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The mouse, the snake, and the devil's collar: Soviet symbols in the memory of Old Believers of the Upper Kama region

Аннотация. Советский проект создания «нового человека» включал в себя конструирование коллективной памяти, которая была не только легитимной версией прошлого, но и хранилищем культурных ценностей, а также фоном (и даже местом — если говорить о мемориалах, музеях и т. п.) для празднования советских ритуалов. Сам проект был достаточно однообразен, но имел много локальных вариантов, которые определялись в значительной степени этнической и религиозной идентичностью местного населения. Старообрядческие общины Русского Севера разделяли символы прошлого, места памяти и памятные ритуалы с остальной частью страны. Однако восприятие коммунистического режима и его символов в этой среде зависело от целого ряда факторов: во-первых, от высокой грамотности глубоко религиозных старообрядцев, их эрудиции в области христианской, и в частности древнерусской литературы; во-вторых, от критического отношения к советской власти; в-третьих, от местных верований. В данной статье анализируется процесс адаптации коммунистического проекта к устойчивым религиозным и культурным традициям старообрядцев Верхокамья и делается попытка объяснить, как коммунистические символы симбиотически сосуществовали с враждебным отношением местного населения к советской власти и почему они пережили крах режима. Взаимное приспособление навязанного коммунистического проекта и местного символического языка заняло многие десятилетия, но в итоге к концу советской эпохи неприятие «коммунистической реальности» было сглажено, повседневная напряженность исчезла, а само прежнее отчуждение стало частью коллективной памяти как на уровне семьи, так и на уровне общины. Статья основана на интервью со старообрядцами Верхокамья, собранных автором в 2011 и 2013 гг.

Ключевые слова: коллективная память, старообрядцы, Верхокамье, Антихрист, октябрята, пионеры, комсомольцы

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Articles

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The mouse, the snake, and the devil's collar: Soviet symbols in the memory of Old Believers of the Upper Kama region

Abstract. The Soviet project of creating the "new man" included the construction of a collective memory which was not only a legitimate version of the past, but also a repository of cultural values, and the background or space for celebrating Communist rituals. The project itself was rather uniform, but had multiple local incarnations that were determined mostly by the ethnic and religious identity of the local population. The Old Believers' communities of the Russian North shared with the rest of the country symbols of the past, sites of memory, and commemorative rituals. Still, local perceptions of the Communist regime and its symbols depended in this milieu on a variety of factors: first, the high literacy rate of the deeply religious Old Believers, as well as their erudite knowledge of Christian, and specifically Old Russian literature; second, the very critical attitude toward Soviet power; and third, local beliefs. This article analyzes the process of adaptation of the Communist project to Old Believers' persistent religious and cultural traditions and seeks to explain how Communist symbols symbiotically coexisted with hostile local attitudes and why they even survived the collapse of the regime. Mutual adjustment of the imposed Communist project and the local symbolic language took many decades, yet finally, by the end of the Soviet era, when three or four generations had seen no other reality than that they were surrounded by, the strong rejection of this reality was smoothed out, everyday tensions mostly disappeared, and the earlier alienation itself became part of collective memory on both family and community levels. The article is based on interviews with Old Believers of the Upper Kama region (*Verkhokamie*), conducted by the author in 2011 and 2013.

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Keywords: collective memory, Old Believers, the Upper Kama region (*Verkhokamie*), the Anti-Christ, Octobrists, Pioneers, Komsomol

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In the focus of my field research were the communities of the Upper Kama Region (*Verkhokamie*), a historic area (about 2400 km^2) near the sources of the Kama river, on the border between the Perm' region and the Udmurt republic. Old Believers migrated there from central and northern Russia since the late 17th century.

By the beginning of the 20th century about 30 000 "priestless" Old Believers (*bespopovtsy*) lived in this area. They lived either in large villages or on small farms, with well-established social and religious ties between them. Many of these communities still exist in the region, with an estimated population of about 10 000. However, the number of purely religious communities (*sobors*) has decreased noticeably; now they consist mostly of elderly people.

The Communist regime was first established in the region in 1918 and met with strong resistance on part of the Old Believers. A peasant rebellion against the Communists started here in August, 1918, but was brutally suppressed. Those soldiers of the Red Army who were killed during the uprising as well as locals who supported the Communists soon became prominent heroes of the regional "official memory" which still dominates official discourse here. In the 1990s there appeared several publications rehabilitating the insurgents in local media, but Communist monuments and museum expositions are still in place (fig. 1, 2).

Unofficial, private narratives present the events quite differently. They portray the rebellious peasants, who were often the fathers, uncles, or grandfathers of the people I talked to, as heroes, or rather victims of the regime, while the Red Army soldiers are seen as invaders and warriors of the Anti-Christ.

When analyzing the perceptions of Communist symbols by the Old Believers of the Upper Kama region in the 1920s–1980s, I am going to try to explain, firstly, the ideological framework that determined the interpretation of Soviet symbols (Pioneers' ties, Pioneers', Octobrists', and Komsomol pins) and rituals as anti-Christian ones, and, secondly, changes in this interpretation throughout the 20th century.



Fig. 1. *Village elders — those who suppressed the rebellion in 1918*
Photo 1967. Courtesy of Sepych Rural Museum,
Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai



Fig. 2. *"Communal grave of 42 rural Communists and Red Army soldiers brutally tortured during the counter-revolutionary* kulak *(peasant) rebellion in the village of Sepych in August 1918".*
Photo O. B. Khristoforova. 2011

The article is based on interviews with Old Believers of the Upper Kama region carried out by the author in 2011 and 2013. A total of 83 interviews were conducted. The theme of attitude to Soviet power was of keen interest to the respondents. They willingly recalled the events of their childhood and youth, talked about the attitude of their parents and grandparents to the symbols of Soviet power. They also spoke calmly and without fear about their attitude to Soviet rulers — from Lenin to Putin. Fragments of 15 interviews were selected for publication.

Communist children's and youth organizations in the USSR were ranged according to the age of their target groups. 7–10 year old children could join the ranks of "Little Octobrists" (*oktiabriata*), the name commemorating the October revolution of 1917. From about the age of 10 they moved to the "Pioneers", and from about 14 to the "Komsomols" (*komsomoltsy*). The first "Pioneer" squads appeared in 1922 in major cities, and the first "Octobrist" groups in 1923. Later these organizations reached the countryside. My informants born in the 1920s had heard nothing about the Octobrists. Only a few of them, mostly children of the newcomers, had joined the Пioneer squads. But many younger informants, born in the 1940s–1950s, while having skipped the Octobrists' stage, entered the ranks of the Pioneers.



Fig. 3. "Oktiabriata — *brave kids. We are named so not in vain but in honor of the victory of October." (From* oktiabriatas*' march, 1940) 1960, Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia Photo from the personal archive of E. K. Buzmakova. By permission of the owner*

Children regarded Pioneer status as a prestigious one: at first only those with high grades were allowed to join, the rest were accepted only later, and some were never admitted at all. Not to become a Pioneer was a disgrace. My informant born

in 1946, whose parents forbade her to join, told me she cried about it because she wanted "to be like others". She also never joined the Komsomol, but regularly attended Komsomol meetings [Resp. 1]. If you did not join the Pioneers you were considered a recluse, said another woman [Resp. 2] (fig. 3, 4).



Fig. 4. *Young Pioneers. 1960s, Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia*
Photo from the personal archive of E. K. Buzmakova
By permission of the owner

In the Old Believer families involvement in any of these organizations was normally rejected. "I will hang you with your scarf!" the father of an informant told her when he found out she had joined the Pioneers in the early 1950s [Resp. 3] (a big red scarf was a personal symbol of being a "Young Pioneer"). However, many children just ignored their parents' disapproval. They put on the scarf on their way to school and hid it while going home. Of course, not all the families had the same strongly negative attitude. Some children joined the Pioneers in the 1940s and 1950s with tacit approval of their parents (fig. 5), while others could not do it even in the early 1980s. Even in the 1960s the older generation seriously called a Pioneer scarf "Satan's/dog's collar", "the Devil's/red yoke", or "sheep's joy" ("they put it on and go happy" [Resp. 4]). In the ends of a red scarf, as well as in the pentagonal star of the Octobrists or in the Komsomol pin they saw the reflection of the fires of Hell. When an informant born in 1966 joined the Octobrists without having asked his elders and came home with a star pinned to his shirt, his grandfather said: "You pierced your heart through with this star, you should have it burnt on your back!" [Resp. 5]. Here we have a realization of a typical motive of the Upper Kama region Old Believers' rhetoric: of burning a sinful object or sign on a sinner's body, with an allusion to hellfire.



Fig. 5. *Sev. Kommunar, Sivinskiy Distr., Perm Krai. 1950s*
Photo from the personal archive of M. M. Fedoseeva
By permission of the owner

We often met such judgments, motivating various prohibitions, in particular, the ban on being photographed:

> *Interviewer*: Are you [members of the *sobor*] allowed to be photographed?
>
> *Resp. 6*: They are not... That is, it is written, of course. ‹...› Mom was still alive, she was reading a book, *The Synaxarion*, I guess. It's very bad. ‹...› I heard it like this, I heard it, when I was little: Here, put this picture on the body, burn it on the body. If your body endures it, let's say, it will not hurt — take pictures. Well, as on the body, put this picture on the body, it will burn — what it will be?

There were other versions of posthumous punishment. It was said that "those who wear a Pioneer scarf in the afterlife would be throttled by a snake. Or a place where a badge was pinned would be nibbled by a mouse, or sucked by a toad" [Resp. 2; Resp. 6]. Where did these images come from? They are commonplaces of the Old Believer literary tradition. For instance, "The Tale of the Sinful Mother" from the Russian version of *Speculum maius* (The Great Mirror) tells the story of a monk who had a vision about his late mother sitting on a snake with a scorpion on her head. Another snake was wound around her neck, and in her ears sat "fierce mice" [Sokolova 1989: 233–234]. Thus, she was punished for her lechery and addiction to embellishment (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. *"The Tale of the Sinful Mother". Old Believer manuscript 19th century, fragment [Antonov, Maizul's 2013: 213]*

Signs of affiliation with a "Godless" organization or of loyalty to the "anti-Christian" regime were perceived as a kind of embellishment. Old Believers regarded any kind of embellishment, for instance, jewelry, as Satan's invention aimed at seducing people. To use them was a grave sin subject to inevitable punishment: "A brooch was prohibited, the toads would stick" [Resp. 2].

The images of the snake and the toad are characteristic of the Old Believer tradition. They are often found in old printed and manuscript books, beginning with the *Explanatory Apocalypse* and ending with various novels and parables. In the Upper Kama region, so-called *tsvetniki* (illustrated books) were widespread in house and cathedral libraries, and in them we often find snakes and toads. Sometimes they are depicted coming out of a person's mouth and symbolizing her or his sins (fig. 7). This motif goes back to the Revelation of John the Evangelist (Rev. 16:13). Motifs where a toad or a snake punishes a person by sucking on her body are connected with posthumous punishments of women for abortions and for wearing jewelry (cf. the above-mentioned "The Tale of the Sinful Mother", as well as the similar "The Tale of the Wife Who Withheld Sin". Both tales are widely represented in Old Believers' illustrated books).

The motif of burning is also very characteristic for the Old Belief tradition. It's worth mentioning that in Soviet culture images of fire and burning were, on the contrary, very positive. For instance, a former schoolteacher of chemistry, who, in her own words, devoted all her life to anti-religious propaganda among

children with the help of chemical experiments, proudly cited to me the words of the Communist poet Nâzım Hikmet: “If I don’t burn, if you don’t burn, if we don’t burn, who will lift the darkness?” [Resp. 7] (fig. 8). But from the point of view of those whom she tried to enlighten, this burning could take place only in one particular location, where they have absolutely no desire to go.



Fig. 7. *“The Tale of the Wife Who Withheld Sin”. Old Believer manuscript 19th century, fragment. Manuscript Department of the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House). Coll. K. P. Gemp. Fol. 89. P. 88*



Fig. 8. *Lidia Zhuikova. Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia Photo by O. B. Khristoforova. 2011. By permission of L. Zhuikova*

Other, obviously ideologically neutral cultural practices associated with the new regime, such as haircutting for girls, were also prohibited. These practices were closely associated with joining the Communist youth organizations. For cutting her braid a girl might be severely punished. As a father, head of the kolkhoz, told one of my informants, born in 1926, in prohibiting her to join the Pioneers: "Do not dare to cut your hair, if you come home without them, I won't let you in" [Resp. 8].

On the other hand, participation in a family's or a community's religious life led to penalties imposed by a school or a Pioneer organization. Many informants related that teachers checked whether children wore crosses under their clothes, so it was necessary to take them off on the way to school, or hide them in the underwear.

> From the house we had been sent with a cross, and we were going to school — somewhere we kept it. On the way home — again put it on. We were not allowed to wear it — so we hid it. You never know, doctors may come to check or someone else [Resp. 9].

Those Pioneers who on Whitsunday visited local cemetaries with their families, as custom prescribed, were publicly reproached at schools. To be sure, here, like in a family, "the human factor" determined a lot. Many teachers were of local origin and treated religious traditions with indulgence or even sympathy.

As a result of all these contradictory influences, several generations of the Upper Kama region Old Believers who took off their crosses and put on their Pioneer scarves on their way to school and vice versa on their way home grew up in a constant position of doublethink. This way of "serving both God and the Devil" that they themselves so disliked facilitated the process of adaptation to the Communist ideology, political and economic realities. As they put it,

> We had it all simultaneously, we prayed and were among Octobrists / Pioneers [Resp. 10].

> I didn't take off my scarf, but always wore a cross, too. You're torn between the two, at school they tell you there is no God, at home, that He does exist [Resp. 2].

Some adults contributed to this cognitive dissonance in their children in order to "compensate" for their adherence to Soviet culture. One of my informants, born in 1922, never joined any youth organization, and prohibited her children to do this. However, they wanted to, and her son dared to disobey. The following conversation took place after that.

> "I don't want to pray, I enrolled in the Pioneers".
> "Do you have a mark on your forehead because of that? Go on, pray!"

At this point, as the informant told me, her husband, a veteran of the Great Patriotic War and an atheist, interfered with a short "stop it!". That was enough, and permission not to prey was granted [Resp. 11].

While the perception of Communist symbols was rooted in the Old Christian literary tradition, opinions about the personalities of Communist or youth organizations' functionaries rested also upon local mythological tradition, that is, witchcraft and sorcery beliefs.

Old Believers regarded being a Communist as a mortal sin. Communists, like sorcerers, were not permitted to be buried according to Christian ritual (other groups of Old Believers had a similar attitude, see [Kostrov 2010: 37–38]) (fig. 9). Most Communists refused to be confessed on their deathbed, which was considered as a sign of being a sorcerer. In the same way a practitioner of black magic reads his/her Black Bible, a Communist reads his/her "Scripture". Sorcerers, as local people believed, often competed with each other, mocked one another. Communists did the same.



Fig. 9. *"This is a Torment for Sorcerers". Old Believer manuscript 19th century, fragment [Antonov, Maizul's 2013: 178]*

Damage done to others rebounds on sorcerers and on their children. A similar retribution awaited Communists and their families. Informants told me that local Communist bosses had suffered from ill fortune, both they and their children came to a bad end, so that all their families died out. An enrollment in Communist (including youth) organizations put a person in danger of irregular death: an early one, accidental, without a confession: "There were those after us who enrolled in Pioneers, but they somehow died early" [Resp. 12]). We may interpret this motif as an allusion to God's punishment. Yet another interpretation is also possible: the Old Believers perceived Communist training and even Soviet school education as an introduction to a secret and dangerous knowledge, similar to sorcery. One of the typical narratives about sorcerers describes how those who

hadn't finished their study were unable to control their demon-helpers and died because of them [Khristoforova 2010: 76–78]. Furthermore, the narratives on how and why a person refused to join the Komsomol or the Party are very similar in terms of their structure and motifs to local narratives concerning a refusal to learn sorcery.

That being said, in the last two decades opinions about Communists in the Upper Kama region have smoothed out and now are not so straightforwardly negative. Opportunities for confession, absolution, entering a *sobor*, and Christian funerals are open to them, as well as to alleged sorcerers.

The attitude towards Communists started to change after the Great Patriotic War. The war changed the status of the younger generation that took an active part in the fighting, and, metaphorically speaking, "wiped out" their sin of being a Communist in the eyes of the elders (fig. 10, 11). On the one hand, many locals joined the Party while at the front. On the other, Komsomol and Party members sometimes turned to the Christian faith in their later days. A kind of mutual adjustment of ideologies and practices took place that changed them both. "Yeah, we were sinners. We went through this Komsomol, that's it. These were the rules. [If] you were not a member, you could not get anywhere" [Resp. 5a].



Fig. 10. *Ivan Selivanov, b. 1918, after the Great Patriotic War, with military awards Courtesy of Sepych Rural Museum, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai*



Fig. 11. *Red Army soldier Unknown local artist Courtesy of Sepych Rural Museum, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai*

These historical changes in the perception of Communists or Soviet children's / youth organizations are also typical for the attitude towards collective farms (*kolkhozes*). In the 1920s-1930s, the grandfathers/grandmothers of many of my older informants avoided not only the *kolkhozes*, but also all contacts with actual *kolkhozniks*, their neighbors. The grandmother of a current religious leader refused to pray with them, or take alms from the ones praying [Resp. 13]. Now informants saay that "to work [even in a kolkhoz] never was a sin" [Resp. 14]. It took about five decades, or two generations for people not only to recognize *kolkhozes*, but to start to accept retirement pensions from them, which earlier were regarded as "Satan's charity" [Resp. 14].

Has the attitude to the Soviet state as the Anti-Christ's power changed over time? The important thing is that Old Believers, according to their interviews, were and remain quite neutral when speaking about leaders of the Communist party, or the Soviet state. Of course, under the Communist regime it was dangerous to express any negative opinions about the regime and its leaders. But the situation remains the same even now, long after the collapse of the USSR. The following dialogue between me and an informant born in 1939 is characteristic in this respect:

> "The Anti-Christ is [Patriarch] Nikon, I would say".
> "What about Lenin, Stalin?"
> "Nope, we haven't said that. You were not supposed to speak badly about state leaders then. They were rulers, their power was from the God" [Resp. 15].

How to explain this obvious contradiction? In my opinion, an explanation should take into account the particularities of the "priestless" communities, the most conservative version of the Old Belief in terms of ideology and lifestyle.

First, according to the Old Believers' worldview, the place of the Antichrist has been occupied since the 17th century [Peretts 1900; Crummey 1970; Kain 2005]. No disorders or even horrors created by later public figures can compete with what Nikon had done. Pakhomii, the author of "The Life of Kornilii of Vyg", was the first who in the early 18th century recorded Old Believers' oral legends about Nikon. According to them, he used images of the Crucifixion and of the Mother of God as insoles in his shoes [Kain 2005: 150]. Eleazar of Anzer saw a snake on Nikon's head during a divine service [Breshchinskii 1979: 138; Kain 2005: 150]. Nikon's crozier staff, a new symbol of the Patriarch's power, was also represented as a snake. Moreover, the figure of the Patriarch, a heretic and black magician, occupied both Apocalyptical positions: that of the false prophet, precursor of the Antichrist, and of the Antichrist himself (fig. 12).

Another important aspect of the Old Belief tradition that helped its followers to adjust to the Communist regime was the patriarchal nature of this tradition. The locals explained the necessity of subordination to the outside rule by well-known Gospel quotes "For there is no authority except from God" (Romans 13:1) and "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and

to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). These principles became an indispensable part of Old Believer speech practice, that both reflects and forms their attitude to state authorities (being a model of and a model for, as Clifford Geertz put it).



Fig. 12. *Peter the Great and Patriarch Nikon as false prophet and the Antichrist Old Believer picture. 19th century [Anisimova et al. 1995: 102–103]*

As a result, my informants do not wait for Apocalyptic prophecies to be fulfilled. From childhood they have been accustomed to the thought that these prophecies have been fulfilling for centuries. Signs of the coming end of the world are abundant and started to appear long ago (electric wires, iron horses, drying rivers, etc.). The key word here is "accustomed". The entire history of the Old Belief, including during the 20th century, is one of active adjustment of its institutes and cognitive models to the circumstances and the environment (see also [Colfer 1985; Pokrovskii 1992; Robson 195; Rogers 2009; Kostrov 2010]).

The mutual adjustment of the imposed Communist project and the local symbolic language took many decades, yet finally, by the end of the Soviet era, when three or four generations had seen no other reality than the one in which they lived, the persistent rejection of this reality was smoothed out, everyday tensions mostly disappeared, and the earlier alienation itself became part of the collective memory on both family and community levels.

List of respondents

Resp. 1 — V. T. G., f., 1946, Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2011.

Resp. 2 — M. I. B., f., 1935, Severny Kommunar, Sivinsky Distr., Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2013.

Resp. 3 — A. E. Ch., f., 1940, Vereshchagino, Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, E. V. Gradoboynova, N. V. Litvina, 2011.

Resp. 4 — A. A. L., f., 1942, Sepych, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2013.

Resp. 5 — A. M. P., m., 1966, Sepych, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2011.

Resp. 5a — A. M. P., m., 1966, Sepych, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2013.

Resp. 6 — P. A. S., f., 1960, Timjony, Kez Distr., Udmurtia, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2013.

Resp. 7 — L. P. Zh., f., 1935, Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2011.

Resp. 8 — A. F. V., f., 1926, Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2011.

Resp. 9 — A. F. B., f., 1935, Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2011.

Resp. 10 — V. L. P., f., 1958, Sepych, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2013.

Resp. 11 — V. F. N., f., 1922, Sepych, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2013.

Resp. 12 — U. F. B., f., 1931, Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2011.

Resp. 13 — E. V. M., f., 1927, Sepych, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2011.

Resp. 14 — E. A. G., f., 1959, Kuliga, Kezsky Distr., Udmurtia, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, 2011.

Resp. 15 — L. D. G., m., 1939, Sepych, Vereshchagino Distr., Perm Krai, rec. by O. B. Khristoforova, E. V. Gradoboynova, N. V. Litvina, 2011.

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