

## **OLD BELIEVER COMMUNITIES: IDEALS AND STRUCTURES\***

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The following analysis and arguments rest on the fundamental assumption that the Old Believers, both priestly and priestless, are best understood as Eastern Orthodox Christians. As they built their communities they saw themselves primarily as the guardians of a more authentic variant of Russian Orthodoxy than that of the official church. Comparison with other forms of Christian belief and practice, particularly Protestantism, can be enlightening, but, if taken too far, distorts our understanding of Old Belief.

If our assumption is valid, the experience of the diverse branches of Old Belief in organizing their common life and worship offers us a window into the range of possibilities within the Russian Orthodox tradition. For, given the extremely difficult circumstances in which the Old Believers lived for most of their history, they developed a wide variety of structures to provide themselves with spiritual comfort and mutual support. These reflected the political, economic and regional circumstances with which different communities had to deal. In times of persecution, for example, smaller, more flexible structures were better suited for the struggle

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to preserve the faith, while in relatively peaceful times larger and more elaborate organizations provided the faithful with a richer liturgical and communal life. The structure of the Old Believers' communities also gave expression to their widely divergent understandings of how true Orthodox Christians could and should live in the End Time—a source of many of the divisions within the movement.

As we shall see, Old Believer communities combined elements of the cenobitic monastery or convent, the idiorhythmic monastic community, the *skit*, the lay parish, the charitable institution, and the peasant village. Which of these elements predominated varied with the intentions of their leaders and the changing social and institutional structures of the larger society within which the Old Believers lived. Thus, the predominant modes of organization changed over time. Until the late 18th century, the most prominent model was the cenobitic monastery. Throughout the 19th century, the recognized centers of Old Belief were parishes with charitable institutions in the main cities of the empire. But until recently the most durable form of organization has been the *skit*. Strictly speaking, a *skit* is a small, remote monastic community. In Old Believer usage, however, the word has sometimes meant any small, remote settlement of the faithful<sup>1</sup> or even, in some instances, communities of considerable size. This flexible use of the term precisely reflects the “mutual penetration of the *skit* and the lay peasant settlement” that historians and ethnographers have encountered everywhere among rural Old Believers from the beginning of the movement.<sup>2</sup> Of course, in practice, none of these ideal organizational types existed in pure form. In many instances, Old Believer organizations are very difficult to characterize neatly, for their greatest strength has been their adaptability.

Moreover, the following discussion may not truly reflect the day-to-day reality of Old Believer life. It rests on selected statements of the Old Believers' ideals and intentions and on normative documents such as monastic rules and communal regulations. Both types of sources show how the Old Believers aspired to organize their communities and create authentically Christian ways of life. By definition, they leave out the messier problems and less desirable forms of behavior that occur when any human institu-

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<sup>1</sup> *Slovar' russkogo iazyka*, 24: 200; *Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka*, 4: 215; and Iukhimenko, *Vygovskaia starobriadcheskaia pustyn'*, 1: 30.

<sup>2</sup> Pokrovskii and Zol'nikova, *Starovery-chasovennye*, 37–58, esp. 51–52.

tion inevitably falls short of its ideals.<sup>3</sup> Some historians argue that, if a normative document repeatedly condemned a certain kind of behavior, it was probably a real problem for the community in question. This assumption seems to me risky, however: repeated prohibitions may just as well reflect the literary prototypes on which the rule is based or the values—or obsessions—of the rule's author. In the present state of our knowledge, there is really no escape from this dilemma. The published reports of government investigators tend to view Old Believer practices and morals in a very negative light. Nineteenth-century officials' repeated accusations of widespread sexual promiscuity among Old Believers, for example, seem to arise largely from the fact that most of them refused to marry in the official Orthodox Church and the priestless accords had only informal substitutes for the sacrament of marriage or none at all. Thus, even in traditional, outwardly respectable family relationships, almost all Old Believers canonically "lived in sin." Other than their leaders' own statements and official reports, we have little reliable information about the inner life of Old Believer communities: many potential sources in state archives and the unpublished records of the communities themselves, where they survive, remain to be explored.

Through most of the movement's history, Old Believer communities had no officially recognized status. As "unofficial" religious institutions, they governed their own affairs independently of any hierarchical structure or national organization.<sup>4</sup> As is well known, the priestless branch of Old Belief—those who rejected the possibility of maintaining an authentically Orthodox clergy after the death of the last priests consecrated before the Nikonian reforms—lacked a central locus of authority and experienced an unending succession of schisms over such vital issues as the possibility of Christian marriage and relations with the Russian state, the domain of the Antichrist. From these divisions emerged the largest priestless groups, the Fedoseevtsy and Pomortsy, who assumed a distinct identity at the beginning of the 18th century, and the Filippovtsy who split with the Pomortsy several decades later. Although the decision of all priestless accords to live as Orthodox Christians without clergy hardened into a tradition, their stance should be understood as a tactical response to the ultimate

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<sup>3</sup> Goriacheva, "Ustroistvo," 255.

<sup>4</sup> On another type of unofficial monastic community, in this case convents within the official Orthodox Church, see Meehan, *Holy Women* and her "Popular Piety."

emergency—the End Time—not as the adoption of a new understanding of the relationship between the believer and God and his fellow Christians. Again and again, most recently in the last two decades, priestless Old Believers have displayed a yearning for the restoration of a full sacramental life if only a truly Orthodox clergy can be found.

The determination of the priestly accords to continue celebrating all of the sacraments led them to retain or, if necessary, recreate traditional structures of authority. Until the mid-19th century, priestly Old Believers maintained a clergy by receiving fugitive priests from the official Orthodox Church. Since the *beglopovttsy* (fugitive priestly) did not have bishops, however, their organizational structures resembled those of the priestless groups and responded primarily to local concerns. Moreover, because fugitive priests were difficult to recruit and their credentials often appeared dubious in Old Believer eyes, the priestly communities continually searched for a way to reestablish the episcopate. Finally, in 1846, a deposed Bosnian bishop, Amvrosii, agreed to join the Old Belief and lead a diocese from Belaia Krinitsa in Bukovina, then part of the Austrian Empire. Amvrosii soon consecrated other bishops and priests. Many Old Believer groups had deep suspicions about the canonicity and Orthodoxy of the new primate, centering on his non-Russian origins and complicated background and the fact that, contrary to canon law, he consecrated other bishops alone. In spite of these doubts, the Belaia Krinitsa hierarchy attracted widespread support because its creation restored both a full sacramental life and the traditional hierarchical structures of Orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, even among the Belokrinitsy, bishops had to deal with a well-established tradition of parish autonomy. Old Believer polemicists of the “Silver Age” contrasted the autonomous, active Old Believer parish, which they saw as the direct successor of the pre-Nikonian Russian parish, with the relatively powerless and passive official Orthodox parish of the day.<sup>6</sup>

One important branch of Old Belief lived on the frontier between the priestly and priestless traditions. The Chasovennyie (or Chasovenniki) became the predominant accord in the Urals and

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<sup>5</sup> Robson, *Old Believers*, 29–32

<sup>6</sup> This point is stressed in Robson, *Old Believers*, 25–28, 124–125; and Pozdeeva, “Russkoe staroobriadchestvo,” 15–18.

Siberia. They began as an offshoot of the Kerzhenets communities near Nizhnii-Novgorod, which had flourished in the early 18th century and, like them, accepted fugitive priests. Over time, as candidates for the Old Believer priesthood became harder to find and many of the faithful had increasing doubts about their sincerity and morals, more and more of the Chasovenniki came to believe that the surest way to preserve true Russian Orthodoxy was to live without priests. In the end, their position carried the day. By the mid-19th century, the accord retained features of the *beglopopovshchina* in theory, but functioned as priestless in practice and in recent times, its adherents' attitudes and practices closely resemble those of the more radical priestless traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from the Belokrinitsey, Old Believer communities, lacking hierarchical structures of authority, allied themselves with one another voluntarily and settled issues through consultation, negotiation, and debate. Following Orthodox tradition, most of the accords or branches of the movement relied upon local councils to set standards for worship and Christian conduct and to settle disputes among the faithful. These councils were made up, of course, not of bishops, but of the monastic or lay leaders of local communities. In other instances throughout their history, Old Believers used less formal negotiations or exchanges of polemical writings to address issues in dispute. Even within highly structured communities with forceful leaders such as the one in Vyg, the traditional center of the Pomortsy, major decisions required discussion with, and approval by, the members of the community.<sup>8</sup>

Two examples illustrate this tradition of consultation. The first is the long debate among and within the priestless accords over the possibility that true Christians could legitimately marry in the absence of clergy. An Old Believer council formally debated the issue in Novgorod in 1694. Then Feodosii Vasil'ev and Ivan Alekseev, who both sought a way for Old Believers to marry, visited Vyg to debate the question in 1703 and 1728 respectively. Finally, toward the end of the 18th century, the spokesmen of Vyg and the leaders of the new Moscow center of the Pomortsy re-opened the debate. These discussions took place in several forums—face to face

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<sup>7</sup> Pokrovskii and Zol'nikova, *Starovery-chasovennyye*, 16–59; and Robson, *Old Believers*, 32–34.

<sup>8</sup> Crummey, *Old Believers*, 108–110.

meetings at Vyg, exchanges of letters, and a series of councils—and ultimately ended with the parties' agreement to disagree.<sup>9</sup> In the second case, N. N. Pokrovskii has charted the history of the councils of the Chasovennye, scattered in small communities across Siberia, from 1723 to 1994. Their protocols record debates of the utmost seriousness about issues ranging from central questions of ecclesiastical organization to minute details of the daily life of a true Christian.<sup>10</sup> In many instances such as these, councils and negotiations served only to reveal the irreconcilable differences among the participants and, in that sense, contributed to the frequent schisms for which Old Belief has been notorious.

Clearly, then, no individual or community could claim to speak for all Old Believers or impose common doctrines, liturgical practices or forms of organization on the movement as a whole. Even the most important early centers of Old Belief, such as Vyg and the Moscow communities, achieved that position primarily through moral and cultural influence and the material prosperity that allowed them to aid their fellow believers.

Until the late 18th century, the most important Old Believer communities modeled themselves on the great cenobitic monasteries of Muscovy. In the clearest example, in their writings, the leaders of the Vyg community often referred to it as a “*kinoviia*” or “*monastyr*” and claimed that it was the direct successor of the Solovki Monastery. Moreover, in constructing its buildings and creating its liturgy and devotional literature, they followed the precedent of the most renowned monasteries of pre-Nikonian Russia as far as circumstances permitted.<sup>11</sup> Its organizational structure also followed the model very closely. Although the head of the community was called the *nastoiatel'* or *bol'shak*, he was chosen by the community as was the tradition in Solovki and his role was

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<sup>9</sup> Crummey, *Old Believers*, 117–122, 203; and Nil'skii, *Semeinaia zhizn*, 1: 20, 95–96, 118–121, 150–180.

<sup>10</sup> Pokrovskii and Zol'nikova, *Starovery-chasovennye*, 59–104.

<sup>11</sup> Iukhimenko, *Vygovskaia staroobriadcheskaia pustyn'*, 1: 11, 58–64; Kuandykov, “Razvitiie obshchезhitel'nogo ustava,” 53–54. Kuandykov is mistaken in arguing that Vyg writers avoided the word “*monastyr*.” To mention obvious examples, Filippov's *Istoriia*, written about 1740, and the documents that made up the rule of Vyg used it regularly. Admittedly, “*obshchезhitel'stvo*,” “*pustyn'*,” and “*kinoviia*” occur more commonly in these texts.

very similar to that of the abbot in earlier cenobitic communities. The titles and functions of the other chief officials—cellarer, treasurer, *nariadnik*, who had responsibility for the economic ventures of the community and the workers in them, and *stroiteli*, who represented the community's interests in the main cities of the empire—copied earlier practice precisely.<sup>12</sup> To the traditional list of officers, Vyg added a *gorodnichii* to take care of visitors, supervise the residents' relations with the outside world, and watch over their conduct.<sup>13</sup>

Both the ideal type and the formal rule of cenobitic monasteries emphasize that all residents must work and worship together as equals. Ideally all property belongs to the community, whose members are fed and clothed according to need from common resources. It would be a mistake to take ideal types and normative statements absolutely literally: institutional reality was somewhat more flexible. In spite of strict prohibitions on private property including food and clothing, Solovki allowed its monks to keep their own books, icons, and money during their lifetimes. Indeed, the cloister's devotional practices encouraged monks to keep suitable books in their cells for significant periods of time.<sup>14</sup> The rule for the Vyg monastery and the associated Leksa convent was, if anything, even stricter than those of earlier monasteries. It made absolutely clear that monks and nuns were not to have their own food, clothing, or money. At the same time, if the cellarer approved, individuals might keep gifts of clothing from their families. Icons that new postulants brought with them to Vyg might, at the cellarer's discretion, be placed in one of the chapels (or, by implication, might remain in the individuals' cells). While the Vyg rule does not explicitly address the question of books, it is reasonable to assume that, as in Solovki, the devotional requirements and cultural activities of Vyg would require some individuals to keep books—the community's or their own—in their cells.

Moreover, studies of Solovki and Vyg suggest that, after an initial period of extreme rigor, both communities enforced their respective rules less strictly and, in particular, that exceptions were

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<sup>12</sup> Crumme, *Old Believers*, 107–108; Barsov, “Ulozhenie brat'ev Denisovykh,” 85–105; and Savich, *Solovetskaia votchina*, 207–211, 247–248.

<sup>13</sup> Kuandykov, “Ideologija obshchezhitel'stva,” 98–99.

<sup>14</sup> Spock, “Solovki Monastery,” 198–199 and her “Weaving Orthodoxy.” I am most grateful to the author for making her work available to me. See also Savich, *Solovetskaia votchina*, 206–207.

made for affluent postulants and visitors. Indeed, L. K. Kuandykov has made the interesting suggestion that, from its beginnings in peasant egalitarianism, Vyg's increasing size and prosperity made it more and more similar to the great monasteries of the Russian North with their elaborate hierarchical structures and economic enterprises. Neither the exceptions to the letter of the rule nor the evidence of greater laxity and inequality over time, in my view, contradicts the fundamental aspiration of these communities' founders and their successors to build and maintain a disciplined monastic way of life or their overall success in doing so.

In the last two decades, among the large volume of new Russian publications on Old Belief, a few scholars have attempted to resurrect the argument of 19th-century populists that communities like Vyg followed not the model of the cenobitic monastery, but that of the northern peasant village. M. L. Sokolovskaia's work is a particularly clear example.<sup>15</sup> Although his articles take a more complex approach, Kuandykov nevertheless concludes his analysis of the Vyg rule in the first third of the 18th century by suggesting that "under the pressure of the peasant masses ... there emerged a type of community more acceptable to peasants—a synthesis of an economic *artel'* and a charitable institution (*bogadel'nia*)."<sup>16</sup> Even if we accept his assumption that the repeated condemnations of illicit eating, private property, and social contact between the sexes in the evolving rule indicates that these were persistent problems within the community, it is not clear on what evidence he based this conclusion. Unfortunately, to my knowledge, he did not publish the subsequent study in which he promised to spell out his argument.

The "neo-populist" scholars also emphasize the fact that, after the first generation, none of the leaders of Vyg or Leksa was formally consecrated a monk or nun even when that option was possible.<sup>17</sup> In my view, this unquestionably valid observation in no way contradicts the aspirations of the Denisov brothers and their colleagues to create a cenobitic monastic community governed by a precise and elaborate rule.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it ignores the tradition

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Sokolovskaia, "Severnoe raskol'nicheskoe obshchezhitel'stvo."

<sup>16</sup> Kuandykov, "Razvitie obshchezhitel'nogo ustava," 63.

<sup>17</sup> Kuandykov, "Razvitie obshchezhitel'nogo ustava," 53; and Sokolovskaia, "Skladyvanie instituta 'uchitel'stva'."

<sup>18</sup> On the rule of Vyg and Leksa, see Kuandykov, "Razvitie obshchezhitel'nogo ustava"; Kuandykov, "Ideologiya obshchezhitel'stva"; Kuandykov, "Vy-



in many priestless groups of having prayer leaders, monks, and nuns consecrate others to follow in their footsteps. While not within the apostolic succession in a strict Orthodox or Roman Catholic sense, this practice amounted to “succession of a personal-spiritual (*pneumatischer*), but not an institutional-legal, kind.”<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of their historiographical underpinnings, recent publications have made significant new contributions to our understanding of the structure of the Vyg community and the ways in which it functioned. First, N. S. Demkova’s edition of the full text of the interrogation of Tereshka Artem’ev in 1695 sheds additional light on the structure of the first Old Believer settlements in the Vyg valley and the attitudes of their inhabitants before a cenobitic community took shape. According to Artem’ev’s testimony under interrogation, large numbers of Old Believers had moved from the surrounding area into the Vyg valley, a situation of which the authorities were already uneasily aware.<sup>20</sup> Artem’ev described two centers some distance apart. One was a loosely organized idiorhythmic monastic community, in which men and women lived separately. Its leader, the fugitive monk Komiliii, directed the spiritual lives of the inhabitants and allegedly provided a form of the Eucharist although he was not a priest. The second community reflected the mixture of religious militancy and social banditry epitomized by the earlier raids on the Paleostrov Monastery and subsequent mass suicides in the name of the Old Belief in 1687 and 1688.<sup>21</sup> Old Believer laypeople, led by Daniil Vikulich—a disciple of the fugitive monk, Ignatii, a leader of the first raid—lived in a heavily armed and fortified settlement, prepared for a siege and for self-immolation if resistance failed. According to Artem’ev, their militancy extended to raids on neighboring villages to spread the old faith, by force if necessary.<sup>22</sup> Even Ivan Filippov’s history of Vyg, which presents the community’s origins in a most respectable light, links Vikulich with the leaders of the raids on Paleostrov and

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govskie sochineniia”; Kuandykov, “Rukopis’ no. 3”; and the sources listed in notes 11 and 12.

<sup>19</sup> Hauptmann, “Das Gemeindeleiteramt,” 488.

<sup>20</sup> Iukhimenko, “Pervye ofitsial’nye izvestiia.”

<sup>21</sup> On the raids on Paleostrov and a similar attack on Pudozh, see Michels, *At War with the Church*, 184–185, 203–205, 207–208; Michels “Violent Old Belief”; and Crummey, *Old Believers*, 45–57.

<sup>22</sup> Demkova, “Vnov’ naidennyi podlinnik”; and Demkova, “O nachale Vygovskoi pustyni.”

tells how he organized a posse, followed a captured Old Believer, and rescued him from the guards who were taking him to prison.<sup>23</sup> It is a tribute to Andrei Denisov's extraordinary leadership that he was able to combine these two currents of Old Belief into a single highly organized community. At the same time, the history of Vyg is marked by a never-ending tension between the desire to build a stable refuge for the true faith and the impulse to confront the forces of the Antichrist whatever the cost.

Second, Elena Iukhimenko's exhaustive study of the literary culture of Vyg and Leksa and Kuandykov's articles on the evolution of their monastic rule provide us with a more nuanced understanding of these communities' growth and its consequences, and of the ways in which they adapted to their changing economic and political circumstances. As Kuandykov pointed out, when monastic communities achieve material prosperity and respectability—which, in Vyg's case, included *de facto* toleration—they tend to lose their founders' rigor and fire.<sup>24</sup> Iukhimenko's book demonstrates the increasing extent to which, in the last century of their existence, Vyg and Leksa came to depend on wealthy lay patrons elsewhere in Russia, particularly in St. Petersburg and Romanov. She attributes this need for outside support to the changing demographic structure of the communities. As they prospered, their populations rose, but the number of women and the elderly grew disproportionately. Thus their leaders needed money to pay hired laborers as well as to meet the government's demands for double taxes and payment in place of recruits for the army. Thus, communities that previously had been largely self-sufficient had to rely heavily on charitable donations of wealthy supporters.<sup>25</sup>

Third, recent scholarship has underlined the remarkable complexity of the network of Old Believer settlements surrounding the main monastery and convent. These included a number of *skity* and *poseleniia* whose residents accepted the leadership of the "Vyg fathers." Some of the more remote *skity* were small monastic communities in their own right. Other *skity* combined features of a normal northern peasant village and a monastic community. According to the Vyg rule, a *skit* had a chapel and one or two monks who were responsible for conducting priestless services

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<sup>23</sup> Filippov, *Istoriia*, 95–98.

<sup>24</sup> See notes 11 and 18.

<sup>25</sup> Iukhimenko, *Vygovskaia staroobriadcheskaia pustyn'*, 1: 462–512, esp. 478.

and ensuring that the inhabitants observed all parts of the monastic rule except celibacy. Economically, some of the largest *skity* such as the Sheltoporozhsk concentrated on agriculture. Others were more specialized: the people of the Berezovsk Skit, for example, painted icons and fished, but did not farm at all. The *poseleniia* were essentially peasant villages of Old Believers that owed allegiance to Vyg and were expected to contribute to meeting its financial responsibilities to the government. With data from the first three 18th-century censuses (*revizii*), Sokolovskaia argues that about 99 percent of the peasants in the settlements around Vyg and Leksa originally came from the surrounding districts.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, once in Vyg's orbit, they moved, if at all, mainly from settlement to settlement within it.<sup>27</sup>

The capacity of the *skit* for combining elements of the monastic community and the village in many variations made it a particularly durable form of organization for rural Old Believers. As their later history demonstrated all too well, communities as large as Vyg and Leksa had both the advantages and disadvantages of their size. In times of peace and relative toleration, they had the skilled population and the economic resources to serve as a vital organizational center and cultural resource for fellow Old Believers all across Russia. In times of persecution, however, these characteristics made them easy targets. The government of Nicholas I succeeded in destroying Vyg, but the life of the *skity* went on.

In the present state of scholarship, we know far less about the internal structure of the other major concentrations of Old Believers in the 18th and early 19th centuries such as Kerzhenets, Vetka and Starodub in Belarus, and Irgiz in the lower Volga valley. For one thing, the brevity and lack of precision of the sources at our disposal sometimes make it difficult to tell whether Old Believer settlements in these areas were monasteries like Vyg, or *skity*.

In Vetka and Irgiz, some monastic communities grew to considerable size. One Vetka monastery, the Lavrent'ev, reportedly had

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<sup>26</sup> Spock, "The Solovki Monastery," 183–185 makes a similar observation about the origins of the monks of Solovki.

<sup>27</sup> Sokolovskaia, "Krest'ianskii mir" and her "Skladyvanie"; Kuandykov, "Ideologiia obshcheghiteľstva," 95–96; Kuandykov, "Rukopis' no. 3," 135 and his "Filippovskie polemicheskie sochineniia," 115–117. See also Pashkov, "Starobriadcheskie poseleniia." As opposed to the other authors, Sokolovskaia insists that the only difference between a *skit* and a *poselenie* was size: both were lay peasant villages ("Krest'ianskii mir," 272).

more than one thousand monks in the mid-18th century and a nearby convent had one hundred nuns.<sup>28</sup> The Lavrent'ev maintained a very strict rule with one exception that distinguished it from Vyg—its wealthiest members kept their private property.<sup>29</sup> Others had more than two hundred monks, while in each of the women's settlements lived about thirty nuns and numerous laywomen.

Scattered throughout the frontier areas of Vetka and Starodub were many smaller settlements of various types. Some of them resembled Vyg in its very first years in that they brought together Old Believer monks or nuns and fugitive laypeople. Moreover, small *skity* of monks and nuns and settlements of Old Believer peasants and their families existed side by side. Indeed, in some instances, very small communities of nuns or monks lived inside lay villages.<sup>30</sup>

The priestly Irgiz monasteries, settled initially by refugees from Vetka, bore a closer resemblance to Vyg at its zenith. At their height in 1828, the three main monasteries, the Upper, Middle, and Lower, and two convents, the Uspenie and the Pokrovsk, had a total of about three thousand monks and nuns. The men's communities were cenobite monasteries led by elected abbots and councils of elders. Two other officers worked with the abbot, a treasurer and an *ustavshchik*, who supervised the internal life of the community and enforced the monastic rule. Early in their histories, the leaders of the Irgiz monasteries strictly prohibited private property and maintained common worship and a common table. As these communities grew in size and prosperity, however, they too relaxed their initial rigor. From their foundations, the Pokrovsk and Uspensk convents had looser, idiorhythmic structures, and, unlike Leksa, had no formal ties to the men's communities other than the exchange of the products of their farming and handicraft work. Prominent laymen from outside had a stronger influence over the decisions of the leaders of the Irgiz communities than was the case in Vyg except perhaps in the final decades of the latter's existence. Although we have too little detailed information on the monasteries in Vetka and Irgiz to make a definitive

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<sup>28</sup> Vurgraft, *Staroobriadchestvo*, 62–63; and Lileev, *Iz istorii raskola*, 1: 361.

<sup>29</sup> On the Lavrent'ev Monastery, Mel'nikov, "Ocherki popovshchiny," 307–351.

<sup>30</sup> Lileev, *Iz istorii raskola*, 1: 371–373, 384–392.

judgment, it would seem that Vyg, at its height, most closely followed the pre-Nikonian model of a cenobitic monastery.<sup>31</sup>

All of the large monastic communities of the 18th and early 19th centuries share two important characteristics. First, whenever possible, they provided books, icons, vestments, and, in the case of Irgiz, priests for their followers throughout Russia, and provided the children of the faithful with traditional Orthodox schooling.<sup>32</sup> Second, because of their size and visibility and their role in spreading the Old Belief, the imperial government eventually destroyed them in one way or another. The authorities closed the Vetka communities by force in 1735 and again in 1764, although the Lavrent'ev Monastery survived. The gendarmes of Nicholas I closed Vyg and the Upper and Middle Monasteries of Irgiz and forced the Lower Monastery to join the *edinoverie* (uniatic church).<sup>33</sup> Understandably, after the mid-19th century, the Old Believers built no more cenobitic monasteries as large and complex as Vyg.

Nevertheless, throughout the history of Old Belief, the ideal of the classic cenobitic monastery retained its power. Even in 20th-century Siberia, the Chasovenniki would still have preferred to build large monastic communities like Vyg if circumstances had permitted.<sup>34</sup> In some instances, later Old Believer communities retained some of the features of the great monasteries of the past, albeit on a smaller scale. For example, migrants from Irgiz created a number of monastic *skity* in the Cheremshan area near the lower Volga. Some of them reached a significant size: at its largest, the Uspensk Skit had 130 monks.<sup>35</sup> The Kurenevsk Monastery and convents in Podolia, although small, took very traditional forms. The men's community, in which 128 monks, novices, and laymen lived at the beginning of the 20th century, followed strictly cenobitic patterns. Its organization had many traditional features including an abbot, treasurer, and council. The first of the two convents, which had as many as 42 nuns and novices, followed more idiorhythmic practices under which the sisters did not keep a com-

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<sup>31</sup> Crummey, *Old Believers*, 128–131; Vurgraft, *Staroobriadchestvo*, 125–128; and Sokolov, *Raskol*, 238–274.

<sup>32</sup> Lileev, *Iz istorii raskola*, 1: 216–222; and Sokolov, *Raskol*, 270.

<sup>33</sup> Sokolov, *Raskol*, chaps. 6 and 7. Founded in 1800 with the blessing of the imperial government, the *edinoverie* created parishes within the synodal Russian Orthodox Church in which Old Believers could worship using the pre-Nikonian liturgy.

<sup>34</sup> Pokrovskii and Zol'nikova, *Starovery-chasovennye*, 434–435.

<sup>35</sup> Vurgraft, *Staroobriadchestvo*, 306–308.

mon table and owned personal property. The second convent, founded in 1908 by the energetic Abbess Faina, appears to have been more tightly organized. In spite of their differences in structure, both convents customarily deferred to the decisions of the monastery on the most important issues and all three of the Kurenevsk settlements owed ultimate allegiance to the national center of the Belokrinitsy in Moscow. The last remnants of monastic communities in Sheremshan and Kurenevsk survived into the late 1920s and early 1930s respectively. The end of the Kurenevsk monastery was particularly brutal: in the horrible conditions of 1933, local “activists” took its books and icons for firewood or lumber for a pig barn and the few remaining monks starved to death!<sup>36</sup>

The emergence of the Preobrazhensk and Rogozhsk Kladbishcha and the Moninsk Molennaia in Moscow in the reign of Catherine II radically changed the balance of power within Old Belief in several ways.<sup>37</sup> First, they were located in the second city of the empire, the historic capital of Orthodox Russia. Second, they were, in essence, parishes consisting largely of laypeople, not monastic communities. Third, because of their central location and their founders’ energy and wealth, they quickly assumed leadership within the movement. On controversial issues like the canonicity of marriage, older communities like Vyg found themselves on the defensive, responding to initiatives from Moscow.

For a variety of reasons, the Moscow centers combined many elements in complex patterns. First of all, they belonged to different branches of Old Belief. The priestly Old Believers of the Rogozhsk community strove to follow the traditional Orthodox structure of bishops and priests, and to retain all of the sacraments of Eastern Orthodoxy. Until the middle of the 19th century, like all of the priestly communities, they had no hierarchy of their own and depended entirely on fugitive clergy. As an escape from this dilemma, the leaders of Rogozhsk welcomed the establishment of the Belokrinitsk hierarchy: the community eventually became the

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<sup>36</sup> Taranets, *Kurenevskoe trimonastyr’e*, 46–58, 74–77; Taranets, “Kurenevskoe trimonastyr’e (istoriia Kurenevskikh monastyrei)”; and Taranets, *Staroobriadchestvo Podolii*, 102–112, 121–130.

<sup>37</sup> On the Moscow communities, Ryndziunskii, “Staroobriadcheskaia organizatsiia”; Goriacheva, “Ustroistvo” and “Istochniki”; lukhimenko, *Staroobriadcheskii tsentr*; Mel’nikov, “Ocherki popovshchiny,” 204–307; Popov, “Materialy”; Paert, *Old Believers*, 59–108; and Vasil’ev, “Organizatsiia.”

residence of the Old Believer Archbishop of Moscow. The Preobrazhensk and Moninsk communities belonged to the Fedoseevtsy and Pomortsy priestless accords respectively. Lay leaders conducted the prayer services of these parishes—in Western terms, an elaborate form of the Ministry of the Word without the Eucharist—and administered such sacraments as their accords had saved from the ruins of authentic Orthodoxy—baptism and, in the case of Moninsk, marriage. Preobrazhensk had a reputation for the extreme rigor and precision of its services as well as its militancy in rejecting all possibility of Christian marriage and prayers for the imperial family.<sup>38</sup>

Second, legally these communities registered themselves as cemeteries (*kladbishcha*) and almshouses (*bogadelennye doma*), not parishes, whence their official titles and popular names. For one thing, Old Believer parishes and monastic communities, even those that enjoyed de facto toleration in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, were illegal. Moreover, the circumstances in which the Moscow communities emerged from underground underscored their role as charitable foundations. In 1771, at the height of the terrible epidemic of plague in Moscow, both Il'ia Kovylin, the formidable founder of Preobrazhensk, and the leaders of Rogozhsk received permission to set up quarantine blockades on the outskirts of Moscow, hospitals to care for the sick, and cemeteries to bury the dead. In dealing with officialdom in the comparatively tolerant times of Catherine II and Alexander I, they operated within the legal guidelines for all charitable institutions and carefully created the impression that they ministered only to fellow Old Believers. The leaders of the synodal church, however, suspected with considerable justification that service to the sick and needy often led to conversion to Old Belief.

The circumstances in which they were founded dictated that the Moscow communities would be complex institutions composed of many elements. Throughout their history, they maintained almshouses, hospitals, and cemeteries. Somewhat less conspicuously, their chapels and prayer houses functioned as parish churches that served the needs of the priestly and priestless Old Believers of the city. Moreover, the visibility that their legal status gave these communities made them the most important centers of their respective accords in all of Russia.

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<sup>38</sup> Vurgraft, *Staroobriadchestvo*, 175, 232–235, 239–242.

Throughout their checkered history, the status of charitable institution saved the Moscow communities from extinction in difficult times. The history of their relations with the imperial government followed exactly the same patterns as that of the other Old Believer centers. After the years of de facto toleration under Catherine II and Alexander I, the imperial regime began to attack on several fronts. In Alexander's last years and the reign of Nicholas I, the government prosecuted Old Believer priests, closed the chapels and churches or gave them to the *edinovertsy*, arrested and exiled their leaders and prominent lay supporters, and put the charitable institutions under its direct control. Like Vyg, Moninsk did not survive the assaults of Nicholas's gendarmes. Preobrazhensk and Rogozhsk bowed before the storm, but lived on, re-emerged into the open as charities beginning in the reign of Alexander III, and enjoyed a "golden age" of freedom of worship and social ministry between 1905 and 1917.

Third, prominent merchants and other laymen established and ran the Moscow communities. Lay leadership was a central feature throughout Old Belief in the late 18th and 19th centuries. As we have noted, even in monastic communities like Vyg and the Irgiz settlements, wealthy lay supporters exercised more and more influence as the years passed. In Preobrazhensk and even in priestly Rogozhsk, the ultimate authorities were the lay overseers, not the clergy.

What were the aspirations of the founders of the Moscow communities? In spite of the Old Believers' reputation for dealing with the government in a devious manner, Il'ia Kovylin was remarkably honest in a petition to Alexander I in 1808. In the plan for Preobrazhensk that accompanied his request to renew the community's legal status as a charitable institution and his appeal for freedom from outside interference, he claimed that its central mission consisted of serving ill, elderly, and orphaned Old Believers' physical and spiritual needs. "The times and circumstances demand that we build almshouses and hospitals for the care and tranquility of elderly and sick Old Believers and orphan children, and a chapel in order to offer prayers to Almighty God according to the stipulations of the old books (*staropechatnye knigi*)."<sup>39</sup> In another passage, he described the community's objectives: "to conduct services unhindered according to the ancient regulations and rule of the Holy Fathers laid out in the old book and to provide a

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<sup>39</sup> Popov, "Materialy," 131–132.



safe refuge for the needy among our brethren.”<sup>40</sup> He also made clear that the community provided housing for craftsmen such as carpenters, stonemasons, and plasterers temporarily in Moscow without their families. If Kovylin’s statements misled the government, it was only in deemphasizing the importance of Old Believer worship and ignoring the possibility that service to the needy could be a form of missionary activity—understandable tactical choices under the circumstances.

In spite of their prominence and the large number of publications about them, we have relatively little detailed information about the inner structure and workings of the Moscow communities. Historians and polemicists have paid much more attention to the merchant dynasties that supported them and the polemical battles among them. Fortunately, we have many physical descriptions of the communities’ buildings and sketches of their organizational structure at various times in their history. For example, Kovylin’s plan describes a community of about eight hundred residents in two sets of buildings separated by inner walls. In one lived elderly and ill men and the out-of-town craftsmen who lodged there; in the other were the women and the orphans. The community committed itself to educating the children in reading, writing, industriousness, and a useful trade by which they could support themselves. The orphans were to remain in the community up to the age of 17 when they were expected to move out. Each section had its own chapel or prayer rooms. A group of guardians (*popechiteli*)—all successful businessmen and honorable citizens, Kovylin insisted—administered the community. One of their most important functions was to manage the bequests to the community by investing them wisely or lending them to reliable borrowers.<sup>41</sup> Although Kovylin’s plan mentioned these activities in the form of a request for official approval, acceptance of bequests and making loans were probably already well-established practices in Preobrazhensk. For one thing, those Fedoseevtsy who took seriously Kovylin’s teachings on the impossibility of canonical marriage either remained celibate or lived in informal unions and therefore could not have legitimate heirs. For many, the logical heir was Preobrazhensk.

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<sup>40</sup> Popov, “Materialy,” 134.

<sup>41</sup> Popov, “Materialy,” 31–39.

T. D. Goriacheva's and E. M. Iukhimenko's new studies give us a detailed analysis of the Rogozhskoe community at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Although her data come from a much later time and she describes a priestly community, her findings are remarkably similar to Kovylin's and P. G. Ryndziunskii's less detailed descriptions of Preobrazhensk as well as to her comparative data on the Chubinsk almshouse in St. Petersburg. The number of residents of the community ranged from more than 1000 in the 1830s to 444 at the beginning of 1918. Iukhimenko states that the Rogozhsk almshouse had 558 residents in 1872 and 730 in 1877, with a heavy predominance of women.<sup>42</sup> In the mid-19th century, Preobrazhensk was slightly larger: it had 508 male and 1119 female residents. According to the documents defining the legal status of Rogozhsk, all residents had to be Old Believers by family tradition, legal residents of Moscow, and poor or ill. In both Rogozhsk and Preobrazhensk, the number of parishioners who lived outside the walls of the community ran into the thousands. According to one rough estimate, Preobrazhensk had up to 10,000 parishioners in 1819.<sup>43</sup> In 1841, according to official records, the priests of Rogozhsk served as confessors for 3,028 parishioners: the real number was undoubtedly much higher. According to Iukhimenko, Rogozhsk had about 20,000 parishioners at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the figure rose to between 35,000 and 68,000 in the 1820s.<sup>44</sup>

The structure of governance of the Moscow communities reflected their legal status as charitable institutions. Even in priestly Rogozhsk, all of the recognized officers were laymen.<sup>45</sup> There all of the parishioners who owned property in Moscow had the right to choose electors (*vybornye*) of whom there were thirty in 1869. The electors in turn selected two guardians (*popechiteli*), normally wealthy businessmen, for three-year terms to manage the community's finances and the care of the residents. The electors were to ensure that the guardians carried out these duties responsibly and had the right to replace them if they did not. Under the *Ustav* (Regulation) of 1883, the council of electors also chose three priests and two deacons to celebrate the Sacraments. The number of clergy rose steadily to six priests and three deacons in 1906, and

<sup>42</sup> Iukhimenko, *Staroobriadcheskii tsestr*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> Vasil'ev, "Organizatsiia," 586.

<sup>44</sup> Iukhimenko, *Staroobriadcheskii tsestr*, 20; Makarov, *Ocherk*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Goriacheva, "Ustroistvo" and "Istochniki"; Ryndziunskii, "Staroobriadcheskaia organizatsiia," 202–213.

in the fall of 1917, the community adopted plans to add still more.<sup>46</sup> Real executive power, however, clearly lay with the guardians whose responsibilities included everything from the community's investment portfolio to the selection of singers for the choir. Their authority, even over spiritual matters, deeply troubled the Old Believer clergy: in 1906, Old Believer Bishop Alexander of Riazan' published a sharp criticism of this situation under a pseudonym.

Even though the vast majority of the residents of Preobrazhensk did not follow a monastic rule, the guardians attempted to maintain strict order through a myriad of regulations enforced by officers whom they appointed. In this regard, their rigor—pedantry perhaps—resembles that of the Vyg fathers. Under their direction, an *ekonom* received and registered the bequests on which the treasury depended and a *kontorshchik* kept the financial records and conducted official correspondence. A host of lesser officers made sure that residents and visitors to the community behaved appropriately. The *dvorovy starosta* screened visitors and made sure that their paperwork was in order. They, the *storozha*, *nadzirateli* (male) and *nadziratel'nitsy* (female) made sure that the residents attended services daily, returned to the community at an appropriate hour each evening, and observed proper decorum. They were to keep beggars outside the gates and away from the cemetery. To this structure, the community in 1897 added the office of female guardians who served for three years and had responsibility for the female residents as well as for the community's food and kitchens.

Although our information is less detailed, the other urban communities apparently had very similar systems of governance. In the relatively small Chubykinsk community of St. Petersburg, the parishioners chose 40 electors who selected three guardians for five-year terms. In this instance, however, the guardians had authority only over the community's finances. Parallel to the guardians was a governing committee of five members plus a chair, which handled relations with the outside world. In the St. Petersburg case, the distinction between the prerogatives of the guardians and the committee was not entirely clear.

In Preobrazhensk, the administrative structure had grown in complexity from Kovylin's time to the mid-19th century. By then, the governing body of the community was a council of 26 men from whom were chosen the five guardians who, as in Rogozhsk,

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<sup>46</sup> lukhimenko, *Staroobriadcheskii tsestr*, 85–91.

managed day-to-day administration. The wealthiest benefactors of Preobrazhensk normally became guardians and even among them one leader enjoyed overwhelming influence just as Kovylin had. In the mid-19th century, that man was F. A. Guchkov, scion of the wealthiest Moscow business family.

Although the main Moscow communities and those in St. Petersburg were governed by laymen to serve lay parishioners and residents, we should not forget their monastic component. They usually contained the “cells” of at least a few *startsy* (male monastics) or *staritsy* (female monastics), especially the latter. In 1845, for example, 164 nuns and novices lived in their own separate quarters in Rogozhsk.<sup>47</sup> Later in the century, the Fedoseevtsy maintained an idiorhythmic convent—labeled a “charitable institution” for the benefit of officialdom—on the outskirts of St. Petersburg.<sup>47a</sup>

For the most part, the complex mixture of elements in the Old Believers’ urban communities served them well. As their leaders hoped, for much of their history they provided thousands of parishioners with the full repertoire of worship services and carried out their charitable missions. Their imposing buildings provided an Old Believer counterpoise to the great cathedrals of the synodal church.<sup>48</sup> Like Vyg before them, they provided their followers throughout Russia with books and icons. And, as historians of the Russian economy have so often stressed, the Moscow communities, especially Preobrazhensk, provided credit for aspiring Old Believer entrepreneurs and sheltered peasant migrants to the city, who often became workers in the wealthy Old Believers’ enterprises. In short, the Moscow communities’ position as the predominant centers of Old Belief legitimized lay leadership and made the combination of parish and charitable institution the primary organizational model, particularly in urban areas. In the short years of the early 20th century when they were free to function with limited outside interference, the urban parishes of all of the main Old Believer groups enjoyed a similar degree of autonomy and initiative.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Iukhimenko, *Staroobriadcheskii tsestr*, 2.

<sup>47a</sup> For example, Zhivotov, *Tserkovnyi raskol*, 54, 66–67; V. N., “Raskol v Peterburge”; Makarov, *Ocherk*, 69; and the sources mentioned in note 37.

<sup>48</sup> Robson, *Old Believers*, 53–74.

<sup>49</sup> For example, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the lay guardians of the Rogozhsk Kladbishche had a great deal of power over the clergy who served the community. See Goriacheva, “Ustroistvo”; and Goriacheva, “Istochniki,” 129ff. and n2.

To be sure, the experience of Preobrazhensk, Rogozhsk and the other urban communities under Nicholas I and Stalin also demonstrates the vulnerability to attack of such centrally located, visible, and prosperous religious centers. Nevertheless, they have endured and remain national centers of the priestless and priestly Old Believers to this day.

After the October Revolution, priestly and priestless parishes continued to function. After a brief period of respite in which the new regime concentrated its anti-religious fervor on the mainstream Orthodox Church, they faced the same trials and tribulations as all of the other major Christian denominations—arrests of leaders and active parishioners, confiscation of many church buildings, and pressure to follow the dictates of the Soviet regime. At the same time, if they met the state's requirements, they were at least able to continue public worship in some of their church buildings and maintain their traditional form of governance under the watchful eye of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. As compared with their Russian Orthodox counterparts, the Old Believers had the advantage of their long experience in adapting to hostile governments.

Roy Robson's study of the Grebenschikovskaia Obshchina in Riga between 1945 and 1955 addresses several of the central issues that almost certainly affected Old Believer parishes throughout the Soviet Union. Founded in 1760, the Riga community closely resembled its model, Preobrazhensk in Moscow. Named in honor of a wealthy benefactor, it consisted of an almshouse, a large parish church known for the authenticity and rigor of its services, and schools.<sup>50</sup> After 1917, of course, the history of the Riga Old Believers and their circumstances in Latvia differed significantly from those of their brethren in Russia. As Robson notes, the Grebenschikovskaia Obshchina suffered severe persecution immediately during Latvia's annexation by the Soviet Union and during the German occupation. After the end of World War II, however, the community regained ownership of its main buildings, including the church and the attached living quarters, and re-established its traditional structure of governance. All the same, relations with the Soviet authorities were a mixed blessing and the source of high tension within the community. During Stalin's last years, the leading Old Believer intellectual from Riga, I. N. Zavoloko, remained in the gulag

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<sup>50</sup> Vurgraft, *Staroobriadchestvo*, 78.

and other arrests took place from time to time. Within the Obshchina, two factions struggled for power. The leader of the self-styled “progressives,” the community’s rector, I. U. Vakon’ia, made good relations with the Ministry of Religious Affairs his highest priority and was not above sending the authorities regular reports on the internal affairs of the Obshchina. The conservatives, led by Fathers P. F. Fadeev and A. V. Volkov, strove for a more independent stance in order to preserve the priestless Old Believer tradition in all its purity. The clash of personalities as well as of programs led on occasion to stormy meetings, shouting matches, and competing liturgical observances. Not surprisingly, in the years Robson investigated, the progressive group maintained its leadership of the community.<sup>51</sup> As far as I know, the history of other urban Old Believer parishes in the Soviet period, including the main centers in Moscow and St. Petersburg, has yet to be written.

In rural areas, Old Believer life revolved around *skity* just as it had in earlier periods of persecution. Both ideological and practical considerations led to the persistence of this pattern of organization. In many cases, the founders and inhabitants of the *skity* consciously followed the urging of the hermits of the early Eastern Church to flee from a sinful world to the “desert” and a life of prayer and self-denial. N. N. Pokrovskii and N. D. Zol’nikova have pointed out that Siberian Old Believers received these teachings directly in translations of St. Efreim the Syrian—several of his sermons, particularly Sermon 105 on the Apocalypse, and “On Admonition and Repentance”—and indirectly through the Old Believer literary and oral tradition. The more militant the Old Believers, the greater the lure of the *pustyn’* (hermitage)! Life in small isolated communities strongly appealed to the Filippovtsy and the more radical of the Chasovenniki.<sup>52</sup> And, for the Beguny or Stranniki, the most radical groups of all, flight from the world and all of its institutions was the only truly Christian way of life.<sup>53</sup> The *skit* also had practical advantages. Since it was a structure smaller, less visible, and more flexible than the monastery or the parish, it was especially suited to times of severe persecution and to branches of the Old Belief whose militancy made them special targets of the government. In Soviet times, rural Old Believers had little choice but to rely on it.

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<sup>51</sup> Robson, “Old Believers and the Soviet State.”

<sup>52</sup> Pokrovskii, “Krest’ianskii pobeg”; Kuandykov, “Filippovskie polemicheskie sochineniia”; Pokrovskii and Zol’nikova, *Starovery-chasovennye*, 16–19, 96, 111, 435.

<sup>53</sup> Mal’tsev, *Starovery-stranniki*, 31–32, 225–226.

By the 20th century, the Old Believer *skit* had an ancient and honorable history. Between the late 17th and mid-19th centuries, government inspectors, attempting to control the movement's spread, had unearthed evidence of innumerable small settlements of Old Believers in remote corners throughout the Russian empire—in the European North, Belarus, the Cossack country, the Urals, and Siberia. They ranged from miniature monasteries in which the residents took vows of celibacy and followed a rule of life under the direction of a monk or nun to communities of devout laypeople, led by a monk. As we have seen, some functioned as satellites of large monastic communities like Vyg and the Irgiz monasteries or were parts of a closely knit network of Old Believer settlements while the founders of others opted for complete isolation in the most remote locations imaginable. In spite of this remarkable variety, all shared one characteristic—close relations with the local peasant population from which many of their inhabitants had come.<sup>54</sup>

Our best study of *skity* in the Soviet period appears in Pokrovskii and Zol'nikova's new book on the history and polemical literature of the Chasovennye in the Urals and Siberia. As before, the desire of their founders for a rigorous Christian life in the "desert" and the policies of the government both shaped them. Siberian *skity* were very small, most frequently of one to 15 residents, and followed a cenobitic way of life with common worship, property, work, and meals. An individual hermit sometimes lived alone within a short distance of a small convent or lay village and served as its spiritual director. The largest, the Sungul'sk Skit in the Urals, which flourished in the 1920s and early 1930s, had up to 40 residents. The number of residents of course varied with the circumstances: from the beginning of Orthodox monasticism in Russia, the charisma of the founder of a hermitage often attracted new disciples, thus gradually transforming an isolated settlement into a monastery.

In the Soviet period, residents of the Siberian *skity* often responded to persecution by migrating long distances to safer areas under extremely risky and arduous conditions. In the early years of collectivization, the migrations of devout Old Believers formed part

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<sup>54</sup> *Opisanie dokumentov i del*, 1: 185–186, 588; 23: 653–54, 971–974; Malyshiev, "Une communauté"; Pokrovskii, "Krest'ianskii pobeg"; Kuandykov, "Filippovskie polemicheskie sochineniia"; Pokrovskii and Zol'nikova, *Starovery-chasovennye*, 16–19; Pashkov, "Staroobriadcheskie poseleniia"; Men'shakova, "Pecherskoe staroobriadchestvo"; Snesarev, "Verkhne-Chirskaiia stanitsa," no. 7: 214–15.

of a larger pattern of resistance to the new order in the countryside. Given the mixture of pressures driving the migrations, the resulting settlements sometimes combined features of a monastic community and peasant village. In one example of such a “*kvaziskit*,” in Pokrovskii and Zol’nikova’s phrase, a group of devout women lived together without formally becoming nuns. When it became clear that, as women living alone in a harsh environment, they could not support themselves, they moved in with their relatives’ families in lay peasant settlements but continued to follow a disciplined celibate life. In other instances, women’s communities depended entirely on the support of neighboring men’s *skity* or on the nearby lay population to which they provided spiritual direction.<sup>55</sup> In the most difficult times, the extreme flexibility of these arrangements was invaluable.

In addition, especially among the priestless groups, Old Believer villagers often lived normal lay lives in their commune or collective farm under the spiritual leadership of a lay *nastavnik* (mentor) whose authority they accepted—or on occasion rejected—as the spirit moved them. The community in the Pechora region described by V. I. Malyshev from documents of the mid-19th century, for example, consisted entirely of laypeople that elected a *starosta* and *nastavnik* from among themselves to provide administrative and spiritual leadership.<sup>56</sup> This pattern has proved remarkably durable: participants in scholarly research expeditions have encountered it in recent years. In this situation, Old Believer villagers make special efforts to distinguish their faith and way of life from that of non-believers and adherents of competing Old Believer factions. In the Upper Kama valley, for example, the priestless distinguished between the most rigorous believers, the “*sobornye*” and rank-and-file Old Believers, the “*mirskie*.” Under the leadership of *dukhovniki* (confessors) and *ustavshchiki*, the former held prayer services in private homes and set and enforced the strict system of taboos that mark off the faithful from the others.<sup>57</sup> How long these arrangements will continue to survive is difficult to say. According to I. V. Pozdeeva, Old Believer life in the Upper Kama villages has changed radically in the last few years.

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<sup>55</sup> Pokrovskii and Zol’nikova, *Starovery-chasovennye*, 29–47, 428–429.

<sup>56</sup> Malyshev, “Communauté.”

<sup>57</sup> *Russkie pis’mennye i ustnye traditsii*, 40–42, 97–99; Vlasov, “On the History,” 65–70. For a lyrical description of researchers’ experiences in Old Believer settlements in Siberia, Pokrovskii, *Puteshestvie*, 19–37.



Each of the fundamental forms of Old Believer organization has contributed to the survival of the movement. The remote monastic communities served as refuges and centers of organization in difficult times and provided the cultural resources—liturgical books, polemical defenses of the Old Faith, icons—to their scattered brothers and sisters throughout the empire. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the leading lay parishes made the Old Believers a significant force in national life. And, in Soviet times, the remote *skity* and villages, along with the more traditional parishes for all of their vulnerability, kept the faith alive in the face of unrelenting persecution.

In facing the challenges of life in the 21st century, contemporary Old Believers hark back to their earlier experiences, particularly in the “Silver Age” of the early 20th century, in order to identify the patterns of organization and behavior that will best serve their needs. The much-discussed decision of many priestless communities in Russia and abroad to accept priests of one jurisdiction or another and restore full sacramental life places the parish and the ecclesiastical hierarchy to which it owes allegiance at the center of Old Believer life once again. This may suggest that, in the best of times—few and far between in the Old Believers’ historical experience—the parish with its associated institutions provides the fullest liturgical ministry and pastoral support for members of both priestly and priestless traditions. Whatever the future may bring, we may reasonably assume that the Old Believers will continue to adjust creatively to the world around them and draw useful lessons from their rich institutional history.

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