audience that is likely ignorant on such matters. Its primary contribution, however, lies in detailing the reception of Mormonism by Russian (and Soviet) intellectuals from the 1850s to the early twenty-first century and although Antonenko's survey of this literature is far from exhaustive, its depth more than compensates for its lack of breadth. Those looking for a history of the Church itself in Russia, however, will no doubt be disappointed, for that book remains to be written.

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