

The Problem of Preserving a Traditional Way of Life amongst the Old Believers of the USA and the USSR

RICHARD A. MORRIS*

Old Believers in the USSR

Not only do the Old Believers occupy the largest cathedral in Moscow, but they have churches throughout the country.¹ Thanks to the events of the millennium, the archbishop of the Belo Krinitza church in Moscow has now been permitted to become a Metropolitan of the Old Orthodox Church of Russia. The Metropolia and affiliated churches no longer refer to themselves as an adjunct of the Belo Krinitza church in Romania.

Characteristically Old Believers are found in more remote areas where, in former times, they sought refuge from religious persecution. Soviet ethnographers, folklorists, and museum specialists make regular expeditions into the countryside to find traditional life, which more often than not has been preserved by none other than the Old Believers.

Several state and collective farms are made up of collectivised Old Believer villages. It is reported that there are some one hundred thousand Old Believers in collective farms in the Transbaikal area. In the depths of the Taiga are villages which have been so hidden from civilisation that they know little of the history of world events of the past 60-70 years. These are Old Believer villages which report that they trade marriage partners with other communities further down river.

But more striking and indicative of the prevalence of Old Believers is the fact that almost all adult Russian or Soviet citizens recognise the term when it is used. They may not know the historical antecedents or the richness of the cultural traditions, but they know of their existence

*This study is based upon field work by the writer in Oregon and Alaska, USA, 1978-90, and in Perm, Novosibirsk and Moscow, USSR, 1988-90. See also the author's *Old Russian Ways: A Comparison of Three Russian Groups in Oregon*, (New York: AMS Press, 1990).

¹See G. Stricker, 'Old Believers in the Territory of the Russian Empire', *RCL* Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 25-51.

and can cite at least one or two places where one can go to see or be introduced to Old Believers.

The persecution which has driven Old Believers into marginal areas of Russia and the Soviet Union has driven them also, on several occasions, into the countries of Europe, Asia, and the Western hemisphere. Conditions vary in every Old Believer community. Yet the question persists: 'How is it that Old Believers still exist?'

It has not been easy. One of the more successful methods of preserving the Old Rite in its traditional-cultural form involves isolation in a remote area. This, in turn, demands hard work and self sufficiency in all respects: building homes and prayer halls; hunting, fishing, planting, harvesting; weaving, sewing; reading, teaching, praying. As the world encroaches on the village and interrupts its activities, threatening their abilities to preserve the Old Rite, the Old Believers move on, all the while experiencing more and more contact with an increasingly modern world.

In the USSR over the Soviet period, the nature of the contact has had a considerable dampening effect. The Soviet Union, as a state which has officially avowed atheism, has introduced laws which separate church and state, and serve to limit many of the functions which would allow the church to maintain its activities and prosper. The laws banning the teaching of religion to minors has curtailed opportunities to bring young people up in adherence to a religious faith. The officially sanctioned desecration of churches and icons has certainly not fostered any feeling of reverence, nor has the very strict and insistent teaching of atheism in the schools. Official youth organisations such as the Pioneers and the Komsomol require atheistic pledges by all members.

A considerable force to be reckoned with is that of social pressure, which rapidly becomes translated into peer pressure. Among children, this is a particularly strong influence and it is difficult for a school child to be the only one without a red Pioneer scarf, or the one who has publicly announced to the class that he or she is a religious person. No one dares to befriend the individual: in effect the individual is cut off from the herd and left to his own resources. Moreover, certain aspects of religious behaviour among adults is not approved. There are sanctions brought into effect at the place of work, in military service etc., for those who admit to a religious way of life.

The overall effect of this can be overwhelming for many. More often than not, religious people tend to refrain from an active demonstration of their beliefs, to remain silent about their faith, and to avoid getting themselves into a confrontational situation. Old Believers in the Soviet Union have mentioned how they gather for prayers, but would be careful to hide their *khalat* under a coat. Books

and icons would be hidden on the premises of members and brought to prayers, hoping that the authorities would not discover and remove these objects. But many of the young are enticed into secular activities: to insist on one's faith would be to choose the life of a martyr. Consequently, many of the young and middle aged simply became 'worldly' (*mirsky*) during their active life. However, once reaching pension age, they then turn to religion and begin practicing it openly and actively. Once a person is on a pension he cannot be punished or reprimanded by losing his job or having his pay docked, or changing his work conditions. Those who have refused to modify their religious way of life have quite bravely fought for their beliefs and 'lived' their religion.

In Moscow some years ago, when the authorities wanted to take over the church of Rogoshskoye Kladbishche and turn it into a club for one of the unions, the people of the congregation, under the leadership of the church fathers, held continuous services in the church. After a prolonged period of activity, the authorities gave up and allowed the church to stay in the hands of the Old Believers. At the Rogoshskoye Kladbishche church, they have been able to continue their services, including training people to read the special music (*kryuki*) without falling foul of the law.

In the countryside the situation differs somewhat. To a certain extent, the elder people are left alone to gather in one another's home for prayers. Having returned to religion at the age of 55 or 60 (pensionable age) they try to acquire the skills of reading Church Slavonic, as well as learning and memorising religious songs. Often instruction is from elderly women, as there are few men in Old Believer congregations. The quality of knowledge is suffering considerably and the Old Belief among these people has in practice become a matter of 'illiterate' faith.

Migrations

During collectivisation Old Believers from the Far East crossed the border into Manchurian China. Here, once again, they gathered into villages where they could build their homes and church, and continued their way of life. The degree of contact with the Chinese was minimal and reduced simply to market relations. Occasionally there was contact with other Russians in the city of Harbin. These were also refugees who had left the Soviet Union, but no Old Believers. Nonetheless, the Old Believers were able to minimise their contact with the city, restricting themselves to medical visits etc., and to focus their activities on the countryside around their villages.

Shortly afterwards, Manchuria was occupied by the Japanese. Japanese settlers were being sent from their island to the main land to populate the new colony. However, the weather conditions were extremely harsh for the new Japanese and many could not endure the severe climate. Japanese specialists sent researchers into the region, who noticed that the Old Believers were able to survive the winters in a hearty fashion, and consequently began to visit their villages in order to discover the means and methods by which they lived. This type of contact was an effective encouragement for their way of life. There was no interruption of their services or any interference in their traditional way of life.

It was not until 1945, when Soviet troops entered Manchuria, and the Japanese troops began a rapid retreat, that the Old Believers suffered once again from contact. In this case the Soviets had pressganged the men and older boys into setting the Chinese rail tracks to the Russian gauge for the incoming forces. Once this was done, the workers were again loaded onto trucks and taken back to the Soviet Union. In this case, many families were left without men and older boys.

In 1949, the Chinese communists completed their revolution and began organising and collectivising the countryside. Old Believers soon realised that it would be difficult to preserve their religious ways. Therefore, those who could, either legally or illegally, made their way to Hong Kong, and on to Australia and South America, eventually travelling on to the United States.

Old Believers in the United States

The main motivation for going to the United States was first and foremost to preserve their religious way of life. That the US Constitution guarantees freedom of religion was well known and under this protection a number of religious groups had been able to settle and prosper in the United States. The Old Believers were well aware of both this and the economic opportunities afforded to emigrants to the United States.

In the Oregon community, where a large number settled, they have indeed found freedom of religion. They set about immediately to build six prayer halls. More recently, one group has become affiliated with the Belo Krinitsa Church of Romania. That group has since built itself a proper church.

However, they have found, even in this rural community of Oregon, closer social contact with a host society than ever before. In stark contrast to the austerity of their experience in South America

and earlier in China, they have found the American experience to be one of great abundance. In particular they have had to come to terms with:

Technology: as wise peasants, the Old Believers were not about to deny themselves a more effective and efficient means of working and providing for their families. Hence, they quickly adopted the technology of the new world on their farms and in their places of work. Where the technology has proven to interfere with their religion, such as TV, radio and films, they have tried to minimise the impact. However, it is an ongoing fight, as the young people are eager to enjoy these entertaining attractions.

Affluence: to the surprise and delight of many Old Believers they are paid well for their labour. Whether they still produce from their farms, work at clearing or planting new trees in the woods, or work in factories, they now earn money which allows them to buy not only essentials, but excess goods as well. The young, who start working early, can now afford to buy themselves fully outfitted cars and trucks, and other items which are purely for entertainment value.

Modern consumerism: along with the adequate and even excessive amounts of money, Old Believers, especially the young people have noticed that there is an abundance of goods available on the American market. Since the young go to work early, often without a high school or higher education, they are receiving high pay at an early age and are able to purchase almost anything they want. In many cases, the parents still insist that money earned by children living in the house be turned over to the family. In these cases, the father provides the child with the basic essentials and will often buy him a new car.

Schooling: the children are required by public law to attend school. Although there was an introductory bilingual programme to assist in the transfer from Russian to English among the large number of Old Believers who were attending school, that phase has passed. The youngest members of the family now learn English from the older siblings. Moreover the school teaches children to be creative, to think for themselves, and to question. These values are in stark contrast to the Old Believers' attitudes towards children: that children must be obedient and follow the rules unquestioningly until they have internalised them. Many Old Believers parents consider that school teaches children how

to be undisciplined! Consequently Old Believer parents are not adverse to having their children drop out before finishing high school. In this manner, they can also avoid some of the 'contamination' of close association with children of other nationalities and religions.

Community boundaries: whereas the Old Believers have consistently maintained a we/they boundary between themselves and surrounding populations, justified by rules within their religion, as well as by the threat of outsiders towards them, their boundaries in a more modern society are obscured by the anonymity of society. Young people and some older people as well, discover that they may take part in the host society to a great extent, as long as their actions are not discovered and made public within the Old believer community. If they are not 'caught', they have not broken the social cohesion of the traditional community. Young people have begun to question just how dangerous the outside society is for them, since they are in a fairly consistent contact with it through school and the work place. Thus the protective boundary, which in the past has encompassed the community, has now been obscured.

The effect of this contact has caused great concern and frustration for the elders. One group moved away to a more remote area of Alaska and established a village there. However, after 20 years of existence, that village itself has in very much the same degree of contact with the host society as their kinsmen in Oregon. The eroding effect is noticeable especially among the young. Young people are questioning many of the rules that their parents insist they follow. In conversation with their parents, they simply justify their independence with reference to what they call 'the new age'.

Nevertheless, the young are not against religion. In fact, they feel a definite identity through it. However, they are confused by the impracticality of the traditional ways — meant for austere conditions — and modern lifestyles — brought about by technology and affluence. It is difficult to preserve austere ways in an easy, affluent environment.

Instead, those who are staying with the faith are relegating it more to a religious compartment in their lives. Thus, it loses many of the traditional features which blended Old Believer culture and religion.

One of the more clear forecasts concerns those groups who have chosen to ally themselves more closely with the institutionalised

church with its priests and bishops as authoritative figures. Factional groups in Oregon, Alaska and Australia have already taken this step by joining the Belo Krinitsa hierarchy.

A view over time can be seen by considering a much older group of *bespopovtsy* Old Believers who settled in the state of Pennsylvania around the turn of the century. They have lost many of their distinctive ways as well as the ability to speak Russian. However, they still consider themselves Old Believers and insist on the Old Rite. In recent times, part of their group has accepted affiliation with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), although they still conform to the Old Rite. They have ordained as priest one of their own in the ROCOR and been given a bishop. The services are entirely in English which has helped to retain the younger members of the congregation. The priest does not speak Russian, and is a lawyer by training.

On the eve of the 21st century, one still finds Old Believers, not only in the land of their ancestors, but now throughout the world. Their lot has never been easy and is not now. The problems of self-sufficiency in remote areas with which they had coped in traditional ways are now supplanted by new problems, presented by increased contact with the outside world. The social environment which in the USSR erodes the young and old alike by fear of punishment for their beliefs, takes its toll. In the US, the social environment lures young people away with its affluence and temptations. The tendency there is to consolidate the core values of the religion and make it a modular part of contemporary life.

To the scholar it appears that the Old Belief is dying out, at least in its most austere, and traditional form. At times it is hard to see the Old Believers lasting another generation. But then a researcher at the beginning of the century might have predicted that they would not have lasted this long.