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ON PECULIAR FEATURES OF THE
OLD BELIEVERS' CULTURE IN THE URAL REGION

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In the course of studying the Old Believers in the Ural region, special attention has always been paid to the cultural customs and traditions. In the archaeographic expeditions carried out by Ural State university during the last several years, more than 5,000 books and manuscripts have been collected and sorted based on the regional principle. Very important results have been achieved through studying folklore. The archives of the Department of literature and folklore of the Ural University can boast of an extensive collection of items of oral folk tradition of various genres with descriptions of their performance. Great success has been gained by art specialists in the field of icon painting who discovered a number of local schools of this kind of art. In September 1993, a conference was held devoted to the problems of studying the Ural Old Believers' icons. Accompanying this conference was an exhibition of restored masterpieces from both state and private collections, which was a great success on the part of culture historians. Much time and effort has been put into investigating the singing culture of Old Believers. As a result, the living tradition of the book singing has been revealed and collections of songs of several libraries have been described. It can easily be claimed that the beginning stage of systematic study of the Old Believers' culture in the region has been realized.

As a part of the national culture, the Old Believers' culture developed during several centuries among a specific strata of the population who acquired, through harassment and persecution, a peculiar religious stance, as well as specific common form of communication and worldview. This culture has specific features both in the

75For the history of creating this collection and reviews of most interesting items, please refer to Books of the Old Ural, Sverdlovsk, 1989. [This title in English translation and subsequent citations are all published in Russian. Editor's note.] The collection is described in detail. Also, please see Memorials of Literature and Written Tradition of the Peasantry of Zauralye, V.1, Sverdlovsk, Publishing House of the Ural State university, 1991, and vol.2, Yekaterinburg, Publishing House of the Ural State university, 1993.
poetic genre and in its historic evolution.

The Old Believers' culture was actively developing literacy because of a sudden schism with the official church body and an opposition to state authorities. These factors did not allow Old Believers to create adequate parallel church structures. It was at the grass-root level of traditional folk culture that the urgency to read, rewrite and interpret books originated. The appearance of nastavniks (spiritual teachers), replaced clergy in Bespopovtsy agreements. And problems with clergy in Beglopopovtsy communities, and the adherence of Old Believers to the right to enjoy their own type of faith and national way of life, made them search for answers to their dogmatic questions and daily problems in books. The process did not, in general, contradict the Christian orientation towards book learning and "wisdom". Books began being read by strata of the population that had not been initially associated with literacy. They simply acquired it by themselves and had no regular confessional education. Their knowledge was non-systematic and was modified with considerations based on natural rationalism or creative imagination.

The principal bearers of literacy combined with folk wisdom were the nastavniks. To become such a leader, the person had to be independent, strong-willed, have a good memory, and be able to find necessary words both in oral and written speech. Dealing with written tradition required advanced knowledge of culture and the desire to strive for intellectual growth. Unfortunately, to date there have been no social portraits of nastavniks, though the materials collected are in abundance: personal impressions, descriptions of private books and manuscript collections of Old Believers' leaders, memoirs and archive sources.

The uniqueness of the Old Believers' culture lies in a combination of cultural factors. The importance of the Old Faith for preserving the ancient Russian culture and literature has been repeatedly praised. It was Old Believers who brought in their hand-written collections a host of memorials of medieval literature to our time. This demonstrates the conservative consciousness of the people who read compositions of ancient Russian literature during the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. But it also serves as an important indicator of the growing complexity of their spiritual world, as
well as the formation of a new aesthetic worldview characteristic of the more "profane" literature.

Preservation and transmission of manuscripts was initially associated only with translations of the "true faith" to future generations. The utopian ideal of the "golden pre-Nikon times" of Christianity turned books into material artifacts of this era. Cultural-historical interpretations of books were modified using their religious sense. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, collectors appeared among the Old Believers for whom the aesthetic essence of a collection or the artistic value of a book or an icon were almost as important as its religious value itself.

Literary creativity revealed itself in the tradition of compiling literary works into volumes. When determining the composition of volumes in any collection of manuscripts, they were usually referred to as "The Old Believers" tradition. It is common practice that collections of Old Believers' literary compositions of various genres were collected under one roof. The closer it got to modernity, the greater the narrow-dogmatic trend in compiling volumes. For instance, the collections created in the Old Believers' (Pomortsy agreement) village of Tavatuii (55 kilometers from Yekaterinburg) at the end of the nineteenth century are specific encyclopedic volumes on polemic problems. Side by side to citations from various authoritative Christian sources, one can find compilations pertaining to the schism from newspapers, magazines, governmental decrees and orders contemporary to the compiler. These volumes, extremely bulky and miscellaneous in content, brought about negative assessments of the Tavatuii community to the reader. These volumes also include compositions of Old Believers themselves.76

The pragmatic doctrine of the traditional culture prompted the creation of variations of known texts as well as adjustment of literary memorials to folk

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76 The Ural copy of the "Life History" of the Chasovennye Agreement" found in "Memorials of Literature and Written Tradition of the Peasantry Beyond the Urals." V. 1, Issue 2, pp. 31-42. The first publication of the "Life History" of the Pomortsy agreement can be found in: Pikhoya R.G., Soboleva L.S. "Tsar's Secretary Ignatii Vorontsov and Don Kazak Ignatii Voronkov (On the History of the Recently Discovered Novel "Life History of the Pomortsy Faith in the Urals and Siberia". In: New Sources on the History of class struggle of the working people of the Ural. Sverdlovsk, 1985, pp. 60-81.
consciousness. As a result, it was from the Old Believers' medium that numerous interpretations of ancient Russian texts in plain folk language came. The Old Believers' literary tradition both preserved the traditions of ancient Russian literature and developed its own topics and, hence, its own original system of genres. Starting from the seventeenth century, literary creative work has been under constant ideological pressure. At times the pressure increased dramatically. As a result, the aesthetic doctrines which were so popular and actually in the literary style of the seventeenth century, became second in importance. The Old Believers started using literature as a means of solving its own polemic, doctrinal, and philosophical problems. The genres that had been referred to as business or technical ones, such as, messages, manifests, resolutions of councils, polemic pamphlets, theological considerations, etc., entered the range of the "artistic" genres by the seventeenth century. It was compositions of that kind that filled the volumes and comprised the greater part of the compositions.

The Old Believer's particularistic literary genre and style paralleled their Old Faith doctrine in its opposition to the official established religious practices. In-depth opposition to the "Nikon" church and, hence, to any governmental structure associated with it, was, to varying degrees, characteristic of any Old Believers' community. Even when a compromise was possible, it had to be theoretically substantiated. The system of polar opposites inherent in folk culture (good - evil, top - bottom, own - alien, etc.) was supplemented with the notions of true and false Christianity, which was related to correct - incorrect norms and standards of daily behavior. Family relations, relations with authorities, the role of community, etc. were all conceived in this manner. Ambivalence, inherent in folk culture served as a means of preserving optimism and survival in the most difficult and dangerous situations. Also, it was, at best, combined with doctrine on the only possible basis for behavioral standards, violation of which was equivalent to death. With the effects of reinforced ideological factors (eg., the preaching of talented nastavniks), people were led to believe in the inevitability of fate, especially during crisis periods. That resulted in the phenomenon of mass self-immolation, which is highly unusual within most traditional folk cultures.
Earlier written texts were subjected to "corrections." Thus, for instance, satirical compositions got "instructional interpretations," while eschatological and apocalyptic topics became most popular. In eschatological compositions, eschatology was interwoven with the contemporary situation, sometimes in a very unusual way. For instance, the canonical text of a handwritten copy of the Apocalypse of the eighteenth century might be modified with miniatures depicting realities of the Russian life of that period and portraits of contemporary political leaders. Until now the basic contents of old Believers' compositions on eschatology are devoted to proofs of the coming end of the world. Recently, in a Ural village a composition by a local leader of the Austrial agreement was discovered. It portrayed the advent of the Antichrist in the form of a laser computer ("komplyuter"), and credit cards.

The Old Believers movement deepened the historic folk notions. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a new genre was developing in the handwritten tradition. These were historical descriptions where events from the history of agreements, the history of Christianity in Russia and biblical stories were logically chained together. The degree of detail might be different, but of principal importance is the fact that every agreement views itself as a follower of the general history of Christianity. The historical concept is based on the generally recognized notion of an ideal state that corresponded to ideal Christianity. Folk legends about utopian lands that had existed at some other time and place received concrete historic interpretation in the seventeenth century. There are several such life histories of various agreements at our disposal, each characterized by its own historic logic. In all of them, however,

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79 This composition is a remake of an American original, which found its way to the Ural God knows how. is also known, as is claimed by Moscow archaeologists, in other regions. In: Soboleva L.S. "An American Composition on a Computer-Antichrist as Interpreted by Ural Old-Believer" (in print).
80 The Ural copy of the "Life History" of the Chasovennye agreement in: "Memorials of Literature and Written Tradition of the Peasantry Beyond the Ural." V. 1, Issue 2, pp. 31-42. The first publication of the "Life History" of the Pomortsy agreement can be found in: Pikhoya R.G., Soboleva L.S. "Tsar's Secretary Ignatii Vorontsov and Don Kazak Ignatii Voronkov (On the History of the Recently Discovered Novel "Life History of the Pomortsy Faith in the Urals and Siberia". In: New Sources on
the aim of the historical process is to transmit the "blessing of the true faith" to future
generations. But every life history has its own ideas concerning the mechanism of
transmission: institution of the Elders (Starshii), training disciples. However, all are
united by the tragic sense of an abyss separating the true historic way of the Old Belief
and the rest of the sinful world. As a result, an original epic tradition arose in the Old
Believers' culture where written compositions were embellished with legends and
narratives of prominent events and leaders of the region's history.

In the compositions of that period one can find polemic messages or
proceedings of councils carried out by Old Believers. These were used to find
solutions to numerous ritual and daily problems in the provincial regions. The
handwritten tradition of that period is characterized by repeated mentions of "painful
points" of the particular history, by worries about the most vital problems of the
communities, and by histories of Old Believers' leaders.

Owing to the necessity to constantly prove the correctness of the chosen way,
the leaders of communities had to create archives to store documents, correspondence,
and notes for historic compositions. In the non-sacred literature the notion of a
historic source and historic evidence was developed. In this case the Old Belief
evolved from eye-witness evidence (also used in historic narratives), which was
traditional for folk legends, to documented evidence. A document might be, a
manuscript, a printed record, or any other material object (such as remnants of a skit,
graveyard blocks, a cemetery with burying grounds, etc.).

The aesthetic criteria were subjected to qualitative changes. Instructive style
saturated with rhythmic formulae had become aesthetically important, and was used in
personal letters as well.

The spiritual culture of the Old Believers reshaped conventional feelings and
senses. Tragic forebodings of the approaching end of the world, images of
postmortem suffering, constant worries about the load of sins obtained in return for
the gift of living in this world—all these were interwoven in the tense genre of a
spiritual poem. The folk culture elaborated ideal images of salvation, and the desire to

the History of class struggle of the working people of the Ural. Sverdlovsk, 1985, pp. 60-81.
flee the world became not only the fate of monks, but a sort of unreachable dream whose realization was the highest possible implementation of the idea of happiness on the earth. Along with the traditional historical and mystical Old Believers poems, the Ural literary tradition has its own Shartash Old Believer center located in the outskirts of the present day Yekaterinburg. Opposition to the political system and official ideology that existed at that time was basically passive. Consequently, the positive characteristics a person might be known for were his patience, ability to defend his Faith, resourcefulness and emotionality. Those new facets of lyrical emotions were reflected in volumes of lyrical poetry, a tradition that has lived until the present day.

Folk consciousness affected the development of written culture by instilling in it attitudes prevalent in the oral tradition. Not only was the content important, but also the form of the word. Once written, the word was believed to acquire magic properties, and therefore, written documents were treated like zagovors (charms), and manuscripts were often used as amulets. The same thing happened with apocrypha, in which case the texts were subjected to significant alterations and variations (for instance, the text of the "Dream of the Mother of God," which existed both in handwritten and oral traditions.81

When the folk notions and way of life started being valued as a norm to be aspired to, it was the deep considerations and thoughts of the Old Believers which enriched the search for national unity. As a result, many great Russian writers of the nineteenth century devoted their compositions to subjects relating to Old Believers, while the pathos of protest and even fanaticism was characteristic of the creative work of Leo Tolstoy. As to the oral and written Ural literary traditions, (eg., novels by Mamin-Sibiryak), Old Believers are their permanent characters.

81 Soboleva L.S. “Apocrypha: Dream of the Mother of God” in the later handwritten-tradition (Based on the Materials of Regional Collections of the Ural State University)”. In: “Sources on the History of Folk Culture of the North.” Syktyvkar, 1991, pp. 65-70.