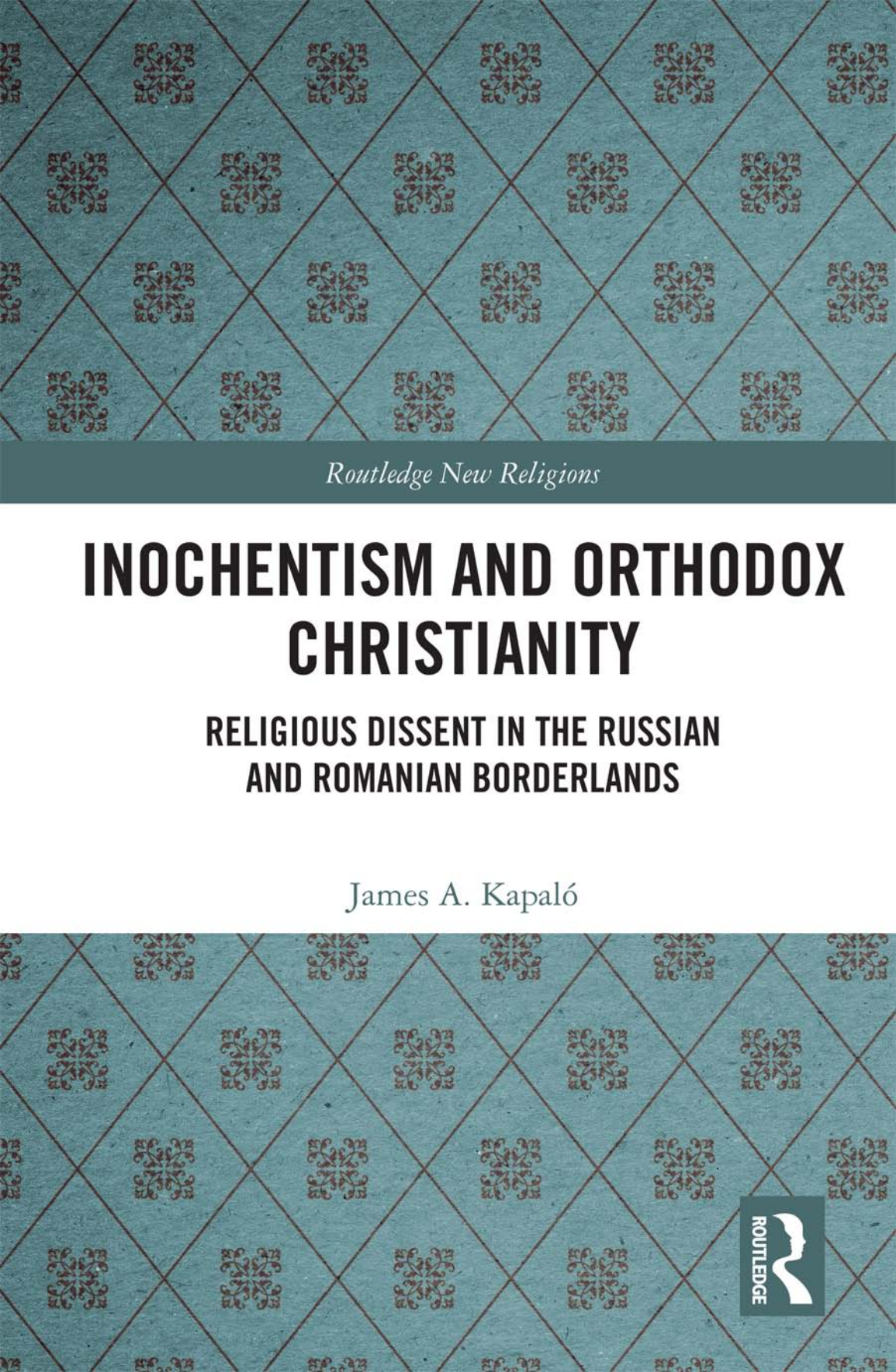




Routledge New Religions

INOCHENTISM AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

**RELIGIOUS DISSENT IN THE RUSSIAN
AND ROMANIAN BORDERLANDS**

James A. Kapaló

ROUTLEDGE



Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity

This book explores the history and evolution of Inochentism, a controversial new religious movement that emerged in the Russian and Romanian borderlands of what is now Moldova and Ukraine in the context of the Russian revolutionary period. Inochentism centres on the charismatic preaching of Inochentie, a monk of the Orthodox Church, who inspired an apocalyptic movement that was soon labelled heretical by the Orthodox Church and persecuted as socially and politically subversive by Soviet and Romanian state authorities.

Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity charts the emergence and development of Inochentism through the twentieth century based on hagiographies, oral testimonies, press reports, state legislation and a wealth of previously unstudied police and secret police archival material. Focusing on the role that religious persecution and social marginalisation played in the transformation of this understudied and much vilified group, the author explores a series of counter-narratives that challenge the mainstream historiography of the movement and highlight the significance of the concept of “liminality” in relation to the study of new religious movements and Orthodoxy.

This book constitutes a systematic historical study of an Eastern European “home-grown” religious movement taking a “grass-roots” approach to the problem of minority religious identities in twentieth century Eastern Europe. Consequently, it will be of great interest to scholars of new religions movements, religious history and Russian and Eastern European studies.

James A. Kapaló is Senior Lecturer in the Study of Religions at University College Cork, Ireland and Co-Director of the Marginalised and Endangered Worldviews Study Centre. He is author of *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice* (2011).

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Inochentism and Orthodox Christianity

Religious Dissent in the Russian and Romanian Borderlands

James A. Kapaló

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For my mother and for Anthony



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Contents

<i>Figures</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiii
<i>Abbreviations and glossary</i>	xv
<i>Language note</i>	xvi
<i>Maps</i>	xvii
 Introduction	 1
1 Between hagiography and history: The life of Inochentie of Balta	15
2 “The mad doctrine of the incarnation of the Holy Spirit”	55
3 “All wells will run dry”: Belief and practice amongst the Balta pilgrims	74
4 Inochentism in interwar Romania	107
5 Visions of the underground: Archangelism in interwar Romania	139
6 “John’s flock”: Ioan Zlotea and the monastic tradition	178
7 Return to the Garden of Paradise: Inochentism under Stalin and Antonescu	189
8 Golgotha: The Inochentist underground in Soviet Moldavia	222
9 Epilogue	256
 <i>Index</i>	 271

Figures

1.1	Postcard image of Feodosie Levițchi (ANRM-TMC3A – 738–1–6831).	25
1.2	Inochentie of Balta.	28
1.3	Hagiographic icon of Inochentie featuring key episodes from his exile and passion.	40
2.1	Photograph taken in a home in Kuibyshev of a lithograph icon of Inochentie enthroned in Heaven with a dove at his heart.	67
2.2	Postcard of a hagiographical icon of Inochentie's life. The caption reads "Some of the miracles and sufferings of Father Inochentie of Balta" (ANIC-IGJ 120/1942, 26).	70
3.1	The holy well of the Mother of God in the village of Lipetcoe (Lypetske) that was visited by pilgrims to Balta.	77
3.2	Photograph of Inochentie's mother with two of his brothers.	86
3.3	Map of the underground complex at the Garden of Paradise produced in 1970 based on the memory of members of the community.	94
3.4	Inochentie and his brother Simion, who later became leader of the community at the Garden of Paradise.	96
4.1	Map showing the distribution of two sects, Inochentists and Nazarenes, produced by the Siguranța, Romania's interwar state security agency. The map is undated but appears together with materials from 1938 (CNSAS D015288, 11).	132
5.1	The Culeac brothers: Ion (standing), Alexandru (seated on the right), and probably Grigore (seated on the left); from a Romanian Military Court File (ANRM-TMC3A 738–1–6846).	144
5.2	Painted photo-icon of Alexandru Culeac as the "Archangel Michael" from a Third Army Military Court file from 1938 (ANRM-TMC3A 738–1–6846). This image is reproduced as the frontispiece of Alexandru Culeac's vision text, "A vision that appeared in 1920" (<i>A vision</i> 1924).	154

5.3	Three Inochentist women, including Maria Sârbu from Sireți, Lăpușna county, who was sentenced to three months' imprisonment on 22 September 1938 for conducting Inochentist propaganda (ANRM-TMC3A 738-1-6846, 21).	170
5.4	Photograph of Inochentist leader, probably "Tătunea Ion," Ion Culeac, in priestly vestments (ANRM-TMC3A 738-1-6849).	171
6.1	Photograph of Father Ioan Zlotea from the cemetery in the village of Dobroja.	185
6.2	Photograph of Dormidon from the re-constructed tomb of Ioan Zlotea, on the site of the old cemetery of the monastery Via Arhierească.	186
7.1	Certificate of Orthodox Faith of members of the Ciumac, Căpătină and Cosma families from 1 September 1943, a year after they were first arrested for Inochentist propaganda and interned in Onești Noi camp (ANIC-IGJ 148/1942, 374).	206
7.2	Photograph-icon of Inochentie as the Holy Spirit. The image was confiscated from followers of Inochentie arrested in Kuibyshev (Cuibușor), Ananiev district in 1942 (ANIC-IGJ 120/1942, 24).	215
8.1	Photograph of Maria Petraș and Mihail Arteni from the youth magazine <i>Tinerimea Moldovei</i> .	238
8.2	Photographs from an MGB file showing the interior of an Archangelist underground chapel. The captions read (top) "Internal view of the hideout under the house of V. Donika and the steps leading down" (bottom) "Internal view of the hideout under the house of V. Donika" (ASISRM-KGB 020193, 195).	240
8.3	Painted photo-icon of Alexandru Culeac as the Archangel Michael.	248
8.4	Archangelist domestic altar with photo-icons of the Alexandru Culeac (bottom row, left) and Inochentie (bottom row, right).	250
9.1	Icon of Inochentie of Balta on the dashboard of the bus between Balta and Chișinău.	257
9.2	Father Ciprian showing the author the ongoing excavations at the Garden of Paradise.	261
9.3	Life-size painting of Inochentie dressed in blue and white from the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, Kuibyshev (Cuibușor).	263
9.4	Lithograph print of the Holy Trinity by German artist Fridolin Leiber (1853-1912) at the grave of Inochentie's mother in the village of Cosăuți, Moldova	264

Preface

I first encountered members of the Inochentist movement in 2005 when I was living in Comrat, the capital of the Gagauz Autonomous Region, in the Republic of Moldova, researching religion amongst the Gagauz minority there. Whilst speaking to a group of village women a friend of mine had gathered together with the purpose of talking about their religious writing practices, one of the women suddenly outed her neighbour by declaring “she doesn’t eat meat at all, she only eats fish, she’s an Inochentist!” The woman took her neighbour’s comment in good humour, smiled and just said something to the effect that she follows the monastic rules, like a true Christian. Over the following weeks and months, little by little, more and more bits of information filtered through about this enigmatic group. I gradually came to realise that their story, and their story-world, was more than some curious local anomaly but a widespread and neglected aspect of religious diversity in that part of the Orthodox Christian world.

On reflection, it was extremely significant that I met some Inochentists before I had really read anything about them. I encountered them first as the neighbours and co-villagers of my friends in the places I was staying, not as evil bugbears on the printed page of Soviet propaganda materials or as heretics described in Orthodox Church journals. I was, however, to meet with these antagonistic images very soon after I began to seek out sources on this secretive religious community, which had formed part of the local religious underground during communism. I have met many Moldovans who are unaware that Inochentism still exists as a living tradition; most people assume, as Soviet propaganda frequently claimed, that Inochentism had been eliminated by the triumph of socialist progress over ignorance and superstition. The connections I made at that time in a handful of villages in the region gave me my route into this intriguing religious culture, a form of what I describe as “liminal” Orthodoxy; seemingly permanently suspended on the borders, both literally and metaphorically, between Orthodoxy and heresy, between Romanian and Russian religion, and between critique and dependency on Orthodox Christianity in its institutional form. Situated on the margins of society in one of Europe’s poorest regions, Inochentism is a phenomenon of the periphery. I realise now, that the historical questions

that I asked during my research on Inochentism were very largely shaped by the perspective of first having met members of this living community who for nearly a century had been a target of state repression and defined by decades of anti-sect propaganda. Although this is not an anthropological work in the strictest sense, two concerns frequently cited by anthropologist colleagues underpin my approach, namely, to present the human side of those that have been dehumanised and to approach cultural diversity as a value.

In mapping the complex history of Inochentism, this book has drawn on many hostile sources, including anti-sect Soviet propaganda, Orthodox Church heresiology and Romanian state security surveillance files to name but a few. I have been able to supplement these antagonistic perspectives, however, with a range of sources rarely consulted by others, namely the range of hagiographies, visionary texts and images produced by members of the various groups and networks that came to be labelled Inochentists. Somewhat paradoxically, many of these texts and images were collected as incriminating evidence by the agencies that sought to destroy the communities of believers. The compulsion on the part of the police, gendarmes and secret police to collect evidence also resulted in the preservation of a rich collection of confiscated religious images and community photographs, invaluable sources of information regarding the life of these communities during periods of totalitarian rule. Finally, especially in the last few chapters of this book, I have been able to include the voices of people who venerate Inochentie of Balta and who follow his teachings today. Inochentist communities remain understandably wary of outside interest, but this book stands testimony to their willingness to invite a stranger into their homes and to testify regarding their experiences and history. Witnessing aspects of communal and ritual intimacy formed an essential component of my attempts at decoding decades of hostile descriptions of Inochentist identities and practices. Absent from this book, however, are descriptions of the contemporary ritual life of communities, which remains largely out of bounds for outsiders. I was granted access to communal prayer on a couple of occasions; however, I have chosen to respect the intimacy of this aspect of religious life that was so often violated by police and informers in the knowledge that my observations would add little to the historical analysis presented in this work. Writing about communities so long under the prying gaze of the secret police, I am uncomfortable with the idea that I may myself have become too intrusive.

The history of Inochentism as written by its antagonists includes accusations of and the presentation of evidence of violence and sexual exploitation. In my handling of these cases, I was guided by the principle that the many unproven cases and sensationalist revelations should be viewed critically and that Soviet-era criminal cases, especially those that were later overturned by judicial review, should be considered extremely suspect, even in cases where seemingly incontrovertible evidence was presented. Sometimes, even when we have access to archives and people, the sources can still confound us.

Finally, in writing this book, I confronted one further ethical dilemma relating to categories and language. In this study, I refer to some of the groups using labels they haven't chosen for themselves and which they often reject. After much deliberation, I came to realise that my choice of terminology was not really my own; the terms "Inochentist" and "Inochentism" have been widely deployed and internationalised by those who came before me. For better or for worse, the followers of Inochentie of Balta have entered Romanian and Moldovan popular consciousness under this label. I nevertheless endeavour throughout this book to reflect the ambivalence and rejection of this term by some individuals and groups and to reveal the diversity of opinion and expression that this term provokes. In so doing, I invite the reader to embrace the irresoluteness of the religious identities described here under the label Inochentism.

Acknowledgements

I began research related to this book more than ten years ago, and during this time have received help and advice from numerous colleagues and friends in the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Hungary, Russia, Ireland, the UK and elsewhere. Although I cannot name everyone here, I am nevertheless eternally grateful for the time and consideration dedicated to my project. Deserving of special thanks are my colleagues and friends in the Republic of Moldova, who helped me with contacts, sources and suggestions as well as offering invaluable cultural and linguistic advice. Igor Cașu acted as my guide to the archival sources in Moldova, and I am extremely grateful for his kind assistance in navigating the system and locating materials. Dorin Lovozanu was an extremely enthusiastic interlocutor on all topics related to with Inochentism and together with Călin Pantea, produced the maps for this book. Special thanks go to Dumitru Lăpușneanu who generously offered his time and insights, both historical and spiritual, and without whose help many aspects of the life and times of Inochentie would have eluded me. I received invaluable assistance from Aliona Yalama, Nicholas Luka and Oxana Trandafilova-Luka who were my local village guides and companions during research in southern Moldova and from Father Ciprian who greeted me with an open heart at the Garden of Paradise. I extend my deepest thanks to the many other individuals with whom I spoke who preferred to remain anonymous. Special thanks are due to my doctoral student Dumitru Lisnic, who in the final stages of writing this book helped locate and translate Russian sources, and together we made two final, very fruitful trips to Balta. Dumitru's insights have enriched many aspects of this book.

I have a debt of gratitude to my friends in Romania, especially Laura Jigăliescu, Emanuela Timotin and Andrei Timotin who made my stay in Bucharest in 2014, when many of the materials for this book were unearthed in various archives and libraries, all the more pleasurable and inspiring. I am immensely grateful to Dragoș Petrescu and Silviu Moldovan at the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives for their patience and guidance, and I would also like to thank the staff at National Archive of the Republic of Moldova, the Romanian National Historical Archives in Bucharest and the Library of the Romanian Academy.

My sincere thanks to Roland Clark who read and commented on some of the chapters of this book and to Tatiana Vagramenko who helped source some last-minute Russian language materials and translated documents from Ukrainian. I would like to thank Catherine Wanner for the opportunity to participate in the Public Religion, Ambient Faith: Religion and Socio-Political Change in the Black Sea Region conference in Kiev in September 2016 and for her extremely helpful comments on my paper on domestic religion delivered there, some of which have been incorporated into this book. Finally, my thanks go to my colleagues at University College Cork, Lidia Guzy, Jenny Butler, Árpád Szakolczai, Kevin Cawley, Tatsuma Padoan and my research team and associates on the Hidden Galleries project; Iuliana Cindrea, Anca Șincan, Kinga Povedák, Ágnes Hesz, Gabriela Nicolescu, Aleksandra Djuric-Milovanovic and Siobhan O'Brien for their inspiring company, help and encouragement.

The writing of this work has been supported financially by the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences at University College Cork and through a Royal Irish Academy Mobility Grant which generously funded archival work in Romania and Moldova in 2014. From September 2016, during the final stages of writing this book, my research on religious minorities in the secret police archives received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme No. 677355.

Abbreviations and glossary

Archangelism	The branch of Inochentism founded by Alexandru Culeac who was considered by his followers to be the Archangel Michael
<i>bălțean</i> (pl. <i>bălțeni</i>)	Alternative term used to identify followers of Inochentie derived from the name of the town Balta where he first began to preach
“Hadjiovca”	The name I have given to the village in southern Moldova where I conducted research amongst Archangelists. It always appears in quotation marks to indicate that it is a pseudonym.
<i>inochentar</i>	The preferred term used by contemporary followers of Inochentie from Balta to describe themselves
Inochentie	Corresponds to the name Innocent in English
Ioan/Ion	Romanian forms of the name John
KGB	Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (Committee of State Security)
<i>kolkhoz</i>	Soviet collective farm
<i>kulak</i>	Wealthy peasant farmer
MASSR	Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
MGB	Ministerstvo gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti (Ministry of State Security)
MSSR	Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic
NKVD	Narodniy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs)
<i>părintele/părințelu</i>	The Romanian vocative form for “father,” used by followers to refer to Inochentie
<i>Siguranța</i>	The Romanian secret police service before 1945
<i>starets</i>	Russian for monastic spiritual elder (pl. <i>starsy</i>). The institution of spiritual eldership is referred to <i>starchestvo</i>
Tătunism	The branch of Inochentism founded by Ioan Culeac, referred to as “Tătunea Ioan,” of Father John, by his followers who considered him to be the incarnation of John the Baptist

Language note

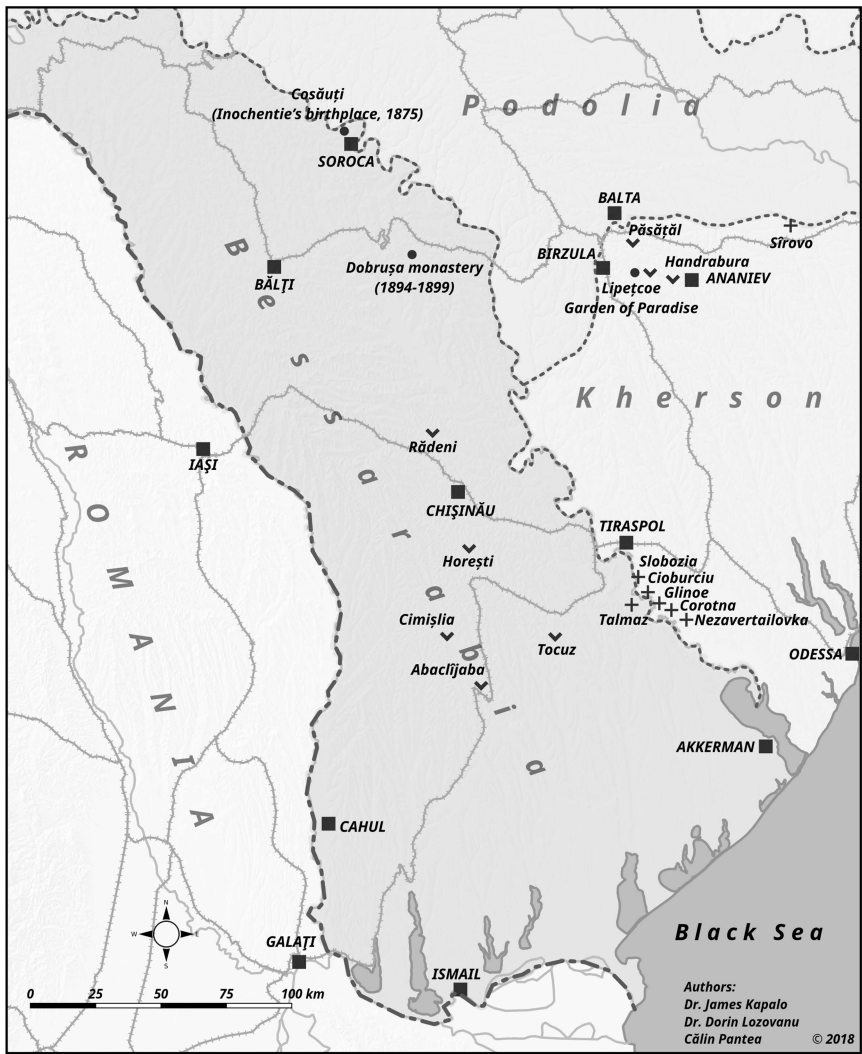
All translations from Romanian are my own, although I am very grateful to colleagues and friends in Moldova and Romania who offered invaluable advice and suggestions, especially when rendering local and archaic forms of language. Dumitru Lisnic and Tatiana Vagramenko both offered invaluable help with translations from Russian and Ukrainian. For transliterations of modern Russian, I have used the Library of Congress system conventions omitting diacritics. Transliterations from Cyrillic Romanian (Moldovan) are rendered in standard modern Romanian Latin script. Translations from Gagauzian are my own with invaluable assistance from Nikos Luka and Oxana Trandafilova Luka.

Romanian names and place names that feature in this book include some letters unfamiliar to English speakers: *ă* is pronounced like *u* in *but*; *î* and *â* do not have a direct equivalent in English but is similar to the *i* in *cousin*; *ș* is equivalent to English *sh*; *ț* is as *ts* in *cats*.

The monk Inochentie was born Ioan Levizor, with his name spelt variously as Ioan or Ion in the sources. I use the former spelling throughout except when quoting sources that spell it otherwise. Feodosie Levitsky, canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2009, is referred to in Inochentist writings and Romanian sources variously as Teodosie or Feodosie Levițchi. I use the Romanian spelling of his surname throughout.

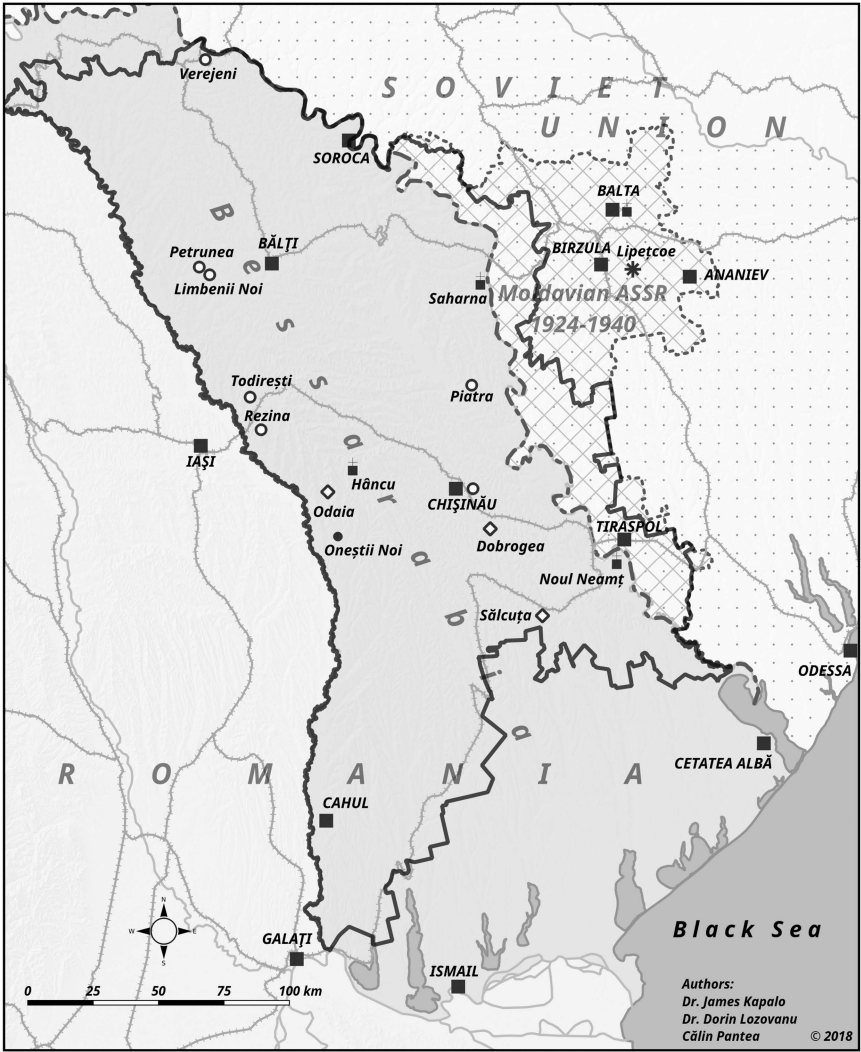
Place names are given in their recognisable international form, when such exist, for example Moscow, Bucharest and Kiev. For places in the Republic of Moldova and Romania, I use the contemporary official Romanian language version of place names. Place names in Ukraine are given in the historical form that appears in written sources cited, and in cases where this differs from the official contemporary Ukrainian version, this follows in parenthesis. For example: Lipetșcoe (Lypetske).

Maps



Map 1
Sites associated with Inochentist practice

Map FM.1 Cartographic editors: Dorin Lozovanu and Călin Pantea



Map 2

Inochentism in interwar Romania and the Soviet Union

Legend

- | | |
|--|--|
| — State border | ■ Cities |
| — Border of MSSR / Republic of Moldova | ○ Sites of early Archangelist-Inochentist activity |
| ■ Interwar Bessarabia in Romania (1918-1940) | ◇ Sites associated with Ion Zlotea |
| ■ Romanian Governorate of Transnistria (1941-1944) | ● Detention Camp |
| ■ Moldavian ASSR in USSR (1924-1940) | * Garden of Paradise |
| | — Railways |

Map FM.2 Cartographic editors: Dorin Lozovanu and Călin Pantea

Introduction

In the first decade of the twentieth century, in a small town called Balta in a remote corner of Russia's western borderlands, an Orthodox monk by the name of Inochentie inspired an intense, apocalyptic, religious revival. The movement, which soon came to be named "Inochentism" after him, proved to be an enduring religious phenomenon that has taken various forms and developed transnational significance over the past 100 years. Inochentie, who started out life as Ioan Levizor, was born in an ethnic Moldovan village on the banks of the Dniester river that now separates the Republic of Moldova from Ukraine. The young Ioan explored some of the most holy monasteries of Russia before becoming a monk and taking on the name Inochentie, or Innocent. He was ordained a priest under unusual circumstances in the context of the transferral of the relics of a local holy man. This book traces the history of Inochentie's movement that started out as a mass pilgrimage, once described as the "Moldovan Lourdes" (Upton-Clark 1927, 108), that was soon disrupted by Orthodox internecine competition and accusations of heresy resulting in Inochentie's imprisonment and exile. In his absence, and just as the Russian Empire was being shattered by war and revolution, the movement transformed into a utopian community called the Garden of Paradise. From the ashes of this community, an illegal, clandestine underground took shape, which succeeded in foiling the best attempts of the Soviet and Romania secret police to eliminate the movement's numerous branches.

Inochentism has been little studied, but due to the ideologically driven character of the Romanian and Soviet-era literature that does exist, a distorted and extremely negative image of Inochentism persists in the region. Writing about controversial religious movements, whether that controversy is well founded or not, presents certain challenges. In the case of Inochentism, clearing the fog of theologically driven condemnations and politically motivated accusations has proven to be both challenging and exciting. This book sets out to chart a complex history of repression and persecution that targeted individuals and groups associated with the name of Inochentie of Balta and to elucidate the forms of creative resistance and compromise these actions provoked. In so doing, I strive to make Inochentism comprehensible

2 Introduction

not only as a social-historical phenomenon but also as a meaningful and authentic religious worldview (see Chidester 2003 [1988], 1). William Husband suggests that Orthodoxy is “best understood as an amalgam of diverse groups who evolve from a common myth, theology, and ritual, but do not constitute a monolith of identically believing people” (Husband 2007, 197). Inochentism, as I argue in this book, forms part of this Orthodox diversity, albeit suspended on its margins.

The religious milieu of Russia’s and Romania’s borderlands in the nineteenth and early twentieth was deceptively diverse, with many thousands of “hidden sectarians” missing from the official statistics (Zhuk 2004, 7); Inochentism added to this diversity. Russian, Romanian and Soviet scholars placed all religious dissenters into three major categories: mystical sects, Old Believers and rationalist sects (see Zhuk 2004, 16; Engelstein 1999, 12–13; Heretz 2008, 78–80). Inochentism has often been included in the first of these groupings being considered as something akin to earlier forms of Russian mystical religious dissent, such as the Khlysty, Skoptsy, Shalaputs and Maliovanttsy, amongst others (see Zhuk 2004, 6–18), all of whom were present on the Bessarabian-Ukrainian borders. Inochentie’s preaching echoed aspects of the message of these earlier groups; he called on his followers to reject marriage and procreation, to renounce meat and hard alcohol and to prepare for the End of Days. These teachings, as they had done amongst earlier groups, produced transformations in social roles and gender relations amongst the rural population. Inochentists also share with certain groups of Old Believers a “shifting or indeterminate” relationship to the Orthodox Church, often dissimulating and sometimes offering conditional allegiance to Orthodoxy when expedient (Bushnell 2017, 10; see also Rogers 2009) – this dimension of the Inochentist worldview is one of the most elusive and difficult aspects of the movement to grasp. Inochentists are not predisposed towards schism but remain in an uncomfortable position suspended between critique of and dependency on the Orthodox Church and her teachings and structures. Later from the 1920s on, those who studied Inochentists in both Romania and the Soviet Union classified them and legislated against them alongside the so-called rationalist sects of Western origin, such as Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, that were becoming widespread in the region in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As a result, the Inochentist experience of state-sponsored harassment and violence, imprisonment and deportation is comparable in many ways to that of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Despite the many commonalities, in terms of belief, practice and experience with the other Orthodox dissent movements mentioned earlier, Inochentism, and Inochentist identities, due to the complex evolution, multiple influences and internal diversity of the movement, *resist* unequivocal categorisation, at least along the established lines of Russian and Romanian scholarship.

Throughout their history, Inochentists were also regarded as one of the most socially and politically dangerous religious groups in the region. The various interventions provoked by this hostile understanding contributed to the

transformation and reconfiguration of the movement through successive generations. The many forms that state and Orthodox Church interventions took between roughly 1911, when Inochentie was first censured by the Russian Orthodox Church (see Chapters 1–3), through the anti-sect legislation and Church campaigns launched in interwar Romania (discussed in Chapters 4–6), the Stalinist terror and Antonescu's holocaust (see Chapter 7) and the deportations and anti-sect campaigns in Soviet Moldavia in the 1950s and 1960s (explored in Chapter 8), elicited diverse responses from Inochentist leaders and groups. These included changes in practices, the development of new forms of visual representation, the creation of new religious spaces, the transformation of group structures and innovative economic strategies. From the Tsarist period on, through over 80 years of repressive policies implemented by successive Soviet and Romanian regimes, rather than abandon their faith in the special identity and teachings of Inochentie, or their commitment to living his message, groups and individuals resisted the power of the state, of the Orthodox Church and the pressure of public revulsion and disdain in ever more creative ways.

Bessarabia: between Romania and Russia

The land of Inochentie's birth was known historically as Bessarabia. It was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1812, having been annexed from the Principality of Moldavia, one of the two Romanian principalities that later formed the fledgling Romanian state in the 1860s (the other being Wallachia). The addition of the lands between the Dniester and Prut rivers constituted the final stage in a two-century long march south and west by successive Russian Tsars pushing back the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. The territory of Bessarabia comprised three distinct regions; the central region referred to as *Moldova de peste prut*, Moldova over the Prut, was ethnically, economically and socially integrated in the Principality of Moldavia and shared many characteristics with the Moldavian lands to the west of the river Prut that remained outside of Russian control. The southern part of the new Russian lands was the territory that had traditionally borne the name Bessarabia, but was also referred to as the Bugeac. This region, which was sparsely populated by semi-nomadic Tartars was, once the Tartars had been expelled to Crimea and Dobrodja, settled with Orthodox Christians from the Eastern Balkans, mainly Bulgarians and Gagauzes. The third part of the new territory, the county of Hotin and its castle, had been directly under Turkish control together with the other fortresses of Tighina, Cetatea Albă, Chilia and Ismail located along the Dniester and Danube rivers. Most of the territory of the Russian province of Bessarabia now forms the Republic of Moldova, with the exception of the southernmost districts, which are today part of the Odessa region of Ukraine.

Today, most Moldovans, who constituted the largest ethnic group in historical Bessarabia, consider themselves part of the Romanian nation,

4 Introduction

although this is still contested by some. The language of Moldova was traditionally, and is still commonly, referred to as Moldovan, or *moldovenește*. Nevertheless, it is considered to be a variant of Romanian by most linguists. Its status as a distinct language separate from Romanian has been asserted as part of political projects designed to assure Moldovan independence from Romania (see King 2000). People who identify, or have been identified, as Moldovans, that is speakers of *moldovenește*, are found in varying numbers in all three of the provinces of Russia – Bessarabia, Podolia and Kherson – where Inochentie of Balta lived and preached.

Cosăuți, the home village of Ioan Levizor, the man who became Inochentie of Balta, faces across the Dniester river to what was the neighbouring Russian region of Podolia (today's Vinnytsia Oblast). Podolia has a chequered history to match that of Bessarabia, having formed part of Kievan Rus, it was later conquered by the Golden Horde only to be liberated by the Grand Duchy of Lithuanian Principality and incorporated into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. After a brief period of Ottoman control, it returned to Poland until the end of the eighteenth century when Russia and Austria divided the territory between themselves, Russia receiving the eastern regions; this greater eastern portion, which had the status of a Governorate in the Russian Empire, remained within Russia and then the Soviet Union. Ethnically, Podolia was mainly populated by Ukrainians with pockets of Moldovans, Jews and Poles. Kherson Governorate to the south of Podolia comprised territory that had gradually been conquered or peacefully assimilated from the Cossack Hetmanate, from the Crimean Tartars and from the Ottoman Empire. This region was also mainly populated by eastern Slavs, Russians and Ukrainians, plus some Jews and Moldovans. Inochentism emerged at the crossroads of these three regions in a town called Balta (see map. 1). Bessarabia, however, with its large ethnic Moldovan population was, and still is, the territory most closely associated with the movement.

Bessarabia changed hands between Russia and Romania numerous times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, cementing its identity as a quintessential borderland. It is worth outlining the numerous boundary movements in order to appreciate the fluidity of the situation that prevailed during this time. The Russian province of Bessarabia as established in 1812 was dismembered in 1856, losing three southern districts, only to be reformed in 1878. In 1918, Bessarabia was ceded to Romania by the Great Powers. Following the loss of Bessarabia, the new Soviet regime “magically” created from parts of western Ukraine (those districts from the old Governorates of Podolia and Kherson where ethnic Moldavians constituted a sizeable minority), a new Moldavia, the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR). Parts of the MASSR were later absorbed back into the new Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in 1940 when the old territory of Bessarabia was reoccupied by Soviet forces. This state of affairs lasted a little over one year until July 1941, when Romania and the Axis powers invaded the Soviet Union and reoccupied the territory. Following the defeat

of Romanian forces in 1944, the MSSR came back into being only without two southern counties of Bessarabia, Ismail and Cetatea Albă, and the northern district of Hotin, which were granted to Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Following Moldovan independence in 1991, the territories of the MASSR that had remained part of the MSSR after 1944 broke away to form the internationally unrecognised Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, or Transnistria as it is commonly known.¹

Borderlands and liminality

The anthropological borderland, as defined by Rosaldo (1989) and taken up by many others working on the lives lived on borders,² is a place where two or more cultures or societies overlap, where so-called hybrid populations have the potential to “subversively appropriate and creolize master codes, decentering, destabilizing, and carnivalizing dominant forms” (Lavie and Swedenburg cited in Ballinger 2004, 31). We can make sense of this assertion through the anthropological concept of liminality that originated with Van Gennep as a term to describe the in-between phase of a passage from one state of being to another, a state of ambiguity and potentiality. This idea was developed further by Victor Turner (1969, 1978) to embrace not just ritual contexts but also wider processes of “spatiotemporal” social, individual and cultural change. As Turner describes, in the liminal phase,

we tend to find the prolific generation of new experimental models-utopias, new philosophical systems, scientific hypotheses, political programmes, art forms, and the like – among which reality-testing will result in the cultural “natural selection” of those best fitted to make intelligible, and give form to, the contents of social relations.

(Turner 1978, 3)

In this sense, liminality describes much more than transition but also the potentiality of moving from one state to another (Turner 1978, 3). Viewed in this frame, border regions fundamentally connect liminality, and liminal activities such as language, trade and sexuality (Szakolczai 2009, 152), which require transaction or crossings, with marginality, being on the edge or the periphery (Szakolczai 2015, 25), generating centres of creative, or destructive, potential.

Andrei Cusco, citing the work of Rieber (2014), asserts that Bessarabia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted a “complex frontier” (Cusco 2017, 10–12), situated as it was on the imperial border of Russia, created through conquest and thus inherently unstable, and the nation-state border of Romania, whose claim was defined by the very different logic of ethno-national unity. The notion of a “complex frontier,” although not predicated on the assumption of the mutability or fluidity of identities to be found there, highlights the operation in the case of Bessarabia

of different modes of state legitimation and projects of identity (trans)formation. Both the Russian and Romanian states, and their respective Orthodox Churches, engaged in “civilising” and “nationalising” missions that attempted to transform Moldovans into loyal and trustworthy subjects and to integrate them into new state (and church) structures (Dumitru and Negura 2014, 3). The competing designs for the population were only partially successful as the border between Russia and Romania shifted back and forth, creating an ever more marginal and contested border zone (Cusco 2017, 12). This more or less permanent state of oscillation between two poles of gravity in the twentieth century created extended periods of weakened structures and ineffective, unfamiliar institutional systems, resulting in perpetual flux or a structureless liminal state, a magical “wonderland” where anything was possible (Szokolczai 2015, 19–20). In such times of radical social transition, millennial religious movements tend to arise amongst certain low status groups in society, such as minorities and those on the margins (see Zhuk 2004, 18), who can come to constitute “liminal people” (Turner 2008 [1969], 125).

The shifting state boundaries, which also brought with them changing religious jurisdictions, demanded that actors, be they political, economic or religious, engage in “boundary work.” The religious leaders discussed in this book, starting with Inochentie of Balta, frequently crossed borders between states, between religious communities and between ethnic groups, displaying considerable ingenuity and creative spirit as mediators, translators, smugglers and masters of disguise. If traditionalism can be considered a characteristic of identities in the region, and particularly in the largely agrarian territory of Bessarabia, this should be complemented with an appreciation of the ingenuity and adaptability of local indigenous actors. King talks about the mutable character of identities forged during this extended period (see King 2000, 1), but I suggest it is more fruitful to focus on agency and motion in describing these processes without the notion of “end-state” identities in mind. For this reason, I avoid the notion of “hybrid” identity, which may do violence to the self-understanding of many Moldovans today as well as inadvertently inscribing, in Ballinger’s words (2004, 49), a new “‘authentic hybrid’ as a subject (rather than a process)” in the territory once known as Bessarabia. As Pelkmans has observed, “actual lives poorly fit the categories we ascribe,” especially in border regions (Pelkmans 2006, 4).

Bessarabia, religion and the Russian Empire

As the shifting of the literal, territorial borders enclosing and demarcating Bessarabia produced adept boundary workers, the changing conditions of religious affiliation and belonging also produced attendant forms of creative agency in the religious sphere. The 1897 Russian Imperial census, which was conducted on the basis of native language, reported that Moldovans constituted 47.6% of the Bessarabian population, with the remainder comprising

Ukrainians (19.6%), Jews (11.8%) and Russians (8%) plus a number of other smaller groups such as Germans, Gagauzes and Bulgarians (Murgoci 1920). In this ethnically diverse context, between 1812 and 1918, the Russian Orthodox Church, following its assimilation of the local Moldavian Orthodox community, intermittently and sometimes vigorously pursued a policy of Russification of the local Moldavian Church. Starting with the Russian annexation of Bessarabia 1812 until the present day, the territory became a “battleground between Orthodox Churches” (Dima 1994, 180) with Russia and Romania competing to define Orthodox Christian culture. Moscow set up its own Eparchy in Bessarabia in 1813 and exercised control of the Church through a succession of Russian Bishops appointed to the region from the imperial centre. Gradually, the Moldovan character of the church was eroded as Romanian language liturgical books were removed, Russian clergy took over parishes and Russian abbots were appointed to head monastic institutions. In 1856, when Russia lost three southern districts of Bessarabia at the Treaty of Paris following her defeat in the Crimean War, the policy of russification of the remaining territory was accelerated. And when Russia won back the southern districts in 1878, they too were subjected to rapid measures to ensure the Russian character of the church life there (see Clay 1998, 252). Archbishop Serafim Chigachov of Bessarabia (1908–1914) in particular, a key figure in the narrative that unfolds in this book, was known for his anti-Moldovan sentiments and was responsible for reversing the more liberal linguistic policies of his predecessor, Bishop Vladimir Sinkovsky (1904–1908). Mainstream Romanian Church historiography tends to frame the history of the territory almost exclusively in terms of the national struggle of the Romanian-speaking majority for control of the local church dominated by Russian hierarchs (see Popovschi 1931, Nistor 1991, Păcurariu 1993, Dima 1994, Clay 1998). Although this process of russification constitutes an important element of the backdrop to the unfolding drama of the Inochentist movement, it should not cloud our view of other important factors that have been neglected in the writing of the genesis and history of the movement.

Despite Inochentie’s Moldovan identity and peripheral location on the borderlands, his life narrative intersects with some key celebrities of Russian religious and political life. There are intriguing reports that Rasputin intervened on Inochentie’s behalf before the Holy Synod (see Chapter 1), and while Inochentie was resident in Saint Petersburg, John of Kronstadt was at the height of his fame, and it seems likely that the two men met (Popovschi 1926, 8). Both Rasputin and John of Kronstadt enjoyed special relations with the Tsars; Rasputin with Tsar Nicholas II (1894–1917) and Saint John of Kronstadt with his predecessor Tsar Alexander III (1881–1894), to whom he administered Holy Communion on his death bed. Intriguingly, Inochentie’s *vita* narrative also accredits him with a direct relationship to Tsar Nicholas, albeit an ambivalent and confrontational one (see Chapter 1). Regardless of whether these connections to important figures that

crop up in the narrative of Inochentie's life are apocryphal in character or not, they suggest a deep connection between the founding narrative of the movement and the unfolding crisis at the heart of the Russian Empire. Having travelled to the imperial capital and having served in several of Russia's most holy sites, Inochentie was a man of the empire as much as he was peasant from the rural backwater of Bessarabia.

Saint Feodosie Levičchi of Balta

In order to understand Inochentie's rise to fame, however, we must begin with his connection to another holy man who conversed with the Tsars. The cult of Feodosie Levičchi (1791–1845), written Teodosie Levitsky in Russian, set the stage and established the conditions for Inochentie's mission. Levičchi was born in the village of Korytna in Podolia when it was still under Polish rule. He became a priest in 1815 after having studied in the seminary in Kamyanets-Podilsky, and with the encouragement of the local archbishop, he married and was ordained in the Church of Saint Nicholas in Balta. Feodosie began his career in turbulent times when, following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, “many religious people took to the idea that the End of Days and the Last Judgement were at hand” (Popovschi 1926, 11). Together with a retired priest friend, Levičchi proclaimed “the impending dreadful judgment and the Kingdom of Christ, preaching repentance” – he is said to have considered the two of them to be “the two ‘martyrs’ of the Apocalypse (Revelation 12:3–12), the tools of God chosen at the final of days before the End of the World” (Popovschi 1926, 11). Levičchi became known for the power of his improvised preaching and, following the death of his wife in 1818, he dedicated himself to delivering increasingly apocalyptic sermons. He lived as a hermit and spent long hours in prayer, reading about the End of Days, eventually writing a study which he sent to Tsar Alexander I via Alexander Nikolayevich Golytsin, the Tsar's conservative Education minister. The Tsar enjoyed the work so much that on 3 May 1823, Levičchi was invited to Saint Petersburg (Popovschi 1926, 12). He left Balta soon after and arrived on 20 May where Minister Golytsin paid him a visit. Levičchi seems to have had a powerful effect on Golytsin, and he became a regular visitor to the priest who was duly presented to the Tsar. Alexander was “very happy and grateful for his work in the name of God” and gave him permission to continue to spread his teachings, adding that “he has not beheld and does not know of any other spiritual man endowed with grace from on high, through whom the mighty works of Christ could be fulfilled in this world with all his trust” (Popovschi 1926, 13). In the summer, Levičchi left Saint Petersburg but continued to write to the Tsar about “absolution, about the sufferings of the people and about the reform of the Orthodox Church” (Popovschi 1926, 13). Levičchi's fame grew, but his association with Golytsin, who was accused by powerful enemies of being a Freemason, was to be his downfall. Witnessing the witch-hunt that

followed, Levițchi asked permission to return to Podolia, but his request was denied, and he was instead exiled to a monastery on an island on lake Ladoga where he was kept under close supervision (Popovschi 1926, 15). When he was eventually released in 1827 following the death of Alexander and the enthronement of Nicholas I, he returned to Balta via Saint Petersburg and Kiev. There he returned to his old position in the Church of Saint Nicholas and built a modest hostel to offer shelter to the poor, orphans and the sick. In 1834 when famine struck, Levițchi is reported to have helped the poor and starving but was later accused of immoral relations with a woman and, on 17 April 1843, he was removed from his parish and barred from performing the liturgy or preaching. He died on 9 March 1845. His many followers hoped to create a special crypt under the church, but the authorities refused permission, and instead he was buried in the family plot in the town cemetery of Balta. Gradually, a cult emerged around the figure of Levițchi, which inspired the building of a new monastery at Balta, and it was in this context in 1909 that Inochentie entered the scene.

Scope and sources

This book is the first monograph on Inochentism in any language other than Romanian as well as being the first to appear since 1926. Scholarship on Inochentism in the English language is extremely limited, consisting of a few pages in Charles Upson Clark's 1927 book (see Upson Clark 1927, 108–10), one or two pages in some general works on religion published during the Soviet period (see Kolarz 1961, 366–68; Lane 1978, 81) and a single academic article by US scholar J. Eugene Clay (1998). In this light, I set out with the ambitious aim of presenting as comprehensive a picture as possible of the many aspects of the life, teachings and afterlife of Inochentie of Balta. The chapters proceed roughly chronologically from the beginning of Inochentie's monastic career in Bessarabia at the end of the nineteenth century to Soviet Moldavia of the 1960s and end with observations drawn from recent fieldwork in Balta and the Garden of Paradise, Inochentie's utopian community. The nature of the available sources has very largely dictated the shape of this work, with each chapter relying on different sets of materials. Inochentism, as much as it can be subsumed under a single label, is a dispersed, diverse, secretive and non-institutionalised constellation of networks and communities that cannot easily be grasped with a single methodological approach.

Inochentie left no memoirs and neither did the leaders that followed him; in fact, very little was written by members of the community for outside consumption. As a result, the public perception of Inochentism has been overwhelmingly defined by sources that are entirely hostile towards their subject. The movement was made infamous by Soviet anti-sect propaganda novels, films and newspaper articles and by the Romanian popular press, which produced fantastical images of underground hideouts, ecstatic orgies,

murder and religious rebellions. These sensationalist reports often bore very little relationship to reality but were driven by the ideological imperatives of two competing political projects, on the one hand the Romanian national project (discussed in Chapter 4), and on the other the Marxist-Leninist materialism of the Soviet Union. Soviet and Romanian propagandists reduced Inochentism to a very limited range of tropes, applying certain sociological, psychological or sensationalist moralistic interpretive frames (Chidester 2003, ix) in much the same way that many Western scholars approached their own “problematic” new religious movements.

In addition to the published sources, I have drawn on a range of archival materials, both Romanian and Soviet. As Sonja Luehrmann (2015, 3), explains in her study of religion in Soviet archives, it is not an easy process to “filter out the facts about religious life” from amongst the rhetoric, the wooden formulaic language and the unfounded sensational accusations that are ever present in communist-era documents. With due attentiveness, however, to the multiple voices and relationships and to the bureaucratic processes through which various texts originating with different actors came together in the archives, the documents can speak on many different levels (Luehrmann 2015, 4). In a number of chapters, I draw on materials produced by the gendarmerie and the secret police, the agencies that were charged with monitoring, controlling and liquidating illegal religious groups and individuals. In order to eliminate these groups, which was the ultimate aim of both the Romanian and Soviet authorities, they first needed to be identified, counted and mapped, and then evidence needed to be gathered, arrests made and trials conducted – both the Romanian and Soviet-era archives contain masses of information relating to these operations. The scale and the depth of their “intrusion” into communities is sometimes staggering. Perhaps paradoxically, the attempts made by these authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, through their evidence gathering, preserved not only data regarding the situation of illegal religious groups, but also numerous examples of their visual and textual materials – many of which are nowhere else available. This hidden repository of confiscated Inochentist materials and photographs often sit alongside photographic images created by the secret police in the course of their investigations into their illegal activities. These archives, therefore, represent an important resource for understanding both how Inochentist groups chose to represent themselves and how the totalitarian system created images of these religious *others* in order to incriminate and produce anti-religious propaganda. Some of the materials we find in the archives, therefore, possess a dual character as incriminating evidence but also as a form of affirmation or justification of religious identities during times of extreme repression.

In the chapters that follow, the observations I make based on my historical research in the archives are grounded by periods of ethnographic fieldwork. In conversation with members of communities, I have been able to test my historical understanding based on archival sources with observations and insights relating to contemporary identity, memory and belief. Because of

the history of persecution and the secretive nature of some of the communities I discuss here, they have rarely, if ever, before been consulted regarding the way they are represented in scholarly publications. I have tried, therefore, to incorporate points that my interviewees were keen to communicate about their history, experience and identity.

In order to protect the identities of people I spoke to (with a few notable exceptions when my research participants preferred to be named), I have taken the precaution of replacing first names with suitable, locally used equivalents, and I have refrained from giving any family names. Wherever possible, when speaking about contemporary communities, the names of villages have also been changed. Only in cases where the location of a community is publicly well known, as is the case with Balta itself, have I retained the real name. Soviet and Romanian press reports and publications from the period under discussion in this book are all publicly available and so anyone wishing to seek out the communities or their descendants has the means to do so.

Naming and mapping

The terms “Inochentism” and “Inochentist” are problematic and not accepted by most of those who venerate or follow Inochentie’s teachings. They represent *etic* terms first applied by the Orthodox Church to those whom they considered had been led astray into heresy and a sectarian way of life. At various points in history, the act of naming someone an Inochentist could, at worst, have condemned her or him to the Soviet Gulag or to Romania’s wartime hard-labour camps or at best, to negative judgements and prejudicial remarks. Most of the people I met who consider Inochentie of Balta to be a holy man and who follow his teachings self-identify simply as Christian or Orthodox Christian. The question of labelling “Inochentism” or “Inochentists” is, therefore, both ethically problematic and politically sensitive. With the title of his 1926 monograph, “The Balta Movement or Inochentism,” Nicolae Popovschi presages this question of how to label the phenomenon at hand, as simply a movement or an -ism, with all the attendant baggage this implies? Robert Crummey (2011, 5–6) touches on a similar question in relation to his historical studies of Russian Old Belief:

How do we categorize people who deny that they are Old Believers but adopt the identifying marks of that movement? Or how do we label individuals who identify themselves as Old Believers but whose lives show few signs of the movement’s beliefs and practices?

Initially, a number of different terms were in use in Romanian to designate the followers of Inochentie; in 1916, the Orthodox Church in its Missionary Manual used the term *innochentenii* (pl.) to identify members of the movement (Chirica and Skvoznikov 1916), but by the 1920s, this had been replaced by the term *inochentiști* (pl.), which since has become the most common expression used in all written sources. The community living today