

Molokans and Old Believers in Two Worlds: Migration, Change, and Continuity

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s I sit at the festive table with Russian-American Molokans who have gathered for a house-blessing ritual of a young family in its new, very American ranch-style house in the very American city of Los Angeles, I am overwhelmed by the feeling that I have seen this all before in a small, southern Russian village near Stavropol, at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains. It is still astonishing to observe in the heart of the most urban American setting a world that is essentially Russian and essentially Molokan.* The entire ritual and the feast that follows seem the same in both places: the hostess brings in a ten-inch-tall round loaf of bread with a salt shaker on top of it; men and women are clothed in the same light pastel colors. The men all have long beards and wear *kosovorotky* (Russian village-style shirts without collars and with buttons on the left side); the women all cover their heads with shawls. The courses of the meal and the order in which they are served are the same (tea, homemade noodles, beef stew, fruit compote, with pieces of bread spread over the table, directly on the tablecloth); the long, parallel rows of tables and backless benches are familiar. Finally, I can hear the same power in their dignified and inspiring singing. Yet the language in Los Angeles is mostly English, albeit interspersed with Russian; the majority of young people only know a few Russian words. The women's dresses and the men's shirts are made from much finer fabrics than those in Russia, and

the furniture and all the accessories mirror those found in other American homes. After a while the singing, too, sounds somewhat different.

This visit with the Molokans in California took place just a few months after I returned from the Stavropol area in Russia, where in August 1989 I worked with a group of Russian Molokans and Old Believers. My journey also took me to Woodburn, a town in Oregon, where the Molokans' neighbors are Russian-American Old Believers. As I drove on a small street, I noticed children playing *lapta* (a favorite Russian children's game, a sort of baseball), girls dressed in sleeveless dresses over colorful blouses, and boys in equally colorful *kosovorotky*. They were speaking Russian among themselves. One block further, I saw a small church painted in beautiful colors with an Old Believers' cross on top. Many of the back yards were plowed and waiting to be seeded. I did not have to enter a single house to determine that Russians lived here.

RUSSIAN ROOTS: THE OLD BELIEVERS

During the 17th century, the Russian Empire was undergoing enormous religious and social changes, which culminated in the 1650s reform of the Russian Orthodox Church by Patriarch Nikon and later, by the turn of the 18th century, reforms of secular life by Peter the Great. These reforms were designed to unify and modernize the Russian Church and to westernize the entire Russian way of life. Patriarch Nikon's revisions of liturgical texts and manuscripts, his modification of the symbolic gesture made while crossing oneself (he insisted on using three fingers instead of two), and other changes precipitated numerous fac-

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Photo by Alison P. Loskutoff

Molokans gather for the first international Molokan congress in Ukraine in 1992. They are preparing a feast for the entire community. The feast includes borscht and *lapsha* (noodles); the men are tending the samovars.

tions and dissent movements. The largest group of those who did not accept the Nikonian reforms and who committed themselves to preserving all of the pre-Nikonian Orthodox practices called themselves *Starovery* (*staryi* = old, *vera* = faith), the Old Believers.

Excommunicated after 1666, the Old Believers were persecuted by religious and state authorities throughout most of Russian history and lived in direct opposition to these authorities until several years ago. Many fled to isolated places where they hoped to preserve their faith and cultural heritage, at times preferring to burn themselves and their churches rather than accept new religious practices. Some Old Believers settled in remote villages of northern Russia, along the coast of the White Sea; others established colonies along the Volga River in central Russia; some fled to the south and settled among the Cossacks; still others scattered in Siberia. Several *soglasia* (concords, alliances) exist among the Old Believers: the Pomortsy *soglasie* (priestless Old Believers originally from the north of Russia), the Belokrinitsa *soglasie* (those who had accepted priests from an Orthodox bishop in the Austro-Hungarian Empire), the Beglopopovtsy (from *beglyi*, "run-away," and *pop*, "priest," i.e., those who had

taken fugitive priests from the Russian Orthodox Church as their spiritual leaders), Chasovenniki (those who had lost priesthood under Czar Nicholas I), and others. In general, the Old Believers who accept priesthood are called *popovtsy*, and priestless Old Believers are the *bespopovtsy*. Some of the *soglasia* consist of married people, while others practice celibacy.

During the 19th century, and particularly after 1905, when official persecution of Russian religious minorities ended, many extremely successful entrepreneurs, politicians, businessmen, and merchants emerged from the ranks of Old Believers.

The first Old Believers came to North America around 1885 from Suwalki in Poland (then a western province of the Russian Empire) and from villages around Minsk (Byelorussia). All belonged to the Pomortsy *soglasie*, the largest single group of priestless Old Believers in Russia who practiced marriage. Although they lived among others, they always tried to preserve their own identity by practicing some self-imposed seclusion. Many of the new immigrants to the United States worked in heavy industry in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Michigan. A large number worked on the ore docks of Erie and in the coal mines of southwest Pennsylvania, where they settled into close-knit communities.

The second largest settlement of Russian Old Believers in the United States was formed during the 1960s around Woodburn, Oregon. They had escaped Communist persecutions twice: first, by moving from Soviet Siberia to China, and then in 1949, when the Communist regime came to power in China,

by moving again to Brazil and Argentina. In the 1960s, with the help of the Tolstoy Foundation in New York, they settled in Oregon. The youngest community of Old Believers in the United States branched out from the Oregon group about ten years ago and settled on Alaska's Kenai Peninsula.

After the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad revoked its excommunication of the Old Believers in the 1970s, a large part of the Old Believer community in Erie accepted priesthood and communion with this church. (The independent Russian Orthodox Church Abroad was established in the United States after the October Revolution of 1917.) Some other groups living in the United States (mostly in Oregon) have recently accepted priesthood and intercommunion with a group of priestly Old Believers now based in Moscow, the Belokrinitsa *soglasie*. Still other Old Believers continue to reject priesthood. Participants in the Festival program are the *popovtsy*, i.e., priestly Old Believers. One group is from Erie; the second group represents the Nekrasovtsy from the Stavropol area in south Russia.

The Nekrasovtsy are descendants of those Old Believers who settled among the Don Cossacks in the steppes along the Don River in south Russia. The Cossacks were independent, peasant military units who guarded the southern borders of Russia. They welcomed many who had fled from central Russia, whether runaway soldiers, bankrupt peasants, feudal serfs, or religious dissenters. At the beginning of the 18th century, Peter the Great attempted to subjugate the Cossacks and abolish their administrative autonomy, but the Cossacks resisted. After Kondrat Bulavin, the leader of an unsuccessful uprising against the Czar, was killed in 1708, Ignat Nekrasov led the Cossacks of his military unit and their families across the Don to escape political and religious repression. In 1812, after a century of moving from one area to another (including the mouth of the Danube River, where descendants of the Nekrasovtsy still live today), one group finally settled on Lake Manyas in Turkey, not far from the Marmara Sea.

In 1912-13 some Nekrasovtsy returned to Russia and were settled in the Krasnodar steppes; in 1962, the remainder of the community, consisting of 215 families, also went back to be settled by the Soviet government at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains, in the Stavropol steppes. Some Nekrasovtsy families did not want to return to Russia and came to various parts of the United States, including Woodburn, Oregon.

RUSSIAN ROOTS: THE MOLOKANS

One of many peasant alliances that expressed religious and social dissent in rural 18th-century Russia, Spiritual Christian Molokans date from the 1760s. Like the Dukhobors (Spirit Fighters), a sect from which the Molokans branched out, they sought religious freedom from the Russian Orthodox Church and economic independence from state-imposed poverty through the establishment of a self-governing brotherhood of equal men.

The name *Molokans* comes from the Russian *moloko*, "milk." Three interpretations of the origin of the name *Molokane* or *Molokany*, loosely translated as milk drinkers, circulate widely among them. According to the first, the Scripture is spiritual milk, and since their teachings are based on a literal reading of scripture, they consume spiritual milk. The second reflects their defiance of Orthodox Church fasts in general and, specifically, the church prohibition against drinking milk (among other non-vegetarian products) on Wednesdays, Fridays, and during other longer fasts. The third refers to the river *Molochnye Vody* (Milky Waters), near which the Molokans lived in their early days.

Molokanism is a peculiar amalgamation of the Old and New Testaments and, at the same time, of popular beliefs and faith



Photo by Anita Robson

Fr. Jurewicz of the Old Believer community in Erie, Pennsylvania, paints an icon at his home. The icons are used in the local church and in Russian communities across the country.



Photo courtesy Andrei A. and MaryJane P. Shabalin

Molokans in San Francisco process to the church for a wedding celebration in 1987. The bride and groom are followed by singers, the bride's family, and friends. They will be greeted at the church by the groom's family and the congregation.

characteristic of Russian villagers. Although links with Western sectarian Protestants, Judaic practices, and earlier Russian mystics are also evident, essentially Molokanism is a Christian protest movement that grew out of traditional Russian values and cultural models. As the Molokans' favorite expression goes, they "live and sing by the spirit and by the mind." This expression provides insight into the Molokan spiritual and cultural universe, which is simultaneously deeply mystical and thoroughly rationalistic.

Like other earlier sectarians in Russia, the Molokans abandoned the Orthodox Church altogether. They rejected the church's rituals, holidays, and all material aspects of Russian Orthodoxy, including the cross and icons. They also rejected the church's hierarchy and paid clergy, as they sought direct contact with God. Salvation is in faith alone, they say; the ultimate enlightenment, Molokans believe, comes through experiences incomprehensible to the senses and to logic, and one should seek it through communal worship "in spirit and truth."

For their resentment of the mainstream Orthodox Church, the Molokans, like the Old Believers a hundred years before them, were outlawed and severely repressed in Russia. In the 1830s the government moved many from central Russia to the Transcaucasus. After their exemption from military service expired and petitions to renew it were denied, they migrated further south, some to territory

which later came under Turkish jurisdiction. Some Molokan schismatics, in search of good land and led by prophecies, ended up in Persia, North America, Australia, and other parts of the world. The largest Molokan community still remains in Russia. In the United States, the first Molokans arrived in Los Angeles and San Francisco between 1902 and 1904.

At present, there are three main denominations of the Molokan sect: the Steadfast, who claim to have nearly preserved the original Molokan doctrine and order of service; the Jumpers, who later began to accept the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in prophecy and physical manifestation, i.e., jumping; and the Maximists, a still-later 19th-century formation, who accepted the teachings of new prophets/leaders, mostly those of Maxim Rudometkin. Recently, a radically new and much disputed development has taken place in an American settlement: a small reform group of young Molokans has adopted English as their liturgical language and introduced westernized approaches to the church. The two Molokan groups presented at the Festival, one from the Stavropol area and the other from San Francisco, belong to the Steadfast denomination.

The San Francisco Molokan community began around 1906, when Molokans from the Caucasus and Kars (Turkey) settled on Potrero Hill, which still functions as the heart of San Francisco Molokan activities. A second wave of migration occurred after World War II and brought Molokans from the Caucasus, Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, the Russian Far East, and from Iran, Iraq, and China.

RUSSIAN ROOTS, AMERICAN BRANCHES

The Old Believers and the Molokans represent two very different phenomena of Russian religious and cultural life. The Old Believers belong to the old Orthodox Church, while the Molokans reject it altogether. If visual aspects are very important for the Old Believers (the best representation of this can be found in

their handwritten books, carefully and artfully illuminated and decorated with colorful miniatures, as well as in their icon paintings), Molokans pay less attention to visual expressions of their faith and concentrate almost entirely on aural aspects. Still, their histories have much in common. Both were persecuted by the Russian church and government, imprisoned, executed, and forced to migrate. For both, living in diaspora and in opposition to mainstream culture became the norm. These circumstances forced them to be independent and strong, spiritually and physically, in order to withstand pressures from the dominant culture.

In some ways, the early history of Molokans and Old Believers in the United States parallels the experiences of other ethnic and religious communities that migrated here. They were hard workers with little English; they settled in neighborhoods and formed close-knit communities. Once they were settled, men sent money home to bring over their families. Some families who lived near one another in the old country also became neighbors here, in the “Russian ghettos” in Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Erie. Gradually, they raised enough money to build their first churches, which, as in many ethnic communities, provided the focus for the religious, cultural, and social life of their parishioners. It took two generations before real integration into the local society occurred. The third generation now includes teachers, college professors, businessmen and women, insurance agents, and other professionals.

To many, Russian Old Believers and Molokans look, speak, and sing like typical Russian villagers. In fact, their connection to the old order of life in Russian villages runs even deeper. They do not compartmentalize life and faith into separate spheres of activity but rather understand religion as a syncretic entity. Both the Old Believers and the Molokans regard themselves as keepers of this rural tradition, perpetuating not only religious concepts and rites but also the old holistic way of living, including the relationships between the individual and the community, family

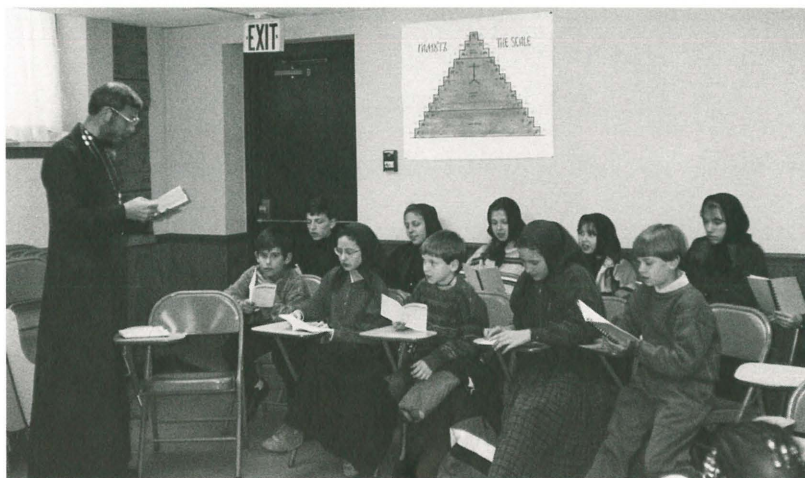


Photo by Anita Robson

structure, rituals, customs, and dietary practices. For those who lived outside of Russia, this commitment included the preservation of ethnic identity, language, and songs.

Observers have often emphasized conscientious traditionalism as the primary factor that defines the world view of these two groups. In reality, Old Believers and Molokans have survived as cultural and religious entities by maintaining a flexible balance between an “ideal” orientation toward the past and the necessities of the present. The strategies adopted by each Molokan and Old Believer community vary greatly. Old Believers living in Oregon and Alaska, for example, have chosen to keep their lifestyle, language, rituals, singing (both sacred and secular), clothing, etc., as close as possible to traditional ways, while a group of Old Believers in Erie has adopted an American approach to secular life. They have changed the language of the liturgy to English and permitted converts to join as well. These decisions have generated heated debates and profound rifts within the community, even within single families. Similar processes can be observed in the Molokan communities, in which the gamut of adaptations employed varies even more widely.

MUSIC IN TWO WORLDS

A cappella choral singing has comprised one of the most central features of the both Old Believers' and Molokans' self-identity. Even those communities that have lived in the United States for many decades and use

Fr. Pimen Simon instructs children of the Old Believer community in Erie, Pennsylvania, in traditional Russian songs.



Photo by Yuri Lunkov, courtesy Moscow Conservatory

A group of Nekrasovtsy Old Believers gathers for a seasonal *krylo* dance near their village in the Stavropol area.

English as their liturgical language have consciously and consistently kept Russian melodies and singing practices intact.

Singing serves many functions, one of which is the creation of a historical continuum: traditional psalms, chants, and hymns assure continuity with the past, while the acquisition of a new secular repertoire links the past with the present. The Old Believers see their special mission as preserving the pre-Nikonian liturgical chant, the *znamennyi*. Some communities in Russia and the United States still preserve the knowledge of the *znamennyi* from manuscript books and a medieval form of its notation by neums (ancient symbols), called *kriuki*. The Molokans preserved the old melodies of their psalms strictly through oral tradition. In addition, the Molokans generally welcomed the opportunity to borrow new melodies and turn any tune they liked into their own song of praise. Melodic hits, including songs from Soviet films and favorite American songs, have left their traces in the Molokans' repertoire ("Amazing Grace," "It's the Last Rose of Summer," "Clementine," and "Red River Valley" are just a few examples.)

In many Old Believer and in some Molokan communities, singing of secular "folk" songs was forbidden, particularly after marriage. (Often, young people sang them secretly anyway, usually at various youth gatherings.) This practice, needless to say, has

not facilitated the steady transmission of the secular repertory, and it is not surprising that most American Old Believers and Molokans do not know Russian secular songs. On the other hand, in every American community I have visited so far, there are still a few people who remember and can sing some traditional Russian songs. Mostly, these are late 19th-century and early 20th-century songs, the so-called romances, factory, and soldiers' songs, as well as more recent songs, mostly from popular post-World War II Soviet films. In each community I was also able to record older ritual songs and laments from weddings and funerals.

The Nekrasovtsy Old Believer community adopted an altogether different attitude toward the secular repertory. For them, keeping old songs in active memory was one of the most important strategies for preserving their Russian roots and history. When they returned to Russia after 254 years, they knew songs and dances that had long been forgotten by people in the homeland.

For any culture, a migration is akin to taking a plant out of its soil. However, for several Russian religious groups it has also been a factor that has stimulated the preservation of culture, no matter where the group has settled.

Since *perestroika*, religious communities can practice their beliefs freely. As people's need to identify their roots surfaces and grows in the former Soviet society, these communities are gaining the respect and even admiration of their fellow Russians for having maintained their faith and preserved their history throughout the Soviet era. No one ridicules Old Believer or Molokan men any more for their long beards and rope-like belts or women for their kerchiefs and dresses. No one forbids the children of Old Believers to wear crosses. The attention scholars have given their culture has also played a positive role. What had separated and differentiated them from their neighbors is now accorded value. In the new Russia, their carefully guarded self-identity once again asserts its powerful role in their survival as a community.

The other major change engendered by the new political climate in Russia is the opportunity to reestablish contacts with their historical brothers and sisters living in the United States. At the beginning, it was not easy, and I felt honored that Molokan communities in Russia and the United States trusted representatives of the Smithsonian Institution, Dr. Serafima Nikitina and myself, to be the couriers and deliverers of news, information, documents, and new literature.

Shipment of religious books was followed by a steady two-way traffic of people. Now continuous humanitarian aid is in place and, with the help of American Molokans, two churches are being built in Russia. Two all-Molokan congresses of representatives of the major Molokan churches in Russia and the United States have taken place since 1991. Singing together is always a high point of the now-frequent meetings of "American" and "Russian" Molokans, and a cassette with recorded psalms and songs has become a cherished gift.

The invitation from the Smithsonian to participate in the 1995 Festival of American Folklife was greeted by the four groups presented in our program with remarkable enthusiasm. Although some communities remain completely closed to scholars even today because they do not think that their singing, not to mention their religious life, should be studied or observed, I have been fortunate to meet many members of Molokan and Old Believer communities who have supported my inquiries and generously shared with me their talents, knowledge, and convictions. I am grateful for their confidence and trust, and am convinced that those who hear their magnificent singing on the Mall will feel privileged, gratified, and greatly enriched.

Edward Samarin, a prominent figure of the San Francisco Molokans, permitted me to quote from a letter he wrote in contemplation of the decision to take part in the Festival:

To a Molokan, singing *posalmy* [psalms] is more than just singing praises to God. It allows one to participate, somehow mystically, in the event we are singing

about and is the door that lets one go in and know and experience the Eternal One. Singing *posalmy* is that theater where we act out the drama of another time that we are all linked to and this unites us together. It [singing *posalmy*] restores the soul and allows for a good and right and healthy relationship to one another, and to God. So singing *posalmy*, singing them the way we Molokans from San Francisco do, is a pretty big deal to me, and now I get to share this very, very important part of my life with many, many others at the Festival. And who knows, just maybe someone hearing might get to feel as good as I do when I'm singing Molokan *posalmy*.

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