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Old Belief and the Balance of Red and Blue: How Old Believers Managed Cultural Infringement

Nestled in small pockets of the world exist small communities of Amish-like peoples, similar to the Amish both in their adherence to a doctrine in which technological prowess is akin to sin and in their religious fervor. These small communities, present across Russia, Brazil, Turkey, China, the United States, and Canada, are known for their isolation and language- Old Russian. These groups of people are known as the Old Believers.

Old Believers and Old Belief stem from a split in the Russian Orthodox Church as a result of liturgical reforms instituted in 1666 by the Patriarch Nikon.¹ While seemingly minor, these rituals for worship angered many in the Orthodox Church, prompting them to split off from the State's church and form their own. Because the church was tied to the power of the state at the time, religious dissent was seen as subverting the rule of the state. As a result, the punishment from the state ranged from mild to severe. This persecution, along with a strong belief that all others were destined for hell, dictated Old Believer behavior throughout the rest of the 17th and 18th centuries. In fact, it isn't really until the 19th and 20th centuries that Old Believers begin to travel outside of their small communities in Russia and begin to move across the globe.

¹ Robert O. Crummey, *The Old Believers and the World of Antichrist: The Vyg Community and the Russian State, 1694-1855* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Milwaukee, and London, 1970), 4.

This paper is an analysis of Old Believer movement throughout the Western world. Following the Old Believers into Canada and the United States I aim to look at the links between these Old Believers develop with other Old Believer communities and their societies around them to see how they adapt to vastly different host cultures. The purpose is to show how small religious or minority groups both isolate and integrate within their new environments.

Scholarship of the Old Believers, like many histories, is intricately intertwined with the political and cultural climate of the mid to late twentieth centuries. Due to the turbulent and at times disruptive politics of the Soviet Union, there were two groups of Russian religious historians: those who were supporters of Soviet Union ideology, and those who were not. Soviet supporters often tended make one of two arguments, the first type being best exemplified by Hans Kohn. Hans Kohn's 1948 "A Permanent Essay on Russia" argues that Russian religion was a systemic Marxist-communist prototype that allowed the people of Russia to have a much smoother transition into Communism while also to allowed this transition to occur at a much earlier pace.² This conclusion is visible in today's Old Believer communities, as more often than not the Old Believers collectivize all of their resources for the benefit of the community.

Through this vein, one can see why an argument like this might be quite attractive to Soviet historians, especially when considering the traditional reverence for the peasantry that many in the Russian hierarchy historically had. In a much similar vein, Dimitri Stremoukhoff's 1953 article "Moscow: the Third Rome" portrays Moscow and Muscovy as the "definite empire, the successor to Byzantium", of which the sub context is to state that the USSR follows in the same

² Hans Kohn, "A Permanent Essay on Russia", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (Cambridge University Press, July 1948), 267-289.

veins as the Romans.³ However, the scholarship outside of Soviet influence looked far different. The historiography only really begins in the late sixties and early seventies as Old Believers begin to flock to the United States, partially as the United States was beginning to portray itself as a safe haven from the “tyranny” of the Soviet Union.⁴ The first notable writer devoted to the study of religion in Russia with a focus on Old Believers within Western academia really begins with Michael Cherniavsky in 1966 with his article “Old Believers and the New Religion”. Cherniavsky argues that the Raskol or schism was never properly explored within Soviet or American academia. Furthermore, he argues that due to the cultural differences of Russian Christians before the raskol had compared to the independent culture developed by Old Believers after the raskol in reality meant that Old Believers had created a new religion, pathfinders in their own right. Building off Cherniavsky’s excellent work, Robert Crummey was the next prominent non-Soviet author to continue focusing on the Old Believer paradigm within Russian religion. Crummey was a major proponent of studying Old Believers as independent groups, as they had not remained one homogenous unit since the raskol. The raskol’niki (or people of the schism as Crummey labeled them), due to historians not properly considering the structures of Russian society and religious hierarchy, have consistently been mischaracterized and misunderstood.

What is also important for understanding the historiography of the Old Believers is that different communities around the world have their own traits and history. Again, beginning in the late 60’s and early 70’s, historians such as Anton S. Beliajeff⁵ and Michael Colfer⁶ have done

³ Dimitri Stremoukoff, “Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of Doctrine”, *Speculum*, vol. 28, no. 1 (University of Chicago Press, January 1953), 84-101.

⁴ Brother Ambrose, *A Short History of the Old Believer Communities in Oregon*, 1979.

⁵ Anton S. Beliajeff, “Old Believers in the United States”, *The Russian Review*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Wiley, Hoboken, New Jersey, January 1977), 76-80.

⁶ Michael A. Colfer, *Morality, Kindred, and Ethnic Boundaries: A Study of Oregon Old Believers* (AMS Press, New York, 1985).

much to chronicle various Old Believer groups residing in North America. Other attempts have been made at categorizing Old Believers residing within other areas, but for all intents and purposes of this paper, the main focus is on the Pacific Northwest of the United States and Canada.

Scholarship of Russian religious history has experienced an incredible amount of growth since the fall of the Soviet Union. No longer subjected to state censorship, combined with an increasing focus on the groups that were notoriously oppressed within the Soviet Union, this new openness lead to a burgeoning scholarship when regarding the Old Believers. Writers such as O.L. Shakhnazarov⁷ have done much to try to bridge the differences in ideologies when concerning Western and Eastern Old Believer historiographies, but there still remains one important gap.

What has happened is that scholars who have studied Old Believers in North America have done so from the Western perspective, and thus tend to evaluate the Old Believer experience from Western cultural standpoints. Those who have studied Old Believers using a Russian perspective have not focused on Old Believers that did not exist outside the borders of the former Soviet Union. Beliajeff, for instance, merely explains how the Old Believers ended up in the United States and does not explore the Old Believer relationship with the Soviet Union, nor the intricacies of the different Old Believer communities that did settle abroad and how that would relate to their cultural practices and beliefs.⁸ Ultimately, Cherniavsky is still right- the raskol'niki have not really been explored as deeply as they should have been, as the relationship between the Soviet Union/Russia and the Old Believers abroad has never really been explored. I

⁷ O.L. Shakhnazarov, "Old Believerism and Bolshevism", *Anthropology and Archaeology of Eurasia*, vol. 41, no. 3 (M.E. Sharpe, New York, 2002), 7-53.

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also think how the Old Believer communities relate to one another has also been a relatively unexplored topic. As a result, in this paper I argue that the Old Believers residing in the Pacific Northwest in the late twentieth century, as a result of generations of separation from the first Old Believers and as a result of constant relocation, maintain fluid boundaries but differ greatly despite a shared religion. To do this, I will explore the various Old Believer communities of the Pacific Northwest and how they adapted to their new environments keeping in mind the historical context of each group that may have influenced where they ended up and how they relate back to the Soviet Union and Russia. This is important because what is most impressive about these communities is how they managed to persevere and adapt to these new environments with powerful and opposing forces on all sides.

Methodology and Sources

The Old Believers as a group have been incredibly tight-knit. Having been distrustful of state apparatuses for years, followed by incessant and constant persecution throughout various generations, Old Believers' response has been to shut themselves off from the rest of the world. As a result, learning about Old Believers firsthand can be extraordinarily difficult, especially considering the language barrier.

To get around this barrier, I accessed English-only sources, and will be accessing sources of those who spent plenty of time in and around Old Believer communities, notably journalists and anthropologists. To this end, the majority of the sources used will be from newspapers, books, and masters theses.

As a final note, the types of sources I use for the Oregon and Canadian communities are quite different. The Oregon community was nestled in the suburbs of Woodburn, relatively close

to a cohesive community of Americans, complete with a newspaper to cover actions and events concerning locals about the Old Believers. This particular Canadian community on the other hand has been the subject of study by a few very dedicated anthropologists. This community is located in northern Alberta, mostly removed from the large centers of Canadian society. Their isolation is exactly why the few sources dedicated to this community comes from a small group of anthropologists. As a result, the source material for the Canadian community is more psychologically and culturally deep than the source material for the Oregon community, as both are intended for vastly different audiences. But on the other hand, the Oregon sources focus more on the Old Believer interactions with their surroundings and give a much better understanding of how this group of Old Believers change and develop to American society, both culturally and economically. Taken together, these two types of source material can provide a comprehensive overview of how Old Believers developed in the late 20th century.

History and Movement of Old Belief

In order to understand how Old Believer communities developed a blueprint for survival that allowed them to maintain cultural and ethnic unity, understanding the roots of Old Belief is necessary. The history of Old Belief in many ways a study of Western influence on religious tolerance within Russia, as Western influence is heavily credited for the initial raskol, or schism, that caused Patriarch Nikon's liturgical reforms that occurred beginning in 1653 and ending around 1657.⁹ In order to line up the Muscovite version of Orthodox Christianity with that practiced in both Kiev (seen as the Slavic center of the West) and Greece, Nikon first "reformed the corrupt text of the church Slavonic books, followed by the introduction of the Greek

⁹ Robert O. Crummey, *The Old Believers and the World of Antichrist: The Vyg Community and the Russian State, 1694-1855* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Milwaukee, and London, 1970), 4.

ritualistic usages.”¹⁰ This caused a big problem for many Orthodox Christians at the time, many believing that Nikon wielded too much power as a unit of the state.¹¹ Immediately following this event, a small community was created as Archpriest Avvakum lead a small group against the Tsar, the western-looking intelligentsia, and Nikon himself.¹² Those followers of Avvakum became known as the “Old Believers”, or raskol’niki (people of the schism). In the mindset of many Old Believers, the actions taken by the cultural elite to discard traditional ways of worship brought the “Third Rome” to utter ruin and transformed all of Russia into ‘The Empire of Antichrist’.¹³

The response from the Tsarist regime came swiftly in 1667, as the Church Council declared that all opponents to the official form of Orthodoxy were to be considered heretics, “liable to civil as well as ecclesiastical punishment” (and didn’t officially regain their status as average Russian citizens until 1905).¹⁴ This caused arguably the first migration of Old Believers that could be measured, as many left dense population centers such as Moscow or St. Petersburg for more remote areas such as Siberia and Poland.¹⁵ The relationship with the Tsarist regime and the Russian state soured leading many Old Believers to develop a distrust of the Russian state.¹⁶ Tensions rising and falling over the coming years during the reigns of different Tzars due to different policies regarding religious tolerance. But ultimately, years of intermittent persecution

¹⁰ Matthew Spinka, “Patriarch Nikon and the Subjection of the Russian Church to the State”, *Church History*, vol. 10, no. 4 (Cambridge University, December, 1941), 354.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 355.

¹² *Ibid*, 10-11.

¹³ Dimitri Stremoukhoff, “Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of Doctrine”, *Speculum*, vol. 28, no. 1 (University of Chicago Press, January 1953), 100.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁵ Robert O. Crummey, *The Old Believers and the World of Antichrist: The Vyg Community and the Russian State, 1694-1855* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Milwaukee, and London, 1970), 23-24.

¹⁶ Michael Cherniavsky, “The Old Believers and the New Religion”, *Slavic Review*, vol. 25, no. 1 (Cambridge University Press, March 1996), 2.

that followed beginning with Nikon himself and continuing through much of the Soviet years made Old Believers a largely independent and wary group. Frank D. Millet, an American Artist traveling with a group of Cossack Old Believers in 1887 remarked that these “free-fighting ‘Republicans’ tend to be independent and free-spirited”.¹⁷ In many ways, this quote echoes how Old Believers adapted to a solitary lifestyle that fused with their religious beliefs. Cut off from many of the official state arteries of support and cordoned off from much of society by religious persecution having been anathematized, many Old Believer communities became self-sufficient.¹⁸ This continued well into the Soviet years, as Niels C. Nielsen asserts, “the Communist government behaved a lot like the tsarist governments of old... centralization of power, separating people from their roots followed by mass persecution not limited by morality”.¹⁹ Old Believers were on their own for a large majority of their existence as a religious group, and like other marginalized religious groups, their strength lies in their strong sense of community.

But Old Believer communities needed to remain bonded together for another reason. It is by religious rule that Old Believers must marry within the Old Believer sect. Old Believers cannot engage with anything symbolizing or belonging to the antichrist- and in their minds, the rest of the Russian population had fallen prey.²⁰ In order to stop engaging with the rest of the

¹⁷ Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, "Campaigning with The Cossacks", New York Public Library Digital Collections, Accessed May 17, 2018.

¹⁸ Caroline Humphreys, "Schism, Event, and Revolution: The Old Believers of Trans-Baikalia", *Current Anthropology*, vol. 55, December 2014, S218.

¹⁹ Niels C. Nielsen, *Christianity After Communism: Social, Political, and Cultural Struggle in Russia* (Westview Press, Boulder, January 1, 1994), 17.

²⁰ Dimitri Stremoukhoff, "Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of Doctrine", *Speculum*, vol. 28, no. 1 (University of Chicago Press, January 1953).

society of the antichrist, Old Believers saw no choice but to clam up. To keep themselves pure, all outside influences must be purged.

This strong sense of community aided the Old Believers in surviving in foreign environments because they always had a group or community they could rely and fall back on. Despite a brief respite from persecution in 1905 with the separation for church and state²¹, Old Believers were still distrustful of the state apparatus. Furthermore, Soviet collectivization policies would have been a big problem for Old Believers, as Old Believers would have considered that a serious infringement on their community and communal freedoms. Being forced to integrate into the Russian society at large caused many Old Believers to panic and leave. Beginning in 1917 with the Bolshevik (or Russian) Revolution, many Old Believers left Russia for Manchuria (China) and Brazil.²² For the Chinese group, life began well, as the Chinese government paid them little attention, and they were able to farm, fish, and hunt on their own to some commercial success.²³ However, that changed in the middle of the 50's as the Chinese government began serious attempts at communization of all of the independent communities within its borders.²⁴ Forced to flee or give up their religion, many chose to move to the United States.²⁵ The Brazilian community was a little different in that many moved from Brazil because growing conditions in Brazil were conducive to bad crop yields that lead to poverty. The increasing presence of modern farming techniques used by other Brazilian farmers

²¹ U.S. State Department, "Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States", 768.

²² Michael A. Colfer, *Morality, Kindred, and Ethnic Boundaries: A Study of Oregon Old Believers* (AMS Press, New York, 1985), 6.

²³ Ibid, 7.

²⁴ Ibid, 8.

²⁵ Mary Harbaugh, "Will Russian Immigrants be Americanized?", *The Capital Journal*, January 7, 1977.

coupled with rampant inflation forced Old Believers to make a choice, and many chose to leave.²⁶

Old Believers in Oregon

The genesis of Old Belief in the United States has interesting beginnings, as Old Believers began arriving (first from Turkey, and then from other parts of the globe) there generally was a lot of suspicion regarding their incentives and of the US government's incentives. There are a few reports in newspaper articles from the mid 60's suspicious about why all of these "Russian" immigrants want to move to the United States. One congressman was reportedly incensed that the United States was being forced to admit 1000 Old Believers from Turkey and was only accepting of this when he was convinced that the United States could spin it as a "propaganda blow to Moscow".²⁷ A House committee on immigration was also notably opposed to the resettling of Old Believers in the United States from Turkey, being worried that admitting this small group of Russian migrants would "open produce a chain reaction of determinations in response to the clamor of other Russian emigree groups".²⁸ The same article notes that one of the main reasons to accept this group of Old Believers is that it takes them away from Moscow's efforts at reintegration into the USSR.²⁹ Questions were also asked of Turkey, as being a NATO member, many were surprised that the Turkish state were either unable or did not want to support these emigrants.³⁰ Either way, the relocation process went underway and most were resettled near Woodburn in Oregon (mostly due to an invitation from the city and from a

²⁶ Michael A. Colfer, *Morality, Kindred, and Ethnic Boundaries: A Study of Oregon Old Believers* (AMS Press, New York, 1985), 8.

²⁷ Drew Pearson, "Junketing Congressman got 30\$ per day, free food", *The Bend Bulletin*, April 19, 1964.

²⁸ Robert S. Allen and Paul Scott, "Allen-Scott", *The Jackson Sun*, May 21, 1963.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

recommendation from other Old Believers who had lived there in the past³¹), though others settled in New York, New Jersey, and Canada.³²

Once settled in Woodburn, Old Believers immediately cordoned themselves off from the rest of the population. The first generation feared that American culture would begin to erase all of their traditions they had held since the Great Schism, and as a result, the citizens of Woodburn rarely interacted with Old Believers. One modern newspaper article even wrote about how they didn't attend school in the early days, desperately trying to maintain that strong sense of community gained from persecution by the Russian state and communism.³³

This fear that American values would begin to infiltrate Old Believer society was very prevalent in the early 60's. Having moved to Woodburn in 1963, the Old Believers spent much of the mid to late 60's building their communities. Many resorted to subsistence farming or logging, reportedly being pleased at the quality of farmland.³⁴ However, fears were prevalent among this first group that when it came time for them to rear kids "in the atmosphere of a centuries-old religion when the kids are exposed to a world of rock 'n' roll, hot rods, drinking and other accoutrements of teen-age America?"³⁵ According to the same article, older kids, the ones who remember their time spent outside of the United States, seem to understand the importance of cultural unity and tend to listen to their parents. However, it appeared the younger population of Old Believers, those ranging from middle school to preschool, might begin to break away from tradition.³⁶

³¹ Mary Harbaugh, "Where they came from, where they're going", *The Capital Journal*, January 4, 1977.

³² David Scheffel, *In the Shadow of Antichrist: The Old Believers of Alberta*, (Broadview Press, Ontario, 1991), 54-55.

³³ Andrew Kramer, "Old Beliefs in a New World", *Statesman Journal*, November 28, 2001.

³⁴ Bruce Handler, "Old Believers face teen problems, too", *Belvidere Daily Republican*, October 6, 1967.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The Oregon community was divided into three, close to four different sub communities organized by family. They were the Kharbintsy, the Sinsianty, the Turchane, and the Turks (the smallest of the group).³⁷ Maintaining these distinctions from their days in Manchuria, these groups make sure that the youths of their respective groups never forget which sub community they belong to.³⁸ In the case of many Old Believers, these links, or kumstvos (here this denotes both a religious and familial tie as the group was first divided by religion from the rest of society, and then from each other by family), can go eight generations deep. These familial ties were of great importance to Old Believers, and children were expected to fall in line with the goals and expectations of that family.

A few interesting things happened towards the end of the sixties regarding familial relations. Those kids that grew up in Brazil, Turkey, or Manchuria became parents. The land that had been fertile up to this point began a degradation process. Their kids began to be enrolled in school. Those same kids enrolled in school began to take sexual education courses.³⁹ There is a gap in the sources here, as after their initial arrival until their kids enrolled in school, there is very little coverage from the early sixties to the beginning of the seventies. This in all likelihood is due to the fact that Old Believers never made news in isolation. But beginning in the early seventies there is an explosion of articles covering Old Belief and Old Believers for a few reasons. The first is that this is the first time Old Believers mention wanting to leave the Oregon community. Furthermore, because Old Believers were not able to rely as much on their environment, they began sending their kids to school, thus increasing media exposure to Old

³⁷ David Scheffel, *In the Shadow of Antichrist: The Old Believers of Alberta*, (Broadview Press, Ontario, 1991), 84.

³⁸ Michael A. Colfer, *Morality, Kindred, and Ethnic Boundaries: A Study of Oregon Old Believers* (AMS Press, New York, 1985), 56.

³⁹ "Countess Gives a Helping Hand", *The Capital Journal*, September 21, 1970.

Believers and Old Believer exposure to the rest of the Woodburn community. The first inclination that Old Believers became disgruntled was from the degrading value of their land. For centuries, the bedrock of Old Believer economies had been farming. Separation from farming meant separation from tradition, from their ancestry. As a result, Old Believers began working for furniture factories or for logging companies, planting and thinning trees. Likely, it was these industries or employers that would let them celebrate specific Old Believer holidays on the Julian calendar (about 13 days behind the calendar used in the United States).⁴⁰ The second inclination that the Old Believers are starting to become disgruntled with their living situation comes initially from the influence of American culture on Old Believer kids. Many Old Believers understood this infringement of American culture (also technically the culture of the antichrist) to mean a loss of salvation if adopted.⁴¹ Another issue came from the subjects that were being taught at school. Because there was no Old Believer school in Woodburn, Old Believer children attended public schools, which subjected them to scientific principles which collided with their old, Christian, beliefs and subjected them to sex education, which collided with their old, Christian, culture.⁴² Some Old Believers were outraged and left. Some began a process of Westernization. A woman who later moved to Canada had this to say about life in Oregon,

But when we came to America, the children started going to school right away. During this time they would get a hold of bad books, and they would come back from school with nothing to do. There were no settlements in Oregon. You can't buy suitable land for setting up a community... The children step out the door, and they are in the city. One

⁴⁰ Mary Harbaugh, "Will Russian immigrants be Americanized?", *The Capital Journal*, January 7, 1977.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 2A.

⁴² "Countess Gives a Helping Hand", *The Capital Journal*, September 21, 1970.

step, and they are in the store. So our people made up their minds to leave when we started to hear about drugs.⁴³

Those that remained accepted they were going to have to adapt to survive in this modern environment. Restrictions differed from household to household, but it became clear that as generations of Old Believers in Woodburn matured, more and more of western culture was beginning to appear in Old Believer daily life. Unthinkable when Old Believers first moved to the area, a surprising amount were beginning to express a desire to obtain American citizenship. This was a big step, because in many ways getting American citizenship recognized the benefits of the “antichrist” while additionally indicated that many Old Believers now considered America their home. An article from the Statesman Journal on the subject of a community college class helping Old Believers gain citizenship reads:

Perhaps the most striking example of the changing attitude of Old Believers here towards the ‘Amerikanskie’ influences is a mass drive toward U.S. citizenship among Old Believers here... They were overwhelmed by the response. Instead of the 20 to 30 students coordinator Nancy Kirksey said she expected to show up for the first session, nearly 300 had gathered by the third session and many more have signed waiting lists for a second class.⁴⁴

Keep in mind that began at around 1000 people, this likely represented a good chunk of the Woodburn Old Believer community. The cultural fabric among youths in the Woodburn community was drastically shifting towards Americanization.

⁴³ David Scheffel, *In the Shadow of Antichrist: The Old Believers of Alberta*, (Broadview Press, Ontario, 1991), 80.

⁴⁴ Cynthia Jabs, “Old Believers in New World”, *Statesman Journal*, February 24, 1979.

As this community continued to grow and mix with local American communities, adults encountered other cultural clashes with their lifestyle, and a big point of conflict surrounded modern medicine. In many schools, vaccination was becoming more and more common. As adults were participating in economic activity outside of the farm or forest, workplace injuries and medicinal requirements for jobs became more prominent. In order to accommodate, certain clinics were set up to cater to Old Believers to better fit in line with Old Believer cultural and religious beliefs.⁴⁵ However, many Old Believers were still wary of modern medicine, and there were fears in the community that some of these children would contract damaging diseases that could spread to the rest of the Woodburn populace.⁴⁶ Over time, as the Old Believer community became more and more entrenched in Oregon, Old Believers began opening up to the idea of modern medicine enough so to alleviate this fear.⁴⁷

Despite these areas of conflict, the community of Woodburn and the rest of the Old Believer community continued to be separate spheres, rarely interacting outside of school. This made interactions children had at school the main drivers of westernization for the group of Old Believers. Children that rebelled “found support from agencies and schools for their behavior”.⁴⁸ Old Believers valued family, church, and community identity, Americans valued individual rights and freedoms, and the schools were a natural clash of these values for young Old Believers. Schools also provided material problems as well. Schools that required uniforms would have been problematic for Old Believers, so many young Old Believer students attended

⁴⁵ Mary Harbaugh, “Will Russian immigrants be Americanized?”, *The Capital Journal*, January 7, 1977.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

public schools. Many young Old Believers brought their own lunches and ate alone for fear of disrupting the restrictions on eating with people captured by the antichrist.⁴⁹

As a result of the new western influence coming from schools on these young Old Believer children, recreation changed drastically. Exposed more to other Americans, and no longer tied down by the family farm, many young Old Believers began to spend free time just like other Americans- they would attend local fairs, watch TV, and play games with other non-Old Believer kids. A passage from the Statesman Journal sums it up best:

When teen-agers from the Russian Old Believer community get together at the Great American Fun Machine to play pinball, you can hear jargon as American as John Travolta. But when they go home, they mostly speak Russian. Like teen-agers all over the country, they compare hotrod cars in the parking lot. But they also compare brightly colored peasant-style clothing, which outshines the most brightly painted cars on the block and clearly comes from a century before hotrods were a glimmer in anyone's wildest imaginations.⁵⁰

This trend of westernization continued well past the seventies through the end of the Cold War. Newspaper articles from the 2000s report minor cultural clashes than young Old Believers have with their parents or with the rest of society. An article from 2001 reports that the Old Believers' strict policy on unshaven faces was problematic for those who wished to join the police department. One young man joined the police department, shaved his beard in order to get the job, but then was prohibited from "chanting the liturgy" with the rest of the church.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cynthia Jabs, "Old Believers in New World", *Statesman Journal*, February 24, 1979.

⁵¹ Andrew Kramer, "Old Beliefs in a New World", *Statesman Journal*, November 28, 2001.

Language is also important here. The continued emphasis on Russian wasn't merely what these parents were comfortable speaking, but it was important religiously that all Old Believers understand and speak a sort of "Old Russian". This is both because all of the texts were written in Old Russian⁵² and because Russian was the language of the last bastion of original Orthodoxy, going all the way back to the "Third Rome" doctrine.⁵³ Language too did not escape the cultural battleground of Woodburn, and many young Russians began adopting English as a second or even first language, where Russian was the language of the home and of the faith, where English was the language of the work and of the school.

As these Oregon Old Believers began to branch out, they began to assimilate more and more into American society, thus allaying many of the initial fears many had about their admittance. Their stint in Oregon saw many Old Believers adopt a mix of both traditional Old Believerism and a materialistic American lifestyle, which is arguably the first instance of a group of Old Believers adopting a mix of a host culture. What was surprising is that Cold War politics had little to do with how the local populace treated the Old Believers and vice versa. Neither party had fears or suspicions about the other. This is likely the case for a few reasons, namely that aside from a few Turkish Old Believers who returned to the Soviet Union at Stalin's call in the late 50's early 60's, these Old Believers no longer felt Russian. They had spent so much of their time living abroad, either in China, Brazil, or both that they no longer identified as Russian, despite continuing to speak Russian. The second key to avoiding a conflict of this sort, however, is that the Americans in and around Woodburn must also believe that the Old Believers pose no threat to them. Even initially, before the Old Believers had moved in, there were no accounts of

⁵² Margaret Hixon (dir.), *Old Believers*, 1981.

⁵³ Dimitri Stremoukhoff, "Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of Doctrine", *Speculum*, vol. 28, no. 1 (University of Chicago Press, January 1953).

people thinking that these people were Soviet spies sent to sabotage the United States. That “threat” was never perceived to begin with. This is probably best attributed to the traditional isolationism of the Old Believers. Early on when the paranoia would have been at its highest, the community would have been made aware of the Old Believers by the Old Believers being participants in the community. At the national level, I mentioned earlier that there were some reservations about bringing in a group of historically Russian immigrants. But the sources show that this fear was isolated almost purely to the federal government, with many communities within the United States often offering to host the Old Believers. Furthermore, it was believed that the incident could be portrayed as a propaganda blow to the Russians, that some ethnic Russians should *choose* to live in the United States.⁵⁴ Alleviating this fear, for many in Woodburn outside a few journalists and/or government officials, this was probably a very much “out of sight, out of mind” situation. If the Old Believers were not taking active steps to interfere with the rest of the Marion county community in Oregon, the community concern would be low. Additionally, if residents had been following reports in the news, they would understand that a few of them had received permission from the federal government, further allaying any fears that may have been had.

Old Believers in Canada

A search through many popular Canadian newspapers during the Cold War period yielded little about the Canadian Old Believers. In complete contrast to the Oregon Old Believers, much of the literature in the media surrounding Old Believers has to do with Old Believers back in Russia or back in the United States. Throughout the sixties, when Old Believer

⁵⁴ Drew Pearson, “Junketing Congressman got 30\$ per day, free food”, *The Bend Bulletin*, April 19, 1964.

immigration in Canada was at its highest since 1917, the only articles that can be found in Canadian newspapers are covering religious persecution back in Russia. For example, in 1962 the Ottawa Journal reported that Russia continued its purge of religious sects under Nikita Khrushchev of which the state branded Old Believers as “backward and fanatic” and that a Moscow truck driver received a three-year sentence because “he forced his children to pray and wear crosses”.⁵⁵ A year later, the Ottawa Journal again focused on Old Believers abroad rather than Old Believers at home. In a small section covering international news, the Ottawa Journal reported that the United States was accepting about 250 Old Believers from Turkey.⁵⁶ It was not until 1975 which an article in the Ottawa Journal mentions Old Believers living in Canada, and even that brief mention occurs in a much larger article covering Orthodox Christians under Archbishop Vitaly Uspinov in Canada and Russia.⁵⁷ Other newspapers in Canada were equally silent regarding Old Believers, as the Nanaimo Daily News has a few mentions of Old Believers, but the only one regarding Old Believers within Canada has to do with an Old Believer who confessed to a local crime involving other members of the general community,⁵⁸ while the Lethbridge Herald reported that a famous Old Believer Archbishop had passed away.⁵⁹ Because there is a distinct lack of unique sources, most of my analysis of Old Believer behavior is going to come from a small series of sources, one from a filmmaker, the other from an anthropologist who wrote a book covering Old Believers in Canada.

Partly based on his doctoral dissertation, David Scheffel spent many years among this small community of Old Believers within Alberta. Heavily based off of the historical work done

⁵⁵ Theodore Shabad, “Russians Purge Religious Sects”, *The Ottawa Journal*, July 6, 1962.

⁵⁶ Religious News Services, “World News Brief”, *The Ottawa Journal*, July 13, 1963.

⁵⁷ Marq de Villiers, “Vitaly Uspinov’s Passions”, *The Ottawa Journal*, May 3, 1975.

⁵⁸ Bonne Morgan, “Murder Suspect Confesses Crime”, *Nanaimo Daily News*, June 8, 1989.

⁵⁹ Canadian Press, “Deaths Yesterday”, *The Lethbridge Herald*, March 12, 1952.

by Robert Crummey (Scheffel even borrowed a portion of the title of Crummey's book), Scheffel successfully invokes a historical rigor mixed with ethnographic analysis garnered from the nearly two years he spent studying the Old Believers directly, including many different first-hand collections of images, words, and phrases from the Old Believers themselves. It is because of this that I feel confident referring to him as one of the few credible sources on the region.

Known as "Little Russia", Berezovka itself is located east of Edmonton, with the nearest town being Josephville.⁶⁰ The spot was chosen purely because it looked and felt like Russia, and it is clear this group has a much stronger reverence for Russia than do the American group, and that has to do directly with their origins. According to Scheffel, the genesis of the Old Believer group in Alberta came directly after the Revolution of 1917, which prompted some Old believers to settle directly in Canada.⁶¹ This group would have had greater ties to Russia, having been from there, than most of the American group, which came from China and Brazil.

The people of this small community were similar to the Oregon community in the ways that they interacted with the rest of the populace. Like the Oregonians, the Old Believers of Alberta had their presence known primarily in school.⁶² Because similarly to the community in Oregon, Old Believers did not have their own school to isolate their kids.⁶³ Scheffel notes that because this was mainly the only impression parents made on the rest of the Josephville community, they took great care that Old Believer children were dressed in only the finest Old Believer garments. Because not only could they be judged by non-Old Believers, but because

⁶⁰ David Scheffel, *In the Shadow of Antichrist: The Old Believers of Alberta*, (Broadview Press, Ontario, 1991), 56.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 56.

⁶² *Ibid*, 58.

⁶³ Michael A. Colfer, *Morality, Kindred, and Ethnic Boundaries: A Study of Oregon Old Believers* (AMS Press, New York, 1985), 60.

other Old Believer members would judge parents for how their kids dressed due to this increased importance on child impression and how important those impressions were for Old Believers.

Scheffel expands a bit on what it means to be an Old Believer more than newspapers could cover. He notes that Old Belief has an inherent tension between physical and spiritual needs. Because on the one hand, Old Believers as a rather isolated and independent group, tends to be rather “earthy” in the sense that they are reliant on the Earth for sustenance.⁶⁴ Furthermore, marriage in Old Believer commonly occurs at much earlier ages than most cultures would allow—sometimes as early as 14, which would allow many young Old Believers to exercise their sexuality at an earlier age.⁶⁵ Despite these factors indicating that Old Believers would have more freedom than the rest of the Canadian population, Scheffel notes that religion acted more like a control mechanism in the spiritual realm than it would offer in terms of material and physical freedoms.⁶⁶ This would match the Oregon community to a degree, but as the Oregon community became more and more Americanized, the roles became reversed. With the materialistic American culture prevailing, those in the Oregon community would have had less physical freedom but more spiritual freedom because on the one hand they were limited by society by school, jobs, and individualism ironically limiting what resources and Old Believer would have access to (as opposed to being part of a tightly-knit community with access to the community’s resources) but were then free(r) to pursue whatever spiritual doctrine they wished.

The family dynamics also changed quite a bit as a result of the move to Canada. In Russia, families often lived for years, even decades in the same home without moving out.⁶⁷ But

⁶⁴ David Scheffel, *In the Shadow of Antichrist: The Old Believers of Alberta*, (Broadview Press, Ontario, 1991), 64.

⁶⁵ Margaret Hixon (dir.), *Old Believers*, 1981.

⁶⁶ David Scheffel, *In the Shadow of Antichrist: The Old Believers of Alberta*, (Broadview Press, Ontario, 1991), 64.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 88.

as the Canadian community grew and demand for land remained within marital ties, sons moved out with their wives to obtain their own land.⁶⁸ As household and luxury goods became more common, they did not need to be shared by the entirety of the family, further allowing many Old Believers to move out from under the guise of their parents.⁶⁹ Building off of this, due to the smaller size of the Canadian community, the familial (kumstvo) ties were less important in Canada than Oregon. Where in Oregon the community was divided into three or four different kumstvos/parishes, the Canadian community was united into a single parish.

In addition to those Old Believers that arrived in Canada immediately after the Russian Revolution, the community grew over the years, receiving a large influx of immigrants from Oregon (which I mentioned earlier). Frustrated with the school system and ever-prominent American culture, many began to relocate from Woodburn to Canada in search of even greater isolation. This has in turn aided in the creation of a far more conservative section of Old Believers than the Oregon group could become. However, that does not mean that the Canadian group was impervious to the benefits and consequences of capitalism. Scheffel notes:

Given the harsh conditions of work in the bush [tree thinning], most men find it impossible to sustain such work by the time they reach advanced middle age. Drained by the expectations of their children and unable to provide more than a meagre income from farming, they sooner or later come to depend on social assistance administered by the very society they are taught to avoid. Their sons, in turn, are slowly coming to the

⁶⁸ Ibid, 88.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 88.

realization that the life-style glorified by the older generation has unforeseen repercussions...⁷⁰

Not able to support themselves as they would have been able to back in Russia (by farming and often logging), many Old Believers had to turn to other forms of economic sustenance. Like those in Oregon, Old Believers in Canada suffered from work exhaustion and physical injuries, which Scheffel notes has also taken the lives of many men of the community.⁷¹ So try as they might, this collective strength began to wither in the face of a society that was far less accommodating of collectivism. Forced to turn to individualism, many Old Believers lost what had made them strong in the first place: their sense of community. In a way, this is a lesson for how difficult it is to maintain a community so isolated in an economy so intertwined when environmental reliance is not an available option.

What was clear, however, was that the Oregon community and the Canada community had some contact with one another. An Old Believer child mentions this connection in Margaret Hixon's film, made in 1981. In the film she mentions that economic stability was far more of a guarantee in the United States, along with "it's a very big difference between Canada and Oregon. Like in Canada you don't have everything, you have everything [you need] in Oregon. I much prefer to live down here."⁷² Aside from the economic connection apparent in this quote, it becomes clear that Old Believers did not just move from Oregon to Canada, but moved the other way as well. In all likelihood, Old Believers treated the boundaries of these communities as fluid, having relatives stationed in different communities all over. Michael Colfer's book mentions this

⁷⁰ Ibid, 101.

⁷¹ Ibid, 101.

⁷² Margaret Hixon (dir.), *Old Believers*, 1981.

to a degree, stating that relatives care for another whenever Old Believer relatives decide to visit or move between the communities of Brazil, Oregon, Canada, and Alaska.⁷³

This level of fluidity really blurs the borders between these communities. This sort of parallels other migrant communities and their propensity to send remittances back home. What is interesting then is that these communities maintain no contact with Russia. To that end, it appears that there would be two separate spheres of Old Believer communities: one within the Soviet Union, and one outside it. The separation of these two communities echoes the geopolitics of the era: the Old Believer communities mirrored the Cold War conflict itself. While not as combative nor as destructive as the Cold War, it is interesting that these communities eventually became so separated for a religious minority that was known for being tight-knit.

Conclusion

But despite their differences, the Old Believer groups existing outside the influence of the Soviet Union maintained their cultural unity in many important ways. Most importantly, this did not necessitate complete separation. One way by which the Old Believers continued to maintain their cultural unity was through their language, which was deeply important to these immigrants, harkening all the way back to the “Third Rome” doctrine- as Russian was the language of salvation.⁷⁴ As members between the two groups continued to visit the other to maintain familial ties, connections were forged and maintained between these differing communities via language, each aiding the other with survival, often with supplies and people moving back and forth between the Oregon and Canadian communities enabled by unique communication.

⁷³ Michael A. Colfer, *Morality, Kindred, and Ethnic Boundaries: A Study of Oregon Old Believers* (AMS Press, New York, 1985), 94.

⁷⁴ Dimitri Stremoukhoff, “Moscow the Third Rome: Sources of Doctrine”, *Speculum*, vol. 28, no. 1 (University of Chicago Press, January 1953).

Additionally, their strong sense of community held strong for the most part and allowed Old Believers to maintain an important sense of cultural unity by preservation of their very old religion. Despite Americanization occurring within the Oregon Old Believer community, striking similarities remained between the two communities, particularly in how they both interacted with the outside communities of Woodburn and Josephville. Also of note here is how the Old Believer communities maintained and did not maintain their economic principles to their respective countries with them. Both the Canada and Oregon communities both started out as subsistence farmers but transitioned more to logging and factory work as the arable land diminished. This similarity, while hardly surprising, shows that the Old Believers themselves are almost like a hive mind, that when put into similar situations yet separated by a large geographical distance, Old Believers' traditions hold their communities together.

However, the similarities between Old Believer communities have their limits. First off, the effect of the rise of the Bolsheviks and the resulting Cold War on these two groups should not be ignored. As a naturally divisive event, the Bolshevik Revolution caused Old Believers to take sides, with some small exceptions. As Old Believers began to leave the Soviet Union, they became isolated from those that remained. The Old Believers within Russia, still often subject to much persecution, did not admit their religious status as Old Believers to the Russian state, giving the community within the USSR without an official apparatus, like a church body, to communicate with other Old Believers around the globe. Old Believers outside the Soviet Union suffered a similar problem, as many countries in which they relocated to would have had no means nor will to aid these Old Believers in communication with the Soviet Union at large. So, there is a failure at the state level to connect these groups.

Secondly, there arises a cultural barrier between the different communities. While small, the cultures of the “host” country has had a drastic impact on Old Believer attitude and life, which is noticeably different between the Oregon community and the Canada community. Oregonians became more materialistic and individualistic, falling in line with American ideals, while the Canadian community remained isolated and distant. This further divided the Old Believer communities and caused many from the Oregon group to transfer to the other.

In all, the relationship between Old Believer communities has grown increasingly complex with their spreading across the globe in the 20th century. Maintaining both fluid and rigid borders, they have both maintained many aspects of their religiosity and culture but have also lost quite a bit over time. This was the story of that cultural preservation- what made it easy, what made it hard, what made it difficult, and what made it successful.

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