

A Messianic Consciousness Interpretation of Science Fiction's Knight of the Forty Islands

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Abstract

Taking the science fiction novel *Knight of the Forty Islands* as the object of study, this paper analyzes the projection of messianic consciousness and its inherent contradictions in the salvation actions of the protagonist, Dima, in the context of the three-dimensionality of the Russian messianic consciousness: religion, spirituality, and politics. Dima's actions of establishing a confederation and inheriting the revolutionary fire correspond to the political practice, spiritual salvation, and religious metaphor of messianic consciousness, while the alien testing ground and the setting of the rules of the game deconstruct the nature of power in the salvation narrative through the postmodern perspective, revealing its complicity with the colonial logic. While critically inheriting the tradition of messianic consciousness, the novel, with its open-ended ending of breaking but not building, provides a new path for understanding the reconstruction of national spiritual genes in contemporary Russian literature.

Keywords

Science fiction, *Knight of the Forty Islands*, Messianic consciousness, Lukyanenko.

1. Introduction

As one of the most intellectually profound works in Russian science fiction, Sergei Lukyanenko (Сергей Лукьяненко)'s *Knight of Forty Islands* (*Рыцарь сорока островов*) centers on the coming-of-age journey of the young protagonist Dima. It constructs a metaphorical apocalyptic testing ground where a group of teenagers are exiled by an alien civilization to a closed space composed of forty islands. There, they are forced to compete for survival in a deadly game of survival. Dimitri evolves from a passive survivor into a resistance leader. He unites with Island 36 to establish a confederation, ending violence with violence, discovering and inheriting the revolutionary spark left by predecessors, ultimately becoming a messianic hero who shatters the game's rules. This work not only continues Russian sci-fi's tradition of philosophical reflection on civilizational dilemmas but also, through the narrative shell of adolescent messianism, subtly reconstructs the deeply rooted messianic consciousness within Russian culture. It provides an allegorical model for interpreting the metamorphosis of national spirit in the post-Soviet era.

2. Overview of Russian Messianic Consciousness

As a distinctive national spiritual phenomenon, Russian messianic consciousness has consistently permeated its historical evolution and cultural construction. Guo Xiaoli and Sun Jingxuan note in *The Structure and Evolution of Russian Messianic Consciousness*: "On the religious level, Russia sees itself as the heir and savior of Orthodox Christianity (религиозный мессианизм); on the spiritual level, it regards its own ideology as the ultimate weapon for world salvation (духовный мессианизм); on the political (secular) level, Russia seeks to liberate all humanity (светский мессианизм или политический мессианизм)." Russian messianic consciousness is not a singular, static concept but a dynamic system interwoven with

and fluctuating between three dimensions: religious redemption, spiritual mission, and political practice. At its core lies Russia's persistent imagination of its identity as a "divinely chosen people" and its eternal pursuit of the mission to "save the world."

2.1. Religious Dimension: "Holy Rus" and "Third Rome"

The core of religious messianic consciousness lies in the utopian vision of "Holy Rus" (Святая Русь): Russia is not merely a geographical nation but the "New Israel" bearing God's will, whose ultimate purpose is to achieve the salvation of all humanity through steadfast faith. In 1492, the monk Philotheus proclaimed Moscow as the "Third Rome" (Москва, третий Рим), succeeding Rome and Constantinople, endowing it with the sacred mission to safeguard Orthodoxy and save humanity. This discourse positioned the Grand Duchy of Moscow as the sole orthodox heir to the Orthodox world, endowing it with the sacred duty to safeguard Christian truth and resist the encroachment of heresy.

The concept of "conciliarity" (соборность) further reinforced this dimension. Slavophile philosopher Khomyakov (Хомяков) emphasized the organic unity of individuals within the faith community, opposing both Catholic hierarchical authoritarianism and Protestant individualism. Its essence lies in "the union of freedom and truth in love". This collective view of salvation infused Russian messianic consciousness with a potent communal spirit, inextricably linking religious mission with national destiny.

2.2. Spiritual Dimension: Passion Narrative and Truth Hegemony

The uniqueness of Russia's spiritual messianism lies in elevating national suffering into moral capital for redeeming the world. Berdyaev (Бердяев) emphasized in *The Russian Idea* (Русская идея) that Russians deeply believe "only through blood and tears can one approach truth. This passion narrative endows Russian literature and philosophy with a pervasive apocalyptic tone. The Russian soul depicted by Dostoevsky (Достоевский), Tolstoy (Толстой)'s concept of "nonviolent resistance," and even the Silver Age poets' invocation that "beauty will save the world" can all be seen as variations of the spiritual messiah—the Russian nation is not only a witness to truth but also its propagator.

Another core dimension is the appeal to "universality" (всечеловечность). Nineteenth-century thinker Danilevsky (Данилевский) proposed the theory of "cultural-historical types," asserting that Russian civilization differs from Western partial civilizations as the ultimate form capable of synthesizing all human values. This logic equating national characteristics with universal values demands transforming the world through its own spirit while rejecting the equal value of other civilizations, rendering Russian messianic consciousness intensely exclusive and expansionist.

2.3. Political Dimension: Imperial Expansion and Revolutionary Practice

Political messianism represents the secular projection of religious and spiritual dimensions. During the Tsarist era, messianic consciousness became inextricably linked to imperial expansion. Catherine II (Екатерина II) famously declared that "Russia's borders have no end," framing territorial conquest as a mission to spread the light of civilization. During the Soviet era, messianic consciousness was reborn under the guise of communist ideology. Lenin (Ленин) defined the October Revolution as "the dawn of liberation for all humanity," while Stalin portrayed the Soviet Union as "the locomotive of human history," transforming proletarian internationalism into a new form of messianic discourse.

Yet political messianism perpetually grapples with the paradox of ends versus means. Berdyaev sharply observed in *The Russian Idea* that Russia's salvific impulse often succumbs to "imperial temptation"—ruling in the name of salvation—ultimately transforming messianic consciousness into an instrument of oppression. This contradiction became particularly pronounced in the late Soviet era. When the slogan of "liberating all humanity" starkly

contrasted with the reality of bureaucratic authoritarianism, the internal rupture within messianic consciousness directly accelerated the collapse of the ideology.

The three dimensions of Russian messianic consciousness did not develop in equilibrium but fluctuated in response to historical contexts. Based on the developmental characteristics of Russian history and culture, Berdyaev divided Russian history into five stages: "Kievan Rus', Tatar Rus', Muscovite Rus', Imperial Russia under Peter the Great, and Soviet Russia." During the Kievan Rus period, the religious dimension dominated, conveying the sacred mission through the missionary work of saints and the construction of churches. From the Grand Duchy of Moscow to Imperial Russia, the political dimension gradually strengthened, with the messianic mission expanding in tandem with imperial territory. In the Soviet era, the spiritual dimension was reshaped by ideology, and messianic consciousness was reborn in the form of the communist utopia. In the post-Soviet era, these three dimensions entered a complex interplay amid nationalist revival, the resurgence of Orthodox faith, and the impact of globalization.

Notably, the evolution of messianic consciousness has always been accompanied by a profound contradiction between universality and particularism. On one hand, it proclaims Russia's mission to serve all humanity; on the other, it devalues other civilizations as "others" in need of salvation. This duality renders it both a spiritual bond forging national identity and an ideological root fueling external conflicts. After the Soviet collapse, messianic consciousness did not vanish but frequently resurfaced in literature and art. As exemplified by *The Knight of the Forty Islands*, which reconstructs the messianic narrative through sci-fi allegory, it reveals both the vitality and predicaments of this ideology within a postmodern context.

3. Manifestations of Messianic Consciousness in the Novel Text

Through the shell of a sci-fi allegory, *Knight of the Forty Islands* embeds the three dimensions of Russian messianic consciousness—religious, spiritual, and political—into the coming-of-age narrative of the young protagonist Dima. The closed archipelago testing ground serves both as the stage for a deadly game and as a metaphorical microcosm of Russia's historical predicament. The following sections will analyze the projection of messianic consciousness within Dima's actions through textual examination across three levels: political practice, spiritual inheritance, and religious metaphor.

3.1. Political Messiah: The Dialectic of Confederation-Building and the Logic of Violence

Dima's attempt to forge a military alliance between Island 36 and other islands, establishing an archipelago confederation, directly echoes the "convergence" tradition within Russia's political messianism. This concept emphasizes achieving social unity through collective will. Faced with forty fragmented islands, Dima believes only unity can break the aliens' game rules and shatter the entire cyclical system. He emulates the early Soviet Congresses by establishing an inter-island parliament and formulating common survival laws. This action implicitly projects the historical legacy of Soviet political practice—dissolving individual differences through collectivism to unify fragmented forces under a higher goal.

Yet the formation of the confederation remains entangled with violence. After repeated negotiations with Musk, leader of Island 16, proved fruitless, Dima and his allies resolved to "surround the island and attack simultaneously from three bridges". From this point, they tacitly permitted military suppression of rebellious islands, sacrificing the minority to save the majority. This paradox of "seeking peace through violence" mirrors the narrow, expansionist nationalist tendencies in Russia, as Berdyaev observed: Russia is the most nationalistic country in the world, a nation where nationalism rages without precedent, a land where peoples endure

Russification under oppressive rule, a state of ethnic arrogance, a nation where everything—including universal Christianity—is nationalized, convinced it alone bears a mission while rejecting all of Europe." Political messianism often rationalizes violence in the name of salvation, ultimately perverting ideals into instruments of oppression. Through the escalating power struggles within the Confederacy, the novel exposes the inherent fragility of political redemption narratives: when a "shared mission" becomes a pretext for power struggles, messianic consciousness slides into the abyss of self-negation.

3.2. Spiritual Messiah: Intergenerational Transmission of Revolutionary Spark and Redemptive Suffering

The discovery of ancestral weapons and diaries in the chapel stands as the core symbol of the spiritual messiah. These dust-covered artifacts and writings reveal that Dima was not the first "savior" to attempt breaking the rules. Half a century earlier, youths had already launched a rebellion—"They resolved to unite all the islands, but instead of a confederation, they formed an alliance. They even possessed their own ship, slightly larger than the Valiant. Among them, a traitor used the radio in the basement to contact aliens. After the uprising, these children were confined to the island, calling themselves members of the Commune." Having read the diary, Dima, like a devout believer, clutched the "banner of proletarian revolution" left by his predecessors, resolutely standing upon the towering shoulders of his predecessors. This tragic narrative of generational redemption exemplifies the quintessential strategy of the spiritual messiah: transforming historical trauma into moral capital.

Dima's characterization further amplifies this dimension. Initially just an ordinary teenager forced to survive, he gradually awakens revolutionary will upon discovering revolutionary relics and voluntarily assumes leadership duties. His transformation mirrors the narrative pattern of the "divinely chosen individual." Much like the metaphor of the Red Guard soldier as a Christ-like prophet in Russian Symbolist poet Blok (Блок)'s *The Twelve*, Dima is crowned with the aura of a "chosen son." He repeatedly survives perilous situations where aliens tacitly permit his anomalous behavior, even becoming seen by his comrades as the key to breaking the rules. This individual hero narrative essentially functions as a symbolic compensation for collective suffering by a spiritual messiah—imbuing chaotic suffering with meaning through the creation of an extraordinary leader.

3.3. Metaphor and Deconstruction of the Religious Messiah

The overall setting of the Archipelago Test Site can be viewed as a sci-fi transposition of the religious messiah. Just as God tests believers to discern the faithful, the aliens—positioning civilizational survival as the ultimate stake—assume the role of supreme judges. They confine human youths within a sealed space, demanding they prove their racial worth through killing. Dima's character resembles a messianic prophet: he repeatedly breaks established rules, exposes the absurdity of the trial, and attempts to rebuild the possibility of redemption through resistance.

The novel deconstructs religious imagery—for instance, when Dima leads his companions out of the "demasquered archipelago" at a critical moment, escaping the "dusty polystyrene foam", into the aliens' control center. The gilded, opulent exterior starkly contrasts with the decaying, intricate machinery within. This spatial metaphor reveals the duality of religious messiahs: the ostensibly sacred promise of salvation may conceal the essence of power manipulation. The intelligent beings of Lotan only reveal their true form at the story's conclusion—slender claws, wrinkled dry skin, and matted fur. What unsettles Dima and his companions beyond their nightmarish appearance is their radically different thought processes and linguistic systems. They struggle to comprehend "the entire strange, anomalous set of human reactions—love, friendship, empathy..." This directly points to the core contradiction of religious messianism:

when a “divine mission” loses empathy for human nature, its salvation devolves into cold moral dictates.

The uniqueness of *The Knight of Forty Islands* lies in its portrayal of the symbiosis and fragmentation within the three dimensions of messianic consciousness. Political practice demands collective obedience and violent means; spiritual salvation relies on individual awakening and moral sublimity; religious mission requires absolute faith and self-sacrifice. Dima continually finds himself in predicaments while balancing these three: he must maintain the confederation's unity with an iron fist, yet his violent methods betray the ideals of spiritual salvation; he is revered as a prophet-like leader, yet questions the essence of the sacred mission lead to his self-exile.

This contradiction culminates in the scene where he assumes command of the island in a moment of crisis. The title of commander symbolizes both power and the shackles of alienation; accepting it effectively transforms him into the embodied vessel of multiple disciplines of messianic consciousness. Dima gradually accepts his coronation amid recurring doubts: “He handed over his command to me so easily, as if passing a burden he no longer needed—one too heavy for him but bearable for another. Am I the commander? In that instant, I felt profoundly alone, a loneliness I had never known during my days on the island.” These soliloquies reveal how messianic consciousness devours individual subjectivity.

4. Postmodern Messianic Consciousness

Russian messianic consciousness has consistently manifested a dual nature at historical junctures: serving both as a spiritual pillar uniting national identity during crises and as an ideological tool for the self-perpetuation of power discourses. The sci-fi framework of *Knight of the Forty Islands* provides a postmodern experimental ground for critiquing messianic consciousness. Through Dima's journey as a savior, it reveals this consciousness's function in suturing collective trauma while exposing the hegemonic logic within its narrative structure, ultimately prompting profound reflection on ethnocentrism.

Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia plunged into identity crises and geopolitical dilemmas, where messianic consciousness resurfaced as a “lifeboat” filling the vacuum of values. Guo Xiaoli observes: “Whenever a nation faces existential threats, narratives of sacred missions activate collective subconsciousness by reconstructing historical memory.” In the novel, the physical torment and mental discipline inflicted upon the youths at the alien testing ground mirror Russia's post-Soviet existential predicament. Amidst the collapse of old orders and the absence of new rules, Dima's rallying cry for “united resistance” swiftly became collective consensus.

Messianic consciousness possesses an inherent expansive nature. Its sacred-secular duality demands the constant production of the Other to validate its own legitimacy. Russia's redemptive impulse invariably accompanies a black-and-white cognitive violence. In the novel, Dima defines islands refusing to join the Confederation as enemies, launching campaigns under the banner of “salvation”—a tangible manifestation of messianic consciousness's inherent hegemony. More alarming is the narrative's self-perpetuating cycle: aliens periodically reset the rules, ensuring the eternal recurrence of “resistance-suppression-resistance.” The terror of this structural trap lies in how the disciplined subjects consciously and willingly assume the role of disciplinarian.

Although Russian imperial consciousness persists in contemporary Russian literature, an increasing number of writers are critically examining its latent nationalist tendencies and colonialist mindset, deconstructing the Russian imperial myth itself. This mirrors the protagonist Dima's reflections and inner conflict during the assault on the enemy island, as well as his sorrow and helplessness when confronting captured adversaries.

In essence, Lukyanenko does not entirely reject messianic consciousness. While exposing its violent core, he preserves a fissure for self-redemption. Through Dima's choice to shatter rather than build, he offers a response: true sanctity lies not in forging new hegemony, but in safeguarding the spark of free will. This spark signifies both a farewell to ethnocentrism and an invitation to reconstruct messianic consciousness. Only by acknowledging the limitations and openness of redemption can the Russian spirit truly emerge from the quagmire of historical cycles.

5. Conclusion

Knight of the Forty Islands reconstructs the historical spectrum of Russia's messianic consciousness through sci-fi allegory. Across the triple dimensions of religious redemption, spiritual mission, and political practice, it reveals both the deep vitality of this cultural gene and the structural crisis of its power-driven alienation. Dima's metamorphosis—from passive survivor to chosen son to system disruptor—mirrors the dialectical transformation of messianic consciousness in the postmodern context: it serves as both a spiritual totem uniting collective action and an ideological machine breeding cycles of violence; it provides an identity anchor for a nation in crisis while simultaneously trapping itself in self-negation through its logic of exclusion.

Through dialectical construction and deconstruction, Lukyanenko reveals contemporary Russian literature's dual scrutiny of national spirit. On one hand, narratives of confederation-building and revolutionary flame-bearing affirm the continuity of messianic consciousness as cultural memory. On the other, the alien testing ground's manipulative metaphor deconstructs the hegemonic essence of salvation narratives, exposing the collusion between sacred missions and disciplinary power. This stance of critical inheritance suggests the transformative potential of messianic consciousness—stripped of its imperial expansionist colonialism, it may evolve into a dialogic discursive resource within the globalized context.

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