

ORAL AND TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION TODAY

THE OLD BELIEVERS: ORIGINS AND SURVIVAL (1)

A R T I C L E S

The Old Believers: The Survival of a Religious and Cultural Heritage

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Historical accounts have well described the Russian Orthodox Church reforms of the seventeenth century and the consequential opposition of large sectors of the Russian Orthodox population. Those adhering to the Old Rite and refusing to acknowledge the Tsarist-mandated Church Reforms became known as Old Believers or Old Ritualists. Often, persecution followed.

Old Believers, independently intent on preserving the Old Rite, sought refuge in remote and isolated areas. Old Ritualism, however, is not a cohesive movement. Groups and communities often exist out of contact with one another. Some groups, called the priestless (*bezpopovtsy*) declared that the priesthood had been lost forever. Others lost their priests through attrition (those priestless known as Chapel-goers (*chasovennye*)). Without priests in isolated communities, doctrine was subject to modification according to the understanding of the elders and the charisma of the particular leader. Therefore, within the overall world of Old Ritualism, there arose a number of 'agreements' or concords (*tolk, tolkovanie* or *soglasie*). Known communities with doctrinal differences between them often considered each other 'out of union,' and required acts of ritual cleanliness to be able to re-enter and participate with the other.

Some communities, known as Beglopovtsy, accepted ‘run-away’ priests from the Reformed Church. (2) This priestly hierarchy, now with bishops, exists to the present day, although many other Old Believers do not recognize them. And in the 1840’s, Old Believer leaders from the large community in Austria-Hungary petitioned to establish a priesthood hierarchy through a Bishop of the Syrian Rite, essentially similar to the Russian Old Rite. While many joined the so-called Belokrinitskii Agreement or Concord, other ‘agreements’ refused to accept it. (3)

Generally, a majority of Old Believers were without priests and sought isolated settlements where they could preserve their religion and practice their faith as best they understood it. Nevertheless, Old Believers, when discovered, were subject to various levels of restrictions, taxes and/or persecution. This adverse treatment by the State authorities increased significantly in the Soviet period during official anti-religious drives, which were only relaxed during the period of the Second World War for the official Patriarchal Orthodox Church. It should be pointed out that the latter, often referred to as the ‘dominant’ Church, soon after the reforms of the mid-seventeenth century objected to the presence of another Orthodox Church which did not accept the reforms, choosing to remain a separate entity. Until the 1970’s, the ‘dominant’ Church maintained an anathema on the conduct of services by the Old Rite. Later, the Soviet-dedicated drive to abolish religion intensified the persecution and obstacles put in the way of the Old Believers and the Patriarchal Orthodox Church alike.

Yet, the basic question remains: “Why does Old Believerism still exist?”

In partial answer to this question, I suggest several obvious factors that have had a favorable influence on the preservation of elements of Old Believerism. Among them are:

Inconspicuous observance of the Old Rite

Old Believers, well schooled in the art of inconspicuous existence during Tsarist times, have reported how they resorted to a number of measures, designed to allow them to continue their way of life in accordance with the Old Rite. The most radical measures involved moving to remote and pristine areas to build a village and conduct self-sufficient endeavors in agriculture, raising animals, hunting, fishing, and collecting the God-given fruits of the earth (honey, berries, grains, mushrooms, etc.). Those unable to achieve isolation sought to bring their icons and books out of hiding for clandestine services. Men would carefully roll and stow their prayer robes under their jackets to walk unnoticed to secret services. In the more obvious areas, as for example, the

Cathedral of Rogozhskoe Cemetery (*kladbishche*) in Moscow, men and women would risk open attendance only after retiring on pension. Nonetheless, the services continued. In the case of Rogozhskoe Kladbishche, the parishioners conducted continuous prayers in the Cathedral when they heard that the authorities were ready to confiscate the building “as soon as the service was over.” Miraculously, the authorities abandoned the effort after several months.

The efforts of Soviet and Russian scholars

Another factor in the preservation of the Old Rite was the attentive work of interested scholars, who persevered in recording among its living representatives and studying its ancient literature to discover the meaning and ways of Old Believers in centuries past to the present day.

While not emphasizing the religious aspects of what they studied, these scholars penetrated deep into the traditional way of life of various ethnic peoples, especially the Russians themselves. The traditional ways of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they studied were referred to, typically in the first and last paragraphs of a published treatise, as the “remnants of previous stages of existence” in conformity with Marxist evolutionary views. Nonetheless, this research did document an inter-related way of life with its intrinsic calendar of religious rituals and natural seasons in rural Russia. Titles of scholarly works had to be coded in Soviet times to read as studies of traditions in the previous centuries ‘up until the beginning of the twentieth century.’

Specialists from the Institute of Religion and Atheism also conducted expeditions to collect information, although their purpose was, by contrast, to dispense information about newly developed Soviet rituals and to dissuade people from their allegiance to religious ritual. It was said of one particular specialist that any village he visited would be “ruined for further field work for at least ten years thereafter,” that is to say, the villagers would not cooperate with other outside field workers.

Nevertheless, Soviet scholars for the most part can be reassured that the attention they gave to detailing traditional ways and deep meanings among the Old Believers certainly provided a conscious opportunity to remember, recognize, review and re-commit to the ways of old. The recordings, publications and collections made by field workers provided a continuity of conscious reinforcement of beliefs and ways.

Indeed, the work of Soviet scholars and their students, visiting numerous remote villages each year, and establishing a favorable rapport with the “old inhabitants” (*starozhily*), surely had a beneficial influence on these clandestine believers.

Regular conferences in the Soviet Union

During an extended period, religious words and expressions were excluded from works published in the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, a considerable amount of expeditionary work was devoted to the Old Believers, but presented in publications under the heading of different topics.

Scholars of various regions regularly met at conferences to deliver papers and exchange views on topics that often used source material gained in contact with Old Believers, while not alluding to them as Old Believers. However, within the field, this material was appreciated for its genuine value as a reflection of the traditional Old Believer cultural way of life.

Communities of Old Believers outside Russia

Another factor favoring preservation was contributed by the families who emigrated, legally and illegally, to areas outside Russia beyond the reach of the Russian authorities. Initially, whole communities sprang up in Poland, Rumania and Turkey. In all but the last, Turkey, Old Believer communities continue to exist to this day.

Later, after the Communist Revolution of 1917, communities that had fled and settled in Siberia and the Far East “escaped” to China. Here they built typical traditional villages: a main village road with houses on both sides, and a Prayer Hall near the middle.(4) However, the principal communities in China, in Harbin and Sinkiang Provinces, found it difficult to preserve their religious rite after the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949. They were also threatened by official representatives of the Soviet Union, intent on coaxing or coercing the members of the Old Believer communities back into the Soviet Union.

Following the intervention of the World Council of Churches, the Old Believers once again moved, making their way to Hong Kong. Here they made arrangements to travel to and settle in Australia and South America (mainly Brazil). Within four years, many of these had immigrated to the US, settling chiefly in Oregon and Alaska, with some moving on into Canada. These communities have preserved many of the traits of their seventeenth-century ethic, while selectively incorporating twentieth-century economic and political standards.

For the most part, communities outside of Russia have maintained their traditional ways. They, therefore, present empirical models of open practice of the Old Rite. Their importance and significance is obvious, once contact with Old Believers in Russia became possible.(5)

The communities outside of Russia, roughly in the order of settlement, are as follows: Romania (then the Austrian-Hungarian Empire); Turkey; Poland (then partially Russia); China; Mongolia; USA (Erie, PA); Australia; South America (Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Uruguay); USA (Oregon and Alaska); Canada.

The lifting of restrictions in the Soviet Union

The advent of 'glasnost' in 1985-7 was followed by the lifting of restrictions against foreign contacts and against religious expression. The Government instituted a program to return Church property to the Patriarchal Orthodox and the Old Believer Churches respectively. This authorized access to religious services. Moreover, the removal of restrictions on travel allowed Western specialists to participate in expeditions and Western Old Believers to visit their relatives. The interchange served as a healthy inspiration and re-vitalization for many.

International conferences and symposia

On a more rarefied level, foreign scholars have made their contribution at international conferences where they reported on their research. Since 1985 a whole series of international conferences with Russian and Eastern and Western scholars have been held in places as diverse as Washington DC, Heidelberg, Zagreb, Novosibirsk, Ciechanowicz (Poland), Tulchea (Romania), Northfield, Minnesota, Imatra (Finland), Erie, Pennsylvania and Moscow (two). Collections of papers for several of the conferences have subsequently been published.

Conclusion

This paper must be considered incomplete, as indeed is the documentation of the rich history, folklore, experience and literature of Old Ritualism that continues in the present day. There is more. But thanks to the devotion and conviction of the Old Believers; to the interest, perseverance and erudition of scholars from both East and West; to the occasional understanding and sympathy of government authorities; to the significance of the issue in academic studies of the culture and religion of traditional communities; and to other genuinely interested parties;

Russian Old Ritualism is now a topic of considerable importance as the following contributions show.

NOTES

- 1 This article was originally given as a contextual paper for the conference on “Old Believers in Traditional Russian Culture”, Erie, Pennsylvania, October 15-18, 1998 under the title “The issue of Old Believers as a growing topic of world literature.”
- 2 Centers in Russia are in Novozipkova, Briansk Oblast’ and in northern Perm’ Oblast’.
- 3 The founding location was in Bela Krinitza on the border of Romania and Ukraine. The agreement is now located with its Metropolitan in Braila, Romania.
- 4 Since these Chasovennye Old Believers had no priests of their own, the Prayer Hall could not receive a blessing on elevation to the status of a church, with altar and relics.
- 5 It would be interesting to consider the relative merits of domestic and foreign Old Believer communities in terms of their “standard and authentic” preservation of Old Believer ways.