

Orthodoxy versus Globalization: The Russian Old Believers in Eastern Europe Today

by Tatiana Filosofova (University of Kentucky)

- An introduction: The Russian Old Believers talking about their way of life - extracts from the film *The Folklorist Olenkin*:
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzzmhckeixq>)
- The paper discusses the issue of contemporary Russian Old Believer communities living abroad using as an example the Old Believer community of Latgalia, a region in Latvia. The community is 350 years old and is the strongest and largest in Europe and is fully functional. Along with the Old Believers of Riga (*Grebenshchikov* parish) it became a cultural, religious and educational centre of the Old Believers in Europe, outside Russia.
- The paper is based on my research of the Old Believers of Latgalia literary manuscripts and personal visits to the community.

Brief historical highlights

- The origin and roots of the of the break-away movement; Schism in Russian Orthodox Church due to the Church reforms of 1653-1666; theological idea of “*poslednee otpadenie*” (“*the last step back*”)
- Some linguistic peculiarities that define the term the *Old Believers*: “*raskol’niki*” are rooted in the word “*raskol*” (*the schism*, refers to the church reform), “*starovery*” (*old believers*) means the followers of the old faith. Old Believers define themselves as “*khraniteli drevliago blagochestia*”, which can translated as “*the saviours of the old piety*”.
- “*The saviours of the old piety*”- a key phrase in understanding the Old Believers’ mentality and world view and how that world view was reflected in their customs, ideology, religious teachings and literature.
- The eschatological idea that “***the Antichrist has already descended to earth***” and has established his realm became the essence of Old Believers’ religious teachings and was reflected in their didactical and polemical works on theology, in their customs, folklore and literary traditions.

The ways to salvation

- However profound the eschatology of the teaching, ideas and religious beliefs of the Old Believers, it was never contemplative or passive.
- On the contrary, the Old Believers actively engaged in seeking ways of living and roads to salvation in this “*fallen world*”. These ways changed with time and bore the mark of one era or another.
- A new tactic, which aimed at creating communities of Old Believers engaged in educational activity and enlightenment inside the communities, was adopted in the last century and is still implemented today - one of the best ways of defying the harmful life on earth was to preserve the basis of religious devotion in Old Believer communities and to inculcate in every Old Believer a sense of personal responsibility, before God, for the flourishing of the old faith in Russia. The traditions of the “old piety” based on the medieval Russian Orthodox mentality and culture has never been compromised. However, an active interaction with the outside world, business and politics became the key to the success of a strong community.











ЦѢ ДѢЛА

ЦѢ ДѢЛА. МЕМОРИА СВЯТЫХЪ.
 ВЪ СВЯТЫХЪ ДѢЛАХЪ. ПОСЛѢДНІЕ ДѢЛА
 СВЯТЫХЪ ДѢЛА. ПОСЛѢДНІЕ ДѢЛА

Some statistics on the Old Believers in Latvia (2007)

According to the Old Believers:
the overall estimate of the Old
Believers in Latvia –
80,000 people;
67 communities;
the Old Believers' community in
Daugavpils 8,000; Riga 12,000

According to the official
Government survey: the overall
estimate of the Old Believers in
Latvia app. 2, 500 (5,49 % of the
population; in Latgalia – 13,5% of
the population); number of
communities – 69.



The Old Believers in Latvia - a success story?

2013: current community activities and interaction with the outside world

Today the Old Believers define the stereotype of an enclosed community of obscurantists. Some examples of recent activities:

- Political activities, participation in local government elections.
- Returning properties, obtaining EU grants for cultural and educational activities (conferences, concerts, exhibitions, publications).
- November 2012 – the second international congress of the Old Believer businessmen was held in Ekavpils.
- August 2012 – a successful negotiation with a Dugavpils local Council over a plot of land.
- Father Zhilko (the leader of Old Believer Church Council) was decorated with the Order of Three Stars by the Latvian Government for his cultural, educational and business activities and promotion of peace, tolerance and interaction.

To be an Old Believer means to have the Old Believer world view - father Zhilko

Some summarising quotes from father Zhilko:

- We are against materialistic values and world view of western society.
- The Old Believer communities are not a “cultural reservation of people wearing traditional Russian shirts” Unfortunately our “free” society does not understand this point.
- To be an Old Believer means to have the Old Believer world view.
- After the Russian Revolution social classes of merchants and peasants who historically supported the Old Believer beliefs and world view were destroyed.
- The main problem the Old Believers facing today is aging communities.
- A lot of current publicity has caused a wave of thefts, recently a large number of icons and other valuables were stolen from the churches and houses.





